

Writing in the Time Since Time Exploded

The Czech Novel, 1990–2002

CHRISTOPHER HARWOOD

1992	Michal Viewegh, <i>Báječná léta pod psa</i>	1995	Jiří Kratochvíl, <i>Avion</i>
1993	Michal Ajvaz, <i>Druhé město</i>	1997	Václav Kahuda (Petr Kratochvíl), <i>Veselá bída</i>
1994	Daniela Hodrová, <i>Perunův den</i>	1999	Ivan Landsmann, <i>Pestré vrstvy</i>
1994	Jáchym Topol, <i>Sestra</i>	2000	Zuzana Brabcová, <i>Rok perel</i>
1994	Halina Pawłowska, <i>Díky za každé nové ráno</i>	2002	Květa Legátová (Věra Hofmannová), <i>Jozova Hanule</i>

THE LANDSCAPE OF CZECH LITERATURE—along with all of Czech culture and society—shifted dramatically after the Velvet Revolution of November 1989, which brought forty-one years of communist rule (and twenty-one years of direct Soviet occupation) to an end. One of the most immediate and obvious changes was that the “three currents” into which Czech literary production was divided after 1968 (i.e., officially published, *samizdat* or underground, and exile-press literature) rejoined to form a single, domestic, aboveground stream. This stream was especially broad in the early 1990s, as small publishing houses proliferated and writers and entrepreneurs rushed to reach all niches of the newly opened reading market. Many of the fledgling publishing concerns quickly folded, but the production of Czech literature now, in the first years of the twenty-first century, remains more diverse—and more difficult to summarize—than at any previous point in its history.

The range of responses Czech novelists have given to the question of what and how to write since November 1989 is too vast to document thoroughly in a short essay. Nevertheless, I would venture to generalize and propose certain features or tendencies that have been characteristic of many prominent Czech novels of the past thirteen years. I acknowledge that

some of these features overlap, whereas others are nearly antithetical to one another, if not mutually exclusive:

- attempts to capture the chaotic essence of life in the post-totalitarian world
- attempts to retell episodes of recent history, with an eye to correcting distortions in previous official versions
- a predilection for postmodernist metafiction and games aimed at destabilizing the text
- an inclination for weaving fantastic and dreamlike elements into the narrative, in ways evocative at times of magic realism, at times of the gothic novel
- an interest in reviving neglected literary genres and traditions
- various stylistic experiments aimed at attaining a kind of authenticity of expression, including (but not limited to) richly lyrical prose, stream of consciousness, radically fragmented narratives, and documentary naturalism

- an interest in exploring and authentically expressing the perspectives of women on history, contemporary life, and relationships
- attempts to incorporate anthropology and sociology into the themes and methods of novel-writing
- an interest in discovering the literary voices of those with rich or unusual life experiences and relatively little prior literary experience.

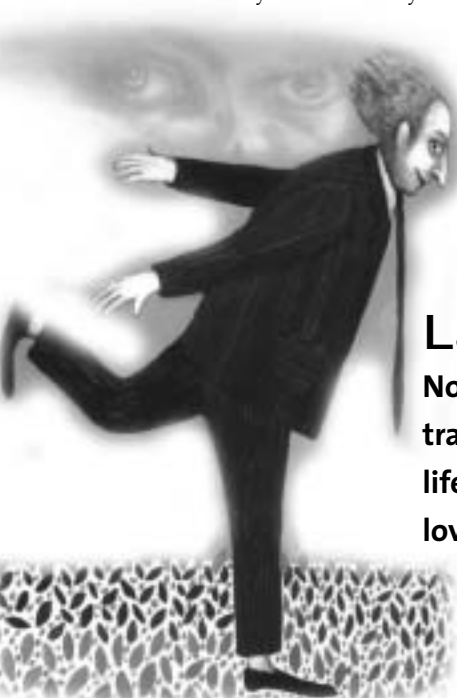
The following list of “the top ten Czech novels of 1990–2002” is subjective and problematic, as all such lists must be. It is not, in fact, a compendium of my ten personal favorites, nor does it purport to be a statistically verifiable record of the ten biggest best-sellers or the ten books most consistently praised by literary critics. In compiling the list, I tried to create a kind of composite that would provide a rough sketch of the current state of the Czech novel by marking some of its more notable manifestations in the past dozen years. I observed the following criteria in making my selections:

- I considered only works that were first published (in any form) after November 1989. This led me to exclude a number of outstanding books that appeared either abroad or in *samizdat* before the cutoff date, even though they reached a broad domestic audience only in the 1990s, and in some senses only then properly became “events in Czech literature”—for example, Tereza Boučková’s *Indiánský běh* (1988; Indian run), Zuzana Brabcová’s *Daleko od stromu* (1987; Far from the tree), Jiří Kratochvil’s *Medvědí roman* (1988; Bear novel), and Iva Pekárková’s *Pěra a perutě* (1989; Truckstop rainbows).
- I gave preference to works conceived and written after the cutoff date rather than to those created earlier and consigned (at least briefly) to the drawer. Thus, I chose Daniela Hodrová’s *Perunův den* (1994; Perun’s day) over the novels of her trilogy *Trýznivé město* (1991–92; City of torment), which were mostly written in the 1980s.
- I would have considered more than one work by a single author only if each book by the author represented a wholly distinct direction in contemporary

Czech fiction. Thus, I included only one of the half-dozen ludic tours de force produced by Jiří Kratochvil since the Velvet Revolution, because they all bear a similar artistic thumbprint.

- By similar logic, I passed over recent works by the lionized writers of the Prague Spring generation (e.g., Ivan Klíma, Pavel Kohout, Milan Kundera, Ludvík Vaculík), concurring with most Czech critics and readers in the opinion that none of these authors have transcended their prior creative output in a significant way since 1989.
- I struggled most with the dilemma of how to prioritize books that enjoyed broad popular success versus those acclaimed by a more elite readership. I finally decided on a compromise, with some prejudice in favor of the latter. Of the books in my top ten, Viewegh’s and Pawlowská’s were clearly written for a mass audience; Kratochvil’s, Hodrová’s, Ajvaz’s, and Kahuda’s have been appreciated mostly by connoisseurs; and those by Topol (underground and youth-cult book), Brabcová (succès de scandale), Landsmann, and Legátová have enjoyed varying degrees of crossover success.

Michal Viewegh, *Báječná léta pod psa* (1992; The wonderful years of lousy living). Michal Viewegh (b. 1962), by far the best-selling Czech author of the 1990s, is often characterized as the opposite pole of Jáchym Topol in the cosmos of contemporary Czech fiction: whereas Topol is heavy, effusive, esoteric, and often full of pathos, Viewegh is light, efficient, immediate, and always playfully ironic. Viewegh won several favorable reviews and the attention of a few readers with his debut novella *Názory na vraždu* (1990; Opinions about a murder). He was then catapulted to the enviable and unenviable station of “most talented young Czech writer” by the success of *Báječná léta pod psa*, a witty, autobiographical novel of education set in the 1960s–1980s of Viewegh’s own childhood, boyhood, and youth. The novel’s appeal lies in its briskly flowing narration, zingy dialogues, and especially in its mock-epic treatment of the childhood and adolescent tribulations of its protagonist, Kvido, a chubby, bespectacled boy-genius and aspiring writer. This orientation from the boy’s perspective casts a light of hilarious estrangement on the adult characters’ serious



Language exploded along with Time in November 1989, and Topol’s *Sestra* is ultimately as much about the transformative power of exploded language as it is about the vicissitudes of life in the new era, a young man’s rites of initiation, his elusive search for love, and his confrontation with the depths of his own soul.

difficulties in coping with the demeaning policies and mores of post-1968 “normalized” Czechoslovakia.

Scattered among the generally radiant reviews of *Báječná léta pod psa* were a few dissenters who dismissed its author as a “superficial humorist.” Such opinions have grown more widespread in the past decade, as Viewegh has sometimes struggled to construct compelling plots since exhausting his own biography, and many critics have chastised him for squandering his talent and pandering to plebian tastes. Nevertheless, no one would deny that Viewegh still has perfect pitch when it comes to observing and reproducing the little absurdities in human speech and behavior across the gamut of contemporary Czech society, that he has proven himself a nimble experimenter in metafictional gamesmanship, or that his books still make for effortless and enjoyable reading. Being snubbed by the high-brow critics has clearly irked Viewegh, who has even retaliated against his detractors in sarcastic digressions within his novels. He has refused to turn his back on the masses of his less demanding readers, however, taking pride in his role as a “liaison officer” between the realms of high art and kitsch in Czech literature.

Michal Ajvaz, *Druhé město* (1993; *The other city*), and **Daniela Hodrová**, *Perunův den* (1994; *Perun’s day*). Michal Ajvaz (b. 1949) and Daniela Hodrová (b. 1946) are both literary theorists as well as novelists, and their fiction in various ways reflects their deep interests in literary history and myth, aesthetics, and semiotics. They also both produced remarkable books in the early 1990s that draw heavily on the literary traditions of gnosticism and magical Prague—novels in which the present-day city and its fantastic or legendary alter-ego are as much the main characters as the somewhat puppetlike human protagonists. In both novels, doubts about the relative “reality” of supernatural and everyday situations implicitly raise post-modernist questions about the relationship between reality and fiction. Ajvaz’s *Druhé město* is structured as a novel of initiation, in which the narrator-protagonist gradually discovers keys to the alternate Prague reality that mysteriously coexists in the same space-time with the more readily visible one. Hodrová’s *Perunův den* is also partly articulated by stages of initiation, complicated by rapid alternations between the perspectives of four female protagonists, who sometimes share the same dreams or hallucinations and sometimes act on their own.

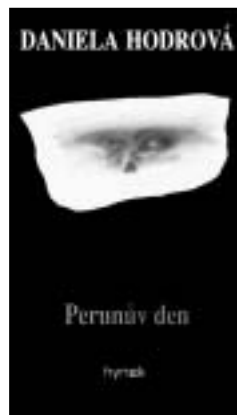
Jáchym Topol, *Sestra* (1994; Eng. *City Sister Silver*, 2000). By almost universal consensus, this rambling novelistic triptych, the prose debut of underground poet and song lyricist Jáchym

Topol (b. 1962), stands as the most remarkable achievement of post-November Czech literature. Among other accolades, it was distinguished as the only work from the 1990s to be included in a list of the one hundred best works of Czech fiction of the twentieth century, as compiled from a 1998 survey of literary scholars and critics.

In the first part of the novel, “City,” the reader meets the young protagonist, Potok, and his clique of outsider-bohemians cum post-totalitarian racketeer-entrepreneurs, collectively known as The Organization. Here Topol’s emphasis is on reproducing the exhilarating blur of life in Prague in the first days and years “after time exploded” and on initiating the reader into The Organization’s tribal rituals and ethics. In the second part, “Sister,” The Organization disbands, and Potok goes forth to seek his anima, with whom he embarks on a series of cloak-and-dagger adventures and an ill-fated journey into vaguely defined territories beyond the eastern borders of Czechoslovakia. In the final section, “Silver,” Potok makes his more-bitter-than-sweet return to Prague, first exploring the lower reaches of humanity among the vagrants at the train station and at an apocalyptic garbage dump at the edge of the city, and then trying, with an absurdly comic mix of failure and success, to rejoin the mainstream of life in a society that is no longer entirely recognizable or appealing to him.

This thumbnail sketch of the sweeping, adventure-laden plot of *Sestra* only hints at the elemental power of Topol’s narrative, which contains innumerable twists and digressions, dreams and hallucinations, monologues and dialogues, poems in prose and in verse. Potok notes in passing that language exploded along with time in November 1989, and Topol’s book is ultimately as much about the transformative power of exploded language as it is about the vicissitudes of life in the new era, a young man’s rites of initiation, his elusive search for love, and his confrontation with the depths of his own soul.

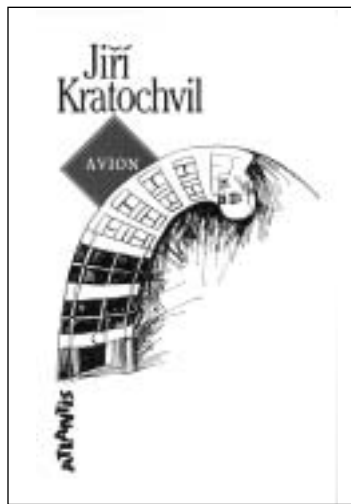
Halina Pawlowská, *Díky za každé nové ráno* (1994; *Thanks for every new morning*). Halina Pawlowská (b. 1955) is best known to her compatriots as a talk-show hostess, editor of an entertainment and gossip magazine, and author of a series of popular “women’s novels” that tend to focus on the tragicomic aspects of relations between the sexes. However, her 1994 semiautobiographical novel, *Díky za každé nové ráno*, drew readers of both genders as well as the attention of some serious critics; its notoriety was further boosted by a successful 1995 film adaptation by Milan Šteindler. In ways the novel mirrors Viewegh’s *Báječná léta pod psa*, with deadpan observation of the comically embarrassing moments in adolescence and life in general under



normalization. Pawlowská's narrative differs in that its authorial perspective is female, of course, and that of an ethnic minority growing up in Prague. The protagonist's father (like Pawlowská's own) is a Ukrainian poet from Zakarpats'ka (earlier Carpathian Ruthenia), and much of the book's poignancy and humor derive from the family's cross-cultural eccentricity.

Jiří Kratochvíl, *Avion* (1995).

Jiří Kratochvíl (b. 1940) is the self-appointed apostle of postmodernism in contemporary Czech literature, its most deft and prolific practitioner, and also one of its leading theorists and apologists. His definitions of postmodernist aesthetics emphasize the text as a game and an open-ended system and reject as misguided any attempt to make literature a vessel for "truth" or "authenticity." His first collection of stories was supposed to appear in the late 1960s, but the sudden change in climate after August 1968 suspended its publication and forced Kratochvíl underground. His creative biography is unique in that his convictions about the autonomy of literature led him to avoid not



only official channels of publication, with the compromises they would necessarily entail, but also any extensive involvement with dissident artistic-intellectual circles, with their characteristically evangelical approach to "truth." Kratochvíl has called the first version of his *Bear Novel* (written in the late 1970s and early 1980s but not released in its original form until 1999, as *Urmedvěď*) his work of internal necessity and the

most complete expression of his artistic ambitions through the 1990s. While he has claimed that the next several novels he wrote after it are mere glosses on, and elaborations of, the material that went into *Urmedvěď*, in fact they are all remarkable, free-standing works, and a good deal more readable than the bear that allegedly spawned them. *Avion*, which takes its title from the name of a functionalist-designed hotel in Brno whose archi-

tectural structure it is supposed to imitate, is perhaps the most finely crafted of Kratochvíl's post-*Bear* novels, and the first one he wrote entirely after November 1989. Its deliciously convoluted, metafictional plot is narrated in alternate chapters by each of two central characters, whom the reader only gradually recognizes as separate persons, and who meet each other near the novel's climax to discover they are writing the same book about each other.

Václav Kahuda (Petr Kratochvíl), *Veselá bída* (1997; Merry misery). After graduating from a vocational school, Václav Kahuda (b. 1965) began his literary career as an underground poet while working through a series of blue-collar jobs. His unique prose works are remarkable for their dense, poetic language, and his novella *Veselá bída* may in fact be best defined as a loosely linked cycle of prose lyrics. As one reviewer observed, it is a work that cannot be read from beginning to end in any traditional manner, but one can derive great pleasure from opening it to almost any given passage and letting oneself sail awhile on its current. As the oxymoronic title suggests, *Veselá bída* is a work that descends to some of the grittiest images and most depraved situations imaginable and manages to find traces of the sublime in them. In this respect, Kahuda shows himself to be perhaps the most direct descendant of Bohumil Hrabal's aesthetics in contemporary Czech literature.



Ivan Landsmann, *Pestré vrstvy* (1999; Multicolored layers). The autobiographical debut novel of fifty-year-old former coal miner Ivan Landsmann (b. 1949) was the most stunning example in post-November Czech literature of a brilliant work of prose produced by a total outsider to the world of literature. It was poet and singer-songwriter Jaroslav Hutka who discovered Landsmann in a pub in Rotterdam and convinced him to write down his engaging tales of life in the mines of Ostrava and the chaotic first weeks of his emigration to Holland. Landsmann's multicolored narrative is notable as a document of working-class anti-communist sentiment in normalized Czechoslovakia; as a semi-technical introduction to the trade of mining; as a store of authentic linguistic specimens of Silesian dialect and obscenity; and most of all as a strikingly vivid, seemingly unmediated record of situations and conversations that seldom find their way into literature.

Zuzana Brabcová, *Rok perel* (2000; *A year of pearls*). Brabcová's novelistic debut, *Daleko od stromu* (*Far from the tree*, first published in Germany in 1987), won her the prestigious Jiří Orten Prize for the best work by a young writer



when it was first published in Czechoslovakia in 1991. Her third novel, *Rok perel*, brought Brabcová (b. 1960) more widespread attention with its taboo plot of a forty-year-old mother and professional editor whose seemingly stable and contented life is turned upside-down by an obsessive, masochistic relationship with a twenty-four-year-old woman. While it may have been the unconventional eroticism at the center of the plot that piqued the initial curiosity

of many readers, it is the jarring emotional intensity and compelling narrative force of Brabcová's novel that make the deepest impression.

Květa Legátová (Věra Hofmannová), *Jozova Hanule* (2002; *Joza's hanule*). Like Ivan Landsmann, octogenarian retired school teacher Věra Hofmannová (b. 1919) appeared on the Czech literary scene (using the pen name of Květa Legátová) out of the blue. Her debut, a cycle of short stories entitled *Želary* (the name of the fictional village in eastern Moravia where the stories unfold), was written in the late 1960s but not published until 2001. It immediately won the favor of critics and readers, who admired its revival of the rural ballad genre in a distinctively terse, naturalistic prose style. Legátová followed the *Želary* stories, which take place in the interwar period, with *Joza's Hanule*, an extended ballad set in the time of the Nazi occupation. The protagonist is a young female doctor who, at the beginning of the novella, works for the underground resistance in Brno. When the Gestapo uncovers her conspiratorial cell, she flees to the remote village of *Želary* and marries a local man to hide her identity. Legátová develops the awkwardly evolving relationship of this accidental couple with a pathos free of sentimentality.

WHAT WILL THE TOP-TEN CZECH NOVELS of the next decade look like? Of course one can only speculate, but I would guess that the last two features I indicated as characteristic of Czech fiction from 1990 to 2002 (i.e., the heightened role of anthropology and sociology in fiction, and the eager reception of debuts by literary outsiders) will also be applicable to many of the most talked-about Czech books of the next several years. Since the fall of communist censorship in November 1989, Czechs have to a large extent ceased to rely on writers to "tell the truth" about the sociopolitical world they inhabit. Still, Czech readers have continued to look at fiction not just as entertainment but as a source of insight into things they know relatively little about or are presently debating. Hence, many of the most popular and criti-

cally acclaimed books of the past few years have contained prominent elements of travelogue and ethnography, as well as anatomies and critiques of specific problems in contemporary Czech society, from ethnic and gender discrimination to the inanity of the mass media. The delayed evolution of postmodernist aesthetics has not yet run its course in Czech fiction, and aestheticist critics will probably continue



to find much to say about the allusive, eclectic, and metafictional works that like-minded novelists produce in the next several years. However, the label of "postmodernism" has already acquired a pejorative connotation for many Czech artists and commentators, so I do not expect the most stereotypical aspects of this aesthetic to remain productive forces in the Czech novel for as long as they have in many Western literatures. Finally, I predict that the present process of the Czech Republic's integration into the European Union may prompt many of the nation's authors to return with renewed acuity—in both the style and content of their fiction—to one of the oldest and most storied questions in all of Czech literature: What does it mean to be Czech? **WLT**

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WORKS IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

Michal Ajvaz, *Druhé město*, 1993; excerpt in *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno: Czech Fiction from the Post-Kundera Generation*, selected by Elena Lappin, trs. Tatiana Firkušný and Veronique Firkušný-Callegari (North Haven, Connecticut: Catbird, 1997), 87–97.

Daniela Hodrová, *Perunův den*, 1994; excerpt in *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno*, trs. Tatiana Firkušný and Veronique Firkušný-Callegari, 191–202.

Halina Pawłowska, *Díky za každé nové ráno*, 1994; excerpt in *Daylight in Nightclub Inferno*, tr. Lisa Ryoko Wakamiya, 166–90.

Jáchym Topol, *Sestra*, 1994; Eng. *City Sister Silver*, tr. Alex Zucker (North Haven, Connecticut: Catbird, 2000).

Michal Viewegh, *Báječná léta pod psa*, 1992; excerpt (published under the title "The Blissful Years of Lousy Living") in *This Side of Reality*, ed. Alexandra Büchler, tr. O. T. Chalkstone (London: Serpent's Tail, 1996), 154–64.

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