

Marta v roce vetřelce. By PETRA SOUKUPOVÁ. Pp. 320. Brno: Host. 2011. Kč 299. Hardcover. ISBN: 9788072945214.

Marta v roce vetřelce ('Marta in the Year of the Alien') is the third novel by Czech novelist and screenwriter Petra Soukupová. Her two previous novels were a success in the Czech Republic: *K moři* ('To the Seaside', 2007) received the Jiří Orten Prize in 2008 and *Zmizet* ('To Disappear', 2009) was nominated for the Magnesia Litera Prize in 2010.

Like Soukupová's two previous novels, *Marta* deals with teenage adolescence and strained family relationships. The nineteen-year-old protagonist still lives with her parents and studies Czech literature at university when she becomes pregnant. The unwanted pregnancy starts off the story, which mainly depicts Marta's path, not only from adolescence to adulthood, but also from complete selfishness to a better understanding of the people around her.

The narrator of the story is Marta herself and the book takes the form of a diary describing the events of one year. Amongst the short diary entries there are also images: naive drawings of Marta herself, her family, and friends. The midway point of the novel is marked by a comic drawn by Marta that depicts the way in which she imagines that her family and friends perceive her. The comic, as well as the many diary passages, show how Marta drifts away from her family, friends, and studies. As the title of the novel suggests, she calls the fetus inside her the 'alien', since it alienates her from her family, who she feels are more interested in the pregnancy than in her as a mother: 'I'm not important anymore, the alien is now important' (p. 123).

Soukupová fills the diary with references to popular television series, films, and books, which construct the picture of an adolescent who enjoys marathons of *The Simpsons*, *Dexter*, and Stieg Larsson's *Millenium* trilogy, but at the same time reads writers like Ian McEwan, Truman Capote, and Michael Chabon. Disappointingly, the avalanche of books, television series, and other cultural phenomena merely serve as superficial illustrations to Marta's everyday activities rather than a literary means to deepen her character.

Compared to her previous novels dealing with adolescents growing up, Soukupová is not at her best in *Marta*. The novel begins slowly and the story absorbs the reader only after a hundred pages or more. Soukupová has attempted to make the fictional diary resemble a real diary: some of the passages are merely reporting mundane everyday matters in a telegram style reminiscent of *K moři*, in which it

worked to perfection. In *Marta*, however, the narrative, and especially the pace of the story, is not as skilfully constructed as the author's two previous novels. Marta's narratorial voice often fails to capture the reader's interest, despite the fact that her story of initiation is captivating. The reader cannot help but think that much more could be said about Marta's circumstances and the motives behind her actions.

In her quest for a realistic, true-to-life story of a young woman, Soukupová has ended up constructing the image of Marta as a teenager lost in an age of expanded freedom and choice. Yet the characterization of Marta is stereotypical and far-fetched. It does not make her recognizable, but rather alienates her from the reader. *Marta v roce vetřelce* is, by temperament and by construction, too loosely written and in need of some unrelenting editing work to strengthen its weak story.

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