



**WINNER OF THE TOP CZECH LITERARY AWARD
(2018)**



ARGO HIGHLIGHTS **LITERARY FICTION**

Portrait of a Scientist in a Postindustrial Society

by **Josef Pánek**



A gripping, provocative, and darkly ironic manifesto for anyone disillusioned with the contemporary world of science

Portrait of a Scientist in a Postindustrial Society is not a conventional novel but a furious, sprawling, and often abrasive monologue – a howl from the edge of reason. Through the protagonist's self-lacerating voice, Pánek creates a searing portrait of the modern intellectual: alienated, brilliant, paranoid, sometimes hypocritical, yet still clinging to the belief in science as a force for truth in a corrupted world. He exposes how research today is driven by money and media attention, while genuine insight is left to wither.

Pánek's distinctive style, giving the impression of a hurried and spoken form of language, flows naturally, maintaining the tension and heightening the absurdity of a chaotic world. The readability and believability are bolstered by the author's experiences as an émigré, thanks to which the novel reads almost like a travelogue.

"A singular, uncompromising voice that challenges the norms of scientific and literary discourse alike. An experimental, expressive style rarely seen in Central European fiction."

— *Critics' podcast*

Josef Pánek (b. 1966) earned his master's and PhD in Prague, then worked in Norway and Australia before returning to Czechia. He debuted with a short story collection, *The Opal Digger* (2013), and his second book, *Love in the Time of Global Climate Change* (2017), won the Magnesia Litera, Czechia's highest literary honor, in 2018. The novel has been **sold to 12 countries**. His latest work is a portrait of a scientist undone by truth – and by a system that no longer wants to hear it.



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Portrét vědce v systému postindustriální společnosti

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English summary of the book

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.

English sample

translated by Bruce Bybee

The celebrity screamed, "What are these provocations you're throwing at me?"

"Yeah, exactly," the guard nodded. "I told him twice already that he doesn't look right, his badge isn't visible, and I didn't let him through; and those ripped jeans of his, that t-shirt, and that filthy jacket. Oh yeah, and he's got something with his hands; some kind of injury; and when he talks to you up close, you'll smell the booze; yuck. He's probably hammered too; likely why he's babbling about, you know...?"

I defended myself: "And what's a guy with a gun doing here, in a conference center (I pointed at the guard)? It's completely ridiculous: take the forum for instance, the very place we're standing in right now, originally a word from the old, ancient Greeks for a space of free & public gatherings, public polemic and discussion, and today it's about presenting the latest scientific discoveries, which belong to everyone in the world! The lay public funds science with taxes, so it should have the freedom to enter and attend the conference, that's why this, i.e., this exact spot (I pointed), is called a forum; instead, we've got armed guards, entrance for a hefty fee and with a sign hanging 'round your neck, in a white shirt and pressed trousers; or maybe a full-on suit, huh? Are we scientists or politicians? Meanwhile, I haven't slept or eaten in four days, I'm just drinking, mentally at rock bottom, 'cause I'm powerless, 'cause they killed my discovery and probably want to steal it from me, even though what they killed is still 750k ly away (I pointed towards my cloud through the glass roof of the conference center), otherwise our entire nearby universe, incl. our own and neighboring galaxies, wouldn't even function! And they're gonna kill it! We've been observing the structure of our galactic surroundings with telescopes, both ground-based and on satellites 'round the Earth, for centuries, and no, no, it does not behave according to current, established, standard theories, and no one had an explanation for it until we, i.e., me and my co-authors, came along, and still, they killed it and rudely cussed us out that they won't allow it, that it's wrong, that we're liars, that they don't like it! OK, they don't burn people at the stake for revolutionary discoveries anymore! Except now it continues by other means, where instead of fire, we have a one-sided anonymous peer review process for scientific publishing. And now, to top it all off, a prominent and famous scientist (I pointed at her, i.e., the celebrity, frowning and glaring at me) is going to explain to me in one sentence that it's all fine, for god's sake!"

The celebrity frowned, "What's this ideology you're throwing at me?"

I didn't back down: "Sure, keep on repeating that the armed security at the conference center is here 'cause of the homeless, the terrorists, and others, so they don't intrude, and I'll tell you, with complete logic, that OK, yes, it's partly 'cause of them, but mainly 'cause of business, 'cause only where there's business, are there weapons, and here, it's already approaching the kinda business run by those who start wars and created terrorism, various people, e.g., owners of currency-issuing banks and multinational corporations, who you don't know and will never meet, the ones you catch fleeting glimpses of in the media, news that pops up and disappears, one of the vilest & most insidious phenomena of our (modern) world, as a device to manipulate the public and to thereby achieve & maintain power over it through fear & dread for their lives, i.e., basic, instinctive human reactions to mortal threat, and further through both mental and physical weakness, intentionally caused by an excess of passive and mentally undemanding entertainment through electronic media, consumerism, hyper-processed foods, and relative comfort. Yes, catching terrorists and driving out the homeless means public recognition, voters, and electoral victories, i.e., power, but not for politicians, they're mere pawns, who publicly, through democratic governance and laws, carry out what others create, i.e., the system of the modern world, and only those are the ones with power, the ones who spark revolutions, coups, wars, and pogroms in the struggle for power, they only care about power, they don't give a damn about climate change, global migration, the unequal distribution of the world's wealth, or pandemics, for them, these are just tools in their fight, they profit from them despite needing nothing more, just wanting more than others have, i.e., more power, so they secretly fund terrorism, suicidally carried out by mentally ill and fanatical individuals, as we occasionally catch glimpses of in media reports, the fact that innocent people die 'cause of it, in vile, treacherous ways, with no chance to defend themselves or escape, is a tool for them to manipulate the public and maintain obedience. Have you never once thought, what if there is no other way than having these sickly ambitious but simultaneously stupid people in power, real power, these celebrities of public and social life that the broad masses in their ignorance—caused, among other things, by a lack of access to scientific knowledge—uncritically admire and worship for their material wealth will always, by necessity, abuse rather than use scientific knowledge and render it counterproductive, and what if our work and ideas are therefore pointless and misguided...? That you'll never get anywhere, not to the old Celtic tower or the lighthouse, not to the sea or the port, just like you'll never reach freedom or a life without fear, when in our modern world we are left only with fences and walls topped with barbed wire, private property marked NO TRESPASSING, armed guards, cops, cameras, and EXIT ONLY signs, even here at a scientific conference in a conference center?"

The celebrity objected: "What is this paranoia you're throwing at me? Why are you dragging the general public into this, what do they have to do with science, man? This member of our security team might actually be right that you're drunk. Go get some sleep first, man, then come back. I refuse to continue this

conversation. The general public is, for understandable reasons, forbidden from entering the conference center, and that includes anyone who hasn't paid the participation fee; that's entirely justified. Please," she turned to the guard, "escort him out. You have my permission—as you can see on my conference badge (she gestured to her belly) (hanging there was her participant badge with her name and below it two wide stripes—a purple and a silver—indicating a keynote speaker and mentor, along with a brown stripe of a member of the conference's organizing committee), I have the authority to have any inappropriately behaving individuals removed from the conference center, and beyond that we have a conference code of conduct and the center's house rules in place. Please." She pointed at me.

The guard—I couldn't believe my eyes—put his hand on his holster and stepped towards me; I stared at him wide-eyed and yelled: "Have you lost your mind? We're at a conference center! You're seriously gonna pull a gun on me—here, of all places? No way! I'm not going anywhere!"

The celebrity stepped in: "Wait, wait, wait, we do not want a scandal (it's bad for business). You (she turned to the guard) please take your hand off that holster before someone notices. And you (she pointed at me) stop arguing about the obvious; wear your participant badge visibly, i.e., around your neck, like any normal scientist; your discovery does not exempt you from your obligation to follow proper conduct at the conference center as anywhere else. Yes, yes, you may have made a groundbreaking discovery, I'm not ruling that out; but you must understand that anything of that sort shakes up standard, established theories, and that generates resistance; surely you understand that, don't you? You're causing problems with that alone; and now this; have some sense, man."

I defended myself: "No, I won't wear that 'round my neck. I'm neither a sheep nor a walking billboard. If I followed the rules, I'd never have made the kinda discovery I did."

"Yes—and just as easily, you could become a thief, a murderer, or a terrorist, and defend it by claiming you made (she waved her hand to the sky) some kind of discovery! Judging by how you behave, they probably rightly, completely justifiably refused to publish your discovery. No: you, like everyone else, even e.g., me, a prominent scientist with achievements, must follow the rules."

"For god's sake, surely you understand that this is about which rules; as a scientist, you should know it's necessary to distinguish, not to see things black and white. And we are scientists here and this is about science; although...I'm not even sure about that anymore! Not even about which rules, since almost none of them actually work! Our social rules led to the creation of racism, terrorism, religious hatred, hooliganism, wars and their export; rules in science have led to its commercialization and conventionality, and thus to its partial

dysfunction. Our universe, e.g., does not behave according to our rules at all! It behaves completely differently! And my discovery is proof of the failure of our established rules. That's why you all oppose it so fiercely."

The celebrity frowned again: "What are these philosophical musings you're throwing at me? Philosophy has no place in the exact sciences, man!"

I buried my face in my hands; lamenting: "And that's what a scientific celebrity in astrophysics tells me! Do you even realize that nearly 100 years ago, our colleagues like Bohr, Pauli, Einstein, Heisenberg, and others already understood that their discoveries touch on things like the nature of human life and its meaning, and that it's up to them to interpret, i.e., philosophize, 'cause laypeople, incl. philosophers, can't understand the mathematical language of physics...? No, this makes no sense. No!"

I lifted my head, turned in silence, walked across the forum, and exited the conference center (through the EXIT ONLY door), making my way along the line of my colleagues, i.e., scientists in my field from 'round the world, waiting to enter the center. Every single one of them had a garishly colored conference participant badge hanging 'round their neck on a wide ribbon, covered in loud, colorful ads. Their line stretched all the way to the Liffey, c. 1 km.

They were looking me over: I had no badge hanging 'round my neck and a scuffed—but not filthy, as the guard had claimed—leather jacket and torn jeans.

It struck me: Jesus, it's exactly like when they used to punish me in kindergarten by taping my mouth shut and making me kneel in the corner because I talked during nap time and didn't want to sleep!

I told myself: "And yet I didn't do anything wrong: just discovered an intergalactic cloud with the mass of a small galaxy, still out there, just beyond our own galaxy in the direction of M31, about 750k ly away; it's there because it's determined by the laws of physics—it's simple, natural, and beautiful, otherwise it wouldn't work. But down here on Earth, it's as if completely different, nonsense laws apply, even though it's still the same physics, same universe, same energy, yet it's as if it wasn't like that at all!"

I walked along the line of my colleagues from 'round the world (trailing me with a silent gaze) all the way to that pretty, white, modern-styled bridge over the Liffey and crossed it; bought a bottle of whiskey at the nearest shop on the other side, made my way to my old spot on the riverbank across from the

conference center, and sat down there on a rusty white pipe cover; in despair, I didn't understand anything and had no idea what had just happened or what I was to do next.

Grants for publishing Czech literature abroad

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Ministry of Culture Czech Republic (gov.cz)



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