



‘How it all turned out alright’: Autofiction as Memory Form in Irena Dousková’s Novels about Childhood and Youth in Post-1968 Czechoslovakia

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Abstract

Autofictions and memoirs about growing up in late socialism have proliferated in Czech as well as in other postsocialist Eastern European literatures. These retrospective texts are often tinged with nostalgia and infused with irony and humour. Two of the most popular texts of this genre in the Czech Republic are Irena Dousková’s autofictional books *Hrdý Budžes* [*B. Proudew*] and *Oněgin byl Rusák* [*Onegin Was a Rusky*]. The Czech author writes about growing-up in a non-conformist family dealing with everyday life in socialist Czechoslovakia. After discussing Dousková’s books as autofiction the article will take a closer look at the poetics of childhood autofictions and their contribution to cultures of remembering socialism in comparison to autobiographies. It will discuss the ways how writing about childhood creates a specific socialist identity through scarcity, ingenuity, and working with/against restraints and the way humour is used to transmit difficult memories.

Keywords: autofiction, childhood, cultures of remembrances, Czech literature

Abstrakt

Autofiktionen und Autobiographien über das Aufwachsen im Spätsozialismus haben in der tschechischen wie auch in anderen postsozialistischen osteuropäischen

Literaturen Konjunktur. Viele dieser retrospektiven Texte sind nostalgisch gefärbt und von Ironie und Humor durchdrungen. Zwei der populärsten Texte dieses Genres in der neueren tschechischen Literatur sind Irena Dousková's Autofiktionen *Hrdý Budžes* [*B. Proudew*] und *Oněgin byl Rusák* [*Onegin Was a Rusky*]. Die tschechische Autorin beschreibt eine Kindheit in einer nonkonformistischen Familie und den Alltag in der sozialistischen Tschechoslowakei. Der Artikel wirft einen genaueren Blick auf die Poetik der Kindheits-Autofiktion und Dousková's Schreibweise, um Autofiktionen und Autobiographien im Hinblick auf ihren Beitrag zu Erinnerungskulturen des Sozialismus zu untersuchen. Gezeigt wird, wie Dousková's Kindheitserinnerungen durch einen Fokus auf Topoi wie Knappheit, Einfallsreichtum und die Arbeit mit/gegen Zwänge eine spezifische sozialistische Identität nachzeichnen. Erörtert wird auch die Frage, welche Rolle Humor bei der Erinnerung an schwierige Zeiten spielt.

Schlagworte: Autofiktion, Kindheit, Erinnerungskulturen, Tschechische Literatur

Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed a host of texts that remember and recreate late socialism through the prism of childhood in postsocialist and transformation countries all over Eastern Europe. Czech literature makes no exception here. An ever-increasing number of memoirs and novels by popular writers, picture books, TV series, and anthologies is devoted to growing up socialist with a special focus on the two decades after the 1968.¹ Many of the authors fall into the same generation—those born in the 1960s who were coming of age in the 1970s and 1980s. In literary retrospective, socialist childhoods and youth are often tinged with nostalgia and infused with irony and humour. They pay homage to the socialist preoccupation with childhood as a collective project but they also address the popular postsocialist conviction that childhood was ‘stolen,’ ‘manipulated,’ or ‘lost’ during socialism (Winkler 2019, 6) as opposed to ‘real,’ i.e. individualistic and family focused childhoods of pre- and postsocialist times. Thus, literature gives today's reader a vivid impression of the way people lived in socialist times and complements historical writing and public discourse on the topic. Literary childhoods offer the added advantage of being seemingly apolitical, thus avoiding political fault-lines that complicate memory discourses in Eastern Europe.

While historians have only just started to confront the many faces of late socialism and the final judgement of the era is still out, it becomes increasingly apparent that the two decades from the late 1960s to the late 1980s were not as black and white as they have been viewed previously. On the one hand today's generations are confronted with pop cultural remnants of normalization in the form of TV series and pop music imbued with certain camp aesthetic that depict little flights and the idyllic, and on the other hand there is the legacy of suppression, disinformation, and denunciation that is associated with this era. Perceptions of late socialism vary in Eastern European countries. The Czech concept most often used for this era is 'normalizace' [normalization], a euphemism introduced by the Czech communist party after 1968, denoting the return to conservative party politics. Due to the violent suppression of Prague Spring these decades that are mainly viewed as a somewhat stagnant but stable period in the Soviet Union are tinged with oppression, despair, and frustration in the Czech context. This negative image of Czech late socialism prevailed in the 1990s and early 2000s. With regard to Czech literature, the negative image of normalization was created in the works of an older generation of dissident authors such as Eva Kantůrková, Ivan Klíma, Ludvík Vaculík, or Václav Havel. Their texts—the fictional as well as the autobiographical and autofictional ones—contributed heavily to the conceptualization of these two decades as leaden time, filled with injustice, petty bureaucracy, and a strict divide between private and public life.² Life stories from normalization times tended to stress the difficulties of late socialism and to derive their claim to significance from the political persecution they depicted. This image is still prevalent today, even if it often does not correspond fully to personal recollections of everyday life under socialism. This may be due to the fact that in comparison to other postsocialist societies in Central Eastern Europe, Czech memorial culture is governed by a marked anti-communist narrative, as indicated in the generally accepted description of the socialist years as 'totalita' [totalitarian times].³ The Czech narrative centres around the idea that socialism was a mistake as well as an outlier in Czech national history. In contrast to other countries, for example Poland, this narrative is shared by governing parties, cultural elites, and the broader population alike (Valeš 2013, 60–81).

In popular culture and literature normalization and late socialism occupy a special place and are gradually viewed more nuanced. Despite the prevalence of the dissident narrative of normalization, there always existed more ambivalent descriptions that highlighted different experiences of this time. A first and very popular of a more ambiguous if not benevolent view is Michal Viewegh's 1992 novel *Báječná léta pod psa* [*Bliss Was It in Bohemia*, 2015]. Ever since Viewegh's autofictional

novel hit the bookstores, Czech authors have used their own childhood memories as a device to recreate these difficult times, to describe collaboration and opposition and to mine jokes from the drab socialist every-day in all forms of life-writing.⁴ Viewegh’s text also proved to be exemplary in assessing normalization not based on theory but on personal experience. He also set the humorous tone and cemented autofiction as the as the preferred literary mode to address socialist childhoods. Authors like Bohuslav Vaněk-Úvalský and Irena Dousková followed in his wake, describing the 1970s and 1980s from the point of view their own childhood.

Irena Dousková’s auto-fictional trilogy *Hrdý Budžes* [1998; *B. Proudew*, 2016], *Oněgin byl Rusák* [2006; *Onegin Was a Rusky*, 2018] and *Darda* [*Darda*] (2011) is especially popular with Czech audiences. While the first two texts refer to socialist times and childhood and youth, the last instalment *Darda* follows the life of the grown-up protagonist after the fall of communism. Dousková remembers a childhood in a non-conformist family dealing with everyday life in the Czech provinces and in Prague. Her texts are a testament to the popularity of the topic of childhood as a vehicle for representing history, a phenomenon that can be observed in most postsocialist countries in Central Eastern Europe.⁵ She shares another trait with Viewegh to whom she is often compared—both authors received mixed reviews by literary critics and scholars but are extremely well-liked by the wider public. In general, Dousková’s first book has elicited much praise and acclaim while the third and last book is reviewed more or less unfavourable. The first two books have not only seen several editions and are bestsellers but have also been successfully adapted for the stage: *Hrdý Budžes* and *Oněgin byl Rusák* both enjoy exceptionally long runs in Czech theatres and raving reviews by viewers. *Oněgin byl Rusák* was on the playlist of *Divadlo v Dlouhé* in Prague from 2008 until 2017, *Hrdý Budžes* is still running since its opening in 2002 in *Divadlo A. Dvořáka* in Příbram, Dousková’s hometown and the model for the fictional town of Ničín⁶ in her first book.

Irena Dousková is known to Czech readers as the author of popular novels with a penchant for humour and irony, female protagonists, and a focus on everyday life during normalization, the era that followed the Prague Spring and is characterized by a forced restauration of the political status quo of the pre-reform era enforced by party hardliners such as Gustav Husák and Soviet leaders. Another topic that she is associated with is the revival of Jewish culture in the Czech Republic after 1989. Literary criticism on Dousková has so far mainly focused on the Jewish theme in Dousková’s work, paying less attention to childhood and youth. The autofictional character of her novels has been stated but has never been discussed in depth. Dousková started her writing career in the 1990s and belongs to a generation of

authors who came of age during late socialism, such as Jáchym Topol, Michal Viewegh, and Zuzana Brabcová who all made their first attempts at writing during this era or shortly after 1989 and who often return to this time in their prose works.

While the first instalment of Dousková’s trilogy focuses on typical events in the life of its heroine Helenka, who is eight years old in the beginning, the second one shows us a more grown-up and thus also more critical Helenka and deals with typical coming-of-age *topoi* such as first love and disappointment, the need to express oneself through art and life-style and last not least teenage protest. When we first meet Helenka, she lives with her mother, an actress, her step-father, who is also an actor, and her younger half-brother in the provincial town of Ničín. Helenka’s birth father who is Jewish has left the country while she was still a baby and she has never met him. Ničín is closely modelled after the town of Příbram, Dousková’s hometown. When the narration starts, Helenka’s parents have been forced out of their jobs in prestigious Prague theatres due to their involvement in the political reforms around the Prague Spring of 1968. Helenka is precocious, sharp, a little clumsy and always chastised by her mother for being overweight. The text narrates Helenka’s childhood adventures and her parents’ troubles as well parental disappointments in the form of Helenka’s diary. Due to Helenka’s young age, there is no before-after comparison, her life-horizon coincides almost completely with normalization times, which means normalization is experienced here (at least in the first book) not as a diminished version of Czech society as it is in many ‘grown-up’ texts but as a given reality.

In the second book, the family has moved back to Prague and Helenka who attends high school is in her final year. Though the mother-daughter dynamic still features prominently in the book this does not mean that Dousková is concerned with gender roles or focusses on the gender aspects of socialist education. The political problems of her family have not subsided and, in many ways, Helenka’s mother who is depressed and has a drinking problem is worse off than she was in Ničín. Helenka enjoys Prague life and wants to be an intellectual, writing poems, making fun of her communist teachers, and staging small acts of rebellion. Dousková thus, fuses *big* history (the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, political persecution, adaptation to circumstance, the Holocaust, and exile) and *small* history (i.e. her family living under these circumstances, marital and money problems). Thus, showing throughout the text that both cannot be separated, that big history pervaded the everyday life of ordinary Czech citizens. By representing a politically difficult and societally fraught period in Czech history through the eye of a child and then teenager she mitigates some of the more disputed aspects of this era. While the

Prague Spring and the ensuing invasion of Czechoslovakia by Warsaw pact troops in 1968 definitely was the formative event for their generational predecessors, Helenka’s generation was shaped by a time of non-events.

This article will examine Dousková’s texts through the prism of two popular genres—autofiction and childhood memories. It asks how these genres fold into a broader movement of remembering socialism and shaping the image of late socialism in Czechoslovakia and how these images are received by readers. It will also put Dousková’s texts in the wider context of writing childhood between autobiography and autofiction.

Autofiction, memory, and the case of Dousková

Autofiction, i.e. the writing of one’s life story in an approximate, tentative way, has been on the rise in most European literatures for a while now. This holds true for Czech literature as well. Though the ‘autofiction’ (*autofikce*)⁷ is not used widely as a critical term in Czech literary studies until now, the genre itself is quite productive. The last two decades have seen an increasing number of texts that present the reader with supposedly authentic and nevertheless fictionalized life-writing in which private and public history intersect. The popularity of autofictions is in many ways, the result of a craving for authenticity in fiction writing and the acknowledgement of the fictionalizing effects of memory and remembrance in every form of life-writing (Zipfel 2009, 306) and of the memoir boom that followed in the wake of 1989.⁸ The transposition of biographical material into a wider social context and the fictionalizing of personal memories form the core of Dousková’s autofictional account of growing up in socialist Czechoslovakia in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. How much the book draws from real life cannot be quantified but it is safe to say that it can be classified as autofiction due its style and use of biographical material. The narratorial ‘I’ that we encounter in her books thus, is both fictional and rooted in Dousková’s own experience, making use of her own youthful writing and experience.

The main stylistic device used by Dousková to establish this close linkage between her own youthful self and the fictional Helenka, is by emulating a childhood diary. She captures the sound, smell, and taste of normalized socialism with diaristic precision and the naïve perception of a child, while operating from the vantage point of post-socialism. Genre-wise the diary is associated with an ‘illusion of “authenticity” and “immediacy”,’ as Irina Paperno notes in her study of late Soviet diary writing (Paperno 2004, 656). As ‘antifiction’ (Lejeune 2007) the genre of the

diary nudges the reader towards autobiography. In Dousková’s case, the immediacy is heightened by the use of Common Czech (*obecná čeština*) which carries connotations of orality and informality, simultaneously highlighting and mitigating the autofictional character of the text. In contrast to autobiographical childhood memoirs which often incorporate the act of recovering and processing the past into the narrative, autofictional childhood accounts stay in the past trying to recreate the child’s perspective without reflecting on its unattainability. While childhood autobiographies are clearly marked by a limited perspective and can only conceive of the child as a contemporary witness with difficulty, childhood autofictions lend themselves easier to childness while, acknowledging and appreciating historical significance. It could be argued that the child perspective is always imbued with a fictionalizing effect, since even in autobiography it is almost impossible to recreate the vision and voice of a child and subdue the adult narrator. Czech critics of the first part of the trilogy have discussed the incongruities of perception and language that stem from describing the world through the eyes and mouth of an eight-year-old girl, criticizing certain expressions as too complicated for a child her age (Dusková 1999, 7). In her capacity as diary writer, Helenka often does not have the words to describe the rituals and ideology of late socialism but also her complicated family life or adult relationships, so she paraphrases and falls back on her imagination, as is proven by the book’s title. Still, the overall composition of the text points us in the direction of an adult narrator who organizes the text, making use of literary patterns such as the fairy tale for chapter headings, while maintaining the voice of a child in the text entries. In trying to recreate a naïve view of late socialism, autofiction such as Dousková’s with their fictionalized child narrators are less prone to metatextual commentary and reflection than autobiographies. In autobiographies, the relation between the narrating ‘I’ and the narrated ‘I’ is always marked by some extent of estrangement, as the German literary critic Leo Spitzer observed.⁹ In contrast, autofictions like diaries are more adept to propel us into the past without the distancing effect of remembering.

In contrast to autobiography, with its focus on introspection, autofiction also allows for a more marked focus on society and the other. Thus, in Dousková’s texts retrospection can only be found on the authorial level but not on the narratorial—the author looks back at normalization as distinct and closed chapter in her life and Czech history, but her characters live and assess normalization as an ongoing event. Namely, this possibility to project the ‘I’ back into the past unconditionally and devoid of metanarrative reflection on the effects of remembering is the main advantage of autofiction. While both books are light in tone, abounding in jokes and

comic misunderstandings, they also address societal upheaval and struggle in the wake of the suppression of the Prague Spring. The fictional elements allow Dousková to open up her book to experiences and phenomena, that could not have found their way into a childhood memoir *sensu stricto*, and thus focusing on the junctions of her life with that of other people. So, in comparison to autobiography autofiction allows the writer to engage in ‘in-the-now-sincerity’ (Pehe 2020, 87) with regard to socialism, a point of view that is practically impossible for retrospective texts. A stance that is very popular in contemporary Czech culture, as Pehe notes. Instead of Václav Havel’s dogma of *living in truth* and the dissident appeal to authenticity and honesty which has dominated literary representations of late socialism from the 1970s on, Dousková and other writers of autofictions opt for a less moralistic tone. She achieves this mainly by presenting the world through a child’s eye, staying with Helenka’s point of view exclusively due to the diary form. Especially in the first book, her text does not so much speak of oppression, censorship, or violence but more of shortages of consumer goods, (Helenka craves for felt tip pens), complicated housing situation (the family is cramped in a small apartment), and silly socialist rituals, depicting the whole spectrum of attitudes towards the system from dissidence and non-conformism to outright opportunism and party membership as perceived by a child in somewhat mitigated way. While the second book shifts the focus towards these topics—owing to the growing awareness of the narrator—the humorous tone and the point of view of an adolescent girl still highlight the less existential side of socialism.

As has been noted, the first two parts of Dousková’s trilogy present her life-story in the form of a diary written by the series’ main protagonist, Helenka Součková, thus staying stylistically within the confines of life-writing, albeit in fictitious form. While the chapters of the first book are structured by fairy tale allusions, the second part refers to popular Czech songs of the 1970s and 1980s by Vladimír Merta, Karel Kryl, Ivan Hlas, and others, thus flavouring the book with an underground songwriter spirit that goes well with Helenka’s teen aspirations. Both books emulate the form of the diary—they consist of twenty stories that resemble diary entries in tone albeit without dates and other markers of the diary. The diary form steers the reader towards an autobiographical reading in the same way the parallels between author and protagonist do, it implies the point of view of an eye witness without claiming to be autobiographical (Tippner and Laferl 2016, 19). Czech literary critics in general do not use the *autofiction* as a label to classify Dousková’s works, describing the book both as a *novel* and/or a *memoir*. Although the author rejects the classification of her books as autobiographical, her writing makes use of widely

known facts of her life as presented interviews and in her first book *Goldstein píše dceři* [*Goldstein Writes to His Daughter*] (1997). In an interview with the literary critic Radim Kopáč (2006) she stresses:

Něco ze mě mít bude, to nebudu popírat, ale obě knížky jsou psány s velkou mírou stylizace. O historkách platí totéž. Některé se staly, jindy jde o čistou fabulaci.

[She [Helenka] has some things in common with me, I won't deny that, but both books are highly stylized. The same holds true for the stories. Some of them happened to me, others are pure fiction.]¹⁰

Her main character and narrator shares many biographical features with the writer Dousková: the absent Jewish father who lives abroad, non-conformist actors as step-father and mother, a mother who loses her job in the theatre, a grandfather who was a village teacher and a much younger brother, a childhood spent in a Czech provincial town, a move to Prague in her teens in the mid-1970s, attending high school in the Prague-Letná, working in a library because she was not admitted at university. Especially, the second part which chronicles Helenka's coming of age and her first attempts at writing poetry and styling herself as an urban intellectual, fuse elements of the *Künstlerroman* with autobiographical material, such as her own first poems which she included in the novel and thus follow a popular narrative model for autofictions (Němečková 2008).

The parallels between the author, her relatives, and friends and those of the protagonists is further strengthened stylistically by her allusive use of names: The absent Jewish father of Dousková's protagonist Helenka is called 'Freistein,' echoing the name of Dousková's father Petr Freistadt, as does Helenka's surname echo that of the author herself substituting just two consonants. Names and the sharing of names being one of the distinctive narrative features of autofiction (Gronemann 2019, 241). With this subtle transposition, she thus indicates that certain aspects of her book, refer to her own biography albeit in a blurred, transformed way. Using these 'Jewish' names, she also indicates that certain aspects of the text, such as the interest in Jewish culture and literature rely more heavily on her personal life than others. In staying close to the details of her own life and making use of her own biography the texts manage to infuse the narrative of growing up during *normalization* with authenticity and authority, while the fictional approach allows her to enhance the same ordinary events and provide comic relief, following Doubrovsky's (2008, 124) dictum that

autofiction is the retelling one’s life in a more interesting way. Rather than autobiographical her trilogy can be viewed as auto-fictional (Grell 2014; Gronemann 2019, 241–247) making use of the author’s biography without establishing an ‘autobiographical pact’ (Lejeune 1996). The fictionalized version of the author’s self and personal details are fused with a larger narrative of living in normalization times and as a means to vouchsafe a communal experience. The book is meant to transcend Dousková’s personal story and attain a wider relevance. A goal she achieves easily, as witnessed by the popularity of her books.

Socialism as seen through the eyes of a child

As has been argued above, adopting a consistent child’s point of view without visible reassessments by the adult narrator already moves the text from autobiography towards autofiction. Dousková’s books look back at the way citizens such as Helenka’s parents and the parents of her classmates adjusted their behaviour and learned to live with the system and not against it. With regard to the GDR, the German historian Martin Sabrow (2010, 17) has called this type of memory ‘Arrangementgedächtnis,’ memories of coming to terms with the system, of living quietly and often happily in difficult times. This is illustrated in *Onegin Was a Rusky*, when Helenka muses on the necessity to join the party youth organization, the Socialist Union of Youth (*Socialistický svaz mládeže*) in high school. She is not keen about joining due to her non-conformist attitudes, but she knows this needs to be done in order preserve the option of university admittance. She reasons:

[...] je fakt, že v tom SSM všichni jsme. Všichni do jednoho—i já. Nikam nechodíme, nic neděláme, nic se neděje, a nikdo, snad kromě Ťuíka, po nás nic nechce. Stačí, že tam prostě jsme, a to asi jde. [...] Kdo chce na vysokou, a to chtějí všichni, ví, že tam bejt musí, [...]. Dokonce i naši to berou jako úplnou samozřejmost, i když nemilou. Jiná věc je členství v straně, to je ta hranice, za kterou se v naši rodiče nejde [...] Jinak ale skoro všichni rodiče ve straně jsou, vždycky aspoň jeden z nich— většinou tatínek. (Dousková 2006, 50–51)

[...] and it’s also a fact that we are all in the Socialist Youth. Every last one of us, even me. We don’t go anywhere, we don’t do anything, nothing happens and nobody asks anything of us, except perhaps Ťuík [the chair of the Socialist Youth Union Committee]. Basically, it’s enough for us to be in it, and that’s what it’s probably all about. [...] Anyone, who wants to carry on to university [...] has to be

in it [...]. Even my folks take it as a matter of fact, albeit an unwelcome one. Now party membership is something else. That’s the limit nobody in our family will step over [...] But otherwise almost all the parents are in it, even my friends’, or at least one of them, usually their dad. (Dousková 2018, 53–54)]

As can be seen, reflections like these have a double addressee—the diary and her 1970s contemporaries but even more today’s readers who need an introduction to normalization attitudes.

While basic involvement with party organizations is, in Helenka’s terms ‘an empty formality,’ (Dousková 2018, 53) to be a card-carrying member of the party means, you are either an opportunist or a communist believer. Even if a certain degree of conformism is necessary if one wants to get into good schools, and universities, or obtain a prestigious position, there is a line that is not to be crossed. She reflects upon this in the end of her text apropos a former classmate who has written an article on a student labour brigade for *Rudé právo*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, saying: ‘Some things are just not done’ (Dousková 2018, 273). Judgements like this work in several ways in the book, they serve as self-assurance but they also create a typology of behaviour (the conformist, the careerist, the party official, the apolitical) and explain the unwritten laws of normalization, to today’s audience. When Helenka goes to a Chartist meeting, she is sharply told of by her parents, who remind her of all political compromises and sacrifices they have made to allow for good schooling despite their non-conformist backgrounds (Dousková 2018, 125–126). Despite her efforts to steer clear of red lines, Helenka is not admitted to university and she proclaims proudly:

Vždycky o tom bude rozhodovat nějakéj komunistickéj hajzl a nikdy ne podle toho, jestli něco umím. V tý fabrice můžu celkem snadno skončit, ale k bolševikům bych nevlezla, ani kdybych v ní měla zůstat celý život. (Dousková 2006, 249)

[It will always be some Communist swine who will make the decisions, and never on the basis of what I can actually do. I might easily end up at that factory, but even if I have to stay there all my life, I will never join the Bolsheviks. (Dousková 2018, 267)]

once again confirming her non-conformist stance and acting out one of the small acts of defiance that characterize her and her family.

Besides observations like this, Dousková’s version of childhood and youth during socialism is relatable for many contemporary witnesses, since she taps into a shared repertoire of memories concerning socialist times, such as after-school clubs, popular pastimes, clothes made of strange synthetic materials such as *tesilen*, *Tuzex* stores where one can buy deficit goods with foreign currency, favourite actors, pop stars, and singers such as Miluše Voborníková and Karel Kryl. Besides these rather harmless and apolitical signposts of life under socialism, she also integrates other less benign aspects, when Helenka is assigned to work in a factory where forbidden books are pulped, letters of denunciation are sent that threaten her graduation, and dissidents are persecuted. The books also owe their great success to the fact that she—very much like Viewegh—presents her family of non-conformists as the prototypical 1970s Czech family. Moving to the province in order to escape the stricter surveillance in Prague, befriending dissidents, being forced out of theatre contracts—these are some indicators of non-conformism embodied by Helenka’s mother. Despite their professional troubles and despite their critical attitudes towards Husák’s politics, the family itself is not engaged in the dissident movement. Rather, they belong to the ‘gray zone’ (Šiklová 1990, 347–63),¹¹ a term coined by the Czech dissident and sociologist Jiřina Šiklová, in order to characterize the silent mass of Czechoslovak citizens who were neither convinced party members, nor openly dissident, who engaged in small acts of disobedience such as refusing to join party organizations or meeting and supporting dissidents, but did not sign the Charta 77 or participate in underground activities.

Dousková’s resistance to autobiographical claims and autobiography as genre, manifest themselves precisely in her narratorial decision to opt for a child narrator. In an interview with the journalist Kateřina Chourová, Dousková argues in favour of the child perspective, saying:

Nikdy jindy už člověk nevnímá tak ostře a s takovou otevřeností vůči světu, jako právě v dětství a raném mládí.

[At no other point in your life, you are as perceptive and open-minded with regard to the world as during your childhood and early youth.]¹²

The child’s point of view has two main effects with regard to remembering socialism: it enables writers to downplay the disciplinary and political effects of normalization politics, while mirroring the infantilization of all citizens during socialist times.¹³ While her parents feel diminished and helpless, Helenka describes acts of

infantilization, especially in the first instalment without judging them. From a child's point of view, question of resistance, collaboration and compromise do not figure largely in the everyday interactions with state institutions such as schools or the party youth organization, while they absorb the thoughts of her parents. For them even choosing roles or maintaining friendships has become fraught with politics as is shown in the rift with their friend and fellow actress, Andrea Kroupová over politics (Dousková 2016, 65, 79, 87). Furthermore, the child as focalizer eases the harmonization of the ‘seemingly paradoxical mix of positive and negative values’ (Yurchak 2005, 9) and attitudes towards socialist reality and allow for a certain nostalgia. Postsocialist nostalgia, a pervasive phenomenon in transformation literature, blends organically with the ‘pristine longing for childhood’ which characterizes the poetics of childhood according to Roni Natov (2003, 6), even if this childhood is far from idyllic like Helenka's. This nostalgia is not without problems as is evident in the memory wars that are waged in the internet where contemporary witnesses debate the pros and cons of pioneer camps, certain types of chocolate wafers, or animated films of the 1980s and weigh these fond memories against persecution and censorship.

While nostalgic images and happy memories are connected to childhood, the trauma and loss associated with the normalization period are firmly rooted in the sphere of the grown-ups and in the second book the growing-up Helenka. Parents are seen as insecure about their rights and status within the new order and thus deprived of their usual parental power, which puts their children in a strange position:

Člověk vidí, jaký jsou ty rodiče chudáci, jak jsou na tom špatně, jak jsou smutný, ztupený a nesťastný, a chtěl by jim pomoci [...]. (Dousková 2006, 114)

[We see what poor sods our parents are, how badly put upon they are, how depressed, despondent and disparaged they are—and we want to help them [...]. (Dousková 2018, 121)]

On the one hand, reflections like these could be understood as retrospective commentary but mostly they attest to the complicated dynamics between parents and children in real socialism. Helenka had to grow up more quickly than children today, because of her parent's precarious position. Her mother Kačenka is the epitome of fragile and wounded parenthood in the book. Already the fact that Helenka calls her Kačenka—an affectionate diminutive of Kateřina instead of

maminka, or mummy, symbolizes a relationship that is marked by the child’s observation of the parent’s vulnerability caused by politics. Apart from minor spats with her mother, it is the mother’s struggle with alcohol and depression due to her futile attempts to fight the system and work as an actress which feature most prominently in the text. In eight year old Helenka’s perspective her mother’s drunken episodes are marked by being ‘cross, [speaking] awfully quickly and [being] difficult to understand’ (Dousková 2016, 146), something she hates but does not really associate with alcoholism or her mother’s dismal work situation, whereas the older Helenka can grasp the reasons of her mother’s behaviour quite well. Despite all her efforts, Helenka’s mother has to leave the theatre which only aggravates her drinking problems, making Helenka dream about ‘setting her mother free’ (Dousková 2018, 156), reasoning that she ‘hits the bottle, because she’s unhappy, but then who bloody isn’t?’ (Dousková 2018, 163). All in all, this image of damaged parenthood makes it difficult for the generation of normalization children of members of the gray zone and dissidents to rebel against their parents.

Especially, in the first book Dousková captivates her audience by presenting them with a mostly humorous image of socialism, providing relief from dissident seriousness and righteousness with regard to socialism. While the parents may have regrets and remorse for past and present actions the child character resides firmly in the present and enjoys parades, pioneer outings, and songs without reservation. This does not mean that she does not address political issues and discrimination both political and antisemitic, for instance when she describes how a picture of hers that was chosen for the wall journal is taken down, because the teacher is afraid of repercussions, telling her colleague:

Mařenko, ta Freisteinová, to je dcera TOHO Freisteina a TÝ Součková? Tak prosím tě, to radši ne, to ne. Ať nikoho zbytečně nedráždíme. (Dousková 1998, 141)

[Mařenka, that Freisteinová— isn’t she the daughter of THAT Freistein and THAT Součková? Then come on, we’d better not. Not her, let’s not annoy anybody unnecessarily. (Dousková 2016, 159)]

So, in order not to ‘annoy anybody unnecessarily’ (Dousková 2016, 159) by featuring the child of this dissident family, Helenka’s picture is not to be shown. The child narrator reports this incident matter-of-factly but does not put it into the context of latent antisemitism and political oppression, this task is left to the readers.

The tone changes in the second book with Helenka’s growing insight into the workings of Czech everyday politics. Here, Dousková combines first love, family trouble, and small political transgressions that nevertheless have big repercussions for Helenka. Now, Helenka still has a conflicted relationship with her mother, but due to more critical view of society, she has gained some appreciation of her mother’s political opinions and of the intellectual and moral stance her family takes, saying of her mother: ‘She is clever and actually quite courageous’ (Dousková 2018, 155). Mother and daughter do not find themselves in opposing corners when it comes to politics, but they are separated by their degree of disillusionment. Helenka’s life is marked by small acts of defiance and a heavy dose of humour that aims at everyone who represents official positions or who conforms too much. Conflicts arise because of Helenka’s youthful contempt for teachers and party officials and the small acts of rebellion vis-à-vis institutions and less because of ideological differences with her parents who act pragmatically on her behalf. While her parents already pay the price, as Helenka is fully aware of (and takes some pride in), she has trouble living-up to this insight. While *B. Proudew* presents the reader with a sometimes mischievous, sometimes naïve but more or less apolitical ‘I,’ *Onegin Was a Rusky* moves closer toward the dissident tradition, as can be found in autofictions by Tereza Boučková or Zuzana Brabcová on growing up in the 1960s and 1970s in dissident circles. Dousková keeps up the humour despite her protagonist’s growing disillusionment with the world of normalization’s everyday politics. The outlook in *Onegin Was a Rusky* is much darker, allowing for less nostalgia and opening up more room for criticism than for comedy.

Humour and the socialist condition

On occasion of the publication of the last part of the trilogy, Pavel Janoušek (2012, 66–67) has remarked that in Dousková’s texts, humour serves as a mask which the author dons in order to come to terms with her life. Dousková’s special blend of situational comic, an approachable heroine, and mild political satire has contributed to the image of *normalization*. Though, Dousková addresses the general mood and every day politics of the 1970s and 1980s as well as phenomena of popular culture as seen through the eyes of a child and later on youth, her books are filled with markers of normalization life that are easily perceptible for Czech readers. Late socialism as we encounter it, in Dousková’s book is at once oppressive and homely, bureaucratic and reassuringly safe. As written above, Dousková is not the first to represent late socialism through the lens of humour, with the humoristic approach being especially

popular in Czech films, as Veronika Pehe (2015, 419) has observed. Seeing the funny side of socialism and underlining its absurdity has become a widespread non-confrontational approach that none the less diverges from the narrative of bleak times initiated by non-conformist authors of an older generation, mainly those born in the 1940s and 1950s.

Dousková herself characterizes her books in an interview somewhat oxymoronic as ‘cheerful nostalgic memories of the misery of Husák’s normalization’ (Strnadová 2004, 13), thus not buying wholly into the discourse of condemnation and trauma, but not giving in completely to postsocialist nostalgia, a widespread phenomenon all over Central Eastern Europe, as well. While postsocialist nostalgic discourses often ‘retrofit’ the past, as Sergej Oushakine has noted (Oushakine 2007), Dousková does no such thing. Instead, she presents her readers with a more conciliatory and less political image of life under Gustav Husák, shifting the attention towards the absurd, often humiliating, but also comforting aspects of life, thus pointing the reader towards the ‘the ethical and aesthetic paradoxes that “really existing socialism” acquired in the lives of many of its citizens,’ as Alexei Yurchak (2005, 9) has argued in his study on late socialism in the USSR. These mixed feelings may explain, why Czechs are nostalgic for this era, despite their predominantly critical verdict of the years between 1968 and 1989 and late socialism. In retrospect Czechs point to positive aspects of the socialist system, focusing less on the politics and more on everyday practices, specific consumer goods, and cultural artefacts such as popular films and books, as well as a shared sense of tranquillity and stability. Literature thus complements historiography in order to create the diverse image of normalization Pavel Kolář and Michal Pullmann (2016, 44–47) have asked for in their study on the 1970s and 1980s.

The humour in Dousková’s autofiction is very much the result of Helenka’s worldview. This works especially well in *B. Proudew*. Here, it is constituted almost entirely by her lack of understanding of the grown-up world, be it intimate relations or politics, but most of all in her overenthusiasm when it comes to socialist rituals and propaganda. Other than the reader, Helenka is completely unaware of the way in which politics play out in post-1968 Czechoslovakia, constantly misinterpreting situations. Helenka appears to be successfully imbued with the ideology of Czech socialism during normalization. Despite her parents’ best efforts, she enthusiastically embraces everything that is offered to children in socialist Czechoslovakia—pioneer activities, honouring socialist heroes, joining clubs, and singing and reciting uplifting and heroic songs and poems. Auditioning for a role in film with a non-conformist director, everything looks fine until she is asked to recite a poem, choosing

Alexander Bezymensky’s ‘Intimate Letter,’ a Russian poem with a rousing theme, that she has learned in school. This prompts her immediate dismissal and earns her the verdict ‘Husákova vnučka’ [Husák’s granddaughter] by the director (Dousková 1998). When she describes the festivities to celebrate the Russian revolution, she is excited about the lantern procession, staying up in the evening, and the special food in the cafeteria. But she also mentions that her parents first do not allow her to participate, something she cannot understand at all. In the end they give in to her wishes, letting her walk in the front with her dad walking ‘in the dark at a distance behind the procession’ (Dousková 1998, 114; Dousková 2016, 131).

There are numerous examples of estrangement as humoristic device, starting with the title *Hrdý Budžes* (B. Proudew). This wordplay has become proverbial in today’s Czechoslovakia and is a riff on a famous poem by the communist author Stanislav Kostka Neumann. The poem ‘Be proud’¹⁴ (Hrdý bud’, 1951) was part of the school curriculum and the third-grader Helenka misunderstands and convolutes the first two lines of the poem she has heard over the school loudspeaker. She deflates the high socialist pathos by transforming the imperative ‘be proud that you’ (hrdý bud’, žes) into the name of person called the ‘hrdý Budžes’ (B. Proudew) while still emphasizing the appeal of socialist heroics for children:

Včera jsem ve školním rozhlase slyšela krásnou básničku o jednom pánovi. Jmenoval se Hrdý Budžes, byl velice statečnej a vytrval, i když měl všelijaký potíže. Já mám taky potíže, hlavně proto, že jsem tlustá a všichni se mi smějou. Ale včera jsem si řekla, že se nedám. Budu jako ten Hrdý Budžes a vytrvám. (Dousková 1998, 5)

[Yesterday I heard this lovely poem on the school intercom about a certain gentleman called B. Proudew. He was very brave and persevered, even though he had all kinds of difficulties. I have difficulties too, mostly cos I’m fat and everybody laughs at me. But yesterday I told myself I wouldn’t give up. I’m going to be like Mr. B. Proudew and persevere. (Dousková 2016, 13)]

At the end of the book, she gets the meaning of the text, symbolizing a growing disillusionment with socialist daily lore, dismissing Neuman’s socialist heroism as a fairy tale like the stories about Father Christmas (Dousková 1998, 149; Dousková 2016, 167).

As with other socialist institutions and emblems, Helenka is overly appreciative and susceptible to their appeal, very much to the chagrin of her non-conformist

mother Kačenka. A good example for this, is the way Dousková treats state youth organizations, the ‘Jiskry’ [Sparkies or Little Flames], the pioneers and the Czechoslovak Socialist Union of Youth. While in primary school Helenka desperately wants to join the Little Flames, since all of her class has joined, something her parents strongly oppose (Dousková 1998, 7; Dousková 2016, 15–16). When she finally joins, she enjoys the outings with her leader Anděla a lot. In Dousková’s depiction, the Little Flames which were supposed to prepare children for membership in the pioneer organization, resemble the Boy Scouts and is devoid of any political activity (Dousková 1998, 54–61; Dousková 2016, 66–74). This corresponds to oral histories analysed in a collective volume on childhood in Czechoslovakia. One of the contemporary witnesses’ states:

Vždycky mě překvapuje, když dnes někdo spojuje pionýrskou organizaci s politikou [...] u nás žádnou politiku na pionýrských schůzkách neprobírali. My jsme si normálně hráli [...].

[I’m always surprised, when people today make a connection between the pioneer organization and politics [...] at our pioneer meetings there were no politics. We just played [...].]¹⁵

Dousková’s depictions adhere to this point of view by stressing the fact that the leaders of the pioneer group use the outings for sexual trysts and keep the children busy with play and adventure stories. It is safe, to say that Dousková’s popularity owes much to her blending shared happy memories and ‘friendly humour’¹⁶ with precise descriptions of the oppressive life under normalization.

The second instalment, featuring an adolescent Helenka taps into another form of satirising the communist past—ironical riffs on party slogans and making fun of narrow-minded and often not very bright party officials. These, especially the low-ranking ones, are depicted as mostly harmless, often unattractive human beings who are if not made fun of, mostly ignored in their futile efforts to impose party directives. Almost every official ranging from the chairs of the Socialist Youth Union Committee (Tůík and Krumphanzl) to the ‘unbelievably stupid’ civic studies teacher Mrs. Veselá (Dousková 2006, 188) is gullible or just a cowardly opportunist like the headmaster Bauch who privately listens to the forbidden music he condemns in public and thus is compromised morally in the eyes of the youth. Helenka and her friend Julie come up with a new school of philosophy that they call ‘neo-materism,’ mocking the cornerstone of socialist philosophy materialism but still gaining top

marks. Dousková goes to great length to describe the ways in which Helenka and her friend Julie practice subversion, by editing the school newspaper ‘Atom,’ or painting absurd banners for 1 May celebration, always with the goal to highlight their essential ethical and political emptiness of socialist slogans. In many ways Helenka and her friends are representatives of what Kamil Činátl (2014, 316) has called the ‘oblíbený typ rozhořčeného antikomunisty’ [the popular type of the outraged anti-communist], someone who is constantly angry and full of complaint, but basically harmless and never acts upon his or her convictions. In the end, they almost risk graduation with these ‘provocations’ (Dousková 2006, 217; Dousková 2018, 233). Though the regime of normalization destroys the life of Helenka’s mother and makes life complicated for her step-father, the child narrator of the first instalment does not dwell on these tragedies, it is only the adolescent narrator who becomes aware of the many faces of socialism. Dousková does not end her book on a happy note either, since after graduation Helenka experiences the full extent of normalization oppression and the regime’s disciplinary measures for the first time by not being admitted to journalism school she applied for, while others who played along such as her school mates Richard and Antonín make it to their dream university. In Douskova’s reading, growing up in socialist times involves acting out against the system and being punished for these transgressions as a rite-de-passage. At this point, socialism has lost its childish and humorous face and has shown some teeth.¹⁷ On the other hand, the book still provides the same pleasure of immersing oneself in late socialist life with all its now exotic practices and eccentricities. Thus, underlining the fact that Dousková’s works give ‘joy by recognizing the period’s outward attributes in combination with a judgement of their ideological defectiveness,’¹⁸ as Veronika Pehe (2020, 87) remarks in *Velvet Retro*, her study on postsocialist nostalgia.

Conclusion: legacies of normalization

The advantages of auto-fiction and childhood memories for recreating the fraught postsocialist past are obvious. Autofictions allow for re-arrangement of historical experiences in the narrative and the child perspective allows for estrangement, combined they allow for a mix of the *here and now* of late socialism without politics taking over the narrative. One can see how the child first person narrator provides autofictions with a heightened possibility to engage with events on the level of synchronicity viewing them through the distancing and seemingly apolitical lens of the child. Late socialism provides the background for the anecdotal recollection of childhood experiences and family history, a narrative frame sustained by the diary

genre. Rather than actually reflecting on childhood memories, Dousková stages the child protagonist as a serviceable figure for expressing a contemporary view on normalization. She uses autofiction to explore both growing up and coming into her own but also to depict the mores and types of normalization. As was shown, her humorous take on growing up in socialist times balances everyday experiences of a child (school, being mobbed because of her weight, little pleasure and hobbies) with the political impact of normalization on her parent's life (job loss, insecurity, harassment by officials). Dousková's approach is a fairly typical for Czech literary texts on late socialism, oscillating between ridicule and nostalgia, but rarely coming to terms with the fact that a majority of Czech citizens were in one way or other implicated in its everyday politics. According to Claudia Gronemann (2019, 243), the impossibility of writing truthfully about oneself is one of the reasons for fictionalizing life-stories via auto-fiction. Transferred from individual to collective level, this would explain the popularity of autofictions addressing late socialism, in a society that is still debating attitudes towards these complicated times.

Nostalgia is evoked by the objects and the culture of normalization but also by the depiction of close-knit communities that also were characteristic for normalization life. In a time, when the memorial culture and historiography are just coming to terms with normalization, books like Dousková's contribute images and experiences of this era as well as ways of relating to its historical-political domain. The nostalgia in her books is rather *reflective* than *restorative*, she does not aim restore normalization on a collective level, but still is savouring aspects and details of this near past. Or to quote Svetlana Boym (2001, 51), 'the mirror of [her] reflective nostalgia is shattered by collective devastation.' As could be seen, part of the appeal of Dousková's books is due to the infantilization that Czechs and citizens of socialist countries overall experienced during and after socialism, which made it easy to deny one's responsibility for and one's complicity in the system. In addition, the child perspective in autofiction allows the writer to push history to the background. Thus, favouring autofiction over autobiography in recent representations of the near past, may be an expression of a less individual and more collective attitude to the normalization years and thus accounts for the ambivalence towards this era that is felt in Czech society. Being at once the time of one's youth and childhood and thus tinged in a mostly benevolent light *and* the time of heightened persecution and ideologization on a societal level. Douskova's humoristic and sad look back at childhood and youth during normalization allows Czech readers to do both: yearn for the simple pleasures of childhoods spent under socialism and make fun of its cultural practices without digging too deep into one's own complicity. This peculiar

type of autofiction achieves its vitality and popularity through its capacity for social affirmation. It provides its readers with social commentary and confirmation of shared experiences. On a literary level, it derives its productivity from autofiction’s capacity to re-create a personal experience, while creating a form for a communal social imaginary. Dousková’s poetic approach via humour and the child perspective (and to a lesser extent the youth perspective), set a process in motion that makes room for community between those who lived through it and those who want to know about it today.

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Notes

¹ Other examples for using the child perspective to depict the normalization era, both fictional and autobiographical, include Jáchym Topol’s *Noční práce* [*Night Work*] (2001), Sylva Fischerová’s *Pasáž (z pohledu vysokoškoláčky)* [*Passage (from the Viewpoint of a High School Girl)*] (2011), a volume edited by Jan Simkanič called *Mé dětství v socialismu* [*My Childhood during Socialism*] (2014) which provides autobiographical essays and sketches by authors, journalists, and public intellectuals.

² See for example Dočekal and Šabach (2005). This volume collects short texts about living in normalization-era Czechoslovakia by older generation authors with a focus on gloom and hardship.

³ See <http://www.totalita.cz/>. Date accessed: 21 July 2020. The view of Czech late socialism and the era of normalization as solely oppressive and monolithic has been criticized in the last ten years, though. Michal Pullmann’s monograph *Konec experimentu. Přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu* (2011) was instrumental in starting a debate on late socialism.

⁴ For a thorough discussion of Viewegh’s autofiction and the depiction of Czechoslovakia during normalization see Artwińska (forthcoming).

⁵ Some critics, as for example Jan Jandourek, criticize the second book exactly for following this established narrative convention, while conceding that for the wider audience the pleasure of retracing childhood experiences might prevail (Jandourek 2006).

⁶ <https://www.i-divadlo.cz/divadlo/divadlo-v-dlouhe/onegin-byl-rusak>; <https://www.i-divadlo.cz/divadlo/divadlo-a-dvoraka-pribram/hrdy-budzes>. Date accessed: 25 May 2020. Barbara Hrzanová, the actress who plays the main character Helenka Součková, received a prestigious theatre prize for her role. <http://www.ceny-thalie.cz/historie.php>. Date accessed: 25 May 2020.

⁵ For a discussion of the borders of autobiography see Soukupová (2015), though she does not elaborate further on autofiction and uses Czech literature as an example only among others.

⁸ For the difficulties of incorporating a historiographic perspective in childhood autobiographies see Lange (2008, 24).

⁹ See Spitzer (1928, 448–449); Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010, 72) expand on this by suggesting that autobiographical texts are also produced by including an ideological ‘I’ and a ‘real’ or ‘historical I.’

¹⁰ See Kopáč (2006). This can also be found on Dousková’s website: <http://www.douskova.cz/rozhovor/douskova-prichazi-s-pokracovanim-hrdeho-budzese/>. Date accessed: 26 July 2020. In an interview with the fellow writer Arnošt Goldflam she refutes his claim that the majority of her work is autobiographical, while still pointing out parallels and answering questions about the relation of life and literature. [douskova.cz/rozhovor/prvni-setkani-s-otcem-bylo-zvlastni/](http://www.douskova.cz/rozhovor/prvni-setkani-s-otcem-bylo-zvlastni/). Date accessed: 30 March 2020.

She refutes autobiography, while voluntarily sharing facts about her childhood that mirror the books and points out parallels in almost every interview. For a recent example see Antošová (2017); see also Němečková (2008).

¹¹ The citizens who actually engaged in oppositional political and cultural activities (e.g. Charta 77, Underground but also clandestine churches, environmental groups) were only a small part of the Czechoslovak part of the Czechoslovak society (see Vaněk and Mücke 2016, 219). Alena Fialová also refers to this concept with regard to Dousková (Fialová 2008, 7).

¹² <http://douskova.cz/rozhovor/hra-hrdy-budzes-byla-tak-trochu-zazrak/>. Date accessed: 20 July 2020.

She makes this point again in her 2016 preface to the English translation of the first part of her trilogy, writing: ‘they [i.e. children] often manage to perceive and identify what is going on around them far more accurately and in focus than the grown-ups around them might guess or would ever be willing to admit’ (Dousková 2016, 10).

¹³ The late Czech literary scholar Vladimír Macura has pointed this out in a short essay on Czech literary texts for young readers from the 1970s. With regard to books on Lenin, Marx and Engels, and the Second World War he notes that these texts not only make the values and ideology of socialism accessible for children, they also ‘infantilize’ and simplify them. This is, in his mind, an overall trait of socialist culture which ultimately infantilized everyone (Macura 1992, 85).

The Czech history project *Socialism Realised* also devotes a lesson to this, which features a film clip of protesting workers who shout ‘Nejsme děti!’ [We are not children!]. See <https://www.socialismrealised.eu/catalogue/we-are-not-children/>. Date accessed: 21 July 2020.

¹⁴ ‘A hrdý buď, / žes vytrval, / žes neposkvrnil / ústa ani hrud’ / falešnou řečí.’ [Be proud / that you endured / that you never stained / neither breast nor mouth / with false words.] (Neuman 1951, 227).

¹⁵ Cited in Krátká (2018, 617–618). The chapter addresses this in other testimonies, too.

¹⁶ The historian Kamil Činátl uses this phrase to describe texts in the vein of Viewegh and Dousková. He is not the only critic who sees this as a cliché and a form of complacency. See Činátl (2014, 316).

¹⁷ This stands in contrast to Veronika Pehe’s observation with regard to Viewegh’s novel and Petr Šabach’s equally popular autofictional coming-of-age novel *Občanský průkaz* [*The Identity Card*] (2006) (Pehe 2015, 430). In a short review of the second part of Dousková’s novel Radim Kopáč (2006) remarks on the fact that *Onegin Was a Rusky* diverges from the Vieweghian model. Jan Jandourek on the contrary writes that Dousková follows well established narrative models (Jandourek 2006).

¹⁸ This is affirmed by critics such as Jan Jandourek (2006).