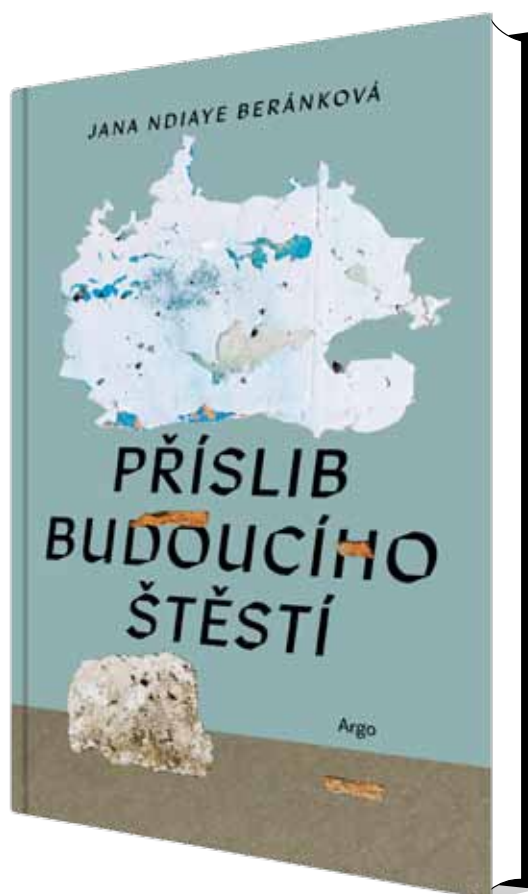




The Promise of Future Happiness

by **Jana Ndiaye Beránková**



A deeply human novel about a fading world of books, memories, and grand ideals

In contemporary Prague, a city suspended between memory and amnesia, the narrator is trying to find meaning again after the collapse of a relationship and of her own certainties — in writing, in love, and in the world around her. Her life is disrupted by an encounter with Nino, an ageing revolutionary living in a kind of inner exile, a man who embodies vanished ideals and dreams of a different future. Their walks through the city gradually turn into an intimate and intellectual dialogue about the past, memory, and a world that seems to have lost its capacity to believe in change. Prague emerges as a city of paradoxes, where high culture mingles with kitsch, history with tourism, ruins of love with ruins of communism, and grand ideas with the banality of everyday life. *The Promise of Future Happiness* is a subtle, dreamlike novel about the meeting of two lonely people, the fragile boundary between reality and imagination, and whether it is still possible to believe in love, radical political transformation, and the future in an age that seems to have come after the end of history.

Jana Ndiaye Beránková currently works at the Institute of Philosophy of the Czech Academy of Sciences, studied and lived abroad for many years, including at the École Normale Supérieure in Paris and Columbia University in New York. In her debut novel, she develops a distinctive mode of writing that remains relatively unusual in Czech literature, drawing on her knowledge of French philosophy, the history of Western left-wing movements, the theory and history of architecture, the work of Walter Benjamin, Central European avant-garde movements, and French prose.

Combining dreams, memories, reflections on particular places, and an all-encompassing perspective unbound by conventional coordinates of time and space, the novel *The Promise of Future Happiness* turns prose into an experimental instrument of thought.



The Promise of Future Happiness

SUMMARY

A Prague university lecturer approaching forty sits before a blank page, unable to begin the book she envisions. Separated from Louis, her French husband, and trapped in a painful divorce, she is haunted by the memory of her father, an architect whose final years were consumed by Alzheimer's disease. On solitary walks through Prague, she moves through grief, digital distraction, and a mounting sense that both her life and the wider world have reached an impasse. Then she meets Nino, an elderly Italian exile whose unusual elegance and inexhaustible conversation disrupt her isolation.

Nino has lived in Prague for almost forty years. His home in an Art Nouveau villa overflows with books, artwork, photographs, and relics of political struggle and private life. Erudite, irascible, and suspicious of the post-socialist world, he carries within him the defeated revolutionary hopes of the 1960s and 1970s. Their first conversation shifts among Czech, French, and English, with translation never quite conveying everything they mean. Yet the narrator feels that she has somehow known him before. He becomes her friend, interlocutor, awakening her fascination with a revolutionary past she knows only indirectly.

Over the following months, they wander through Prague's streets, gardens, housing developments, libraries, and bars. Their conversations make history speak through the city's stones, buildings, and antique books, connecting Prague to revolution, exile, fascism, and the European left. In Nino's company, the narrator's stalled imagination begins moving again, and the words that had refused to come finally pour onto the page. But their friendship is never simple. His frailty, insomnia, and obsession with his archive cast a shadow over their closeness, while she realizes that she may like the figure he awakens in her imagination more than the difficult, aging man himself.

The narrator's encounters with Nino continually draw her back into her own past. She recalls the mixture of suffering and tenderness in her past relationship, which made the divorce so difficult. Her father's memory loss is set against Nino's compulsive preservation of books, papers, and objects: one man forgets the twentieth century, while the other is almost buried beneath it. Around them, monuments are demolished, histories repackaged, and ruins polished into spectacles. News of war, climate crisis, and migration press in upon their intimate conversations, placing two vulnerable lives against the upheavals of twentieth-century Europe and an increasingly unstable global present.

The fragile balance breaks when the narrator reads Nino an excerpt that quotes their conversations and transforms him into a literary character. Nino refuses to be the subject of her anthropological research, arguing that everyone has a right to their own image and that she cannot exploit another person's life for the purposes of fiction. The quarrel raises an unsettling possibility at the heart of her art: after describing how she felt as an object in her marriage, she may have done something analogous to her friend by turning him into material for her book.

At that moment, the real man and the character separate. A luminous fictional double, Nino's "light-body", accompanies her home but soon grows cold and silent. Dreams, recollections, and immediate experience overlap ever more completely. When she returns to Nino's villa, the windows are dark, his name has disappeared from the doorbell, and no one answers. His fate is left unexplained and it is unclear whether he was a real person or a specter of a long-forgotten past. Fleeing through Prague, the narrator senses the dead and the absent walking behind her. She opens a damp notebook and begins to write before she forgets.

The Promise of Future Happiness is an essayistic, associative novel about friendship, political disillusionment, the possibility of radical social transformation of the present, and the dangerous intimacy of turning life into art. Its restless first-person voice moves from architecture and revolutionary theory to bad food, bodily frailty, and grotesque humor, making Prague a place where the past continually intrudes upon the present and high culture mixes with the commodified low-culture of the post-communist city. At its center is a woman recovering her voice after a painful marriage and confronting both literature's power to preserve

what has been lost and the ethical danger of turning another person into material for writing. The glance of a stranger and the closing vision of imagination coating a rose in crystals after it is submerged in a mineral spring leave her poised between what she cannot recover and the promise of future happiness evoking Stendhal's theories.