

The Hot Summer of 1968

Viliam Klimáček

Peter Petro, Translator

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Viliam Klimáček's historical novel is both heartbreaking and hopeful as it shares the stories of families displaced by the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia.

When the Warsaw Pact countries invade Czechoslovakia in August of 1968, Alex and Anna; their daughter, Petra; Anna's sister's family; and the family of Petra's close friend, Tereza, feel as if their home has been stolen. Russian tanks move down their roads, and people they know are emigrating to Israel, the UK, and the US. The violence, oppression, and blackmail commanding their lives drive some of these characters to leave, too, but others are trapped under the thumb of the Soviets. Scattered across the world, these individuals work to rebuild their livelihoods, and cling to those with them in remembrance of those they left behind.

These realistic, complex characters endure difficulties unique to refugee experiences. Petra and Tereza are strong, pushing to better themselves in the face of opposition, but they have weaknesses that peek through their vigor. Alex, Anna, and others who struggle under the emotional weight of separation may meet tragic ends, but their inner strength and purposeful choices show that they possess grit, too.

Despite the heavy subject matter, the book is light in tone. Its friendly, omniscient narrator often breaks the fourth wall to make jokes that are both self-deprecating and that poke fun at the characters' quirks; they also make poignant comments about the complexity of society in 1960s Eastern Europe. Humor and heartache take turns dominating the mood of the story, following the characters as they separate from each other for an indefinite period of time, some reuniting, some dying before getting the chance to see their loved ones again.

The Hot Summer of 1968 is tactful and humorous about bringing to life the calamitous experiences of Slovakian people during the fall of communism.

AIMÉE JODOIN (May / June 2021)

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