



#27: Absurdist fiction from Slovakia

Jana Beňová on post-communist life in Petržalka



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Welcome to Bookmarked, a weekly newsletter following my journey as I read one book from every country. If you're enjoying my project, I'd love it if you shared Bookmarked with a friend.



I read this week's book, *Seeing People Off* by Slovak author Jana Beňová, in a single sitting. At just 126 pages it's a slim novel that offers a brief glimpse into life in post-communist Bratislava through a series of absurd, loosely connected vignettes.

The book follows Elza and Ian, a young couple who live in a suffocating flat in Petržalka, a borough of Bratislava which has been filled with high-rise apartment buildings, having previously been the site of a labour camp during Nazi occupation. Elza, who narrates parts of the book, lives with her husband Ian and their friends Rebeka and Lukas. Together, the quartet spend their days discussing David Lynch films; drinking wine in their favourite spot in Café Hyena; and roaming the city. As a foursome, they have developed an unusual sponsorship arrangement, whereby they take it in turns for one of them to work in order to financially support the other three, who are free to follow their own artistic pursuits or otherwise spend their time as they please.

Stylistically, *Seeing People Off* is more like a prose poem or a collection of flash fiction than a novel. It's not that things don't happen—Elza has an affair, Ian's mother develops dementia, Rebeka is institutionalised—but the book's plot points are scattered throughout its narrative haphazardly. And the transitions between the book's vignettes are digressive; more than once a story that feels like it's going somewhere leads to a dead end. Nonetheless, Elza's inner life is richly described and I especially enjoyed her reflections on her youth.

My childhood was marked by socialist materialism. That is, until the arrival of the new girl. She moved to Waldemar Street when I was twelve. Her father was a socialist diplomat. She had completely different toys than I... The new girl had Monchhichi and Barbie, listened to Limahl, Duran Duran, Nena, and Nina Hagen, and cut pictures out of *Bravo* magazine... I liked Monchhichi best of all. I asked my parents to buy me a Monchhichi somewhere. In our shops they didn't have them and my father bought me some stupid mole as a substitute. Mama wrote one at a time to all our relatives and friends who had emigrated and lived in the West. She asked them for God's sake to send me a Monchhichi. She wrote them that it was a top priority... We were just picking grapes in the garden when the postman brought a package... In the package was a Monchhichi. My life could now go on, my body grow, my mind develop. I know that I would live.

Bratislava's history plays a central role in the book, as do the effects of collective trauma. Petržalka has witnessed horrors under Nazism and Stalinism and, in the present day, anti-Semitism seems again to be on the rise—something that Beňová explores through satire. Take, for example, Elza's short-lived job on a failing reality TV show that reenacts life at a concentration camp or the description of Elza's aunt's care home as a “youth camp for... [people] in old age.”

For me, *Seeing People Off* was a little too chaotic. Though Beňová does a great job of describing the claustrophobia of living in Petržalka and I appreciated her experimental take on how trauma can affect entire districts of people, at times I struggled to hold everything together. But still this is a highly original book, which is well worth your time.

Seeing People Off by Jana Beňová, translated by Janet Livingstone (Two Dollar Radio, 2017 / Martinus, 2008)

More books by Slovak authors

Here's a short list of other recommendations:

- *Bellevue* by Ivana Dobráková, tr. by Julia and Peter Sherwood
- *Ilona. My Life with the Bard* by Jana Juráňová, tr. by Julia and Peter Sherwood
- *Samko Tále's Cemetery Book* by Daniela Kapitáňová, tr. Julia Sherwood
- *The Equestrienne* by Uršula Kovalyk, tr. Julia and Peter Sherwood
- *The Night Circus and Other Stories* by Uršula Kovalyk, tr. by Julia and Peter Sherwood

What have you read recently?

If you've read a brilliant book in translation or want to pass on a recommendation, I'd love to hear about it! For this project, I'm focussing on contemporary fiction and short stories, with a preference for female authors—but I won't be too dogmatic about it so do share recommendations that don't quite fit the bill, too.

You can get in touch by replying to this email or leaving a comment. I'll be featuring your recommendations in upcoming newsletters, and I'll keep a growing list [here](#).

Bookmarked is written by Tabatha Leggett. Thank you to Julia Sherwood and Magdalena Mullek from [Slovak Literature in English Translation](#) for their recommendations. If you know someone who would enjoy this newsletter, please forward it to them!



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