

Love in the Time of Global Climate Change by *Josef Pánek*

summary

The protagonist, Tomáš, travels to a conference in Bangalore. He is a man struggling to pull himself together after a divorce, a scientist forced by our hectic, globalised world to learn to work with others and suppress his individuality for the sake of research. A more or less chance encounter with an attractive Indian participant at the conference leads to a night of intense passion, both in terms of sex and conversation. While the ending may seem predictable, the author's playful treatment leaves it to the reader's imagination to decide what has really happened. But one ought not to dwell on the plot too much, since what is more important in *Love in the Time of Global Climate Change* is that Pánek's writing continues a tradition of Czech literature that started with Bohumil Hrabal and can be traced to more recent writers such as Emil Hakl. This pedigree is apparent in the author's relentless verbosity, story-telling for the sheer pleasure of story-telling, the verbal deluge sustained for pages on end, alternating between outright bragging and masochistic (self-)denigration. At the same time, Pánek's writing shows a kinship with writers such as Josef Škvorecký, particularly in the portrayal of life "elsewhere", i.e. outside the Czech environment.

Pánek's protagonist Tomáš is brilliant at ranting about the ways of the world, his job and the global academic establishment, with its impact factor journals and grant funding. He also relishes discussing and analysing the Czech national character and xenophobia, or pondering the various guises taken by racism in today's global village. His sarcastic comments often eschew political correctness: "There's a good reason why, before going to India, you're told that black females are dirty. Those who tell you this are the same people whose parents grew up during the Nazi occupation of Bohemia and Moravia." Despite this undiplomatic language, Tomáš suggests that racism is outmoded, that notions of homeland, nation and race are vestiges of past centuries. Pánek's character defies pigeonholing: he has lived in South Australia, his ex-wife is Colombian, one of his best friends is Chinese, and during the conference he goes drinking with a Hungarian and sleeps with an Indian woman. Can he still be regarded as being "just" Czech or is he more of a "European"? Tomáš is aware that he is doomed to remain an outcast, a loser, a psychologically deprived individual typical of this day and age. He doesn't really know where home is, since in our globalised era of globetrotting lifestyles people like Tomáš are more at home in hotels or various temporary abodes. And although he's not lacking in make it any-thing (or precisely because of that: take

your pick) he is ultimately discontented. Uprooted and unhappy with himself, he is left alone with his phobias and memories. The phobias prevent him from getting a proper night's sleep in India (because of the incessant noise and smog) or having a drink of water (for fear of falling ill). At the same time, he is annoyed by the contented and placid nature of the people of Bangalore who go about their business smiling and have found peace of mind in their karma. While he can't really communicate with the people he meets in India, he also has problems communicating with his exwife, who lives in Australia with their two-year-old son. He is dismayed to learn that the son's first word wasn't "Daddy" but "idiot", but he can never be sure if his ex-wife is telling the truth or not. Her sinister, spiteful messages only exacerbate his general sense of unease. And while globalisation facilitates physical contact, the constant connectedness also leads to misunderstandings, as people no longer listen and everything carries the same weight, whether it is fact or fiction. Everything unique is disappearing, erased by things that are shared. The combination of a homeless nomad with a mildly autistic commentator on world affairs creates an explosive mix. Pánek's character relishes in self-denigrating accusations, self-pity and nostalgic reminiscence. If it weren't for Tomáš' one-night stand, the book might offer just an interesting but one-sided look at our world and an individual in it, another example of what has become known as expat fiction. However what makes Pánek's book stand out is that he doesn't stop at taking his character on a journey to a distant place to open his eyes to reality. Halfway into the novella, he does something unexpected: loosened up by the "conference sex", Tomáš discovers in himself a dormant desire to recount stories that may seem trivial but are actually crucial. At this point, we are suddenly taken back to the 1990s and follow Tomáš as he hitchhikes his way through Iceland. A greater contrast between the permanently teeming Indian megalopolis and the quiet, deserted northern landscape would be hard to find. By acknowledging his nomadic condition and retrospectively making sense of things that happened over thirty years ago, he is able to find his own inner peace, akin to the karma of the Indian culture but which had eluded him hitherto. Admittedly, this sudden finding of peace doesn't last long, if for no other reason than Tomáš' propensity for irony and seeing everything as relative, especially the great, enduring notions such as love, truth, happiness and even, ultimately, replace with home. Readers should take note of this novella, which takes Czech literature into the European league despite an intentionally misleading title that may make it sound "unbearably heavy".

– Michal Jareš