

A Theory of Strangeness by Pavla Horáková

summary

The protagonist is Ada Sabová, an intellectual who, according to her own feelings, has buried herself professionally as a scientist at the Institute of Interdisciplinary Human Studies, about whose meaningfulness, or more precisely, about whose contribution to the overall level of human knowledge she has her doubts. In her late thirties, after several rather negative amorous experiences, she prefers short-term, non-committal relationships, and is equally non-committal in her contemplation of a variety of subjects, although she sometimes feels that she could fix her concentration on something more definite or more substantial, and thus achieve perhaps more remarkable results than her current life balance shows.

One of her favourite topics of contemplation is the external influence of people and the processing of the initial impression that forms the basis of a feeling of sympathy or antipathy. This topic is partly related to her scientific interest, which revolves around techniques of perceiving people at first sight. The complex phenomenon of initial evaluation with its wider social implications is something she would like to combine with a theoretical model and anchor the research in an analysis. But she fails to do so because, as she herself realises, it is a challenging research project. In her state of intellectual and relational frustration, she indulges in the pleasure of at least making small observations and evaluating her surroundings, for example, by continuously grading and evaluating the individuals, especially men, she meets around her.

In terms of sympathy, a ten signifies absolute, almost miraculous compatibility, as if they were two entities separate from the original, more perfect being. On the other hand, individuals rated less than a seven Ada is not going to concern herself too much with.

The novel consists mainly of the protagonist's numerous observations and impressions. Ada Sabová proves to be a quite insightful, interesting and witty guide through the text, who does not try too hard to impress the reader at any cost. Through her narrative, the author plays out various motifs and weaves together many storylines, although for a long time it is not clear whether some of the observations and events are related and whether something more substantial will emerge from them. We mostly find the heroine in ordinary situations, which bring numerous work and leisure encounters. Ada drops in on the radio to see her mother,

visits her ever-vigorous grandmother in the old people's home, and goes to see her father, who, after a nervous breakdown, spends all his time in a rather gloomy cottage in the country.

Ada also meets her colleagues, her free-thinking and artistically gifted brother and his friends, her psychologist and her ex-boyfriend, with whom she is working on an eccentric sleep experiment. This consists of recording the varied and often interesting technical ideas and constructions that her subconscious gifts her with during sleep. The enterprising ex-boyfriend then tries to make money on some of the ideas with the help of his innovative start-up, and plans to share the profits with her.

Many things pass through the heroine's mind. From a personal crisis of values to love problems and family relationships to more general reflections on art, sociology, cultural studies or quantum mechanics (in almost every chapter, the protagonist briefly discusses a well-known contribution to the subject: the double-slit experiment, Schrödinger's cat, the wave-corpuscular nature of particles, etc.). Gradually, the search for the missing son of Ada's acquaintance, who fascinates Ada because, among other things, he is, according to photographs, a pure "ten" for her, takes centre stage. The disappeared is named Kašpar Hauser, just like the mysterious Nuremberg foundling from the early 19th century. Other connections between the lost hero and this historical figure suggest some interpretive possibilities, but these must be left to the reader's independent judgment.

Although the book gradually focuses more and more attention on the search for the fate of the mysterious Hauser, the plot continues to unfold along other lines.

Pavla Horáková's book surprises with the number of diverse themes and the unexpected way in which she handles them within the tricky layering of motifs and implied connections, while remaining a witty and readable text. Horáková does not strictly adhere to the boundaries of realism, and calmly ventures beyond what could easily be interpreted by the standards of conventional logic and knowledge. Even in *A Theory of the Strangeness*, everyday reality in its diversity encounters something that transcends ordinary experience, and through the narrator the author conceives of the world not as an indecipherable mystery, but rather as an ever-open space whose every nook and cranny we have not penetrated.