

So Much Ash by Ondřej Štindl

summary

Ondřej Štindl's novel *So Much Ash* is set in Prague in the first half of 2020, during the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic. It tells a fantastical story that thematizes the apocalypse as a symbol of extinction but also the promise of a new beginning.

The book's protagonist, Kryštof Mráz, is filled with a new urgency in the time of the pandemic, both on a social and personal level. He is forced to ask himself some very difficult questions that he has pushed aside and ignored until now, to consider the meaning of life and perhaps even the existence of God, to try to come to terms with his own life and the losses he has suffered, to open himself up to the possibility of love, to stop living in a "lukewarm" way.

Kryštof Mráz is a middle-aged translator and writer who lives by himself. Shortly before the lockdown is announced, he attends a friend's funeral. In the pub after the ceremony, he bumps into his old girlfriend Martina, and she bitterly accuses him and his indifference of being the reason she got an abortion when she became pregnant with his child a quarter of a century ago. Kryštof is thrown off balance by the situation (and the alcohol), and in a fit of remorse and nostalgia he sets off to visit the family grave he hasn't been to in years. He finds it covered with flowers, which turn out to have been left there by a cult that worships Kryštof's long-dead sister Ivana.

That same evening, he attends a TV debate on an inconsequential cultural cause célèbre and, while in the studio, drunkenly argues with the intellectual Kristýna, who is a generation younger than him. The conflict ends in a debacle, with Kristýna unwittingly making a fool of herself, and the video of their argument goes viral. Kryštof attempts to get in touch with Kristýna, and although the gulf in their ages and views seems insurmountable, he is intent on seeking her out. When he does, she happens to be embroiled in an awkward situation—he manages to get her out of it and ends up walking her home.

He is then contacted by Kamil Rýdl, the leader of the cult that worships the deceased Ivana. He invites Kryštof to a gathering. There Kryštof learns that, according to Kamil, Ivana had prophetic dreams in which she saw the coming of a pandemic and the general destruction that would follow. At first Kryštof takes Kamil for a fraud. Then he learns from him that decades ago, when Kamil was a lost young junkie in Prague, he did actually know Ivana. On top of that, some details of the dreams his dead sister supposedly had begin to come true.

At the same time, Kryštof continues to grow closer to Kristýna and goes to visit her, walking through the ghostly, locked-down city, thinking of Ivana and blaming himself for not knowing exactly what his sister was going through when she was dying. In Kristýna, he sees a kind of substitute for the child he might once have had. Kristýna is ill, but Kryštof is unable to help her and is forced to take her to a psychiatric hospital.

He discovers that Kamil has a miraculous power. He lends it to Kryštof, who attempts to use it to help Kristýna. Kamil becomes convinced that he has been entrusted with the knowledge of the date on which Prague will face total destruction and he will meet his death—April 14. He locks himself in his house and Kryštof waits there with him. At the predetermined hour, they both go to a hill above the city and await the arrival of a great revelation. But nothing happens—by all indications, the city has managed to weather the pandemic without major losses (indeed, Covid-19 did not hit the Czech Republic hard until the autumn of 2020). It seems as though God is laughing in Kamil's face. The strange prophet dies according to his own prediction. When that happens, Kryštof experiences a curious form of ecstasy, a sense of transcendence and reunion. Knowing he has contracted Covid-19, he makes his way to the hospital. He thinks of Kristýna and of the moment he saw his dead sister. The questions that have been weighing on him remain unanswered, but Kryštof no longer minds. He is at peace and open to whatever is to come.

– Ondřej Štindl