FICTION

A Shape-Shifting Novel About the Power of Stories

In Helen Oyeyemi's "Parasol Against the Axe," a woman's trip to Prague becomes a meta-narrative about connection with art, people and more.

By Chelsea Leu

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PARASOL AGAINST THE AXE, by Helen Oyeyemi

Helen Oyeyemi is a literary pied piper — her voice is the kind that readers gamely follow into the most bewildering and unnerving of situations. Take, for instance, the racist house bent on harming its nonwhite inhabitants in her 2009 novel, "White Is for Witching," or the exploitative theme park where farm girls sell gingerbread and nostalgic visions of agrarian life in her 2019 book, "Gingerbread." In this new novel, "Parasol Against the Axe," Oyeyemi takes us to … Prague?

Yes, Prague. Oyeyemi has lived there since 2014. But the novel's Prague is a strange, shifting mass of forms, at once the chaotic narrator of "Parasol Against the Axe" and also several mysterious characters within it, including a forgetful "earthen-toned" man who speaks Malagasy and someone dressed in a costume of a Czech cartoon mole named Krtek.

Prague also seems to be the narrative force behind a book called "Paradoxical Undressing," whose contents change every time the novel's characters try to read it, and whose short stories — set in different periods of Prague's history — appear in lengthy excerpts scattered throughout "Parasol." When a character describes

the city as “a dissociative state” late in the novel, the phrase struck me as downright comforting. Finally, an apt summation of whatever I’d been living through for the previous 249 pages. Prague may not be a city at all, Oyeyemi suggests. It’s something that happens to you.

Prague certainly happens to Hero Tojosoa, the book’s protagonist, who arrives in town for her friend Sofie’s bachelorette weekend. She doesn’t walk so much as hurtle through the city. “Each stop seemed to send her sailing onward to the next,” Oyeyemi writes of Hero’s tour of the capital. Time skips and speeds forward, yanking Hero out of scenes and plunging her into entirely unrelated ones. She hears her own disembodied voice one night in her bed-and-breakfast, then finds a marriage certificate with her name on it. “I don’t think you were meant to see this yet,” the owner of the bed-and-breakfast tells her. Hero, we discern, isn’t actually the hero of this story; the agency usually afforded to protagonists has been stripped from her. The story *itself* is calling the shots.

Then there's "Paradoxical Undressing," which Hero begins reading to pass the time on her trip. It begins with a tale-within-a-tale about a nobleman in the 16th-century court of Rudolf II, but breaks off to address Hero personally. Other characters read stories that involve Jewish taxi dancers under German occupation in 1943, or fringe art on the city's subways in 2016. These narrative fragments are easily the most riveting in the book; they're romps that let us in on delicious secrets about Prague's inner nature or poignantly illustrate human idiosyncrasy against the weight of history. Some are simply so complete in their strangeness that one can't help reading them with a sense of awe: Where did this even *come* from?

The world outside is less compelling. The plot's main action kicks into gear with the arrival of Dorothea Gilmartin, a former friend of Hero and Sofie's. Thea has her own elaborate back story, her own copy of "Paradoxical Undressing," her own wacky encounters with various embodiments of Prague. But there's something brittle about the central characters — their interactions feel like a hyper-articulate facsimile of real friendship. Both Hero and Thea remain flat collections of attributes rather than convincing humans. Moments in the story suffer from the same flippant quality — a revelation that hinges on child sexual assault, for instance, delivers a peculiarly empty shock; it's just another event in a series of madcap events, rather than a bombshell with emotional repercussions.

But Oyeyemi isn't interested in anything as mundane as what a story might mean. Many details in this book seem like they're there simply because they're weird or fun, not necessarily because they gesture at some larger significance. Her stock-in-trade has always been tales at their least domesticated; her concern lies in form and the unruly patterns and peculiarities that allow stories to take on lives of their own. In this novel, they have all the autonomy, charisma and messiness of living beings — and demand the same respect.

If the novel feels chilly at times, it stems from a preoccupation with storytelling's darker aspects. It's no coincidence that Hero is an "ex-journalist" who wrote a book about a man that made him kill himself, an act alluded to throughout the novel. By

the end, creating narratives about other people takes on a compromising, parasitic edge, in a way that calls to mind Janet Malcolm's description of journalism as "morally indefensible."

What warmth there is in "Parasol" comes from the spark that ignites between a person and a book, a person and another person, or even a person and a city. This is where the magic is, Oyeyemi suggests: the private, subjective alchemy of coming into contact with something else. To put it another way: What happens between you and Prague stays in Prague.

PARASOL AGAINST THE AXE | By Helen Oyeyemi | Riverhead Books | 256 pp. | $28