
The first thing to say about *Prague* is that it begins in Budapest. In the opening pages of the novel, five young American expatriates sit at a table in the Café Gerbeaud, playing a truth-telling game called Sincerity. Their rehearsed lies reveal more about them than their truthful statements. One character despises his brother; another is shallow and greedy; a third has fallen in love with one of the other players in the game.

Arthur Phillips’ debut novel, published in 2002, is warm, witty and engaging. It is not the work of genius that some reviewers claimed it to be – it certainly did not bring ‘such giants as Proust and Joyce’ to my mind – but it is an insightful and entertaining novel. The reader follows the fortunes of the five players of Sincerity as they negotiate the social landscape of Budapest in the early 1990s, ‘immediately following the … hissing, flapping deflation of Communism’ (4). Charles Gabor, Mark Payton, Emily Oliver and Scott and John Price all work, study, fall in love and spend endless hours partying in the clubs and bars of Budapest. Their experience of the expatriate community is the theme and setting of the novel.

It is the Americans whom we come to know rather than ‘their history-battered Hungarian acquaintances’ (8), because only one of the five protagonists speaks Hungarian. The others are ‘essentially illiterate’ (51) in the language of the country that they are living in, making no attempt to master anything beyond a few phrases. This ignorance is perfectly exemplified in the scene where Scott, an enthusiastic jogger, runs along the narrow, crowded footpaths of the city, innocently receiving the curses and complaints that accompany his progress with his sole Hungarian phrase, ‘kezet csokolom’ (‘I kiss your hand.’)

The young Americans rely on the English vocabulary of their Budapest acquaintances, and Phillips overcomes the problem of their shallow knowledge of Hungarian society in the second section of *Prague*. This is not entirely successful: the lengthy piece on the history and fortunes of the Horvath Press breaks the flow of the narrative so abruptly that it left me wondering if I had stumbled into another novel by mistake. But it does allow Phillips to offer insights on Hungary’s politically-scarred and war-torn past, insights that his cast of Western characters is completely unable to attain.

It is not only linguistic ignorance that bars the Americans from understanding and experience, it is their ‘flat-earth approach to the world’ (8). Emily, in particular, is naïve and childish (Charles complains that she is so sweetly American that she smells like buttered corn on the cob.) But all of the protagonists are blinkered by their convictions of cultural supremacy. Charles destroys the proud independence of the Horvath Press with his Western ‘entrepreneurship’; Scott teaches English, ‘that most valuable commodity’ (9), without understanding his students’ native language. (He does marry a young Hungarian woman, but the last sight that we have of Maria is her departure on a train, ‘quietly dismayed’ by the prospect of her future, while Scott leans out of the carriage window, gesturing obscenely at his brother.) Mark Payton is trapped in a world of nostalgia that has no viable connection with the present. Only John, Scott’s despised younger brother, makes any real effort to understand the lives of the people around him.

Phillips’ greatest strengths as a writer shine in this examination of the ‘inevitable cross-cultural misunderstandings lurking in tones and glances and assumptions’ (58). He displays a wry sense of humour and a passionate love of language, playing with memorable words and phrases: John wonders if he has committed ‘fratultery’ by coveting his brother’s girl-friend, and Mark becomes convinced that he is suffering from ‘Retros’, an overwhelming form of nostalgia. Incomprehension is rife in even the simplest conversations:

‘Heirless,’ he confirmed to his two friends that Monday evening at the Gerbeaud.
‘Can’t he use an inhaler?’ Mark asked. ‘I did when I was a kid.’
‘There’s a spray you can rub on your scalp now, I think. It makes it grow back,’ John offered. (176)

Such deceptively simple linguistic jokes are the hallmark of Phillips’ writing in Prague; often, they have more serious repercussions. John misses his brother’s announcement of his engagement to Maria, made in a noisy bar, because he mistakes ‘married’ for ‘harried’, loses the sense of (honey)moon and completely misinterprets the couple’s plans to leave Budapest for Romania. Mark’s loneliness becomes overwhelming when his attempts at intimacy, with a young Hungarian man called Laszlo, dissolve in a welter of misunderstandings. Scott’s Advanced English Conversation students are driven to distraction by his determination to reduce their political discussion to a grammar lesson (‘To think: state-of-mind verb … and Scott was back at the white board writing in red erasable marker.’ [55]) Charles understands Hungarian words and phrases but not the true meaning behind them, as his fate at the end of the novel makes clear.

Prague has much to recommend it, particularly an elegant use of language and many enjoyable moments of comedy and irony (not least the irony of a book set entirely in Budapest being given the title Prague.) It received rapturous reviews, reprinted as ‘Praise for Prague’ at the beginning of this new edition by Scribe Publications. According to these quotations, Phillips is as brilliant a writer as Fitzgerald, Hemingway, Proust, Joyce and Kundera rolled into one: a clear example of hyperbole. I have read much more thought-provoking debut novels about youth’s ‘coming of age’ – John Bemrose’s acclaimed The Island Walkers (2003) and Daniel Magida’s witty and clever Rules of Seduction (1992) amongst them. Prague is an engaging and accomplished first novel by a promising writer rather than a masterpiece. But that alone is more than enough to make it worth reading.

Jennifer Osborn