

Josef Pánek: Portrait of a Scientist in a Postindustrial Society

Jakub, an unkempt Czech astrophysicist in his forties, arrives in Dublin to present a groundbreaking astronomical theory: contrary to accepted models, the Milky Way will not collide with the Andromeda galaxy, but with the Large Magellanic Cloud in approximately 5.1 billion years. His discovery redefines both the structure and fate of our galaxy. But triumph quickly turns to disillusionment when his manuscript is rejected by a top scientific journal—not on scientific grounds, but through vague and dismissive peer-review comments like “I don’t like it.” Shaken and furious, Jakub abandons the conference and drifts into the ruins of Dublin’s industrial periphery to drink, unravel, and reflect.

What follows is a chaotic, poetic monologue—one long day and night of walking, drinking, remembering, and ranting. Jakub’s thoughts spiral through childhood traumas in communist Czechoslovakia, institutional violence, philosophical digressions, and a brutal reckoning with the current state of science. He recalls being punished as a gifted but unruly child, silenced by teachers and misunderstood by his mother. His estrangement only deepened through military service, academia, and the scientific establishment.

To Jakub, science has become corrupted—a careerist system where innovation is crushed by mediocrity and conformity. Peer review is portrayed as a mechanism of suppression, anonymity used to eliminate competition. Scientific conferences are not forums of inquiry, but corporate-sponsored spectacles filled with networking, ego, and shallow performance. Jakub compares himself to Galileo and Copernicus—visionaries exiled for their truth-telling.

Throughout his journey, he collides with others who challenge or expose his worldview. His girlfriend, Lenka, calls from Prague to accuse him of hypocrisy—scorning materialism while living off grants, advocating nonviolence while training in Krav Maga. Their argument escalates into a breakup. Later, a receptionist named Beatrice recounts her own history of systemic sexual abuse, mocking Jakub’s intellectual crisis as a privileged man’s luxury. Their lives intersect painfully but incompletely.

Jakub wanders through Dublin’s decaying infrastructure—razor-wire fences, rusted train wheels, empty ports—and fixates on a childhood memory: a submerged, broken railway wheel beneath a bridge in Prague. It becomes a symbol of his inner world—beautiful, broken, and self-destructive. In a pivotal scene, he returns to the conference center and is denied entry for not displaying his badge. A celebrity scientist mocks him, and Jakub walks away rather than conform.

In bars, alleyways, and abandoned places, Jakub debates students, workers, and strangers. Some see him as a madman; others admire his clarity. Through it all, he grieves the decline of science, art, and truth under a collapsing postindustrial civilization. War is normalized, education hollow, and even scientific discovery has become a commodity.

Yet amid the bitterness, the novel ends on a fragile note of hope. Sitting beside the river, hungover and lost, Jakub remembers advice from more pragmatic colleagues: survive within the system, do real work in secret. He considers that others like him might still exist—scientists

committed to truth, working quietly within the machinery. He decides to stop drinking, return to his hotel, and submit his paper again—not for glory, but for the idea itself.

Portrait of a Scientist in a Postindustrial Society is not a traditional novel. It's a furious, sprawling, often abrasive monologue—a howl from the edge of reason. Through Jakub's self-lacerating voice, Pánek crafts a searing portrait of the modern intellectual: alienated, brilliant, paranoid, sometimes hypocritical, but still fighting to believe in science as a force for truth in a corrupted world.