



**WINNER OF THE TOP CZECH LITERARY AWARD
CRIME STORY (2023)**



ARGO HIGHLIGHTS **CRIME FICTION**

The Beast



by **František Šmehlík**

Political corruption, media scandal, and murder collide

When a journalist exposes the Interior Minister's shady underworld connections, a televised confrontation ignites national outrage. Days later, the journalist and his girlfriend are found dead – executed with chilling precision. As investigator Laura Ara and her team delve deeper, they uncover links to an older, unsolved case and a tangled web of political cover-ups, mafia ties, and foreign interference. Is this merely an attempt to silence a journalist – or part of something far darker?

Hear the Stags Singing



by **František Šmehlík**

A murder in the mountains, a village full of secrets

In a remote village in the Beskydy Mountains, a young girl's mutilated body is discovered. The brutality points to a deranged predator, but as the investigation unfolds, something even more disturbing emerges. Ostrava homicide chief Miroslav Lada and his team explore the village's hidden undercurrents: drugs, resentment, and long-buried trauma. Suspects include a failed musician, a reclusive goatherd, and a man whose son may have witnessed more than he understands. Driven by their own personal demons as much as by duty, the investigators must stop the killer before they strike again.

“A sophisticated world of police investigators, quirky yet very human and real.”

— Kosmas

František Šmehlík (b. 1995) is a writer from Ostrava with a background in competitive judo – he is a three-time national champion. He studied Czech Language and Literature in Olomouc and draws literary inspiration from Milan Kundera, Bohumil Hrabal, and Ladislav Fuks. His debut *Hear the Stags Singing* (2021) was praised for its strong plotting and deep psychological insight into life in a close-knit rural community. *The Beast* (2022) launched a three-part crime series featuring chief investigator Laura Ara.



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***The Beast* by František Šmehlík**

summary

The novel is comprised of six lengthy chapters, but the plot takes place over just a few January and February weeks.

The book starts with a prologue set sometime in the 1980s when Czechoslovakia was still ruled by socialism. It depicts an incident during which Private Nowicky has a drunken officer torn apart by dogs.

Twenty-five years later, two corpses are found in a cottage in the Šumperk region: journalist Matěj Jahn has been shot dead and his girlfriend, student Lenka Podlešáková, has been brutally stabbed to death and later found by her mother. The first to arrive at the scene is Josef Změlík, the head of the Šumperk crime unit, whose son went to high school with Lenka.

The leads point in two different directions. The male victim, a journalist who published several articles shortly before his death accusing the Minister of the Interior, Štěpán Maliňák, of being connected to businessman Filip Horký, one of the main figures of the underworld, is suspected to have been murdered by the mafia, perhaps on the instructions of politicians. The fatal injuries sustained by the female victim, however, seem to point to a serial killer referred to in case files as the Obstetrician. Suspicions of the crime being politically motivated grow after Maliňák unexpectedly turns up at the crime scene.

The investigation is led by the Olomouc crime unit in cooperation with organized crime unit investigator Terea Bergerová and two criminal investigators from Ostrava, Václav Pesta and Aleš Černý. The team is headed by the very peculiar major Laura Ara along with the young investigator Adam Prut, and complemented by Dr. Hlaváček, a psychologist who specializes in mass murderer profiling.

Laura Ara is inclined to believe that the murders are the work of the Obstetrician, but the team of investigators cannot seem to figure out why the killer would make a comeback after years of silence. For political reasons, the team decides to go public with this version of events.

The gun found near the scene of the crime is traced back to Attila Krasniq, a Kosovo-born hitman and employee of Horký. The search for him eventually leads the investigators to Zagreb, as they suspect he may have found refuge with Croatian underworld boss Jurij Gjakova. It turns out Gjakova has no idea about Krasniq's whereabouts, but when the team talks to local criminal investigators, they learn that years earlier, Croatia saw the murders of

several young women committed with the same *modus operandi*. However, before the Czech team has a chance to find out any details, they are forced to return to the Czech Republic. Meanwhile, Maliňák resigns as the Minister of the Interior and is replaced by the young politician Patrik Voňavka, who used to date Lenka Podlešáková when they were in high school. The investigators eventually find Attila Krasniq deceased near the cottage where Lenka Podlešáková and Matěj Jahn were murdered. Shortly afterwards, another woman is murdered. All signs point to the version of events in which the Obstetrician is the one committing these murders.

Croatian criminal investigators arrive in the Czech Republic to inform their Czech colleagues about three cases that resemble the Obstetrician murders. One of the suspects in the three murder cases was a friend of Krasniq's, embassy official Artur Nowicky, who disappeared after the third murder before he could be interrogated. When the Croatian team asked Czech Police for help with their investigation, it became clear Nowicky had disappeared without a trace. It's becoming clear Nowicky is the killer. Eventually, thanks to the president's intervention, the team of investigators learns Nowicky's current identity from former intelligence chief Ladislav Provazník. Nowicky now goes by the name of Lukáš Hájek and teaches at the Šumperk Academy. Lenka Podlešáková was among his former students.

The crime novel, which follows the investigation of a series of murders, dons the garb of a thriller. Dominik Změlík, a former classmate of Lenka's and the son of the head of the Šumperk crime unit, discovers that his younger sister is having an affair with an older man. He secretly follows her and finds out that the older man in question is his former teacher Lukáš Hájek. In the meantime, the police are getting ready to arrest Hájek. The SWAT team is on the way, but when Josef Změlík learns that his daughter is with Hájek, he decides to seek him out himself to rescue his daughter instead of waiting for the SWAT team to arrive. Wanting to avenge Lenka, new Minister of the Interior Patrik Voňavka decides to go out to find Hájek as well. When the SWAT team breaks down the door to Hájek's house, he flees the scene, but Voňavka knows where to find him. He fires a shot at Hájek but misses. Hájek eventually commits suicide, letting himself be torn apart by Doberman Pinschers.

The novel ends with the government resigning under the weight of the recent scandals, the instigator being Ladislav Provazník and his puppet master, businessman Robert Jánošík. Filip Horký is discovered dead in a sandpit lake. Robert Jánošík gets ready to take hold of the reins over the country.

Hear the Stags Singing by František Šmehlík

summary

The crime novel is set in the small village of Halešná in Beskyd Mountains and partly in Slovakia as well.

The novel begins with a prologue in which an eight-year-old boy sneaks out of his grandmother's house at night to go to the woods and try shooting his bow and arrow, which he was gifted by his father. He hits a deer, but it runs away. On his way back, the boy sees a man carrying a sack over his shoulder. He is scared and decides not to tell anyone about his little adventure.

The novel's opening chapter takes us to a press conference in Ostrava dedicated to a recently solved case. We meet two police officers from the Regional Directorate, Colonel Josef Lada and Major David Krejčí, and later other Ostrava sleuthhounds, Major Václav Pesta, Captain Aleš Černý, Captain Petr Mráček and a new addition to the homicide unit, Captain Roman Nitka.

The following day, the homicide detectives are called to a new case, a murder in the settlement of Halešná. Local virtuoso Julius Ludwig has reported the murder of a young woman, Iva Hulová, whom he discovered when he was walking his dogs in the morning. The woman was strangled to death and her breasts were chopped off by the killer. The investigators argue about the motive of the crime. A search of the victim's house reveals two empty glasses, an empty vodka bottle, and a stash of drugs hidden away in the couch. The victim's boyfriend, soccer player Ondřej Jasný, is among the suspects. The investigators explore several possible scenarios and conclude that the murder must have been committed by a local. The evidence eventually leads them to a local Roma man, Marek Gomboč, the victim's childhood friend. Their suspicions grow when a drug dealer who knew the suspect is murdered. On top of that, they find what looks like a shrine dedicated to Iva in Marek's house, and forensic evidence collected inside the house proves that Marek was with Iva prior to her death. Marek eventually confesses to having spent time with her that day, saying they celebrated his birthday and ended up in bed together. However, he denies responsibility for her murder, claiming he loved her. When little Honza finally plucks up the courage to testify, Marek's future starts looking even bleaker. Encouraged by Captain Černý, little Honza picks Marek out of a lineup, identifying him as the man he saw and believed to be the powerful Guardian of the Forest that fateful night.

The case seems to be solved. However, Major Cesta is not satisfied with the outcome. He believes that Marek is innocent, so he decides to defy his superiors and investigate further. He

enlists the help of rookie investigator Roman Nitka, who is on board not because he has high hopes for Nitka's theory, but because he has the hots for one of the witnesses, Iva's friend Sára. Step by step, they uncover clues that reveal Nitka might be on the right track. At the same time, they learn that the neighborly relationships in the village are far from what they first appeared to be. The pair discovers that there is a link between those connected to the case and a woman who has gone missing in Slovakia. When the investigators double-check the alibi of one of the victim's neighbors, the seemingly proper young widower Mr. Zapletal, they discover that the CCTV footage that placed him at a hotel in Katowice at the time of the murder has been manipulated. They uncover that Zapletal is a drug mule, smuggling in drugs from Poland and reselling them here as well as providing them to his lover.

The climax of the novel has a thrilleresque feel. Sofia, the missing Slovak girl, has been held captive by Zapletal, who now takes another hostage—Sára, who regularly watches his little son. When the noose begins to tighten around his neck, he murders the Slovak girl and flees into the woods with Sára as his hostage. Roman Nitka wants to rescue Sára, so he convinces Aleš Černý to join him in pursuit of Zapletal without waiting for reinforcement. Aleš, who is an avid runner and is in better shape than Roman, runs ahead but ends up falling into Zapletal's deadly trap. Roman gets wounded, but eventually saves Sára and shoots Zapletal dead.

The novel's epilogue depicts the funeral of Captain Aleš Černý, at which his pregnant widow Barbora meets Sára, whom the captain rescued. Barbora considers getting an abortion, one of the reasons being the high likelihood of giving birth to a mentally disabled child. Sára manages to convince Barbora to keep the baby. She herself wants to take care of Zapletal's orphaned son.