



The Witch of Prague

J. M. Sidorova

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In J. M. Sidorova's propulsive fantasy novel *The Witch of Prague*, a girl unravels political scandals amid discoveries of her own mystical abilities.

In the late 1960s in Prague, Alica is on the cusp of adulthood. Craving independence from her mother and wrathful stepfather, she answers an ad for lessons in stenography and typewriting in exchange for "light housework" for austere, mysterious Pani Agáta. She also secures a job at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and becomes entangled in its power struggles among corrupt, abusive men. All the while, Pani Agáta trains Alica in relation to a unicorn-hunt tapestry that hangs in her home.

Alica's narration is breathtaking. As she faces daily troubles, her views of the world are variously whimsical, gritty, and hopeful. Elements of political thrillers, works of magical realism, and dark fairy tales wend into her coming-of-age story: Alica rages against the systems that seek to possess or silence her and others. The book's magic is nonetheless subtle, so quick that Alica often doubts if it's real at all: an expansive series of dreams involving a hunt and a mysterious man, a shifting in the tapestry's art, a persuasion with someone in power, all spied via elusive flourishes that blur the line between fantasy and reality.

The abuses that Alica and the women around her endure at the hands of men in power are unyielding, and the Ministry operates with toxic, unfettered duplicity. This darkness is tempered by the relationships Alica forms within her community. Kind, generous people live in Pani Agáta's building, including Pan Kaska; the son of Pan Kaska, Vasek; and Alica herself, who takes joy in observing the world around her.

A profound novel about a fearless girl, *The Witch of Prague* celebrates inner strength and magic.

NATALIE WOLLENZIEN (March / April 2026)

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