

JULIA SHERWOOD

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A Kingdom of Souls by Daniela Hodrová

The work of the acclaimed Czech novelist and literature scholar Daniela Hodrová has been translated into several European languages but was largely unknown to Anglophone readers until Jantar Publishing took it upon itself to bring out two of her books in English.

The first, published in David Short's translation as *Prague, I See a City* in 2011 and reissued in 2015, was originally commissioned for a French series of "alternative" guidebooks, and presents the city as a magical, labyrinthine place. 2015 also saw the publication of Hodrová's first novel, *A Kingdom of Souls*. Written in 1974, it first appeared in 1991 as *Podobojí* (literally "in both kinds", referring to the use of both bread and wine in holy communion, a key tenet of Czech Protestantism) and forms the first part of a loose trilogy entitled *Trýznivé město* (The City of Torment). The story of this translation by Véronique Firkusny and Elena Sokol spans almost a quarter of a century and is deserving of a novel in its own right.

The trilogy, like most of Hodrová's subsequent books, is set in and around the Prague district of Vinohrady. Instead of a traditional, linear narrative, *Kingdom of Souls* develops in a spiral motion, as a hypnotic layering and interweaving of micro-stories linked to a tenement house in Vinohradská Street, which overlooks the Olšany Cemetery. Some of the stories are clearly linked to historical events, such as the Holocaust or St Bartholomew's Night, while readers familiar with Czech history will also recognize allusions to the Stalinist terror, the Prague Spring, the 1968 Warsaw Pact invasion, and the period of so-called "normalisation", a grim time of repression that followed the invasion.

A Kingdom of Souls begins with Alice Davidovič, a young Jewish woman who commits suicide by jumping out of the fifth floor window of her flat in order to escape deportation. The recurring cast of characters consists of her tenement house

neighbours and the people living in the surrounding streets; rendering their symbolically-laden names in English was just one of the many challenges posed by this demanding book to which the translators have overcome with admirable inventiveness. Some characters—like Alice at the moment of jumping—are suspended between life and death; others have died

and their souls are now wandering about the cemetery or venturing beyond its confines. Among the dead souls, we encounter historical figures buried in the cemetery, such as the writers of the 19th century Czech national revival or Jan Palach, the student who set himself alight in 1969 in protest against the creeping normalisation, as well as former residents of the house. The traditional omniscient narrator alternates with narrators including inanimate objects, such as the pantry in Alice's flat, a muff, a melancholy stone angel, and Olšany Cemetery itself. The latter is the eponymous kingdom of souls, a place where "the dead seem to be coming to life and the living struggle along as if dead. And no one is able to tell where life ends and death begins." The cemetery, indeed the entire city of Prague and its genius loci is, in fact, the central character, not just in *The City of Torment* trilogy, but in all of Hodrová's fiction. It is hoped that

English-speaking readers will soon get the chance to read the other two books in this remarkable trilogy, *Kukly* (Puppets, or Cocoon) and *Theta*. /

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Daniela Hodrová:

A Kingdom of Souls, trans. Véronique Firkusny and Elena Sokol (London: Jantar, 2015)