

REVIEWS

dreams to escape such drudgery but instead is locked inside a house, covered by a headscarf whenever she is permitted to venture out. She sees herself as 'a trapped moth, beating against the lampshade', and becomes, as Blanche in *A Streetcar Named Desire*; a character fluttering from place to place, seeking the light, yet, on finding it, dazzled, and ultimately burned. The resemblance between the cages both mother and daughter inhabit could have been further explored. Their interior world is not dissimilar, each living a version of the Sisyphus myth, condemned to roll a rock up to the top of a mountain, only to have it always roll back down again.

This claustrophobic novel holds a keen lens to the predicament of women. Sarah's insider-view of Saudi Arabia is revealing as well as chilling. The disintegration of her marriage to one of absolute abuse and neglect is predictable, yet horrifying. She is desperate for recognition. This Seeing Eye comes in the unlikely form of Grace, her second knight in shining armour, who offers to send her back to where she came from. The tangential narrative view is brief yet alarming: 'Eyes wide, so close now, pupils dilated, is that my body rising or hers, my hand on hers, my body or her body, the rising and falling, the gentle landscape.' The effect is intensified by being placed side by side with the (just as brief) account of Asha who 'could be stoned' for committing adultery.

The two 'escapes' clip the novel together: the first a going away, the second a returning. The plot falters, wobbling as Mohammed finds the money for Sarah's escape; the writer pulls back from the denouement as if this were too soon, before ramping up the tension ready for the final reveal. The sense of surprise as Sarah proves her worth is almost unbelievable: 'We're not going to Plymouth. We're not going home to Wales.' Her journey to date has shown little forethought or clever planning, yet here she is, taking the reins to her new life with a hitherto unseen confidence.

The backdrop of war is alluded to, though not truly touched, and yet the landscape of the outer world is well observed in contrast to the inner world of female survival. *Inshalla* is a thoroughly readable novel, set against the seeping damp of Wales and the white heat of Arabia.

Dr Anne Lauppe-Dunbar teaches Creative Writing at Swansea University. Her novel, *Dark Mermaids*, will be published in September by Seren.

The House of the Deaf Man Peter Krištúfek

Parthian, £10.99, PB, ISBN 9781909844278



This vast historical family drama offers readers a privileged vantage point from which to watch a nation write (and then promptly edit and re-edit) its history, **Phillip Clement** writes

'I realised long ago... That the history of Slovakia boils down to proving that you were in the right place at the right time.' Through a child's eyes the reader experiences the petty tensions and conflicts that are played out within a rural Slovakian family amidst a violent period of national upheaval,

economic stagnation and social displacement. The narrator, Adam Trnovsky, spurred on by the mysterious human remains he uncovers in his childhood home, attempts to reconcile himself with the truths he learns about his father's life. *The House of the Deaf Man* hurtles through the twentieth century, documenting the effects of four (very different) political regimes, the Jewish Question, the political trials of the 1950s and the secret police that came after 1968.

Krištúfek manages his narrator's voice well; the light-hearted and conversational tone mesmerises readers with its flat, dead-pan humour and its keen eye for the detail within the spectacle and naïve interpretation of events. Here Adam's uncle gifts him a Star of David:

He took off his star and pinned it to my chest. It looked great. He wetted his fingers and slicked down my hair. I had always hated that but I didn't mind when he was the one who did it.

'Let's have a look at you! What a good looking young fellow you are!'

Armin broke into a laugh and patted me on the shoulder. I started laughing as well and ran to the dining room where the others were sitting.

'Daddy, daddy, look what I've got! I got it from Armin, isn't it lovely? May I keep it? Please, please...! I will wear it just like everyone else!'

I will never forget Father's red face. He ripped the star off my chest. Then he marched out of the dining room and he

and Armin locked themselves in the isolation cell.
I heard Father shouting at him.

The novel, reminiscent in tone to Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief*, 'inches along as slowly as a snail; then, you when you least expect it, it surges forward like a racehorse.' However, one quickly acclimatises to this quirk of Krištúfek's prose, and special mention should go to Peter and Julia Sherwood for realising this in the English translation. I soon found myself enjoying the pedestrian speed with which he relates (and, most importantly, repeats) the nation's turbulent history.

In *The House of the Deaf Man*, Krištúfek builds a world in which nothing is constant. Town squares, high streets, hotels and village sculptures trade namesakes as though they were rationed luxuries; meanwhile, through necessity, Christians become Jews to escape the clutches of the Ottoman Empire, Jews become Lutherans to escape the concentration camps of the Third Reich, and everyone forgets their past in a mad dash to appear more communist and escape the gulags. Characters scramble over one another in a desperate attempt to be remembered in the right way by the right people in this fascinating tale of human forgiveness.

But, above all this, informing much of the novel's delicate structure, hang Francisco Goya's Black Paintings, a series of fourteen (badly preserved) murals executed in oil directly onto the plaster of Quinta del Sordo (deaf man's house) that chart our progression through Adam's memory. Each chapter is given over to one of these paintings and the memories within each are related to them. Perhaps the greatest achievement of Krištúfek's novel is in the novel's realisation that, like Goya's murals (and the book's canny design), the past exists to be painted over. As is repeated throughout the novel: *nostalgia is remembering something that never happened*.

Metaphors and imagery are established carefully and often returned to in a sustained effort to crystallise the novel's overarching theme: that *history is what you choose to believe*. Political regimes as well as characters tinker with their personal or shared history, hoping either to improve their lot, as in the case of Adam's friend's father, or to better fit within the national zeitgeist, as when the authorities of Brežany elect to replace Jesus in a sculpture of the Stations of the Cross with a likeness of Lenin:

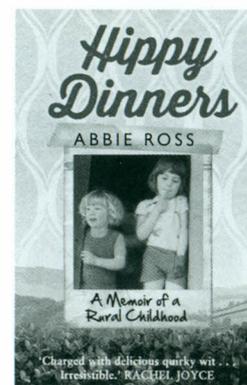
The Stations of the Cross on the hill behind Brežany parish church underwent a transformation. Initially the authorities wanted to get rid of the Stations altogether. But taking a leaf out of the Christians' book, the communists realised it was not enough to destroy a place. To make a place disappear you had to overlay it with new a meaning.

So the hill was turned into a pantheon of prominent comrades.

Phillip Clement recently completed a MA in Creative Writing at Aberystwyth University.

Hippy Dinners Abbie Ross

Black Swan, £7.99, PB, ISBN 9780552779753



Alan Bilton enjoys a memoir about a girl's conformity but argues that ultimately, normalcy is achieved at something of a cost

It seems to me that the trick of writing a successful memoir (a sentence typed with the blithe confidence of one who has never tried to do so) is to find a balance between the familiar or recognisable, and the unique and utterly personal: which is to say, the difference between remembering *John Craven's Newsround* from the 70s and being an eight-year-old girl growing up in rural north Wales who longs to *be* John Craven, side parting, jumper/tie combo and all. The key note of *Hippy Dinners*, however, isn't whimsy but rather the toe-curling comedy of embarrassment. Though the subtitle, *A Memoir of a Rural Childhood*, suggests some hazy bucolic paradise, Ross is far too sharp-eyed and beady a narrator to leave us roaming along the brambles for long. Rather the book is all about the longing to be *normal*, John Craven being the epitome of regularity – even if the attempt to ape his fashion sense is not.

For the young Abbie, the great fear is to be lumped in with her parents' 'alternative' lifestyle summed up by the taboo word, 'hippy'. Sure, her father may still hold down a part-time job in advertising, and her Liverpool grandparents are comic exemplars of upwardly mobile conformity, but for Abbie it's only one step from her mother's topless sunbathing and penchant for lentils to the freakishly bohemian depravity of the commune down the hill. How then to avoid tuning in and dropping out? The answer is by eating sliced white bread, watching *Charlie's Angels* and wearing polyester denim-look playsuits. The central gag of course is that both sides may look utterly ridiculous from our twenty-first century point of view, but Ross quietly lets her work register the idea that her younger self prefers bright orange crispy pancakes to health food, ABBA to Captain Beefheart,