

Trump Card, a novel by Petra Hůlová

Translated by Alex Zucker

Can a woman wake up one day and say “#MeToo” 20 years after the fact? Or is “#MeToo” a right reserved for the younger generation? An extraordinary novel about feminism and the culture wars in everyday life. Plus, reflections on the state of Czech publishing and the literary business, including working conditions for authors.

The novel opens with the protagonist, Czech author Sylvie Novak, looking back on the start of her friendship with fellow writer David Karel, years ago, when they first met in a dingy underground club, at a party hosted by Sylvie’s publisher, Oto. A year later David publishes his debut novel and asks Sylvie to write a short introduction. Now, in return, he is attending the launch of her new book of essays, *Extraterrestrial Girlfriends*, which David describes as “a summary of what is most interesting in the current gender debate.” Sylvie sees this as an “unimaginative characterization.”

Sylvie and David leave the party together, taking a taxi partway, then walking. Sylvie notes that David, “a privileged white heterosexual,” living mainly off his inheritance from his deceased father, writes some of the best work coming out in the Czech Republic these days. He is mainly a provocateur. She agrees with him that the most important thing is to force people to think and everything else is secondary. “Half of our gender’s tragedy comes from the fact that you can rape us,” Sylvie tells David.

Sylvie reflects that women’s self-determination, which her book sings the praises of, is impossible until the two parts of the “gender tragedy” are resolved. 1) The fact that women can be raped means they don’t have control over their own lives, and 2) the life that arises inside them doesn’t wholly belong to them either, although in her new book, “I describe the process of coming to terms with abortion primarily as ‘liberating oneself from the absurd criticisms forced on one by one’s surroundings.’”

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Sylvie wakes up at Oto’s, waiting for him to bring her breakfast in bed. They have been sleeping together for years. In public they “pretend” to be sleeping together, publisher and author, since nobody knows they actually are. Sylvie reflects on the literary business, noting that, “without state support, translations of Czech books abroad basically aren’t published.”

When Sylvie goes to meet David outside the university, he is waiting along with “a buxom brunette” named Edita. David tells Sylvie he has left his publisher, Radler, because of

Sylvie's pointing out their shabby practices vis-à-vis authors. "As if Radler weren't living off its authors, but its authors off them, and at their expense." He's going to publish now with Oto, just like Sylvie. David is texting with his wife, Marie, and says she wants to talk to Sylvie, because she thinks Sylvie can talk him into having kids with her.

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Sylvie reads a review of her book and reflects on her relationship with her children, noting that when they were little it was a battle every time she left the apartment to work at night. A critic named Lipová wrote that *Extraterrestrial Girlfriends* is the year's best book of essays, praising its "intellectual maturity" and "objective, readable style" in comparison to Sylvie's previous work, the novel *Square in a Circle*. Sylvie says it makes her want to laugh and cry at the same time. She reflects that her mistake is she has worked hard to grow in her work, and unconsciously assumed critics and readers are doing the same, moving toward "a greater willingness to understand the complexity in my texts, as opposed to just my supposed 'complexes,'" as Lipová put it.

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Sylvie comes home from food shopping to find a box of her old journals splayed out on the floor by Judita, who says the contents are "scandalous," whereas scandalous for Sylvie is the fact that her daughter poked into her private journals. "We have a right to know who you are," Judita says. Sylvie reflects, "My children's idea of where their never-ending rights end never ceases to fascinate me. Do they not believe I have any rights, or do they consciously not give a shit?"

Judita: "How come you never told us about this?"

Sylvie: "I don't know what you're talking about."

Judita: "Everything in these journals. How you fucked absolutely everyone."

Ondřej, Sylvie's son: "More liked everyone fucked mom, sis."

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Sylvie sits down and, after giving her kids "a short lecture on the irrevocable loss of trust due to spying on my private affairs," offers to answer whatever questions they have. Judita breaks into tears.

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The next time Sylvie sees David, all he talks about is the fact that Marie is pregnant again. Three years ago they bought an apartment in Poland for the price of a new car in Czechia and he's afraid he and Marie and two kids won't fit into it. They go there in summer and he goes for two or three weeks at a time during the year to write. He asks Sylvie to tell Marie the next time she sees her that David wouldn't be able to handle another child. Says she'll take it better coming from her.

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Sylvie and Oto meet to go over the program for her tour together with David. He asks if she's ever had a thing with David. "No, not even when I was young." They smoke a joint. Oto says they'll go first to Brno and Ostrava, then Krakow and Warsaw. The Poles are paying for the trip as part of a celebration of the 900th anniversary of birth of Kosmas, who wrote *Chronica Boëmorum*, the first chronicle of Czech history and turns out to have been born in Poland.

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Back home, Judita asks Sylvie if she cared that Jan Sír, a famous older writer she had sex with when she was young, had a year-old daughter when the two of them slept together. Judith says her blocked emotions aren't surprising given her traumatic experience.

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Sylvie meets with Marie, David's wife. Asks if she agrees that there's lots of funny movie scenes where a man gets slapped by a woman, but a funny scene where a woman gets slapped by a man is hard to imagine. Marie wants Sylvie to talk David into her keeping her baby.

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Visiting Oto to make plans for a joint book tour with David, Sylvie finds a pink hair scrunchie under the bed that she recognizes as belonging to a young woman named Ema and realizes Oto is also sleeping with her. Feeling betrayed, Sylvie asks why Oto didn't tell her. He says he didn't tell Sylvie about Ema, just as he didn't tell Ema about Sylvie, because he "didn't want to complicate things." Plus Sylvie would have made fun of him and Ema never asked. Sylvie points out that he used to tell her when he slept with other women.

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Sylvie and David ride the train to Brno for the first leg of their tour. In the dining car, Sylvie notices the woman waiting on them has her first gray hairs. "Sometimes even women who are barely thirty have them. The ones over fifty all color their hair. People think it's because they don't know how to age. What if it's not about accepting old age, though, but a desire to stay in the game? Colored hair is a signal to the world, like plastic surgery. A way for a woman to make clear that she still has an interest in 'doing it,' so much so that she's willing to have her face cut up. That's why plastic surgery is sexy, even though it's creepy."

"Do you realize Sír abused you on a regular basis?" Sylvie's daughter asked her the night before. "He has to apologize, and not only to you. He has to admit he treated you like a predator. It's the only way things will ever change." Sylvie replies that Jan is 77 years old and she doesn't feel the need to revisit the whole thing. Judita insists it doesn't matter that she did everything with Jan voluntarily. "Because if he hadn't been who he was, you wouldn't have let him do it. And he was well aware of that and counted on it." Then she shows Sylvie the page in her journal where she wrote exactly that.

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At the event in Brno, a young woman in the audience asks Sylvie what it's like combining creative work with childcare and does she have any recommendations. Sylvie asks her why she doesn't pose the question to David too. Reflects that her idea of feminism "arose more than thirty years ago in the study of Jan's wife Klára."

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After their event in Ostrava, David tells Sylvie that Marie called and is going to get an abortion. "I think I'm supposed to talk her out of it. And in my opinion she knows that and is counting on my trying it." Sylvie tells David ("The words come out of me like it was someone else saying them"): "Don't forget about yourself. Your work. You can't live without it. With another child it'll be even harder than now."

"That's the total opposite of what you were saying a minute ago," says David indignantly. "You're giving me advice when you still haven't come to terms with your own abortion?" But, Sylvie reflects, to assume that our own mistaken decisions can serve as a guide for the decisions of others is sheer presumption.

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After the event in Krakow, the moderator, a young Polish poet named Piotr, invites Sylvie out for a drink, and they end up on a park bench with a bottle of wine. Sylvie is attracted to him, but wonders if he is going to rape her when she notices the knife in his hand that he used to open a bag of chips he bought with the wine. Though he absolutely "doesn't seem the type."

She remembers the first time she slept with Jan, when she went back to his apartment, and after they had sex she noticed his wife Klára's study, with its walls full of books, and felt both triumphant and awful because she knew his wife, an older woman, didn't stand a chance against her as a younger woman, yet it was a crucial moment, because it gave her the idea that women need to care for other women as a fundamental feminist principle. Sylvie reflects that most women, sadly, don't realize this until they're older, so they can only expect younger women to treat them the same way they treated older women when they were young.

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Marie makes up her mind to get the abortion and David is relieved. After the panel in Warsaw, Sylvie and David go for a TV interview and while they're in the studio Sylvie gets a text from Judita saying, "Síra agrees to a visit from you." Sylvie is furious. "I pull my phone out of my pocket and in a few sentences formulate something approximating the basics of good behavior."

Before she and David go on, they agree to make it "scandalous." While they wait for the moderator, Sylvie reflects on Marie's decision to get an abortion. "I sacrificed my unborn child in order 'to become something.' My own mistake, which can't be blamed on my mother,

was that I didn't consider a child part of my self-actualization but something that prevented me from achieving it."

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Sylvie returns home from Poland to find the box of her journals, clippings, and old photos still open in the middle of the kitchen floor. Judita says she read all of Sylvie's journals, and "It's time you finally saw things the way they really are." Sylvie says there was no abuse, Judita insists there was. She says if a guy did to her what Jan did to Sylvie, Sylvie "would beat the guy half to death."

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Sitting in a pub with David and a group of mostly female students where they've gone for a seminar instead of doing it in a classroom, Sylvie reflects that "The draining of money out of literature goes hand in hand with its feminization . . . just like in every other area of life. Men still support women more often than the other way around, so they can't afford the low pay that exists in literature."

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Sylvie meets with Marie, who is clearly upset at having had the abortion. She says David "told me the abortion was your idea, Sylvie." David doesn't answer Sylvie's calls.

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David texts Sylvie that he and Marie are separated, but he sees their son Hugo every other day and their relationship hasn't suffered. He didn't answer the phone because he was writing, he says. Sylvie has seen him only once in the last few weeks—with Edita, one of her writing students, getting out of his car in front of the school. She had noticed Edita's papers getting better all of a sudden, and realizes it's because David has been editing her work. Sylvie asks Edita, who is also Jan's daughter, to come see her in her office. At the end of the meeting, Edita declares, "I know it was my father who actually wrote your first novel."

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Sylvie visits Oto and he says her book is selling well. A critic named Hníková calls it "the cult book of the new feminism." As for the new book she's working on, about survivors of the climate apocalypse who live in luxury bunkers, Oto declares it anticapitalist agitprop. Sylvie says the left is a blind spot of Oto's, as it is for most former members of the anti-communist underground, and that "the importance of the Czech underground doesn't reside in its politics of struggle against communism, but in the creative community it formed, independent of the state to a degree hardly imaginable in society today."

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Sylvie gets a text from Marie saying, "David actually loves you." Which Sylvie describes as "a lie so egregious that under certain circumstances it might even be true." She asks her son Ondřej if he's heard from Judita, since she isn't answering Sylvie's calls, and when Sylvie

texts, Judita only writes back asking when they are going to see Jan Sira. She adds that if Sylvie continues “to ignore the reality” she will go see him by herself.

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Sylvie goes to see Oto. Someone told his wife Žofie about his affair with Ema. He blames it on her. Says they can't go on anymore. Says she's stalking him. She should get help. Sylvie knows she should get up and walk out but keeps arguing.

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Visiting her mom, Sylvie remembers how Oto said she should “seriously get treatment,” because her need for sex at age 52 was pathological and he “refuses to satiate it” anymore. Then, before she left, Oto whipped out a printout of an email Edita sent him, claiming that Jan wrote Sylvie's first novel. Oto reminds Sylvie: “You and Jan yourselves said you didn't write it, remember?” She objects: “We were just kidding.”

Oto: “Here it is, in black-and-white. He told her himself he wrote it, and she's considering going public with it.” Sylvie objects that it's one person's word against another. Oto threatens her that if she doesn't stop accusing him of sleeping with other women, he'll go public with Edita's claim that Jan wrote Sylvie's first novel.

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Sylvie sees Judita for the first time in a week, and Judita says she contacted Jan. Wrote him a letter demanding that he publicly apologize to Sylvie for what he did, but she hasn't sent it yet. She says there must have been other women Jan took advantage of.

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Sylvie runs into David on the street. He's excited about his new text, which he describes as “a clean break” with his previous work. She wonders if he knows about the email Edita sent to Oto. David tells Sylvie that Jan got fired from his job at the institute for his political views, not because of sleeping around. Says he is getting along with Marie and they only see each other to hand off their son. “She's right that I'm a dick. It took me a long time to admit I was trying to make myself into something I'm not suited for.” Family, kids, relationship. “I need absolute freedom, and as soon as I feel like somebody's criticizing me for it, I lose control.” Sylvie asks, “What do you mean?” David: “I was bad to Marie and I regret it.” He stops and looks at her. “Didn't she tell you about it?” Sylvie asks, “Did you hit her?” Tells David her daughter and son think there's something between the two of them. David doesn't react.

Sylvie speaks at art opening for a gay artist friend of hers, and meets Adam, an expensively dressed architect who studied in Berlin and has an office there. Looks to be under 30. Sylvie is smitten. He walks her home after the opening, but her hopes of sleeping with him are dashed when he jokes, “I didn't know you were a cradle robber.”

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After a few more failures with younger men, Sylvie starts using a gigolo service recommended by her friend Irena. One morning she wakes up in bed with a gigolo when Jan calls, saying he bought her latest book and heard from Judita, who said she wants to interview him for a school assignment. Sylvie knows that's not the real reason Judita wants to meet.

She remembers the time she blew Jan in a movie theater with him stroking her head and saying every man is a pedophile at heart. He was joking. Jan's friends would wink at her and she'd wonder if they knew. Judita said it was part of the "psyche-out" that "fucked her up." When she hears him sigh her name over the phone, "something deep inside me trembled. Something inside melting like an iceberg, and the methane from the melting permafrost is like a gust of feelings that was hibernating inside me." She notes that he once told her, "You can do better," and "He was the first person who ever believed in me."

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Irena, Sylvie's friend, who works as a therapist, tells her that the reason Edita told Oto that Jan wrote Sylvie's first book is because she's jealous of her. "She's jealous of what she doesn't have. She wants to humiliate you. Either forget about it or prove she's wrong."

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Sylvia and Judita show up at Jan's apartment. He introduces them to a young woman, Sára, who from the way she's dressed, "obviously doesn't work in culture." Jan introduces her as his wife. Asks what Judita wants to know. "About your latest work," she replies.

Jan, who received the national literature prize for his last novel, says he feels increasingly liberated from the expectations of critics and readers, writes basically for joy, and unlike when he was young, no longer forces himself to write. "It's my report on the world as I see it." Says he's mainly interested in language.

Judita: "I thought the point of a book was to say something."

Jan: "Of course, but meaning is born from words and that's what makes a text rich."

"Rich?"

"Imagine a jungle. A wild jungle of meanings and metaphors."

"To me that just sounds like ducking the question, not to mention old-fashioned."

Sylvie observes, in her thoughts: "My daughter has predator's eyes."

"What have you actually read by me?" Jan asks.

Judita doesn't answer the question. Before they came, Judita told Sylvie she only needed to read a few excerpts to see that Jan's work was lacking in any insight.

Judita says, "The first time you slept with my mom, she was wasted and you knew it." Jan says they drank all the time, so he doesn't remember. Sára shouts that Judita is falsely accusing Jan.

Judita asks her, "Were you there?"

Sylvie parries, "Were you?"

Judita says, "It's the principle, Mom. Plus there are your journals. You're scared shitless of him. After all these years. Just look at yourself."

She asks Jan: "What did you have that was so important you couldn't accompany my mom to the hospital for her abortion?"

"He didn't know, don't be stupid," says Sára.

Jan says nothing.

Sára: "Didn't you hear your mom? Didn't you hear her say he didn't know?"

Jan: "Your mother knew very well what she was getting into. We both wanted what happened between us. No one forced her into it. I helped her to believe in her talent. And I supported her financially, too, in case you're interested."

"All the worse," says Judita.

Sylvie thinks: "I feel a sting somewhere inside me. A shame I never felt before. Something between me and Jan ended only now and I deeply regret it."

Judita: "You made her into a whore."

Jan: "I loved her."

Judita: "You were 25 years older. She was 17. You had power over her. You took advantage of who you were and how old you were."

Jan: "She was of age. I didn't break any law."

Judita: "She never got over it."

"Evidence," says Jan. "As far as I know, your mother is a successful writer."

"My mom is a wreck, you asshole."

Judith yells at her mom not to be a coward.

"It's time to go," Sylvie tells her daughter.

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As she walks onstage to receive a prize, Sylvie remembers a time when Jan kissed her on the neck from behind and fireworks went off in her head. That was thirty-five years ago, almost to the day. "Somewhere in my head, and in all my being, something fundamental to my life happened, and Judita claims that it marked her forever too."

In her speech, Sylvie says we thought that once there were McDonald's everywhere, there would finally be a world of peace and justice. McDonald's was undoubtedly better than the Holocaust and Communist concentration camps. That was how Jan's generation looked at it. Just like a lot of young progressives today believe that for anything fundamental to change, we have to attack without compromise and subject the disobedient territories to a new regime. She rejects the tendency of women to underestimate themselves, pointing out her success as a writer, and "proudly noting that I am the mother of two adolescents, with the words 'Every day I learn something new from my children.' "

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Sylvie visits her father to see if he has the manuscript of her first novel, which was inspired by him. When she finds it, all she can think about “is the relationship between the manuscript and Jan’s green pen. There isn’t the slightest doubt about the relationship between the green ballpoint and my text, and it does nothing to change the relationship between my father and me.”

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Judita doesn’t come to see Sylvie get her prize. Her son Ondřej sits in the audience with his boyfriend Marek, and next to them her mother. “Prouder than anyone.”

“The greatest gender crimes have nothing to do with illegal behavior,” I say to the packed auditorium, “but with biological givens, which my feminism has proven itself to be absolutely powerless over.” She thinks about the letter she saw that Judita wrote to the three colleges where Jan teaches. The other women she met with who Jan allegedly abused. “His wrongdoings have had a profound influence on all his victims, and he has expressed no regret for his behavior,” says Judita’s letter. But, Sylvie thinks, what if only half of that is true?

At the conclusion of her speech, she returns to “the two halves of the gender tragedy: the fact that women can be raped and the lot, or gift, of conception. In fact those are only two-thirds of the gender tragedy. The last third is aging. As a woman desiring love, I am invisible to men no matter how I look or what I’ve been through. And for a brief, intoxicating moment, when I’m capable of a generous detachment, I try to see this fact in the only sensible way—as an opportunity for my own newfound freedom.”

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