

The house.txt

The house of the deaf man Review by Dianne

For the May meeting, we read 'House of the Deaf Man' by Peter Kristufek, a Slovakian writer and apparently one of the rising stars of the Slovakian literary scene. In a country of only 5.5 million, most local authors are considered successful if they sell 500-1000 books. 'House of the Deaf Man' sold over 2500 in its first print, which is considered something of a runaway success. Unfortunately for local authors, sales tend to be dominated by translations of English-language best-sellers, such as Dan Brown and Jodi Picoult, who can sell in the tens of thousands. However, since the 1989 Velvet Revolution, there has developed a strong current of self-parody and introspection in Slovakian literature and 'House of the Deaf Man' falls very much into this genre.

The story is told through the voice of Adam Trnovsky, a child at the start of the book in 1938 and focuses very much on his father, a well-respected GP, whose deafness, at first metaphorical and then physical colours their relationship. Adam returns home after his father's death to clear out the former family home, but of course, everything is touched with memories, good and bad. His father has turned a deaf ear to the huge social and political upheavals of his life and tried to portray the image of a happy and contented man - the truth, though, is very different. Adam describes this 'deafness' as almost a national trait - if you pretend that something isn't happening, you don't have to do anything about it.

The plot is quite sparse, with lots of unresolved questions (Did his father really turn his uncle over to the Nazis? Who belongs to the bones that Adam found in the backyard and how did they get there?). It's told almost as a series of (sometimes unrelated) anecdotes, a bit like listening to an older relative recount family stories after dinner. Some parts are snortingly funny and others quite sad and introspective, but all are interesting and give us an insight into a country and a view of history that we've not come across before. One of the dangers of recounting a story that is within the living memory of much of the population is that the author needs to be either very precise or very imprecise. Kristufek has followed the imprecise path, which allows a huge amount of leeway in dates, experiences and perceptions. Enjoyable but meandering and quite waffly, we decided that this book (at 650 pages) could have done with some judicious editing and was a story that readers could dip in and out of and come back to without too much loss of continuity.