



# The Engineer of Human Souls

*Josef Škvorecký, Paul Wilson (Translator)*

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*The Engineer of Human Souls* is a labyrinthine comic novel that investigates the journey and plight of novelist Danny Smiricky, a Czech immigrant to Canada. As the novel begins, he is a professor of American literature at a college in Toronto. Out of touch with his young students, and hounded by the Czech secret police, Danny is let loose to roam between past and present, adopting whatever identity that he chooses or has been imposed upon him by History.

As adventuresome, episodic, bawdy, comic, and literary as any novel written in the past twenty-five years, *The Engineer of Human Souls* is worthy of the subtitle Skvorecky gave it: "An Entertainment on the Old Themes of Life, Women, Fate, Dreams, The Working Class, Secret Agents, Love and Death."

## The Engineer of Human Souls Details

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Author : Josef Škvorecký , Paul Wilson (Translator)

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# From Reader Review *The Engineer of Human Souls* for online ebook

Agnieszka says

One of the best novels I read from some time and though it's only February I can safely assume also one of the most valuable reading experience this year. I loved the way it blended absurd with seriousness, nostalgia with grotesque, black humour with hearty laugh, homesickness with plights of life on foreign soil.

I liked its structure and polyphonic composition, *The Engineer of Human Souls* is divided into chapters titled by the names of writers that narrator Danny Smiricky lectures about at Toronto university. And these are, among others: Poe, Hawthorne and Twain. Skvorecky uses one or more quotes to draw nostalgic, full of references to history, both times of war and post-war Soviet domination and finally after the shameful intervention of the armies of Warsaw Pact escape abroad, a tale of refugee. The chronology jumps back and forth, it also contains letters of Danny's friends, but you quickly can grasp sequence of events.

*The Engineer of Human Souls* contrasts the views of Danny's students with the views of their lecturer, and not only on literature. Using examples from Poe or Conrad Danny is trying to teach the young people something more universal but it seems rather hopeless task. They do not know history, nor understand it, and as someone said the eulogists of communist system are mostly people who never had to live in it and endure it, their intellectual potential seems too limited they could fully fathom the whole complexity and tragedy of the life behind the Iron Curtain.

Danny constantly falls in reverie and returns to his little town Kostelec, to enforced work in munitions factory during the war, to girls he loved once, he for sure was an amorous kind of guy, then again regales us with tales on emigrants and how they differ between themselves, how try to cope with new reality to share his ideas on heroism and pragmatism, love and friendship, literature and freedom. Stories are wonderfully digressive, funny and warm, you can't help but laugh reading about one tragicomic literary soiree or attempts to create somewhat fantastic liberation movement not to say hilarious story about seizing allegedly invaluable manuscript and all that in men's room; he's equally reliable evoking his alienated new life and remembering the one that was left behind. And by no means it is idyllic picture.

For every good story needs its heroes so Skvorecky provided delicious gallery of protagonists, quiet heroes and naive idealists, fatuous sycophants of the new order and its amenable servants. I want to mention only some of them: funny Debilinka who's looking for proper husband, a feisty and valiant publisher of Czech books Mrs Santner, melancholic Veronika and thin, skinny Nadia, the girl from Kostelec and if her story didn't move you I'm going to think there is something wrong with you.

To me the novel felt like something well known, Poland was part of that system either and this reading could be as well a tale of Polish emigrants abroad. I wish someone had written such a novel. Skvorecky conjured story about some generation of people that had that misfortune to live in two totalitarian systems in a row, forced to weave between nazizm and communism. But make no mistake. It's not a nostalgia for the sake of old times, at least not only. It's something that runs much deeper. It's longing for lost things, for youth and innocence, for friendship and love, for Czech language and sense of togetherness and identity. It's sense of being always a stranger and awareness that return is not possible for you can't go home again like you'll never be young again. Or as one of Danny's friend stated once you can't have both Prague and freedom.

*The Engineer of Human Souls* contains everything I love in Czech literature or general in literature. It's comic and broad then again pensive and nostalgic. Someone said about it that it combines the best of Kundera, Hasek, Hrabal and Pavel. And while the first one does not work for me completely, I do not know if I read him too late or too early to fully appreciate his artistry, the others are a recommendation enough. So if you ever enjoyed bawdy humour from the soldier Švejk, if you liked lyricism and sadness from Hrabal and Ota Pavel's subtle, nostalgia-tinged aura you definitely should be satisfied for these ingredients are wonderfully combined here. And the novel definitely is worthy of the subtitle the author gave it: *Entertainment on the Old Themes of Life, Women, Fate, Dreams, The Working Class, Secret Agents, Love and Death*.

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## [P] says

I have long fantasised about leaving the UK, but it wasn't until recently that I seriously considered the prospect. Indeed, a couple of weeks ago I took a trip to Prague, my favourite city, in order to feel the place as someone looking to live there [which obviously involves a different mind-set from that of someone going there on holiday]. To this end, I made an effort to speak to locals, of course, but focussed my attention on those who had moved from elsewhere. As you would expect, there is a healthy ex-pat community; and what I found is that many of these people were damaged in some way, were running from something [even if only themselves], just as I am and would be. Yet many of them still seemed to yearn for 'the old country,' without, it seemed, having any intention of actually returning there. And as I sat in various bars talking to these people, I started to wonder how I would feel, years from now, as an ex-pat myself. Would I begin to view the place of my birth romantically? Would a snatch of British accent on a street corner send me into sentimental reverie?

"All of my thoughts are memories."

*The Engineer of Human Souls* by Josef Škvorecký begins with mention of a 'wilderness', which is, for the narrator, the grounds of Edenvale College in snowy Toronto. The use of this word is, of course, intended to emphasise that Danny Smiricky, a Czech by birth, has in a sense been cast out, or, more accurately, has cast himself out, from his home country. Czechoslovakia, as it was known at the time, was first invaded by the Nazis, and then, after the war, became one of the Soviet Communist satellite states; and so it was, without question, a dangerous, unstable place for quite some time. Therefore, Danny is, in essence, a refugee; his decision to move was not made in search of adventure, as is the case with many novels dealing with the émigré experience, but in order to live without being in a constant state of anxiety or uneasiness. Indeed, he calls Canada 'wonderful', because 'there is nothing to be afraid of.'

As you would expect then, oppression plays a major role in the novel, although it is often dealt with in a lighthearted, almost good-natured way consistent with the narrator's personality and outlook on life. For example, the father of Nadia, the girl who a young Danny spends much of his time trying to lay, is sent to a concentration camp, and is presumed dead. Danny himself, meanwhile, is, as are many of the inhabitants of Kostelec, forced by the Nazis to work in a Messerschmitt factory, and subsequently becomes embroiled in a sabotage caper that he believes may cost him his life. Likewise, the evils of communism are frequently alluded to: Veronika, one of Smiricky's students, was, we're told, thrown out of a Prague theatre group for having Jewish blood; and, in one of the old letters that pepper the text, letters from Danny's friends and fellow artists, a playwright informs him that his work has been suppressed, including a play that seems to have involved little more than a bunch of people shitting.

[“Memorial to the Victims of Communism” – Prague, Czech Republic]

Yet even in present day Canada Danny and the Czech community he regularly interacts with are not entirely safe from what he describes as ‘the many horrors of our life.’ There are numerous amusing chapters devoted to Czech informers and secret police officers and their attempts to entrap or, in the case of Magister Maslo, take out, these enemies of the state. However, even when recounting the most obviously comedic episodes – such as the female informer who Danny manages to get so horrendously drunk that she cannot keep her cover story straight – Škvorecký has a serious point to make, about freedom, the kinds of freedom that people like me often take for granted. For example, he notes Dotty’s crude t-shirt, which depicts a naked couple in the act of copulation, and for which she would have been arrested ‘back home.’ And one gets the sense that this is why she is wearing it: because she can, and because at one time she could not. One also sees something of this in Mrs. Santner’s passionate defence of a Czech author and his right to be as blasphemous or inappropriate in his work as he sees fit.

It is worth saying a little more about the Czech community, and indeed all of the minor characters in the novel, for they are so lovingly, finely drawn: autumn-eyed Veronika, who misses Czechoslovakia so much and feels out of place in Canada; skinny Nadia with the big appetite, who displays more genuine heroism than anyone else in the novel, and who, I have to admit, made my poor heart ache; Novak, who brings Danny a replacement for a record he had played a part, a long time ago, in losing; and many many others. But this, as noted previously, is due to Danny and the way that he sees the world. He describes himself as ‘a sadist with a soft heart,’ and that is a nice phrase, but I would lose the sadist bit, for he is a pure sentimentalist; indeed, he is the best kind of sentimentalist, which is to say that he isn’t naive, he merely tries to see the best in people. Even the informers and secret police officers are given something of the benefit of the doubt, and he treats them all with warmth. Moreover, he understands that if something bad happens, something much worse could have happened instead, and does happen, and is happening somewhere else in the world. Make no mistake, *The Engineer of Human Souls* is a relentlessly moving and beautiful book, written in the loveliest blue-eyed style.

“The writer is the engineer of the human soul.” – Joseph Stalin

In my introduction I wrote about yearning for ‘the old country’, and have mentioned how Veronika does just that, yet it is Danny who lives in his memories the most. Everything reminds him of Czechoslovakia, everything transports him back home, everything is a madeleine. So, for example, when his English is praised in the present, this instantly brings to mind for him a story from his youth, an incident whereby he spoke English to a German officer, and of course immediately regretted it. Indeed, while watching a film at the Svensson’s, as he experiences another of his flashbacks, he states that ‘associations’ are ‘the essence of everything.’ And, if you have read a number of my reviews, you will know that I agree with him, that, without question, were I to emigrate to Prague, that beautiful city that Danny left behind with such a heavy heart, I would still spend much of my time here.

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## Robert Drozda says

Obdobná koláž jako Mirákl, ale v něm jsem sledoval všechny nitky a kousky skládáky se stejným (nadšeným) zájmem. Tady pro mě už to? byly zajímavější ty příběhy, které se týkaly Dannyho mládí, Kostelce a války, než ty z emigrantské diaspory v Torontu. Zajímavé propojení knihy s literárním rozbořem

román? v univerzitním kurzu, který Danny vede. Ob?asná perla slovní, v?ta k zamyšlení, i když ?asto "jen" p?iznaná citace odjinud. Jeho pohled na ?eskou spole?nost je výjime?n? p?esný a (pro m?) osvobozující, ho?ká groteska.

*"Tatínek byl skrz naskrz ?ech. Vždycky sv?domit? sloužil, p?itom si vždycky myslel opak toho, co si myslet m?l, ale sloužil."*

Hašek, Kafka, Kundera. S nimi všemi rád Škvoreckého nejlepší místa srovnám. Jeho zobrazení druhé sv?tové války pokládám za excelentní. Vadou tohoto konkrétního zážitku byl nekvalitn? zpracovaný ebook (koupený na ereading.cz), který vycházel z vydání Železného 1998. Spousty chyb, hlavn? chyb?jící ú a rozd?lovníky nahrazené mezerou...

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## Ronald Morton says

*We live in a world of absurd circumstances, accidental, perhaps the unfathomable caprices of a cruelly jesting God*

I find that there is potentially a lot to say about this book, but, at the same time, in its straightforwardness, there might not be much that is necessary.

The book is centered around Czech exile Danny Smiricky, a literature professor living in Canada in the 1970's. The book alternates between scenes from Danny's youth living in Czechoslovakia – both during World War II and the Cold War – letters both between Czech citizens (many living abroad) and to Danny directly, and modern day scenes centered around Danny's classroom lectures and time spent with other members of Canada's Czech exiles community.

The historic scenes are the most straightforward the lot, painting a picture of the toil and hardship of living under German occupation, and then living under the communist regime. These scenes are all well done and affecting – they tend to lean more towards the tragic – and manage to explore both the socio-political landscape at the time, as well as operating a bit as a coming of age tale, one that would be both familiar – in its emotions and struggles – and alien – in its backdrop and setting – to most western readers. These scenes are both straightforward, and are mostly tinged with a black-and-white worldview that goes along with a youthful naivety.

The letters are more complicated – not in that they are hard to keep up with (though there are numerous characters and voices throughout these sections, they are mostly distinct and easy to keep separate), but instead that Skvorecky is not particularly interested in writing in absolutes, so instead the voices all contributed varied – and certainly at times contradicting – views and opinions on politics, war, rebellion, struggle, communism, and the like. This certainly goes for the rest of the novel as well; this is a nuanced, deep book, one that has a lot to say, and certainly has no issue utilizing both subtlety and, when needed, yelling-from-the-rooftops-type in your face tangibility. So these sections both continue with the "time-and-place" historic sense of the youthful scenes, but begin to interject more actual complications and nuance into the book.

The other sections, the more modern-day sections, manage to be the most successful and engaging of the book. The classroom scenes carry special importance in light of the book's title – it is held to be Stalin's

definition of a writer – as Smiricky’s lectures in the classroom explore how literature manages to reach across language, how it continues to be relevant even through the passage of time, and how great literature manages to be prophetic; not only is it relevant looking back, but is relevant looking forward. These ideas are explored through Smiricky’s classroom lectures and discussions, and are tied to specific works and authors. Through these lectures, and through these modern day scenes, Smiricky continuously flashes-back to his youth, to where scenes of his youth are described in between the lines of his lectures. For Smiricky – and for many exiles from communist countries during the cold war – the past both interjects, and is something that never fully relinquishes its hold on you.

These scenes are also frequently funny – bordering on the absurd – and are a real joy to read.

This book was incredible; there really is no other way to say it. I am continuously grateful to Dalkey Archives for their publication of these works, as I would otherwise be unaware of them. This book deserves your time and attention. You will not regret it.

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## **MJ Nicholls says**

A whirling epic from a master-in-pieces: a piece of wartime life manufacturing messerschmitts; a piece of life in Canadian exile as a professor teaching a cast of oddballs about Poe, Conrad, Lovecraft, and co; a piece of life hobnobbing with the spooked and strange émigré community; a piece of life in love with village girls and Scandinavian students; a piece of epistles of other lives in pieces; a piece of mind and no peace in mind. Ladies: let this man’s splendid arms wrap themselves around your literary brains.

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## **Bill says**

Skvorecky, a Czech emigre who left his native land for Canada after the Soviet put down of the Prague Spring, and with Milan Kundera and Bohumil Hrabal is one of that nation's great writers has really written two books here. In the book's dual plots - Professor Danny Smiricky looks back at his young wartime adventures while negotiating tenure and academic politics at a Toronto university - he manages both to capture the transition from young adulthood to adulthood and adulthood into old age.

If that makes the book sound like one of those elegiac "coming of age" tales of 19th century England, it's far from it. Skvorecky's a Bohemian (as in the region of the Czech Republic) and captures his homeland's sense of in your face earthiness. His character Danny Smiricky's epic quest is that of any young man in any nation in the world - to get laid. He'll stop at nothing to do it - including sabotaging bombs in the munitions factory in which he works in Nazi occupied Czechoslovakia.

The book is poignant with nostalgia, but, more importantly, it's funny as hell. Take away the Czech locale and WWII-era setting and this could be the long lost John Hughes movie.

Some books have a tremendous impact on you because of when you read them in your life. I found a second hand copy of this a couple years ago on the street in New York and bought it for a quarter. I've always said to myself I have to reread it to see if it holds up. I haven't yet - and maybe it's best that way.

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## Jonfaith says

A swelerting summer delivered me into contact with this tome, in fact I bought it in Bloomington and then collapsed into it, the parallel gravity of its temporal tracks swept me along. Sadly, I haven't been able to replicate the effect with other works by Skvorecky.

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## Mairita (Marii gr?matplaukts) says

Nopietns, intelektu?ls rom?ns ar parupju v?rdu piešprici. Viet?m tra?ikomisks, viet?m skumjš un apsl?ptu šausmu pilns. St?stu lupatu de?is par veselu laikmetu.

Piln? atsauksme: <https://gramatas.wordpress.com/2015/0...>

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## Tsung says

This is the follow-up to *The Cowards*, written about 20 years before. If you appreciated the Czech style of storytelling, you will not be disappointed with this one. There is noticeable progression in the writing style, which seems more mature, pensive and organized in this second book. It is a semi-autobiographical work featuring the inimitable Danny Smiricky. While the novel primarily revolves around Danny, there isn't much of an overarching plot. Spanning a thirty year time period, it features Danny from his WWII experience in the fictional town of Kostelec (based on Skvorecky's own home Nachod) all the way to his professorship in literature in Toronto. The book is divided into seven chapters, each named after a famous author whom Danny is in the midst of discussion with his students. It is quite a challenging test of one's knowledge of these literary figures. Inserted between episodes are correspondences from people in Danny's past, illustrating the fates of the Czech diaspora. My favourite storyline is Danny in the Messerschmitt factory and his relationship with Nadia the factory girl. At this time, he is still rather naïve, horny and hapless. He makes a pseudo-heroic attempt to sabotage the production of German fighter planes. But true to Danny's character, it is a foolhardy undertaking just to impress a girl. His relationship with Nadia was more interesting to follow, more than his relationship with his student Irene many years later in Canada. Most of the stories from the post-WWII and Canadian stage seem to reflect an anti-communist stance. But even in exile or in fleeing the country, the political refugees are still not safe from the prying eyes and ears of the Czech secret police. They are presented as sinister but somehow do not seem as dangerous as the Nazis. The phrase "The Engineer of Human Souls", coined by Yury Olesha and quoted by Stalin, is an honorific reference to writers. Yet there is very little in the story in relation to this. Danny himself teaches literature but is not a writer. Perhaps the reference is to the seven famous authors, but Danny's students, who are from different backgrounds, have different responses to their works. Or it might be an ironic reference to Skvorecky himself as a writer. See last quote below.

The book is long but the stories are engaging, often amusing and sometimes poignant. Although there are some parts which don't seem to fit in, but overall it was an enjoyable read.

*Only the potential deportee attempted to use the word "freedom" as a trump. Between those paneled walls, the word sounded old-fashioned, like something that had outlived its time. The world has moved on. The issue is no longer freedom, that absolutist ideal of eighteenth-century madmen, but the extent to which*

*freedom may be permissibly limited. It is beyond those limits that persecution begins. The word "persecution" has a much more modern ring to it.*

*The trouble is that students are more interested in conjuring life out of fantasy than they are in examining its concrete details.*

*"Man will be free by not trying to be free. He will make a dialectical leap from Engels to Epictetus... Do not desire that everything happen as you wish, but desire that everything happen as it in fact does happen, and you will be free..."*

*Why do people write books in the first place? They want 'to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.' This particular kind of torch carrying, however, is an incurable disease, and one of its symptoms is an attempt to improve the world. But men and women of the pen rarely succeed at this, because they are not men and women of action. Still, they feel – quite mistakenly – that all you have to do is show men of action the truth, and they will understand and know that the men of the pen are their allies. But the men of action, to act at all, have to ignore this manifold truth. To silence it with their own, singular, one-and-only begotten truth. Simplified truth. That is why 'those who can, do, those who cannot and suffer enough because they can't, write about it.'*

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## **Hugh says**

This is a book I have not read for many years, but since it does not have many reviews here, I'd like to add a few words. It is a magnificent novel - complex, readable, nostalgic, irreverent and often funny. Like several of Škvorecký's other books, it is partly a semi-autobiographical rites of passage story about the life of Danny, a young teacher in post-war Czechoslovakia, this one is also partly about his later life in exile in Canada.

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## **Bruce says**

This book disappointed me. I probably went in with too high expectations, given the bombastic language from the reviewers plastered all over the cover, suggesting that it was one of the best novels of the past few decades.

You've already seen the plot summary in other reviews. The book is punctuated by a half dozen chapters, each named after a major writer. But each of those chapters only deals loosely with that writer, usually through references to the college course taught by the semi-autobiographical author.

The main problem for me was that it overall didn't hold together enough to make me want to keep with it, due largely to the flashback style. Keeping all of the Czech surnames straight wasn't easy, and the plot lines were generally too fragmented to keep my interest. Nor did I find the vocabulary, phrasing, or feel of the language to be especially captivating. Reading it today also adds a complicated wrinkle to the attempt to figure out the relationship in time between all the different episodes - Czechoslovakia under the Nazis, under the Russians, the Canadian Czech emigre community in the 70's, and more. Finally, it's just too long, by half.

If you have an interest in 20th century Czech history, or if you are a college literature prof, you might find

this to be captivating. For me it was a slog.

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## **Vit Babenco says**

Joseph Stalin called writers ‘the engineers of human souls’... And exterminated them thoroughly.

I look up from the book. In Hakim’s eyes I see the scorn the men of the future hold for the men of yesterday, men to whom today still provides a brief respite before they are branded the betrayers of Hakim’s tomorrows. “Steer clear of the jugglers of concepts and feelings as carefully as you would avoid leprosy and the plague.”

He who isn’t with us is against us... Such is the one and only law of ideology.

*The Engineer of Human Souls* is a nonlinear agglomeration of the past and the present, of memories and events, of teaching and living, of the comic and the tragic... And also it is an epistolary novel, at least partly. The book comprises seven magnificent chapters: Poe, Hawthorne, Twain, Crane, Fitzgerald, Conrad and Lovecraft.

...stiff literary censorship can trim even the greatest of the great down to official size. In our present age of normalization, however, we have come a long way from those wooden cowboy stories from the age of socialist construction, and those clipped geniuses, though the forms have been reduced, now have control of their pens, and no longer simply splatter ink all over the page.

In the twentieth century, there were two deadly literary censors: communism and fascism – along with the books they destroyed those who wrote them...

Now the only censor is conformity... It isn’t as deadly but it is no less pitiless... It painlessly turns literature into cud... And readers ruminate happily.

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## **Czarny Pies says**

Czech émigré Josopeh Skvorecky is one of my favorite writers. Skvorecky is a master at describing what communism is like without demonizing its opportunistic supporters in his home country.

I can think of no one else who is better than Skvorecky at describing the environment in Toronto during the seventies and eighties. During this time one met central Europeans everywhere: at work, in my neighbourhood and at all levels of schooling. They all lived through the experiences described by Skvorecky in the *Engineer of Human Souls*.

Most of these central Europeans arrived at a time when communism was intellectually fashionable due to widespread disapproval of America's intervention in Vietnam. The central Europeans who had lived under communist regimes tried to argue with the Native Canadians on the merits of communism and got shouted down.

The *Engineer of Human Souls* is the work where Skvorecky most successfully describes what it what was

like to live in Communist Central Europe after WWII and then how you were received once you arrived in North America at the height of the Viet Nam war. At one level people liked you. On another they took you for a right wing nut. You got to live in a congenial environment but you were completely misunderstood.

You are most likely to enjoy Skvorecky if you are interested in the zeitgeist of Toronto during the 1970s and 1980s. If you are not the Engineer of Human Souls is still tremendous fun. Joseph Skvorecky possesses equal measures of Czech bonhomie and the incisive wit of Evelyn Waugh. You find Skvorecky's characters tremendously sympathetic. You are moved by their courage and weep at their misfortunes. Skvorecky expresses only love for the victims of oppression. He never asks the reader to hate the oppressor.

I love this book. Depending on your life experience, you might too.

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### **Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says**

I actually approached this book with trepidation. It is thick, with almost six hundred pages of the usual hardbound size book. The title is imposing, the author's name has the same foreboding sound as that of Kafka, the cover shows a typewriter with a sheet of paper flying upwards off it stair-like, with a blurb by Milan Kundera ("Magnificent! A magnum opus!") who is himself not easy to understand.

It turned out to be a delightful read, Czechoslovakia's answer to Azar Nafisi's "Reading Lolita in Tehran" and, in the context of its common theme of literature in a state of repression, would have been more aptly titled: "Teaching Poe, Hawthorne, Twain, Crane, Fitzgerald, Conrad and Lovecraft in Toronto While Recalling the Nazi Invasion of, and Communist Rule in, Czechoslovakia." Nafisi would have been envious of this title.

This novel does not claim to be an autobiography but no reader can be blamed for suspecting it to be so. Or at least semi-autobiographical, maybe one which another writer describes as "an autobiography disguised as a novel." The principal protagonist (and narrator) named "Smiricky," like the author Skvorecky, hails from Czechoslovakia and was a young man there during the second world war. He migrated to Canada, settled himself in Toronto, and continued his career there as a writer while teaching literature in a university. The author and his wife Zdena Salivarova, also a novelist (I haven't read any of her novels but they must be mouth-watering, judging from her name) own a publishing house in Canada (publishing Czech authors) just like a character in the book.

In Jane Yolen's "Take Joy: A Writer's Guide to Loving the Craft" she says that a first-person-narrative type of a novel has a lot of limitations and pitfalls, among them being that the author cannot go beyond what the narrator is, or is supposed to know. This novel seemingly has taken up the challenge, is written in the first person narrative, but with a nice trick: Skvorecky incorporated therein letters to the narrator from diverse characters so one gets a sweeping panorama of events from various places around the world participated in by diverse characters with Czechoslovakian ties on or about the time of the second world war and the subsequent communist rule in the country.

Now one can see why I wrote in my last review previous to this that Jane Yolen's book was an eye-opener for me. Before, I just read a book and see how I react to it. Now I can go beyond the story and the language and appreciate the style and technique used by the author!

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## **Jan jr. Van?k says**

THE Great Czechoslovak Novel. Made me cry when I read it at 16, and it still does. Also laugh wildly, and think a lot.

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## **Angela says**

"The Engineer of Human Souls" is a 20th century Czech novel and like every obediently disobedient 20th century Czech novel, it tells the story of a dissident male writer in trouble with his government for reasons that seem especially hazy in light of his more pressing preoccupation with philandering. With the surrounding political turmoil, meaning is extracted from love and art.

Dan Smiricky is a Canadian English professor and Bohemian exile from Kostelec. He goes about life teaching literature to mostly disengaged students and hanging out with his emigre community buddies, allowing these two worlds to touch, briefly and barely. Meanwhile most of his conscious thought is spent reminiscing about his youth, beginning with coming of age under the Nazis and the eventual end of the war and establishment of communism. Through a series of letters and scenes that bring us up to the present day we find out how the choices of his childhood friends have led to their various, far-flung fates.

"Engineer" is many things. Through Smiricky's lectures and informal debates among Canadians and Czech emigrants it's a damning condemnation of authoritarian government - not a philosophical objection to Marxism but rather an opposition to the violence and dehumanization of all externally imposed regimes, a perspective the Czechs can speak to better than most. Skvorecky's familiarity with and love of literature comes through constantly. The story is comical and hilarious: "it was gallows humour, of course, but perhaps there is no other kind." With all of the parallels between Smiricky and Skvorecky's lives it is likely more than a little autobiographical. It's a rumination on the fact that while man does not live on bread alone, bread certainly helps. (Most of the Czech women who have immigrated to Canada have done so on their personal charms, and we can't help but wonder about Dan and Irene) Most of all, though, it is Dan's memories and loves that are so striking. "They say that returning in daydreams to an idealized youth is the first sign of old age." His various crushes and liaisons throughout his life may be the most ordinary thing in the world, but it is these memories that stay with him and define his coming of age in a life that suffers the curse of happening "in interesting times."

Meandering, but lovely.

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## **Ian Robb says**

An excellent book. It is one of those books that I did not want to finish.

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## Ints says

Daniels Smirži?kis ir ?ehu emigrants Kan?d?. Vi?š ir literat?ras profesors Toronto koledž?, vi?š m??ina viet?jai jaunatnei iedz?t galv? literat?ras kritikas pamatus. Cenšas past?st?t vi?iem, k?d?? to dz?ves uztvere ?sti neatbilst realit?tei, seviš?i, kad runa ir par soci?listisk? bloka valst?m. Vakarus vi?š vada citu trimdinieku sabiedr?b?, kur da?a cenšas saglab?t ?ehu kult?ru, da?a sap?o par valdoš?s iek?rtas g?šanu un citi vienk?rši veido jaunu dz?vi. Visa gr?mata pāiet klejojot starp pag?tni un tagadni, atkl?jot daž?dus posmus Daniija dz?v?. Piedz?vojumiem un raib?m epizod?m bag?ts, komisks un liter?ras erud?cijas pies?tin?ts, “Cilv?ka dv?seles inženiera st?sts” piln?b? attaisno tam autora pieš?irto apakšvirsrakstu “Seno dienu enterteinments par dz?vi, sieviet?m, likteni, sap?ošānu, str?dnieku š?iru, zi?ot?jiem, m?lest?bu un n?vi”.

S?kot las?t gr?matu pag?ja zin?ms laiks l?dz noorient?jos visnota? plašaj? Daniija pazi?u lok? un vi?u dz?vesst?stos. P?c tam jau viss nost?j?s sav?s viet?s, un nek?da svaids?šan?s starp bijušo un esošo vairs nesp?ja izsist no slīd?m. B?t?b? jau gr?mat? ir divas galven?s sižeta l?nijas - par Daniija darbu tot?l?s mobiliz?cijas laik? Meseršmita r?pn?c? un vi?a dz?vi emigr?cij?. No atsauksm?m biju sapratis, ka tur ir daudzi savstarp?ji ne p?r?k sasaist?ti st?sti. Man viss š?ita pat ?oti struktur?ts. Iesp?jams, ka haosu nedaudz ievieš Daniija bijušie draugi, kas vi?am raksta v?stules. T?s lai ar hronolo?iskas rada st?st?jum? p?rr?vumus, kas prasa nelielu p?rsl?gšanas no viena pasaules redz?juma uz citu. No Daniija uz plaukstoša kolhoza vad?t?ju vai ebrejieti Izra?l?.

Gr?matai ir diezgan daudz l?me?u, un katrs las?t?js sp?s atrast savam izpratnes l?meni atbilstošo. Gr?matu var las?t k? labu piedz?vojumu st?stu, kur? notiek daudz smiekl?gu notikumu. Tas nekas, ka humors ir ?oti melns un laika re?lij?m atbilstošs. Pie š?s kategorijas ieskait?mi st?sti par pieck?jaino c?ku, par soci?listisko atejas apmekl?jumu, par mucu ripin?šanu r?pn?c?, par latviešu tualetes apmekl?šanas paraž?m masu pas?kumos. St?sts par aizraut?go amerik??u detekt?vu pla?iatoru un kolekcion?ru Novosadu mani apb?ra. Seviš?i tas, ka vi?š nozaga visus Agatas Kristi detekt?vdarbu s?jumus uzbeku valod?. Izcila bija ar? saruna gr?matn?c? par to, kas var b?t rakst?ts gr?mat?, un trimdas š?elšana literat?ras ietvaros, man patika vislab?k.

Var las?t k? m?las rom?nu, par Daniija topoš? liter?ta m?lest?bas piedz?vojumiem. Par vi?a m?ža m?lest?b?m, un k? tas main?jis vi?a pasaules redz?jumu. Var las?t k? vieglu ironiju par trimdu, kur katrs trimdinieks uzskata, ka tieši vi?š ir pareizo uzskatu paud?js. Par to k? visa t? trad?ciju un identit?tes glab?šana paties?b? ir viens garlaic?gs process, kas turas uz p?ris entuziastiem. Ir ar? spiegu rom?na elementi. Tas, ka esi aizmucis no valsts, v?l negarant? to, ka valsts zaud? interesi par tevi. Danijam regul?ri par draugiem uzmetas droš?bas dienestu p?rst?vji, kuri paties?b? pat nav p?r?k konspirat?vi, p?rv?ršot visu verv?šanu par farsu.

Tas v?l ir p?ris sl??i, kuri man pag?ja gar?m nesaprasti. Neesmu tik stiprs ?ehu liter?tos un literat?ras kritik?. T?d?? man nesaprastas palika liel?k? da?a no atsauc?m, kas ietv?ra ?ehu autoru dai?darbus. Gods kam gods, tulkot?js un redaktors ir l?ga cilv?ki, kas visas zemsv?tras piez?mes, ir ielikuši lapaspuses apakš?, tas ?oti pal?dz?ja las?šan?. Otrs sl?nis, kas man aizg?ja da??ji nesaprasts, ir noda?u nosaukumi. Katra noda?a ir nosaukta k?da autora v?rd?. T? k? no piesaukto autoru dai?rades es orient?jos tikai Po un Lovkrafta darbos, tad man ir aizdomas, ka cit?s noda??s es ko esmu palaidis gar?m.

Lasot gr?matu es n?cu pie secin?juma, ka latviešu gaušan?s par savu lielo neveiksmi laikmeta griežos un m?su unik?lo v?sturi, kuru neviens nesp?s saprast, ir maigi izsakoties stipri p?rsp?l?ti. ?ehu tautas probl?mas pirms un p?ckara gados nemaz ?paši neatš?r?s no m?s?j?m. Un paties?b? es no š?s gr?matas uzzin?ju diezgan daudz par vi?u v?sturi juku laikos, starp vis?m okup?cij?m un tautas revol?cij?m.

Grāmatai lieku 8 no 10 ballēm. Noteikti ieteiktu izlasīt visiem, kurus nebaida grāmatas biezums. Viņa ir ļoti, ļoti interesanta - nenožēlosiet.

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### **Juliet Wilson says**

I first read this book 20 years ago when I was living in Malawi. It was someone else's copy so I left it over there not realising it would take me 20 years to find another copy....

It's a wonderful book, focussing on the lives of Czech emigrants in Canada, flicking back and forth between their life there and their earlier lives in Czechoslovakia.

It's thought provoking and entertaining, and well worth reading a second time...

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