

## Emma Kausc: *Plot Disruption* / *Narušení děje*

### Synopsis

This almost 300-page prose debut, *Plot Disruption*, by the young Czech writer Emma Kausc, explores fresh (feminist) ways of narrating the issues involved in trauma, (queer) identity, desire and pain in the Western world through its novel thematic, spatial and intellectual range. Set against the backdrops of Los Angeles, London and Prague, the composition of this autofictional novel presents the reader with a deep fascination with story not only as a multi-layered link between life and literature, but also as a way of grasping life and human experience.

The author frames the prologue and epilogue of the work with the story of William “The Mole Man of Hackney” Lyttle, who in the 1970s dug an intricate network of tunnels beneath his house and the surrounding area, thus undermining them. By the end of the book, they have to be filled in with concrete because of the presumed danger, and Kausc uses this to illustrate her authorial approach. The Mole from Hackney raises the topos of delving and disappearing, as well as surfacing and (constant) return. The narrative itself in *Plot Disruption* presents us with instability; it is a novel which, through this authorial gesture, seeks a language for the non-linear process of self-discovery.

The novel’s plot begins in London, where 33-year-old Emma, in addition to searching for the roots of her Czech identity, seeks answers to the question marks surrounding her missing female partner. From the outset, the narrator emphasizes and thematizes the act of writing, doing so in conjunction with the declaration of love she seeks to place before the reader. The protagonist copes with separation from her femme fatale, or as she often points out, from her personal myth, the photographer Alyona Shevchenko. She disappeared one day without a trace, and Emma is only left with the search for a memory and an attempt at a confession: “I am constantly trying within it to translate memories into words. A lot of words. I go as deep as Alyona can go. Trying to find Alyona in her entirety constantly clashes with memory and its tendency to leave important parts unsaid” (p. 38). Throughout the book, then, we see a mythologization of love, an elevation of this relationship with Alyona to a myth that often sets the rhythm and pace for the narrative. This is bolstered by a constantly reinforced belief in the narrator as eyewitness: “The survivors are, after all, the ones who can tell the story. Stories exist mainly in the hands of storytellers.” (p.48) Or: “After my death, no one will tell Alyona’s story; after the death of our loved ones, the duty falls on us.” (p. 112). Kausc explores the limits of love as if it were a verb: although Alyona is never found, the protagonist keeps her alive to the end through constant narrative returns.

The novel’s Emma also looks back at her relationship with her mother, Zuzana, whose own story was disrupted by her emigration to the UK, trapping her forever in the midst of history and language. Zuzana has recently died, and in addition to her passing, Emma is coming to terms with the traumas framing their entire relationship, smouldering beneath the surface and making themselves known in unexpected ways.

The lyrically paced plot after the first half of the book is taken over by the embedded story of actress Sara fleeing to Iceland from the emotional consequences of her relationship with writer John Smith. The leitmotif of constantly fragmenting time comes to the fore here – contracting and expanding at the same time. Time in *Plot Disruption* thus operates on a personal, universal and environmental level. Through Sara, Emma shifts the focus to a vanished Icelandic glacier, whose melting represents the search for ancient layers of history and memory. But it also touches on the interrelationship between people and the world they inhabit. After a painful break-up with John (“Sara winds up all her time after leaving Iceland around those few hours in The Last Bookstore,” – p. 147), Sara attends the funeral ceremony of this natural feature. A glaciologist there remarks that “glaciers have a body that can hold entire centuries”; the Icelandic Prime Minister speaks of time being out of joint, and

Kausc's arc comes back to the necessity of stories: "We need narratives that overcome our fear, that transcend the apocalypse." (p. 137) It is important to note here the plasticity and emphasis on social contexts that characterize the author's artistic and geographical world. Throughout the book, the young writer emphasizes the visual perception of the world and the description of art installations and works; in contrast to the world of natural disasters, devastating fires and floods, this is an intensely expositional contextualization of the multilayered nature of the contemporary world.

From Iceland, the narrator takes the reader with her to California, where she has decided to move because of Alyona's disappearance. Alyona spent a significant part of her life in America, and so Emma moves there in a desire to be closer to their relationship and not to lose sight of it. At the airport she meets and starts a platonic relationship with British journalist Anne, and then in Los Angeles she meets John – a writer of Czech origin and Sara's former lover. She has a brief passionate fling with him. In Los Angeles, Emma is also caught up among the growing wildfire hotspots. The escalating heat is not only an effective narrative device in contrast to the geological time of the disappearing glacier, but it also points to a consistently occurring theme of narrative and the exploration of its possible modes: "If we are at the end of history then our disappearance is our only language," John says (p. 223). At the very end, Emma heads off to Prague with him. She reflects on her ambivalent relationship with the place that made her the child of emigrants, and she breaks up with John. She considers relationships as stories in which we sometimes reach the end alone, without the other person. She also reflects on societal expectations – be it the assumption of heterosexual love or the paradigmatic trajectories of relationships and their milestones. She thus arrives at the end of her own story alone, but with an awareness of the retold histories and stories which without her testimony would disappear.

Although Emma Kausc's novel is about stories, the text itself is not a classic novelistic testimony. It is based on a love of literature and the act of writing itself. Despite the apparent fragmentation of an almost Sebaldian style, the author's mastery is evident; the novel has a very deliberate pace, rhythm and composition. The linguistic sophistication of *Plot Disruption* brings to mind associations with Vladimir Nabokov; both authors are linked by evocative metaphor, playful innovation and precise work with narrative construction.

By raising carefully constructed question marks beyond genre and canonical paradigms, Kausc comes close to the genre-straddling Maggie Nelson. Her work explores the boundaries of queer love, a feminist take on relationships, and the transformation of identities over time. Through the speculative nature of her prose, the author's remarkable inventiveness is also close to that of the recently deceased Paul Auster. Both authors explore the complexity of human existence against the backdrop of the desire to understand the world, the uncertain future, loneliness and the uncertainty of identity.

Not least, the American writer Jennifer Egan is also well worth noting here. As in the case of her award-winning novel *Visit from the Goon Squad* (published by Odeon in Czech in 2012), the theme of time and its passage is also of crucial importance for *Plot Disruption*. Although Emma Kausc's novel is set in a difficult-to-grasp present, she succeeds, like Egan, in capturing its discontinuities, the layers of collective memory and the fluidity of interpersonal relationships and human experience. In this respect, it is a truly universal statement. In her distinctly feminist work, the young writer, like the above authors, deals with memory, its unreliability and love in its many forms. Although the trajectory guided by *Plot Disruption* is a challenging axis of stacked stories, characterized by intractability and ambiguity, it is a carefully thought-out work that is completely outside the context of contemporary Czech prose.