

To Them, I am God by Josef Pánek

summary

The main protagonist, a young Czech research scientist, leaves to work in Norway at the end of the 1990s, because he cannot earn for living at home, in the Czech Republic. In Bergen, a city “at the edge of the world” where it rains constantly and it is perpetually dark in winter, he is soon considered a non-conformist freak among his colleagues.

Similarly, the author of the book, Pánek, went to work in Norway as a young researcher at the same time. “The only thing there I had enough of was money. I don't remember them even having a theater in Bergen in the late 90s. Or a music club. I had a naive idea that every city must be like Prague,” he recalls today.

But the similarity of the author's journey with the one taken by his literary character ends there. “It's definitely not an autobiography,” Pánek explains. “The text doesn't tell a story, instead is used as a tool for getting into the subject, a person's mind,” he adds. “The story is not important and serves only as a starting point to that.” The focus of Pánek's new book does not lie in examining the darkened inhospitality of Bergen, which the hero exchanges for the exuberant metropolis that was Prague. The core of the narrative is an expedition into one's own mind, to which the young scientist is driven by the culture shock and deprivation by the surrounding environment.

Gradually he hears his suddenly nagging conscience and discovers his perception. “He questions himself, finds out who he really is” the author describes the experiments to which the protagonist is exposed and thus examines his thinking. According to Pánek, the journey into the unknown, in this case for work, always leads first and foremost to the mind of the person who undertakes it.

“When you get down to the molecular level and see the interactions of molecules and even more basic particles that make up us and our thinking, our physical and mental bodies, as a scientist you must necessarily wonder what our free will is,” Pánek develops the main theme of his novel. It had seven versions, the first of which he started writing about aloneness abroad 13 years ago, to “save his sanity and not get permanently drunk”, much like his literary character.

How the supreme being got into the title of the book For them, I am god, in which the main character recognizes himself, Pánek explains by saying that every self-knowledge inevitably touches the idea of God. “I imagine that anyone who discovers and understands self-knowledge, and opens one's mind to oneself, is a god, or at least touches the divine nature of the world. When I imagine God as the energy and basic substance that makes up

our world, including ourselves, then also according to the modern quantum mechanics, we are connected to each other and with everything on a fundamental level, which we are not completely aware of. When a person begins to perceive himself, his emotions, qualities and feelings, one asks where they come from and what defines them, touches the basic level of human existence. Of course there is heredity. But by what is it given?" asks Pánek about the first cause. "The biggest secret is we humans to ourselves. We know very little about ourselves," he concludes. "With this text, I tried to get closer to the reasons for this fact and its meaning."

Credit: Petr Vizina, Josef Pánek