

# Confronting the Past: Contemporary Eastern European Writers

(Note: This book series is currently retired)

## CONFRONTING THE PAST: CONTEMPORARY EASTERN EUROPEAN WRITERS 1

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## Overview

The Eastern Europe with which most of us are familiar was born from the ashes of World War II. By the end of the 1940s, communist totalitarian regimes held power in all European states within the Soviet sphere of influence. By the 1950s, a forced split into West and East culminated in an "Iron Curtain"—a sophisticated and inhuman system of barbed wire, minefields, and secret police forces depriving people of their right to travel freely. In 1961, the Berlin Wall became the symbol of the division between the East and West in Europe.

Today, the Berlin Wall and the Iron Curtain have fallen, and the architectural work of revolution is complete: the old order has been replaced by various forms of free market economy and de jure democracy. But enormous rifts still divide ex-communist countries from the capitalist democracies, and many people are not willing to emerge from their old ways.

While the politics of this region may be complex and hard to understand, its literary heritages are ancient, rich, and clear. This series seeks to illuminate the cultures of Central and Eastern Europe through some of the very best literature in translation from the region.

Slavenka Drakulic's *Cafe Europa* (1996) is a brilliant work of political reportage filtered through the Croatian writer's own highly personal experience. One of Europe's most acclaimed writers, Drakulic portrays a continent that is still divided, with the East separated—and ostracized—from the West by prejudice and intolerance.

Born on Yugoslavia's border with Hungary, Danilo Kis published *The Hourglass* in 1972 as the final volume of a trilogy recounting the story of his father's life, disappearance, and death in Auschwitz. In this remarkable

novel—evoking the spirit of Franz Kafka—Kis continues the tradition of ironic pathos that is so much a part of Central European literature. His masterful account of the final months of one man's life before he is sent to a concentration camp is at once sidesplitting and heartbreaking, as well as an esthetic tour de force.

In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984), Franco-Czech novelist Milan Kundera raises the European "novel of ideas" to a new level of dreamlike lyricism and emotional intensity. Set first in communist-controlled Czechoslovakia, then in Switzerland, Kundera's story chronicles the adventures of a Czech surgeon forced to flee the Russian invasion of his country. It portrays a world where lives are shaped by irrevocable choices and by fortuitous events, where existence seems to lose its substance, its "weight." Hence, we feel "the unbearable lightness of being," not only as a consequence of our private acts, but also in the public sphere because the two are inextricably intertwined.

During the period of the Berlin Wall, the divided city of Berlin resembled an island in a sea of land. In 1982, West Berliner Peter Schneider wrote his novel *The Wall Jumper* about the people of East and West Berlin and their relationship with and vision of the wall and their city. Schneider's story is also a tale of people walking boundaries in the unreal reality of Central Europe during the Cold War. It is a novel as much about invisible walls as visible ones.

Bohumil Hrabal's tragicomic and charming look at the life of a young train conductor during the German occupation of Czechoslovakia was the basis for a 1966 Academy-Award-winning foreign film. *Closely Watched Trains* (1965) draws a sharp parallel between the loss of innocence of young Milos Hirma and the experience of the Czech people during World War II. Hrabal's technique of penetrating into the psyche of "the little person" who reflects a whole society has created a work in the best Central European tradition of ironic self-deprecation.

Czech playwright Vaclav Havel helped transform his country into a democracy during the turbulent decade of the 1990s. *Disturbing the Peace*, published in 1986, is a compilation of Havel's responses to a series of written interview questions smuggled to him while he was under surveillance by the Czechoslovakian authorities in the 1980s. The book is a contemplation of Czech history, the social and political roles of art, and the values underlying recent events in Eastern Europe by a man who ultimately became the president of his country. Suggested Further Reading

## For Further Reading

For further exploration of Eastern European literature, look for these titles at your local library or bookseller. The Wyoming Council for the Humanities cannot provide these titles for addition or substitution in this series.

Jerzy Andrzejewski, *Ashes and Diamonds*

Vaclav Havel, *Largo Desolato*

Ivar Ivask, *Baltic Elegies*

Danilo Kis, *The Encyclopedia of the Dead*

Ivan Klima, *Waiting for the Dark, Waiting for the Light*

Jerzy Kosinski, *The Painted Bird*

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*

Czeslaw Milosz, *Collected Poetry*

Gregor von Rezzori, *The Snows of Yesteryear: Portraits for an Autobiography*

Bruno Schulz, *The Street of Crocodiles*

Josef Skvorecky, *The Engineer of Human Souls*

Jiri Weil, *Mendelssohn is on the Roof*

Dubravka Ugresic, *Fording the Stream of Consciousness*

Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday*

## **General Commentary on the Series**

I'm posting the names of a couple books Casper facilitator Erich Frankland suggested for anyone leading the new Eastern European series. Erich has done a lot of work in post-Cold War/Eastern European studies, and he recommends these titles for anyone wanting some background for the series:

*The Patriot's Revolution: How Eastern Europe Topped Communism and Won Its Freedom* by Mark Frankland (1990)

*From the Yaroslavsky Station: Russia Perceived* by Elizabeth Pond (1981) (currently out of print, but probably available at most libraries)

Stefani Farris

Carol Bell commented on a voucher that "this series really needs a history book or an accompanying time line. None of us know enough about Eastern Europe, and I think that is a detriment to discussing these books." I'm not sure how to address this problem but will try to do so as I have time. In the meantime, if any of you discovers resources of the sort Carol refers to, please post them for us (bdtalk-ed@uwoyo.edu). (Judy)

I have recently talked with Carol Bell and recommended to her Rebecca West's book *Black Lambs and Grey Falcons* (I think that's the title). It is a VERY long book, but it does give quite a thorough historical background that she talks about. There's another by West and I'll have to find the title.

Norma Christensen (Worland)

Let me recommend another text which discussion leaders in the East European series might find useful. "European Intellectual History Since 1789," by Roland N. Stromberg. It is academic and a bit pricey (\$35.00 in paper), but it is an excellent survey and it has extensive bibliographies. I have the fifth edition but there probably is a newer one.

Dennis Coelho (Cheyenne)

As a member of the committee that designed the BDP series, "Confronting the Past: Contemporary Eastern European Writers" (and, alas, as a European historian in another life, long, long ago), I am interested in the responses by some members of the groups reading this series that they need some kind of history of the period in order to properly discuss the works they are reading. Such has not been the case with all our other series, and I'm wondering why it is with this particular series. Is it because we are dealing with a culture that is so plainly different from ours, whose mental furniture is not quite in the same place as ours, that we perhaps think we need to have a history when what we may really need is the will to dig a little deeper to try to understand an aesthetic and a view of life that is not "American"? When we designed this series, we considered this issue, and therefore tried to come up with a series of books in which each work would stand alone as work of literature in its own right (or, in the case of this series, as a piece of political reportage - *Café Europa* - or a non-fictional examination of the political role of aesthetics - *Disturbing the Peace*). While I applaud the desire on the part of readers to know more about the history of the period, I do not necessarily agree that ignorance of such history should impair an enjoyable and interesting discussion of the selections any more than a lack of knowledge of the Dustbowl and the Depression should hinder a discussion of *Grapes of Wrath* (an enormously popular book among Eastern European readers).

When we selected the books for this series, we concentrated, at least with the novels we selected, on works that were available in well-written English translations (not easy to find), and that carried on long-standing literary traditions from this part of the world. Danilo Kis's *Hourglass*, for example, is in the tradition of Kafkaesque irony that was so much a part of the culture of this part of the world even before its more contemporary domination by the Soviet Union - an ironic literary tradition made more tragi-comic and more necessary by the brutal fact of totalitarian politics. Kis's novel is an aesthetic whole, and is understandable on its own terms. Irony is such an integral part of the culture of this part of the world, and while a knowledge of the history of the period would obviously deepen one's reading of the work, the novel raises moral and ethical questions that are universal. Similarly, Kundera's *Unbearable Lightness of Being* is in the long tradition of the European novel of ideas, but it is taken to an ironic and other-worldly plane by the circumstances of people living in an oppressive society, regardless of whether Kundera himself was living in exile in Paris when he wrote the novel. I in no way want to discourage groups who are reading this series from dipping deeply into the history of this period (and I would

be willing to suggest some first-rate historical works on the period), but I don't think a lack of knowledge of this history should in any way diminish the rich aesthetic and cultural experience awaiting readers of these books. And, as our brochure states, "this series seeks to illuminate the cultures of Central and Eastern Europe through some of the very best literature in translation from the region."

On another matter, and for what it's worth, Harold Bloom literary critic and English professor, has just published a book on "How to Read and Why." I usually hate these things, but Bloom lists five principles to "restore the art of reading" which may be worth discussing or thinking about among ourselves. First, he admonishes us to "clear our minds of cant - including that of the academic variety, such as multiculturalism and gender studies." Second, he writes, "Do not attempt to improve your neighbor...by how or what you read. Self-improvement is a large enough project for each of us alone." Instead, Bloom urges, we should read by a third principle: "the inner light of the authentic reader, undimmed by politics, agendas, or histrionics." Fourth, he urges every reader to "trust oneself." And finally, he urges us to recover the sense of the ironic; but this last principle brings Bloom "close to despair, since you can no more teach someone to be ironic than you can instruct them to become solitary." And yet, "the loss of irony is the death of reading - in essence, to read human sentiments in human language you must be able to read humanly, with all of you...not to believe, not to accept, not to contradict, but to learn to share in that one nature that writes and reads."

Bob Young (Laramie)

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I think appreciation for the Eastern European literature was strong in this group, even among readers who felt consistently baffled and occasionally overwhelmed. I also know that this series is hard to pull off comfortably - it requires definite personal enthusiasm on the part of the leader. I think leaders who are neither interested in this sort of literature and history nor excited to plunge into it and learn will struggle to lead this series successfully.

There is a "dark" quality to most of these novels and essays. They're endlessly fascinating, but I would agree with most of my group participants that these books generally are not what one would call upbeat. In my opinion, there's more substance here than in much (if not most) contemporary American writing. I happen to love delving into European literature in general. This is what I read in my spare time for enjoyment, so I guess I'm biased. Most discussion group attendees read to have their minds opened. This series can do that powerfully, if it's approached with enthusiasm. The secret for discussion leaders: Preparation.

Peter Anderson

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This group remained fairly large, even after the usual expected 2nd session shrinkage. I think attendance could be even stronger if the group didn't meet mid-day. Many of

the participants in Jackson are younger working people - some arranged extended lunch breaks to attend the discussions. That's fine, but I think a mid-day meeting cuts many people out of the loop. I'd recommend going to an evening meeting for next season.

My comments on the series itself are virtually identical to those I submitted for the Alta group, with the following addition: I think this series is one in which the order in which the books are read makes a significant difference. I'd recommend starting this series, when possible, with "Cafe Europa" or "Closely Watched Trains" and reading "Unbearable Lightness of Being" and "Hourglass" somewhere toward the end. I'd suggest using the more accessible books early on to explore vigorously some of the key issues of Eastern European literature in order to make the more difficult books blossom.

Peter Anderson

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What an exhilarating and depressing series. Look, I'm using ironic pathos. I must have learned that from the six books I just completed reading and studying. If any of those writers wore off on me, that would not be a bad thing. I enjoyed the selections enormously and am very happy to have had a chance to read books I probably would not have found on my own. But this group was not just all about me. Other readers needed to feel the same, and I have my doubts that they did. Instead, I suspect many of them felt that this series was like a trip to the dentist... good for you, but painful and depressing. The fact that we started out with about 15 per night and finished out with 5 was painful and depressing to me. I'm struck by how difficult it must be to choose a series that enhances opportunities for thoughtful discussion, but that also makes people want to head out of their warm houses on snowy winter nights to talk about ideas they find depressing or otherwise daunting.

Before this report starts to sound too negative, let me describe the books that participants enjoyed the most. Café Europa induced two hours worth of knowledgeable and well-considered discussion. Perhaps the memoir form is one that should be further explored for this series. Compared with fiction, it tends to be straightforward, understandable, and use metaphors and symbols that interested but casual readers can easily follow. At any rate, that book did well with the group. The Wall Jumper did well too, perhaps because the fall of the wall is a recent and positive memory for most of us. Although it is a novel, it is almost written like a memoir. Perhaps that's another reason readers liked it.

I think where the series started to feel like a downer for people was when it turned to the Holocaust. Obviously, few people feel "positive" about that period, other than perhaps about the final outcome of the war. The subject matter of Closely Watched Trains and Hourglass was depressing for the group, and the writing style in the books, especially Hourglass, would challenge even the most sophisticated reader.

If I had this series to do again I think I'd request the books in a more chronological order, starting with the books set in the W.W.II era, through the Communist era, and ending with *Café Europa*. I think that ordering would help the group get a feel for the flow of events. It might be nice to include something very new on the unrest in the Balkans. Many of us found ourselves struggling to understand the concerns of the Serbs, Croats, and other groups depicted in some of the more recent books. I don't mean to imply we need a scholarly grounding in the politics of historic and contemporary Eastern Europe. I'm just suggesting something that could bring us up to date on the more immediate areas of concern in Eastern, and really all of, Europe. Happily, I never felt a pressure to provide such a context for the group, and they never seemed to feel I should do so. In fact, many of the group members were very informed on the topics, especially one Danish group member who has lived in the US for many years but lived through the war in Europe.

Julianne Couch

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The most wonderful thing about this series, we all agreed, is that all of the books were books none of us had read or would have read on our own and those of us who stuck with the series learned so much about Eastern Europe (and our preconceived notions of Eastern Europe).

The weakness of the series is that it is a mixture of non-fiction and fiction. I think this works okay in some of the other series because we are familiar with the issues and the historical context from which the American authors are writing (Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* comes to mind). Still, I think the series work better when we're reading books of the same genre. And when we read and discuss fiction, the discussions open up because there are no answers. I think the participants feel less inclined to assume I'm the one with all the answers when there are no clear answers. When we read non-fiction, we tend to have less to say. Our group is very politically correct and respectful of differing opinions, so we point out the issues but rarely do people come down on one side or another.

I'm not sure anything needs to be changed about the series. I would prefer to read books of one genre, but I'm not sorry to have read any of these books. I don't think some of the books are as strong as the books in some of the other series, but still I learned more by reading them than I have in any of the other series in which I've participated. This is a very difficult series, and ten of our 20 participants dropped out after 2 books. Still, I think the humanities ought to run some really challenging series. The people who stuck it out really valued the series and were grateful to have been exposed to these authors and to have had the luxury of discussing them with others. I have served as the humanities scholar for this group 3 times, and this time I got to know a completely different set of people. In a small group, the quiet people who rarely get to talk in a group of 20 were able to be heard.

Carol Bell

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As I've commented in past instances, I believe this is one of the most challenging and fruitful of WCH's book discussion series. The series demands a lot of time responding to questions about Eastern Europe history and culture in general. It's important, I think, for the leader to be armed with a working knowledge of these subjects.

I agree with those who have pointed out that great discussions of these books can be had without any reference to external materials, such as history. But I would suggest that those discussions are fundamentally different than discussions which draw in a lot of information -- whether from the leader or participants -- about Eastern Europe. The former are more literary in nature. The latter tend to be more cultural. Either or both make for fine humanities discussions.

Peter Anderson

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In our last meeting, we discussed ways that we saw the world differently after reading and discussing the books in the series. We agreed that, because of the discussions, we have

more insight into how other people see America.  
a greater understanding of the history of Eastern Europe, and in particular what life was like under Communism.  
an appreciation for other people's points of view, that "the American way is not the only way."  
a sharper appreciation for the freedom we enjoy and the responsibilities that come with it.

Rick Kempa (Baggs group)

## **Café Europa**

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After the strange and dark tone of *The Hourglass*, we found *Café Europa* to be a delightful book. Drakulic's writing has the light style of a journalist as opposed to convoluted style of *Hourglass*. The author writes about easily moving back and forth between Europe and Eastern Europe. Since, like most Americans, the group did not have a strong concept of the physical and political geography of the area, I brought several maps to the discussion. She also wrote about the psychology of moving back and forth between the two - Europe representing plenty and progress, Eastern Europe the opposite.

Robert Kothe 10-21-03

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. . . Many of the participants had personal or family experiences with E. Europe which really added to the discussion. In particular, one of the participants is from the Czech republic and she provided some interesting supports and counters to our discussion.

Much of our discussion focused on the descriptions of Eastern Europe and the range of possibilities for these countries' futures. Of particular interest were the tensions between the West and East (from national to individual levels) and the intriguing mirror that the author provided for us to examine ourselves. The participants also enjoyed placing themselves in the role of carrying out the author's personal struggles. In addition, the participants made a lot of connections to historical developments in the U.S. and elsewhere underscoring the commonalities of human existence.

. . . The discussions on the book served to highlight the significance of the issues the author was raising and their relevance to Americans. The participants each seemed to have a favorite story or image that emerged from the book though seemed a bit concerned about the overall grim outlook provided by the author. This in turn generated an interest in the author's other books and the rest in the series (perhaps hoping for some hope at the end of the tunnel) . . . . The participants seemed to appreciate the background information on the author and the context for the book's stories. I was told privately by several participants that they were not sure about the book and if they would get anything out of the discussion, but afterwards they had reassessed the book and had found out that they had gotten a lot out of the discussion and an appreciation for the author's positions and descriptions.

Erich Frankland (Casper group)

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People said they liked the book and found each essay within it accessible. The group discussion touched on the major themes of the book, such as they collective "we" of communism, the shifting nature of values, and the disappearance or recreation of the past. The group drew comparisons to life in the US, even Laramie specifically. A comparison of the tree-cutting essay with Laramie's potential loss of trees on Grant Avenue caused us all to look at the value of public discussion. A lengthy discussion took place on the topic of how people in the former communist countries could continue to accept the treatment they received during border crossings, etc. We looked at what they were getting in return for this treatment: access to goods and comfort with a system in which they were highly skilled. The group drew upon the analogy of the Wall Jumper from the last book, and concluded that Drakulic and others were most comfortable dealing with shifting worlds, rather than absolute worlds.

Julianne Couch (Laramie library group)

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Initially, I was unhappy that this series led off with "Cafe Europa." I felt in advance that a collection of essays would be difficult to discuss if the group had no framework on which to hang them. I would have preferred to begin with one of the novels and have a couple discussion sessions to develop the history, geography and culture of the region. But I was wrong - the book was greatly appreciated. The participants - in this case all women - especially liked Drakulic's perspective. This is probably the

least feminist of Drakulic's books, but it's still definitely a woman's point of view.

To prepare for the discussion I made a short outline of each of the book's 24 chapters (and introduction), and selected a few which offered meaty questions for discussion. Examples for my cohorts:

Cafe Europa: By calling something another name, can we transform it into something new?

Why I Never Visited Moscow: Do even the best-intended among us sometimes find ourselves feeling superior to people when we travel?

In Zoe's Bathroom: What do American public bathrooms say (or try to say) about life in America?

A Smile in Sofia: How does a change in the system bring about a change in values, and a change in values subsequently bring about a change in personal experience?

The Trouble With Sales: Does buying things make you happy? What does that experience say about our culture?

Buying a Vacuum Cleaner: How is the experience of financial (and social) hardship different for men than it is for women?

On Bad Teeth: Is personal hygiene a political issue?

My Father's Guilt: Do circumstances determine character? What does that say about national or generational differences?

People from the Borders: To what degree is identity (whatever that might be) a political issue here in America?

A map of Europe is very useful to have on hand for these discussions.

Peter Anderson (Jackson library group)

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Like many of the other scholars, I made a list of the issues that came up for me while reading some of the chapters.

Here are a few of them:

"Cafe Europa" Can we transform things by naming them? Is naming things after things we WISH they could be a dangerous and disappointing practice?

"Never Visited Moscow" How do we decide where to travel? Do we choose to visit places that make us feel lucky, or does the stress of visiting strange and new places always make our homecoming sweeter? In other words, do we have to visit a dismal place to feel lucky to return home?

"To Have and to Have Not" We compared Drakulic's tendency to take gifts home to the tendency of our Hispanic friends to take gifts home to Mexico or to send money. This tendency made more sense to us after reading this chapter.

"Pillbox" Is TV's effect different in Croatia than it is here? (I remembered out loud my early years in Kentucky and my surprise at the satellite dishes I saw on homes in the most destitute neighborhoods. Others shared similar stories.)

Can the escape offered by TV be a good thing, or is it merely paralyzing? Does TV destroy work ethics?

"Uniforms" What is the role of the uniform? Does it "restrict the beast within"? None of us had ever thought of uniforms in this way.

"People from 3 Borders" IS it true that the "concept of identity is enlarging" while the "concept of nationality is reducing"?

We finished up by talking about why this series is called "Confronting the Past"? We decided many of the authors are confronting the present while reviewing the past. We agreed that we were all leaving this series hungry for more info. about Eastern Europe. We read the papers differently now, and we're all much more interested in learning more about the history of these countries.

Carol Bell

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Here is an essay by essay outline I made up to use with "Cafe Europa." It is just topics from each article, but maybe it will help some other discussion group:

1. Café Europa: The centrality of Vienna, various kinds of coffee: espresso, Viennese mit schlag, pastries. Sofia, Tirana, Bucharest, (but note, not Budapest which already sets the style), Prague, Bratislava, Zagreb. The impact of English in trade names. "Europa" means that the Balkans have become "western" as opposed the old Slavic, even Muslim, East. "Europe represents the absence of communism, of fear, of deprivation."

2. Invisible Walls Between Us: Ex-Eastern bloc citizens still need visas and permission to enter western Europe (though this is changing as the EEC brings in new members, 2003-5) Fear of a bureaucracy. The travel advantage of certain passports.

3. Why I Never Visited Moscow: Where is the audience for ex-communist writers? Russia as threat, the old emotions of the Cold War. The rise and fall of interest in the Russian language in Europe and the USA. Who reads Solzhenitsyn in the west?

4. In Zoe's Bathroom: The Ceausescu's daughter's bathroom-monumental bad taste. What do you expect from peasants come to power. The terrible condition of public toilets, good toilets are reserved for the dictator.

5. To Have and Have Not: Why do goods cost more in poor, ex-commie countries? Because the poor have limited options in shopping. Less money but higher cost of living, same as poor neighborhoods in the USA/Cheyenne. Need for presents (guilt) when visiting Zagreb.

6. A Smile in Sofia: Service in eastern Europe-they simply don't care, aggressively not helping. Service to them simply equals time on the job. Customers are irrelevant. "Proud to serve" is oxymoron. In the East, a smile equals inferiority. (Actually, I think this is European in general.)

7. The Pill Box Effect: Row after row at the Tirana airport. That's what the dictator knew how to build. The un-reality of Albanian communism.

8. Money & How To Get It: The translator does a poor job. Czechs did not understand that jobs and contracts have expectations that must be met. They see no relationship between quality of work and amount paid. Westerners get charged more, on principle. Easterners now have to work harder for the same low salaries and they resent wealthy foreigners. Czech border guards can now check to be sure that in-comers have at least \$20 per day. (Author doesn't notice that Austrian have been doing this for years to Slovaks, Gypsies and Hungarians.)

9. The Trouble With Sales: The psychology of suddenly having surplus money, "disposable income." Need to check any item on sale for some possible future use. The bigger problem is learning to accept the consumer economy: spend, buy. How much do they have to save to be secure? Too much!

10. My Frustrations With Germany: Memories of W.W.II, reinforced by films of cruel German soldiers. Then, several 1,000 Yugo's went to Germany as guest workers, and Germany comes to represent the "West." German tourism drives the Yugo economy. NB: A lesson: Germany was strong enough "...not to erase its fascist past." (i.e. A lesson for Croatia).

11. The Importance of Wearing a Uniform: Symbolism of various uniforms, often uniforms they have no right to wear. The uniform represents a step to security and respectability, but now they are an abuse of power.

12. A Premeditated Murder: Trees-administrative secrecy in cutting them down. Lesson: people must learn to be citizens.

13. A King For The Balkans: Crown Prince Alexander of Yugo. Suddenly, Royalists emerge and pressure him to declare a monarchy (Royalists come out all over the Balkans, still a powerful European idea). A Royalist past as an alternative to the communist past! "...the people from the communist world as still children in the political sense." Could a king be worse than Milosevic?

14. Buying A Vacuum Cleaner: Croatia maintains border guards, in and out. What is there to take out of Croatia??? But instead of confronting and changing the system, the Croats subvert it by cheating, smuggling-old habits from the commie days.

15. A Nostalgic Party at the Graveyard: The Romanian dictator's birthday. He's quite dead, but nostalgia,...anti-capitalist. Romania today.

16. On Bad Teeth: American tooth ads, good teeth symbolize what? Good teeth=braces=money=status. Why is there no free dental care in the USA, as there is in commie societies? But the commies have awful dental health. Image and aesthetics. Free dentistry is often bad dentistry.

17. *A Croat Among The Jews*: Jews keep alive memories of the Holocaust in Croatia. But Croats themselves are trying to bury their own murders of 300K+ Serbs (and others) in W.W.II. Memory is vital!

18. *My Father's Guilt*: Guilty of opportunism, tacit collaboration with a repressive regime, and mostly guilty of silence. He was trained as a carpenter but after the war became a military officer, when communist also meant "anti-fascist." But then, is to be anti-commie the same as to be pro-fascist?? Good question.

19. *People From Three Borders*: Divided between Croatia, Slovenia, Italy. Multiple languages and dialects are a fact of everyday life. Understanding at some deeper level. Geographic vs. political identity. Life in a non-EEC past of borders and passports.

20. *He Sleeps Like A Baby*: The fascist Croats murdered Jews, Serbs, commies, Gypsies. How many? According to "Hitler's Pope," 300,000+. Dinko Sakic-war criminal who escaped to Argentina after the war. Meeting the criminal, the banality of evil. That the crimes of the era are the foundation of today's Croatia.

21. *Who's Afraid of Tito's Wife?* They keep her under "house arrest," but they are afraid to learn from her past and experience. "...an unwanted witness locked up in the dark cell of our conscience."

22. *An Unforgettable Meeting*: Tadjman, at a dinner party in London draws a map showing the planned forced division of Bosnia between Croatia and Serbia. Monomania, vanity, ego.

23. *Still Stuck in the Mud*: Comparing Swedish urban life with that of Eastern Europe, viz "Peasants in Cities."

24. *Bosnia, or, What Europe Means to Us*: The menu of local foods! Refugees from Bosnia to Stockholm. Immigrant problems in adaptation. By age 50, the father has no role at all. Why did Europe not help stop the Bosnian war? Competing and conflicting interests. The myth of a Muslim Bosnia. After Bosnia, what is Europe? More organized, more federal. After Kosovo, what is Europe? Who knows.

Dennis Coelho

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Several folks had European maps which we found very beneficial. The group explored in a limited way the political history in the area. I recommended Rebecca West's book about the region for the several folks who wanted to know more. Members are intrigued with the series and the opportunity to read books by Eastern European authors. We discussed--in a limited way--Communism, Fascism--comparing them to democracy.

Norma Christensen

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I read the comments from the two other groups that did this series, and we had some of the same topics arise. However, this community has several people descendent from Balkan immigrants" Tomich, Tominc, Petrovich, Pernich, Musich, Painovich, Panelsck, etc. We talked at length about how Eastern Europeans have influenced this community. It was marvelous. ALL of the group appreciated Drakulic's style and point of view. We lauded the way she was self-critical without bitterness or deprecation. We loved the way she blended East with West. All was charming and endearing.

Victoria Vincent

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The bulk of this discussion was devoted to an informal "lecture" by a visiting couple. I invited two valley residents, friends who had not been part of the discussion group heretofore, to attend and tell us about their experiences growing up in Eastern Europe (Poland, specifically) and with the fall of communism there. They gave a fascinating talk, full of insights and personal observations about life in that part of the world. They shared their photo albums and a few artifacts (traditional dolls, for instance). We then spent about thirty minutes talking about "Cafe Europa," which most participants found stimulating. A couple of readers didn't care for it - they preferred the denser novels we had read previously. Since time was limited, I mostly asked questions about a handful of anecdotes from the collection. We didn't have enough time to reflect at length on overall perceptions of the series.

Peter Anderson

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We enjoyed a wonderful evening talking about Slavenka Drakulic's *Café Europa*. Several group members commented that they hadn't thought they would like the book, but found it a "delightful read"! Discussion was spontaneous, lively, insightful - just FUN! We used some of the questions listed below to focus our discussion, but members' sometimes wry, and often brilliantly perceptive comments and questions also drove our exchange. The recurring themes in our discussion seemed to be that "it's the little things in our daily lives that have such an incredible impact on our perspective - and our politics" and that "one's past and one's culture has a tremendous effect on your world view and politics." The consensus was that *Café Europa* was an excellent way to begin the series. (Note: The following questions were available to readers when they picked up their books.)

### Discussion Questions for *Café Europa*

#### On labels and perceptions:

- What is the power of a name or label to shape our perceptions, to mold the image we have of a person, place or thing and to influence our response?
- Why is Western "better"? Is there an inherent imposition of Western attitudes, politics, and values with the exchange of Western goods? Is this a problem?

- How do perceptions influence our sense of obligation?
- Is the renaming of places to reconfigure our memories of the past a positive or a negative?
- The essay "Buying a Vacuum Cleaner" explores the author's use of subversion as a means to fight the system. Is there any correlation between her behavior and that of Americans?
- How does the creation of a "mythic" and unrealistic Europe affect not only the Balkans but Europe and the rest of the world?

**On the past and the present:**

- How might one's past experience influence one's perceptions, beliefs and choices?
- Why are we afraid to ask questions about the past?
- How does history influence cultural mores? What is your reaction to the comment that "A smile is a sign of inferiority?" (in "A Smile in Sofia")
- How might the past contribute to personal or to community illusions? How might the past contribute to a country's political, social, and economic "immaturity"?
- How do our stories or histories perpetuate our incomplete (and possibly incorrect) image of communist countries?
- What is your reaction to the author's statement that "...what is absent from history, what is forbidden or repressed, often turns into myth..." (104)?
- How might our human need for continuity affect both our "history" and our political choices?

**On politics and community:**

- Does the environment influence community values and behavior? Is there truly a difference between "urban" and "rural"?
- What is your reaction to the author's use of the mud image in "Still Stuck in the Mud"?
- What happens when political decisions do not reflect the way a people live?
- What responsibility does each person bear for the behaviors of preceding generations? How is this related to a sense of civic responsibility?
- How might the way a society functions contribute to feelings of individual security – or insecurity?
- What is the relationship between community hygiene, personal self-responsibility, and a democratic system?
- What are the consequences of a lack of interest in history?
- What is your reaction to the author's claim "To grow up under communism means to live forever in the present...Perhaps this is the reason why we are now, with this recent war, sentenced to live in the past." (in "A Croat among Jews")
- How, according to the author, is the concept that service is honorable a key to a democratic society?

**On the media and information:**

- How might "media events" or politically motivated "theatrical performances" affect a society or a person's politics?
- What is your reaction to the author's idea (in "The Pillbox Effect") that a "false promise of a new and better life comes from the television screen"?

**On identity:**

- What are some personal features that are often associated with status and wealth? How might the presence or lack of those traits influence self-perception?
- How is nationality or ethnic identity a part of our personal identity?
- How might our identity be related to opportunistic attitudes or behaviors?
- How might the recognition that war criminals appear to be like "ordinary people" affect our self concept, and subsequently, our response to the criminal?
- Do clothes "make the man"? Or is what we wear a reflection of our true nature?
- What kinds of "uniforms" do we see in contemporary American culture? Do these "costumes" affect the wearer's behavior?
- How does a perception of being an "outsider" or a "foreigner" affect attitude and behavior?
- How is our past a part of our individual identity?

Ebba Stedillie (Douglas group)

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Our first session with Drakulic's *Cafe Europa* had a mixed group of community and college members with some having immigrant backgrounds from Europe. One member had visited the area within the last five years.

The group's reaction was positive. Several thought that after getting past chapter 3, the book became more interesting. Reactions were as follows: "a fatalistic view of the world," "a depressing book," "a most revealing book." We discussed how the book revealed the Eastern European situation to us, how the common people fared coming out of communism. We drew many comparisons to what Americans are feeling after the terrorist's attack on September 11, 2001 with airport checks, travel plans, and a national ID card.

Joanna Tardoni (WWCC group, Rock Springs)

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The initial comment about the book, which became something of a theme for the discussion, concerned how difficult freedom and democracy are to build and sustain. Readers commented a lot about the ongoing struggle to create a western-style democratic government out of the rubble of communism, and more importantly, how difficult it is for cultures to change. We in America, it was pointed out several times, take a lot for granted regarding our government and economic systems, and without an immersed upbringing within those systems, it's tough to adjust to them.

One reader was turned off by the seemingly fatalistic tone of the collection. She couldn't find anything positive or optimistic in it. Most of the group, however, loved the book and found it genuinely funny in many places, albeit with a somewhat dark, wry sense of humor. Discussion was lively and fast-paced.

Several group members had traveled in eastern Europe or had other ties and experiences to that region, and all agreed that communism breeds masses, not individuals. We talked at some length about the nature of individualism, everything from the liberty to move around at will to the desire for good personal hygiene.

We spent a lot of time talking about the Muslim presence in the Balkans because of its presence in our minds right now. Somehow, this year the fall of communism and the transition to democracy seems less compelling than the conflict between cultures that's in our faces now.

There was some disagreement about Drakulic's intended audience. Some thought she wrote the book for westerners to explain the problematic and complex environment residents of eastern Europe had inherited. Others felt she had written many of these pieces primarily to try to understand the problems and issues herself.

Peter Anderson (Pinedale group)

The Baggs group had a terrific conversation of Slavenka Drakulic' "Café Europa." Group members liked the book a good deal--partly because it was a piece of cake after wrestling with Skvorecky's tome the previous meeting, but mostly because of the Drakulic's own solid merits. We appreciated the book's distinctive style--how she grounds all of her essays in particulars (given this strength, we decided she must be a good novelist). We explored her major themes--the difficulties of "learning" democracy, the numbing effects of totalitarianism, the responsibilities that we have to the past as well as the future, the misconceptions and preconceptions that the "West" has for the "East" and visa versa, the effects of these false views, the mixed blessings of "Westernization," the less-apparent but equally real gifts that the "East" could give to the "West"... The discussions of "border mentality" took on some unexpected freshness in Baggs, perched as it is on the border between two states. By the end of our conversation we had touched on every essay in the book!

I found an excellent and fascinating array of reviews of "Café Europa" on the Academic Abstracts periodical database--not just from the USA (NYT, LA Times, Washington Post, Village Voice), but from newspapers abroad as well--Vancouver, Scotland, even Moscow (which was, interestingly, the only review that could be called "critical"). This same database yielded this interesting and ironic tidbit, which was news to me: the peace summit convened to end the Bosnian conflict in June 1999 took place in a bordertown establishment called--you guessed it--"Café Europa"!

Rick Kempa

I gave some background on European Communism as the past that these authors are dealing with. At first several people thought the author was negative and whiney, but others saw her as energetic and positive. Older participants identified the issue of having a way of life stripped from you. We discussed the legacy of a caretaking style of government, repressive though it may be, as people move toward democracy. We discussed the idealized compensatory vision of Europe and its inevitable failure as a political and psychological phenomenon, and referred to the risks in the USA's accepting an idealized view of itself. We focused on stage transitions (in the developmental, not theatrical, sense) as inherently painful, confusing, and intense, in countries and in individuals, and the ways in which the author embodies as well as observes that transition.

Stephen Lottridge

All enjoyed the book, although several commented that it wasn't great literature and probably wouldn't be a significant book in years to come. However, we all considered it invaluable for getting a first hand view of what life is like in eastern Europe in the immediate post communist era. Some of the issues discussed were adaptation to life, politics, and economics after communism, feelings about western Europe, the role of history and memory, and what will cause life to change for people living in these countries. Most of our time was spent in an interesting discussion comparing the author's sense that eastern Europe refuses to learn from history and embrace memory and whether we in the United States are any different. The consensus was that we bury our history as well. As far as the series went, there was unanimous agreement that the series was excellent, books worth reading, and that we would not have read them on our own. Only two people had read even one of the books in the series (*Unbearable Lightness of Being*). The view was that these books were only a start and that group members will be reading more on eastern Europe. We acknowledged that we learned a great deal about our American views of culture, politics, and economics by reading about these subjects from another culture's point of view. We particularly enjoyed the fact that the books were written by those imprisoned, those who emigrated, and those who are young(ish) journalists/novelists today. It was a deeply satisfying and complex series. No one wanted to see it end.

Barbara Gose

## **Closely Watched Trains**

This was an entertaining book that translated well into English. The group found it interesting on several levels. The power of the bureaucracy even before the Communist takeover was interesting. A theme that we could relate to several other books, notably *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *The Wall Jumper*, in the series was the way that a rigid bureaucracy, regardless of the underlying

politics, was incapable of rational decisions in many cases. We also found the emphasis on sex as a motivating factor an interesting comparison with *The Unbearable Lightness*.

Robert Kothe 2-17-04

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I opened the discussion with a short history of Bohemia and Moravia which were combined into "Czechoslovakia" in the aftermath of W.W.I. Since the story takes place towards the end of W.W.II, the discussion often moved into issues about the war, or specifically about the war in Czechoslovakia. Primarily we looked at the story as a metaphor for both the war and the postwar Soviet occupation. And we looked at the ways that the author maintains this metaphor. As long as Milos is obsessed with his sexual problems, the war hardly intrudes into the story. But as he has successfully overcome his difficulty, in fact at the very moment he does so, the war is suddenly in the foreground starting with the nearby bombing of Dresden. Milos' epiphany is not so much one of sexuality as one of reality.

We also looked at how the author subtly takes the reader from a political position of Germans vs. "enemies" (i.e. the locals identify with the occupying German forces) to at the end we see Germans as enemies.

Dennis Coelho (Pine Bluffs)

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The group liked reading *CLOSELY WATCHED TRAINS* much more than *THE UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING*. They felt it was more accessible, especially for those without a background in the history of Eastern Europe. We discussed the narrator's coming of age and our sympathy for him. We tried to put ourselves in his shoes by considering his family and his country's history, his place of work, and his dealings with the opposite sex. While none of us had ever lived in a country at war, we could appreciate the humor and discussed how humor was something we looked for during difficult times in our lives. Some readers skipped the scenes depicting cruelty to animals (the blinding of the bull), but this still led to a discussion comparing the treatment of people and animals in times of war and how it is possible to lose one's compassion and become inured to suffering and death. We also discussed censorship and Hrabal's declaration of support for socialism, comparing his experience to Tomas' experience in the Kundera novel. Most people in the group said they had not experienced much oppression in their lives except as women, which led to a lively discussion that concluded the meeting.

Lisa Vice (Thermopolis)

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This book, *CLOSELY WATCHED TRAINS*, was very well-received by the group. It is funny, provoking, and short (they especially appreciated its brevity!)

We began by reading the first two pages aloud. Then we talked about how those pages introduce us to the theme of time, to the elements of storytelling in Hrabal's technique, and to the main character. Someone pointed out how quickly the villagers erase all signs of the German war plane, how this "magnificent bird" is turned into pencils and rabbit hutch roofs and bicycle fenders almost overnight.

We talked a lot about metaphors. Everyone in the group had a recollection of one certain image from the book that remained with them--dead horses with feet in air, Mr. Lansky & his pigeons, the bricklayer/savior, the little girl in the hospital who had lost her feet/boots, and more.

We took turns reading and discussing various passages and arguing about possible metaphors. Lots of fun, very lively! During our second hour, we tried to pinpoint ways in which the three books we've read so far (Kis, Kundera, Hrabal) are alike. We agree on the following three similarities:

1. The theme of time plays a part in all of the novels. The characters are aware of the ticking clock; we are aware of their desire to impose order on a chaotic world through the use of schedules or clocks. In spite of the efforts by characters to control time, events happen randomly and time marches on with a mind of its own.
2. There is no heroic grandeur in the books. The "heroes" are ordinary folk living ordinary, mundane lives. Their heroic deeds occur (if at all) in spite of them rather than because of them. And hope is heroic, in times like these. Perhaps that is enough.
3. Themes and ideals are constantly undermined.

Sometimes, in Kis and Kundera, the narrative voices undermine what the lives of the characters bear out. Often in Kis and Hrabal, the seriousness of the situation (war, German occupation, death) is undermined by the hilarious antics of the characters. When Hrabal imagines the bomb in Dresden as a part of his first successful sexual experience, it is hard to know whether to laugh or cry.

This discussion was a turning point for our group. We seem to have finished grumbling about the difficulty of the reading, and now we are getting down to the business (and good fun) of discussing the books.

Carol Bell (Cody group)

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This was the first discussion of the fall series, the first time I had led a book in the new Eastern European series and the first discussion for a new discussion group in a new location. I felt some performance anxiety.

But overall it was a great talk, and the group seemed to enjoy themselves a lot. Below are some of the notes I used to lead the discussion of "Closely Watched Trains" - hopefully they'll be of use to other discussion leaders.

We pursued three fundamental issues recurring in the novel. (1) The issue of "delayed responses," such as Milos' development from boy to man, the locals' understanding of war and occupation and the contemporary response (as of publication) of Czechoslovaks to Communist rule. (2) The issue of "ongoing servitude," both as a theme in the novel and as an element of Czech history, and how that servitude has suddenly transformed in the past ten years. (3) The issue of "ironic bad luck," seen everywhere in the book (and a fundamental darkly humorous aspect of Hrabal's writings), as well as a quirky element of Czech culture.

I spent some time on the symbolism in the novel, since it's a dominant aspect and people like to talk about it. The story opens with a huge, dark wing floating over the town. Other symbols worth exploring: eyes watching from behind windows, ticking clocks (and snowflakes, watches, timetables, etc.), uniforms and uniformities, pigeon-keeping, the ventilator shaft, dead horses with their feet in the air, the bricklayer as God installing fire extinguishers, rubber stamps, striped pajamas, marching feet, furniture.

We spent time talking about the quality of his writing, specifically its richly descriptive and sensually lyrical qualities (even in translation) and his coterie of characters from the fringes of society. I explained the setting of the novel (a town called Nymburk east of Praha) and how his writing is almost always rooted in Czech history and folklore. We talked about his reputation as being "untranslatable," and what is meant by the act of translation, linguistically and culturally.

I touched on the novel's playfully modernist style, especially the fact that it's narrated by a dead man. I drew out the idea that it was an "historical novel" (set twenty years earlier), but in many ways is "about" its own time and circumstances (the mid-'60's; Communism). I brought out the notion of heroism, and we talked about what this novel seems to imply about heroes. I also outlined the history of the Czech people up through W.W.II and in the decades following. Finally, I suggested that readers examine this novel as being like an old morality tale, filled with emblematic animals: pigs, cats, hyenas, sheep, cows, bulls, horses, pigeons, crows, rooks, goats, calves, mice and so forth.

Here are a few of the discussion questions I composed:

- 1) What do you make of the interplay between humor and tragedy?
- 2) What does the stamping episode indicate?
- 3) What is God's role in the narrative, and what does that role say about Hrabal's view of history?
- 4) What is this novel saying about the Czech people? About the Nazis? About the Communists?
- 5) Do you think this is a work of so-called "social realism?"
- 6) What is this novel's definition of valor?
- 7) Why does the Nazi with the scarred face let Milos go?
- 8) What is the nature of aristocracy, as portrayed by Hrabal?

9) How does this novel compare and interrelate life and sex?

10) Why does Milos decide to bomb the train?

11) Does Milos break free? Of what and to what end?

12) What do you make of the ending of this story?

Peter Anderson (Alta group)

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The group seemed split on this book with some enjoying the dark comedy utilized by the author, while others felt that the tragedy overwhelmed the attempts at humor. Almost everyone in the group seemed to like the author's frequent use of symbolism and more human characters. The consensus was that the book represented a coming of age story in light of extraordinary historical and personal circumstances. Many were able to relate to the small town setting of most of the story. There was some uneasiness regarding the sexual nature of much of the story, but no one felt it was overdone and that in fact it was integral to understanding the characters and the situation. The treatment of the war by the narrator and the portrayal of the different sides involved in the conflict seemed to touch many of the participants. There was some appreciation expressed regarding the brevity of this text, but also consistent efforts to relate it to the earlier ones in an attempt to grapple with the genre. The author's interest in time, noise, human relationships, and utilization of animals occupied much of our time and provoked fruitful discussion.

Erich Frankland

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I thought this was a sterling discussion. Participation was great. There were lively discussions, a touch of debate, some personal storytelling and scads of insightful comments.

I prepared for this discussion much as I did for the discussion at Alta library, which I had just conducted a few weeks previously. Please refer to my notes on the BD archive if you wish to know how I approach this book. In general, I believe the book was well-received, despite the usual issues. Some readers found it difficult to adapt to Hrabal's peculiar style. Others read the book through easily enough, but couldn't decide what it was about. But all that made for good discussion fodder.

Marginal note: The Alta group will be gathering soon to watch the film of "Closely Watched Trains" as an adjunct to their earlier discussion. For the upcoming discussion in Jackson of "Unbearable Lightness of Being," I'm considering showing a couple short segments from that film which gloss or problematize elements of the novel. I think the movies of these books help bring Eastern European literature to life.

Peter Anderson (Jackson group)

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I had read the evaluations from other scholars and was prepared to handle any negative responses. I was pleasantly surprised. No one disliked CLOSELY WATCHED TRAINS, but we didn't have the lively discussions that we did with the other books. We thought the content was thin--enjoyable but thin. Most readers liked the comic aspects and thought Hrabal was great at seeing the humor amidst the tragedy of W.W.II and German occupation. We did get sidetracked onto how German/Arian influence pervades attitudes today.

The discussion was good and everyone was engaged, which was very pleasant. I brought some materials about Hrabal from the internet that gave us background on what an important role he played in Czechoslovakia.

Victoria Vincent

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To start the conversation on this book, our first of the series, I talked briefly of the political, cultural, and historical dimensions of "Eastern Europe." I was conscious of Bob Young's thoughts on how such background is not essential to an appreciation of the books. Still, I personally felt the need for context, and group members said it was helpful to their understanding of the text and the theme of the series. A terrific source for this kind of overview is the Introduction to Volume 232 of "Dictionary of Literary Biography" (DLB) series, which can be found in the reference collections of some libraries. (The Rock Springs public library has it.)

This volume, which focuses on Eastern European writers of the last 50 years, also has extensive chapters on four of the writers in the series: Hrabal, Kundera, Havel and Skvorecky. We had a good and lively discussion, which helped us all towards a better appreciation of this lovely little book!

Rick Kempa (Rock Springs group)

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I spent half an hour providing historical background. Then we proceeded to a very open and wide ranging discussion. Some items discussed: what was the author's point; if this book is meant to be understood by anyone? We decided it was--nothing is as it seems. For example, all the emphasis on rules, behavior, is not what's really important, but Nazis, then communists, would focus on these topics. We examined Milos' search for "sexual energy," the role of animals (concentration camp, gulag victims?), the issue of trains--west east, then east west. Several participants drew comparisons to other books they had read, i.e., Catch 22, Painted Bird. We are excited about this series (and I--feeling very nervous--am somewhat reassured--but can't find much for background).

Barbara Gose (Lander group)

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The group had different reactions to the book. Some thought the book revealing about the war and the ordinary people. A few felt that the book portrayed a bleak outlook

and attempts at humor didn't work for them. Others noticed the tragedy, but delighted in the humorous events. We discussed the sexual ventures portrayed and how they related to the political scene and war. A few noticed the realistic pictures or descriptions of animals, such as the cows, the horses, and even the pigeons. We spent time discussing the protagonist who seems such an unlikely character to pull off the bombing escapade since his innocence, his attempted suicide, his sexual problems, and his eventual death all contribute to making him a tragic-comedic figure. The one saving action of Milos came when he held the hand of the slain German; instead of being enemy to enemy, the scene was transposed into man to man. I added the definition of surrealism, and this began a discussion about the psychological aspects of Milos and others trying to survive war, trying to have inner strength, that so many of us saw in these Eastern European novels. We again referenced the real wars being waged in our world today, and many saw how these novels explore the harshness and the destruction of human lives. This was a great in-depth look at the issues presented by the novel.

Joanna Tardoni

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Most group members confessed initial confusion in reading Closely Watched Trains, but admitted that the book became much more accessible once they had relinquished expectations for a traditional chronological novel structure and had "given themselves up" to the novel. We discussed the surrealistic atmosphere of the novel in relation to its setting and to the historical and political context of the story. Several suggested that the interplay between humor and tragedy to be the most significant element to understanding the novel, comparing it to Heller's Catch-22. Others noted the powerful images - - poetic and/or macabre --that provoke reader laughter and/or revulsion can provide clues to certain ideas or concepts. (A great deal of our exchange revolved on readers' selections of images and passages that they found especially humorous or repulsive.)

I shared several critics' comments on the novel. Members agreed that Closely Watched Trains uses minute detail and folksy dialogue to paint a portrait of the modern Czechoslovakian and the political and historical events shaping their self concept (personal and national) and the Czechoslovakian world view. (Several members pointed out the similarities between Twain and Hrabal, noting that Mark Twain has been in the news recently. Others reflected on similarities to Faulkner, as noted in the preface).

The novel's structure seemed to affect our discussion, as we wove back and forth among several topics and themes:

- personal consequences of living in a world in which there is little privacy, in which private acts may be public concerns (several group members noted a relationship between the world as depicted in Closely Watched Trains and Afghanistan under the Taliban)

- human compassion & how it may be deadened
- silent film elements reminiscent of Max Sennet, Buster Keaton and Chaplin
- role of time & the human need for order in a chaotic world
- human response to the element of chance and random occurrence
- surprise that the narrator is dead
- significance of the train metaphor
- what might be lost in translation
- ordinary heroes
- consequences of war
- humor in the face of tragedy and horror

I shared a brief excerpt from Hrabal's autobiography in which he tries to explain his writing in terms of his artistic search and his "gallows humor." I also shared short passages from *Dancing Lessons for the Advanced in Age*, from a short story in the collection *Cutting It Short*, and from the novel *Too Loud a Solitude* to illustrate both Hrabal's philosophy as expressed in his autobiography, and also to demonstrate why he is so popular in his native land. Group members also found Hrabal's obituary information to be fittingly ironic, in light of the characters and details found in *Closely Watched Trains*. Several expressed interest in viewing the film. It was a good evening's discussion.

Ebba Stedillie

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Discussion was very lively and more literary than others have been. Participants noted the narrator's strong voice and the poetic/image-based structure of the book and drew comparisons with Camus and other existentialists. Skvorecky's introduction was useful, especially as we discussed types of heroes and the role heroes in literature play in reader's lives. The issue of what it means to be a man--sexually, professionally, militarily--evoked considerable comment, as did the whole question of effectiveness/passivity in human experience. The images of blood, death, brutality, violence and random mercy evoked lively comments and broadened to a general discussion of moral issues in political and social contexts. One participant believed that women so far in the series have been "undeveloped" and "backward," but that was not a general view. The ironic/ambiguous resonance of the title came under discussion. Participation was lively and free-wheeling, and the group plans to watch the movie of the book together on the 21st, as a social gathering.

Stephen Lottridge

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This turned out to be the session in which I spent a great deal of time laying out the history of the Czech Republic since the Habsburgs. Of the four sessions devoted to Czech writers, I wanted to make use of one to sketch the

history of the region and use it as a model for all of Eastern Europe.

Regarding the book itself, expressions ranged from great appreciation to great perplexity. We talked a lot about the sense of utility that seemed to emanate, for most readers, from the novel. I asked questions about the motivations of the various characters, especially the sacrificial decision of the central character to bomb the train. I pointed out the carnivalesque nature of the novel, and we explored the notion of the inter-relationship between surreal comedy and the brutality of war and persecution.

We spent a lot of time talking about the fact that the book, though set in the period of Nazi occupation, is clearly about another occupation, that of the Communists.

I also inquired if anyone could explain why, in the novel, God wanders around installing fire extinguishers.

Peter Anderson

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## The Wall Jumper

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The group found this book amusing and informative. Perhaps the strongest reaction was to the casual way some people moved back and forth from East to West Berlin. Most of us in the group were used to images of snarling dogs and trigger-happy East Germany border guards, but the characters in the book moved back and forth with ease and if they were caught did not suffer horrific punishment. Also interesting was that some characters preferred the tight control but security of the East. We did compare the emphasis on bureaucracy and its fundamental silliness that was so central to *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*.

Robert Kothe 3-16-04

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We had ten people to discuss this book. I started the session by asking whether this text still had any relevancy. The text is a series of vignettes about the early days of the Berlin wall, with each narrative designed to show the paradoxes and ironies of the political, geographic and cultural situation along the wall in a divided Berlin, in a divided Germany, in a divided Europe.

I found that I had to present a lot of information about the history of Germany itself (especially since 1871), World War 2, the agreements at the end of the war which created the multiple "zones" both in Germany and in Berlin, the Soviet experience in the war and its relationship to the creation of the DDR, the status of Berlin in the Cold War, and the symbology of the Wall itself in the latter context, with visits by both Kennedy and Reagan. I found in response to questions that most of the readers had little understanding of the context of the book, and therefore, little understanding of the story. One reader said, "I wish I had known all this before I read the book!"

We discussed the similarities of life under a police state as present in Kundera's earlier text and in Drakulic's book. The discussions around the historical background used much of our time as several members shared experiences in travel to East Germany and Berlin in those days. I was frustrated that we did not have time to get to some of the author's interesting metaphors, e.g. his elderly male neighbor who turns out to be a transvestite. I was reminded of the gender issues in Gunther Grass's "Tim Drum" or even "Cabaret" as a similar use of metaphor in the context of German history. Beats me as to what it all means!

Our next book is the interview with Vaclav Havel, who sadly no one remembered. Sic transit gloria mundi!

At the end, the group decided that the book should be retained.

Dennis Coelho, Cheyenne group, 12-7-03

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A wide ranging discussion, from what constitutes "fiction" to comparisons of Wyoming/Colorado to East/West Germany. Participants enjoyed the compelling theme of the book, that how things appear to be can vary greatly depending on what side of the wall one is on. They discussed that central theme in light of wide ranging issues, including current political ones. They also discussed what "freedom" means, and explored whether disenfranchised Americans who state they feel oppressed and not terribly free are in fact not free or simply unaware of how good they have it in the U.S. Two participants are natives of European countries, and they explained the differences between how communism is viewed in the U.S. and in Europe. Because communists are represented in the parliaments in much of Europe, that part is not as "ogre-ized" (a participant's wonderful word) as it is in this country. That observation led us back to the book and one of its other central questions: where does the self end and the state begin. The group concluded that the narrator was the ultimate wall jumper--the search he was undertaking to find that person was actually a search for himself.

Julianne Couch (Laramie)

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The group loved this book, for the most part. They found it intriguing, informative, well-written, intelligent and even humorous. A lot of the discussion was about walls of the figurative sort. The Berlin Wall had an ironic power - it held everything together. That comment brought about a long exploration of cultural and personal walls, culminating in a reading by one of the group members of a recent letter to the local paper in which a resident of Teton Valley threatened his adversaries, effectively building walls through our community.

One participant said, "I've always felt like a wall jumper." We discussed the role of the deep-thinking, broad-minded citizen of the modern world in deliberately crossing walls and boundaries.

Another participant pointed out that walls have value. They serve as definers of identity in a time when many people feel terribly fragmented, uprooted and displaced. Walls are necessary for rational life. The group discussed how any wall has many different meanings, and each side of a wall has only relative degrees of value.

In addition to all that wall business, we talked about Germany, its post-W.W.II history, from the Berlin Airlift to Reagan's speech, life under Communism and after, the purging of Stasi files in recent years, and the contemporary relationships between East and West Germans since Unification (the longing by some for things to be as they were).

In closing, I shared with the group some comments by Peter Schneider from his later book "The German Comedy," in which he looks at the Wall (and his many writings about it) with benefit of hindsight. I also read aloud a recent Schneider essay called "The Two Berlins," in which he expresses elegantly the cultural problems facing residents of contemporary "mixed" Berlin and Germany at large, thrown together by the erasing of boundaries.

Peter Anderson (Alta group)

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The episodic nature of the book made finding a narrative thread sometimes difficult. The book is a collection of (sometimes) inter-related anecdotes about reactions to the Berlin Wall from Germans, East and West. Refreshingly, it treats East German attitudes and values with the same validity and respect as those typically presented in the West. Like other books in the series, the discussion often digressed into historical background and context. Still, this was one of our best discussions!

Dennis Coelho (Pine Bluffs group)

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We had another lively and stimulating discussion about this, our final book in the series. Everyone liked this book, and we talked about the comment from another group about the negativity of the book and the series. Basin folks did not agree with that analysis, referring particularly to Havel and his optimistic outlook. We examined how difficult it is to let go of preconceived notions about some things--and that if we don't agree or understand we tend to ignore the whole thing. It was a fun discussion and a great series!

Norma Christensen

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For the most part, the group liked the book. Some of our group think all the books sound alike. We discussed lots of ideas about that because we have two literature teachers in the group. Our discussion was varied and interesting. All of us remembered the erection of the Berlin Wall and the incidents surrounding it. We discussed how western propaganda shaped our perceptions and how Schneider shows us that regardless of which side people lived on,

the wall divided PEOPLE. The humor was engaging and delightful. Schneider's insight was brilliant. We all appreciated that he made the people so interesting and varied. We discussed communism and our version versus "their" version. We talked extensively about perceptions and how they shape our attitudes and actions. It was a great discussion. We're all enjoying this series so far.

Norma Christensen

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The use of humor and the colorful characters and personal stories resonated with the members. An interesting issue was raised in discussion regarding the differences in perception between this writer who has largely lived in the West (plus Germany's position between the two Europes) and the others who are more strongly Eastern in background and focus. The participants enjoyed the various manifestations of the "wall" as described in the story as well as the varying motivations to cross or not cross it. A concern raised by some members was whether communism and the wall were being too trivialized by the author's use of humor and satire. A lively discussion ensued on this point. Another point that was raised was the lack of strong female characters in this book as compared with the others. The book inspired reflections on the impact of state/society upon an individual's development, the divisions this country and others still face as compared to Germany's, and the generational tensions the communist experience poses (one of the participants is from the Czech Republic and several others have lived extensively in E. and W. Europe before and after the fall of communism).

This book also encouraged a fruitful discussion on the traits of East European literature versus more familiar forms.

Erich Frankland

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Quirky, unusual, unexpected were some of the descriptions applied to the book. One participant made the interesting observation that while the little sub-stories were light-hearted, the narrative itself weighed heavily, the difference between those two sensations is the core of the book. Another reader mentioned that while the book sets out to be a novel, it never settles down into being one thing or another, and in fact that unsettled feeling may be the point. The group spent a lot of time talking about the ways the culture in which one is embedded influences mindset. A participant brought up an important issue: the tone of the entire series, she felt, was one of negativity, meaning that the books, while beautiful and uplifting in many ways, left a dark overall impression on the reader's emotions. We debated whether this sensation was (a) true, or shared by others, (b) if true, a function of the specific books selected, or (c) if true, an aspect of eastern European literature and culture. We arrived at no particular conclusions on any of these potentialities, but the discussion, I think, was crucial.

Peter Anderson

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The group really enjoyed reading this story, though many of them commented that it wasn't as thought-provoking as the previous novels we've read. We pondered the question, "Can one move beyond (or leave behind) one's history or environment?" How much a part of our identity is our history and our sense of place? Can one separate nationality from identity or are they intertwined? Many of the members of our group have lived in many places and most of them agreed that they felt more at home in one place or another.

We talked about different kinds of walls--do good fences make good neighbors: Do walls divide or unite? Do walls present a challenge--to cross, to climb, to trespass?

We talked about the ambiguity most of the writers we've discussed feel about political systems. They all seem to recognize good and evil in both communism and democracy.

Carol Bell

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I have searched the web for information about the Eastern European book discussion. Here are two that I would recommend:

The first one is a site to find a map of the Eastern European region. (The site has many maps available about any region.) <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/>. After getting to the site, select the Digital Library Initiatives and then PCL map collection.

The second site is a <http://www.memorial.fr/10EVENT/gb/berlin.htm>. This site is titled "A Concrete Curtain: The Life and Death of the Berlin Wall" with links to the Wall dates, escapes, victims, and espionage. In addition, the site has photos of the Wall, before and after, and some of artistic murals. I found the site interesting, and I plan to use some of photos from the website to show at my book discussion on *The Wall Jumper* by Paul Schneider.

Joanna Tardoni (WWCC, Rock Springs, WY)

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We had an enthusiastic discussion of this book. They found the short stories' structure enjoyable and easy reading. We discussed the narrator's search for the "boundary walkers" as an intriguing dichotomy of cultural and political identities. The group compared the book with the previous book *Cafe Europa*. They discussed the similar ideas of Eastern European issues of separation evident in both books. They recognized the power of the military with its uniforms and the checkpoints. Individuals in the group also read interesting passages from the book, such as the Berliners as "half people," the search for an identity, the issues of the fatherland (deutsche), the many jumpers, and communism next to democracy. I ended the group discussion by going to the website, *A Concrete Curtain: the Life and Death of the Berlin Wall*.

Joanna Tardoni (WWCC--Hay Library group)

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As is my approach with most of the books in this series, I first tugged out maps of Germany and Berlin and explained the lay of the land and the historical episodes. I find keeping an eye on geography (in particular) lights up this series for most readers. I think places come alive with physical descriptions, and these sometimes fairly foreign-seeming books take on additional life when readers can place the subjects in time and space.

We spent a lot of time talking about wall-jumping in all its many metaphoric senses. I tried to raise the issue of invisible walls in a community like Pinedale, and found most participants reluctant to get into actual social barriers they were accustomed to encountering, because they sought to tread lightly on each others' toes. No one wanted to say something which might inflame others in the reading group, which is commendable, but meant that my hoped-for discussion of social schisms in small western towns kind of went down the drain.

This discussion went into current events to a substantial degree, which I admired. Participants talked about the walls between Islam and the western world, and how those walls may be jumped.

Here are some potential discussion questions:

- 1) What does it mean to be free of restraints? Are you?
- 2) What happens when formerly divided societies merge into one (as is sort of happening right now in Germany)?
- 3) How does the society in which you grow up form a "silent language" which you understand and others may not?
- 4) How much do you believe the news that you hear on TV or the radio or read in the print media? What different combinations do you need to use to get at the truth?
- 5) Do you feel more like an individual or like a small part of a larger whole? What stimulates those feelings?
- 6) What does crossing a border accomplish for the individual who does it? What does it accomplish for his or her society?
- 7) Is "The Wall Jumper" fact or fiction? How do you know? Why did the author write it in such a deceptive style? What's the difference between fact and fiction, and when do they merge?
- 8) In what ways is architecture (walls, buildings, bridges, highways) symbolic? How are the interactions of individuals with those structures also symbolic? How do these layers of symbols interplay?

Peter Anderson

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Lander met with 12 people to discuss *The Wall Jumper*. I had used the web site suggestion with pictures of the Wall, so I passed some information around. One of our members is a native of Germany who moved to the U.S. in the 50's. She was invaluable during our discussion. Some of her points: Germany is many different regions, each territorial. The author got most of his information by sitting in bars! Thus to her the book was useful, but rather light. We talked about walls, their meanings. We spent a lot of time on identity and sense of place, on the issue of communism, on whether we thought there was much difference between people's lives in the east and west as described in the book (we felt there wasn't), and on the role of media. Enjoyment of the book varied; some readers found it too episodic, others enjoyed the semi-autobiographical nature of it and didn't mind the lack of plot. I reminded them that the author is a journalist. Then I ended the evening by reading the short story by the author on the wall dogs. We had fun discussing the satire in that.

Barbara Gose

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A lively discussion! The book's subject matter inspired people to bring in maps, photo albums, pieces of the Wall itself. A "new" person who was born in Germany in the Nazi era, showed up, fully prepared and contributed a good deal. Among the many points discussed were these two vital ones:

- how different points of view from East and West are equally worthy of consideration (and how hard it is to remember this)
- how "wall-jumping"--moving beyond our rigid little zones--is a pursuit that all of us must practice, if we are to be fully human.

As far as research goes, I found a couple of decent articles on Schneider's book through the Lexis-Nexus database, but the pickings were pretty slim. Good old Britannica came in handy, too, with a cogent little history of Berlin and the Wall.

Rick Kempa

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We discussed the history of the Berlin wall and its political context. The group spent much of the time discussing walls--literal & metaphorical--in personal & political life; the questions of what forms our ideas, values and sense of self--our individual selves or our social/political worlds; reality as a subjective phenomenon; the relationship between walls and boundaries in emotional life; the nature of freedom and constriction; and, finally, the legacies of fascism and communism in all the books we have read.

Stephen Lottridge

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Our discussion opened with readers' responses to the narrative images, to the various episodes of wall-jumping, and to various intriguing characters such as Lena,

Pommerer, Mr. Kabe, the narrator's cousin, and the narrator's neighbors, to note but a few. Significant and lively discussion also targeted the narrator's various tales of complicated -- and absurdist -- border crossings. Readers' comments then led to speculation regarding perspectives and perceptions (those of people in Eastern Europe versus those of westerners) and to walls as a metaphor for social as well as political barriers and constraints. (Frost's "Mending Wall" lines "There's something that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down..." and "...Before I built a wall I'd ask what I was walling in or walling out..." and "Good fences make good neighbors" were mentioned!) That discussion contrasted with comments on the wall as a challenge, similar to that of a mountain to climbers. There was also some discussion of social and individual perspectives reflected and shaped by news casts, as well as how a physical object such as the Berlin Wall can actually become a part of an individual's (as well as an entire region's) identity. Of course, the narrator's mention of the newscasts on the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan not only illustrated the divergent political perspectives, but also drove home the influence past history can have on current perspectives and our subsequent behaviors. One group member shared a very useful map of divided Germany and divided Berlin, color-coded as to areas of division according to nations. The book and our discussion illuminated the effects of the Cold War on German identity, on the identity of Eastern Europeans, as well as its influence on our own sense of self. As is usual with this group, a far-ranging and thoughtful discussion brightened our week!

Ebba Stedillie

## **The Unbearable Lightness of Being**

There was a general feeling that, given the rapidly changing political landscape in Eastern Europe, the books in this series are, for the most part, not relevant. The *Unbearable Lightness of Being* did evoke a discussion of human nature, especially how sexual feelings can motivate people in other areas. The interfacing of ordinary people with bureaucracy is a theme that winds through several of the books in this series. We discussed at some length whether this function of Communist rule is somehow ingrained into the Eastern European character. Chaos is central to this novel. I played several scenes from the film based on this book. We discussed the effectiveness of the written word in conveying this situation as opposed to film or video.

Robert Kothe 1-20-04

The group had a very mixed reaction to the book. Some people loved it--especially the philosophical content. One woman was so taken by the ideas behind "the unbearable lightness of being" it made her weigh various aspects of her everyday life. Some said they never would have read this book had it not been selected for them, but were glad they did. Others said they didn't really understand the

book at all, and one reader couldn't finish it because she was shocked by the graphic sexual content. The discussion was lively and ranged from ideas about the influences of the political situation on the lives of the characters (and Czech people) to why the dog, Karenin, was the most likeable character. The issues of fidelity and betrayal were addressed. We also discussed the book's structure and the surreal nature of some of the scenes. Several participants made connections between this book and Fay Ng's book "Bone" which we read in another series.

Lisa Vice (Thermopolis)

We began this discussion with a short lecture on Kundera and Czech history. Somebody pointed out that *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* was written after Kundera had left Czechoslovakia, and it might have been intended for a non-Czech audience.

In an interview, Kundera says people stand against power/authority with sex, humor, and memory. We tried to find ways in which the characters in his novel are empowered by these things. Could not agree on whether or not they are.

We talked about Kundera's use of opposites--lightness vs. heaviness, commitment vs. responsibility, memory vs. absence of memory, feeling vs. intellect. Our group felt as if in the world of opposing forces, Kundera always chooses the middle ground. He doesn't come out for or against communism. We had a long discussion of his use of the term kitsch, defining the term, looking for kitsch in the book & society.

Carol Bell (Cody)

Kundera's *UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS OF BEING* certainly provoked strong responses from some of the group's members. Several of the members informed the coordinator that they could not finish the book or planned not to attend the discussion because of the book's sexual commentary. This turned out to be ironic because virtually none of the discussion focused upon the book's sexual content except for using it to put the relationship of Thomas and Tereza in context. Instead, the group focused upon how different this book was from the previous ones and how they appreciated the growth aspect of the novel as played out in the central characters. The group seemed to enjoy the detailed historic aspects of the novel as well as the intriguing characters. In particular, the metaphysical questions raised by Kundera provoked the most discussion and thought by the group's members. The discussion consistently returned to grappling with East European culture and history, which this book seemed to make easier. The discussion was furthered by the inclusion of a Czech woman who greatly added to the group's understanding of the context and implications of the book. Also the tensions between East and East, man and woman, public and private person, etc. were raised again in nearly 2 1/2 hours of fruitful discussion.

Erich Frankland (Casper group)

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...we had a lively discussion from which two main points emerged. First, we agreed that the book was deeply complex and none of us had a complete grasp of all the author's analogies, metaphors, and dream interactions. We also agreed that this is a book that would reward several re-readings. Second, we are starting to make inter-connections between this book and the two previous novels, "Closely Watched Trains" and "The Wall Jumper." I don't think we are quite ready to say exactly how these books reflect East Europe or the communist experience, but we are finding commonalities. One long-time participant said that this was the best series of books she had read.

Dennis Coelho (Pine Bluffs group)

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The discussion was VERY enthusiastic. All participants enjoyed the book, and we explored many of the ideas in it. I had each person write a question on a piece of paper--and then we worked through those--with frequent "side trips" into other spontaneous questions. One person had a friend who had taped the movie which coincidentally was being aired the night before. She has volunteered to share with each of us. The books made all of us aware of what living in a more or less free country is all about. We loved it!

Norma Christensen

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A lively discussion--this book is roundly loved. Among many others, here are some comments brought up by participants:

The yin & yang notion of existence. The way each of the four central characters displays light and heavy elements. The fact that most people in real life seem to, also.

The lyrical sensation of reading this book. Several people discussed music and the way this novel reads like a musical composition, establishing themes, developing them, making forays into side alleys, inverting melodies and harmonies, drawing disparate threads together. I pointed out that Kundera is, among other things, a musician.

The method or approach Kundera has of reversing ideas to make a point--an example is his notion that vertigo is, in fact, a desire to fall.

Attempts to identify, trace or comment on "Czech national character," or other eastern European themes, in this novel.

The idea that doctors, in particular, may be prone to compartmentalizing experience in ways that other people are not.

Kundera's tenuous relationship to his country, Czech literature and writers, politics, and the history of European thought.

Peter Anderson

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A participant eloquently compared Unbearable lightness to Camus' *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, relating the sense of determination, the idea of "es muss sein" in Kundera to the sense of meaningless compulsion in Camus.

Another reader described how, when she first read the book almost fifteen years ago, it had made a deep and lasting impact on her life, literally changing her outlook permanently. Other readers felt that the book described people in a profound and sad state of failure--each of the characters fails to come to grips with the world and their circumstances.

We discussed all the usual things: kitsch as the absence of site (a paradoxical reality--devoid-of-reality); lightness, and its paradoxical unbearability; history and its paradoxical resemblance to an ongoing joke which everyone takes or is forced to take terribly seriously.

Peter Anderson

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This book provoked mixed reactions from the group. Some members enjoyed its deeply textured structure and roving narrative approach. Others thought Kundera's emphasis on ideas over plot made the book slow going to read, yet still interesting. We tried to unravel the paradoxes of lightness/weight, commitment/fulfillment, personal/private, and so on.

We investigated the book's balance between decisions made by the characters for political reasons and those made for private reasons. We looked at Tereza's obsession with goals, and Tomas' willingness to let go of his "mission" at the end of the book. Discussion also focused on the dreams which figure heavily into the narrative, and one group member who is a psychotherapist gave an interesting dream analysis, centering on Tereza's abusive childhood. We were all captivated by the chapters toward the end of the book dealing with life in the country, and the narrator's/Kundera's notions of the relationship between animal, man and God. We grappled with whether or not the characters of Tomas and Tereza love each other by the end of the book (and of course, just before the end of their lives), and whether they were happy. We also discussed the characters of Fritz and Sabina to unravel their function in the novel.

Julianne Couch

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We discussed Kundera's adherence to existentialism and how this philosophy pervaded western thought the last 70 years. We talked about archetypal characters and how developments in the world of physics guided his prose.

I didn't like the crassness of Kundera and when Linda, a group member, read quotations from other books, I saw that the crassness was part of the message of this

particular novel. Then we explored. That MADE the discussion. I have to say, I liked his other works better.

Vicki Vincent

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Notes for reading: The Unbearable Lightness of Being

I think the initial question to be tackled by any reader of this book is, What do you think is meant by the concept "the unbearable lightness of being?" Although the narrative defines it several times in various ways, the idea is left fluid and open to interpretation. How do you interpret it, with particular regard to your own life experience?

This book is in many respects about the problematic relationship between public life (or politics, or cultural upheaval, or repressions) and private life. I'd bet a group of American readers might share fruitful discussion comparing the public/private confluence described in the novel and that confluence as we personally have lived it. In other words, please consider how the more stable aspects of American life have shaped your personal experience, and how America's changing, shifting cultural forces and social mores have influenced your family life, your interior life, your love life.

Another more technical aspect of this novel is its ephemeral narrative voice. At some moments, we'd swear this is the purest of dialogues: A conversation between ourselves and the author. Other times, it seems like simple, light-hearted storytelling. Still others, it seems like a philosophy text, replete with examples and endless hypotheticals. Why is all this woven together? What is that deliberate confusion of sensation attempting to tell or ask the reader?

This sort of novel is sometimes called a "novel of ideas." The word "idea" derives from the Greek for "to see." Lightness and seeing, perception and representation, complicated interrelationships among images, memories, public and private symbols and signs--that's all part of this book. Be on the lookout for Kundera's obvious and oblique forays into "seeing" as well as "being."

Finally, this book is overtly about men and women. What do you think of Kundera's world of love relationships? How universal are his descriptions, or how specific to place and circumstances?

Peter Anderson [These "scholar notes" were distributed before the group read the novel.]

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I opened with biographical information on Kundera. Several participants had seen the film and opened our discussion with how film and books often differ dramatically. In this case, the film's chronological order makes this medium very different. We then went on to a lively discussion of the characters, kitsch, Kundera's possible point about the role of dissidents, the Soviet [?], sex versus love, lightness, heaviness, being, and finally "soul." We had a lively discussion of "shit" and cleanliness

(European and American versions from a participant of European background). Our young male participant was very angry with Kundera's "selling out" (in his view). We spent a great deal of time on that subject. Even those who a) had trouble with the book and b) disliked the book were glad they finished and attended the discussion.

Barbara Gose

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The Baggs readers found time in their hectic Sunday afternoon schedule (between choir practice and the annual Parade of Lights) for a 1 ¼ hour discussion of Kundera's book. Discussion centered around the idea of how the four main characters represented the undesirable extremes of "heaviness" and "lightness," and to what extent they were each able to move towards the middle. We discussed too how Karenin the dog possessed many desirable character traits that the people lacked (as another WCH scholar pointed out).

As for "kitsch," we were able to connect the idea to our life and times, whether it was the mild complaint one person offered of the good-news-only-please Christmas letters that people sometimes send or-more disturbingly-the version of kitsch that our government and media is serving up in this post-September 11 season, where dissenting voices (such as those who suggest the U.S. may be partly responsible for the climate of hate that led to the attacks) are either silenced or heard only in external news sources like the BBC or Canadian Broadcast Network..

A highlight of the meeting was the vivid recollections of a man (present for the first time) who had helped liberate Czechoslovakia in 1945 and who was stationed there for half a year!

Rick Kempa

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Our group enjoyed reading this book by Kundera. The discussion began with the novel's universality about human nature and with how philosophically the author inserted his commentaries on the "lightness" and "heaviness" of life. It seemed that the main characters were playing parts for Kundera to work out his philosophy. The political scenes showed how the characters were trying to deal with, to survive, and to escape their loss of identity and freedom. We discussed the four characters (Tomas, Tereza, Sabina, and Franz) and their many interplays of emotions, thoughts, and discoveries. Many enjoyed the two-sided views of the characters; Sabina, most thought, remained freer than the others. Another part of the novel that the group enjoyed was the dictionary of words--the misunderstandings of men and women. Some pointed out the poignant moments in the novel, such as the photos of the tanks, the doctor's editorial mess, the cemetery scene, the dog's death, and Tomas and Tereza's death. I added some material about Nietzsche's philosophy of "Eternal Recurrence," which gave rise to some discussion of its tie to Kundera's novel. We ended the discussion talking about the concept of "Kitsch" and

how all tried to live their lives seeing only one side and ignoring the harsh reality of the political environment.

Joanne Tardoni

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I believe these readers enjoyed the challenges in Kundera's novel, even though our program director noted some had returned the book (citing the usual objections of reading difficulty or "offensive" topics), and despite the fact that we finished the evening with more questions than we had when we started! Discussion was animated as various group members offered their favorite quotations from the novel, as

they targeted specific sections they wished to discuss, and as they referred to images they found particularly powerful or troubling. (We either found the text to be very entertaining or quite enigmatic -- at times, both! It seems clear that we wished to get others' insights as we puzzled and reflected on the potential meaning of certain lines and images. )

The discussion revolved around several topics or themes:

- truth can be a weapon
- history profoundly affects individual lives
- humans are the planet's administrators, not its masters
- closed borders between people and between countries
- Sabina's artistic philosophy as a means to understanding the characters' lives and relationships as well as key to understanding Kundera's artistic approach
- the musical qualities in the novel's style and structure
- the duality of human existence

The consideration of that duality in its various manifestations -- light/darkness, warmth/ cold, inferiority/superiority, lies /truth, dreams/reality -- comprised much of the discussion. That dialogue, in turn, contributed to our attempts to clarify the concept embodied in the novel's title in relation to characters' personal and political lives, as well as in relation to the novel's historical and political context. We left with more questions than answers, a tribute to the novel's value in this discussion program.

Ebba Stedillie

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The Pinedale group loved this novel, even though several of them admitted they could make neither heads nor tails of it.

Our strongest discussions centered on issues of political responsibility (debate stemming both from the novel's characters and situations and Kundera's own life), the notion of futility (of life and the cycles of history amounting to a big joke) and complexity (the interweaving of many lives and incidents into a chaotic tapestry which defies interpretation and understanding).

I spent a fair amount of the session giving background on Czech history and literary environments in the 60's and 70's leading up to Charter 77.

Peter Anderson

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The book evoked animated and impassioned discussion. Central themes included the ramifications of the opposition of weight and lightness and its implications for the lives of the characters; kitsch as a concept and as an active part of life (ours and the characters); the relation of politics/political structures and private lives; the concept of freedom in the novel and in our own lives; the relationship between freedom and responsibility; the role of compassion (burden/gift); and especially the end as resolution? capitulation? Many participant commented on the role of the narrator and his intrusions into the novel. Many were intrigued by Karenin's role and we discussed human/animal relations and their place in our understanding of ourselves. While I did not push it, for a change, several participants made trenchant observations about the structure of the novel. We also used ideas from developmental psychology to illuminate the idea of kitsch. We deferred comparisons with the other book till next time, since we had run a good two hours.

Stephen Lottridge

## **The Engineer of Human Souls**

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As I expected, the mammoth size of the text (571 text) scared off several of our regulars, a couple of whom called me at home this morning to apologize for not finishing the book. And, once again, an article in the local paper on Friday announcing the Sunday discussion, brought in a new member who had only read part of the book.

I produced an outline of twelve themes threaded through the text and I wrote them on the board to use as a prompt for the discussion which was surprisingly animated, but which is often the case when one of the participants has actually read the whole book!

Since the author uses a different American writer as the analytical focus for each chapter, we decided that an excellent series could be developed using Skvorecky as the backbone, chapter by chapter but then using the American text as commentary. His chapters are based on Poe, Hawthorne, Twain, S. Crane, Fitzgerald, Conrad and Lovecraft, in order. This would create an eight book series but our crew was eager to try it out. All of those who completed the book agreed that it was the best in the series.

This was my third time reading it, and it just keeps getting better, use many of the themes in Kundera's book but with a somehow more humane touch. We agreed that the author's true topic (aside from sex, love, war, and sex) is the stifling force of any ideology and the intellectual resistance provided by literature.

Dennis Coelho, 3-28-04

I opened our evening with background information on Skvorecky and his work, with insights to the place "The Engineer of Human Souls" has in the "Danny Smiricky" series, the role of music (and film) in Skvorecky's life and work, a brief historical context, the title's allusion, and some of Skvorecky's comments on his writing (both Engineer and more recent works, such as Dvorak in Love and The Bride of Texas.) Other scholars may find the sources listed at the end of this report to be both informative and entertaining.

The seven of us exchanged our reactions and responses to Skvorecky's jazz-like novel. A few readers' confessed they had not finished the novel, due to its length; others said they just couldn't "get into it", due to its format. Two readers who had finished, or nearly finished, the novel, claimed that it "got better the further you read," but that they did find the novel's length combined with its style presented a formidable challenge for the reader. There was general agreement that we could not do this novel justice in a single evening. (Here's a thought: A novel this richly complex might be read and discussed over the course of

several months, so readers might chew awhile on smaller and more digestible bites.) Some reader's expressed interest in Skvorecky's first novel The Cowards, speculating that might have been more readable. Others expressed interest in Dvorak in Love and The Bride of Texas, as they were interested in historical novels, and found Skvorecky's topics and angle intriguing.

Readers commented on the ironic humor in The Engineer of Human Souls, as well as the surreal atmosphere surrounding very real experiences. In fact, some readers gleefully compared Engineer to Catch-22, pointing out situational and character similarities, such as the Apolena / Crack McCracken CIA tale, the tale of the Gestapo confiscation of the pig in the suitcase, the Czechoslovak émigrés continual and futile plotting to overthrow Communism, the fiasco at the Messerschmitt plant, the hilariously funny yet desperate arguments in the restroom, the "quotas", the barrel scene, the two Novaks, Danny's father's

gangrenous leg and related courtroom scenes, the "Theatre of Cruelty" exam, the students' plagiarized and /or unconventional "papers", Danny's various love relationships, and the crazy accounts of the publishing process. (to note but a few!) Those who had enjoyed Heller's novel enjoyed this one once they finally "gave themselves up" to the novel, and gave up trying to impose a sequential structure. (We ALL struggled with that) Those who had disliked Catch-22 also found Engineer's shifting settings,

characters, and time frames to be off-putting. However, several readers commented that they felt they had a better appreciation for the novel because they'd read Café Europa first, noting the references to bad teeth, to filthy toilets, to daily frustrations and anxieties, and to corrupt officials in the novel were an extension of the commentary in Europa. Readers shared favorite lines and passages in

Engineer, noting either the humor or the despair illustrated in them.

Finally, we attempted to answer how this novel fit the "Confronting the Past" theme. Several noted that the novel was like Café Europe in illustrating the power the past holds on our perception and our behavior, pointing to Smiricky's constant shifting from the Canadian present to his Czech past. (Surviving one's past also mentioned.)

Discussion leaders may find the following sources useful:

- Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series Vol. 63, pp. 402+
- Contemporary Literary Criticism Vol. 69, pp. 340+
- Skvorecky, Josef. "Drops of Jazz in my Fiction" Black American Literature Forum, Fall91, Vol. 25 Issue 3, p621, 12p
- The author discusses the different aspects of fiction writing and the relationship of musical elements in poetry writing. He also comments on how he incorporates jazz in fiction. (available full text through WYLDCAAT via EBSCO)
- Skvorecky, Josef. "Keynote Address: Eastern European Literature in Transition" Review of Contemporary Fiction,
- Spring,97, Vol. 17 Issue 1, p98 10p.
- This is a very funny speech, giving the reader insight into Skvorecky's sense of humor, as well as his irreverent attitude toward academic analyses, the "academic" title notwithstanding. I highly recommend it! (available full text through WYLDCAAT via EBSCO)
- Solecki, Sam. "An Interview with Josef Skvorecky" Review of Contemporary Fiction, Spring,97, Vol. 17 Issue 1, p82 10p.
- A great deal of intriguing information on The Bride of Texas and on Dvorak in Love, but also some discussion of how The Engineer of Human Souls contrasts with these later works. Readers might also be interested in his comments on his female characters. (available full text through WYLDCAAT via EBSCO)

We also found using a map of Eastern Europe at the outset helped.

Discussion leaders might want to ask group members to share passages they want to discuss, such as:

"The relentless ascent of Mr. Benes is an exact manifestation of the American rags-to riches story which experts claim is a myth. Perhaps it is because Mr. Benes is an immigrant and is ignorant of American legends that he has made it a reality."

"If only one could say: Class dismissed! In the miserable school of life, when there is no curriculum, that is impossible."

"Even horror has its beauty...what is beauty in art? The realization that this is exactly how it is in reality or in nightmares. But nightmare and reality often overlap ..."

Ebba Stedillie (Douglas group)

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I enjoyed reading Josef Skvorecky's "The Engineer of Human Souls. The legion of characters, the multi-lingual text, the wildly achronological structure, the multiplicity of mysterious letter writers, the range of literary allusions--all this tested my resources as a lifelong reader to the fullest. Plus, I found some of the characters to be likeable and engaging, and the slapstick bathroom humor made me laugh out loud a couple of times--which doesn't often happen. In some ways, it reminded me of reading War and Peace--although Tolstoy was much easier.

Unfortunately, the members of the Baggs discussion group did not share in my enjoyment. They're good readers, on the whole, willing to be challenged; but this book was simply too much to handle, surpassing everyone's threshold of patience, frustration or just plain time and energy. One other person did finish the book (and was lauded as a hero.) Another scholarly sort took the initiative to research the biographies of various writers whose names are used as chapter headings. But mostly it was up to me to sustain the conversation--explaining plot and character, proposing and supporting possible themes (instead of coaxing possible themes out of the others), reading and explicating various passages--in short, to deliver a lecture instead of to nourish a conversation. Afterwards, several made the usual comment about understanding the book better and wanting to read more if it. Some agreed with the idea suggested by readers from another discussion group, to do this book in two sessions (although that's probably not feasible, given the way the series is set up).

In sum, "The Engineer of Human Souls" holds the dubious distinction of being the hardest book in the hardest series. I'm sure some other groups with an intellectual bent will have a better experience with it--especially if the leader is able to preview it extensively or supply study materials in advance. My feeling is that it's ultimately unsuitable for what we want to accomplish with our WCH reading series.

I would be glad to be wrong, because it is a mighty good book.

Rick Kempa

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As you can see, [the comment above] is from Rick Kempa (Baggs group). Any comments? We made the change from "Hourglass" to "Engineer" because so many groups found "Hourglass" unproductively difficult. Is there anyone out there (other than Bob) who has read both books and can make a comparison?

Judy

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Here's a comment from Peter Anderson about the question I raised. Lots of food for thought here--I'm tempted to jump into the fray myself, but I think I will wait to see what others have to say. As a side comment, Bob (Young) said this morning that "Engineer" may be like "Catch-22" in an Eastern European context--I assume most of you remember past comments about difficulties working with the satire in that novel. Thanks, Peter. J.

I'm taking a little break for lunch, and Jeanne forwarded Rick Kempa's comments to me here at work, so I thought I'd chip in my two cents worth. I, like Rick, love "Engineer." I find it fascinating and funny. I think it's chock full of great historical and humanities-related material suitable for discussion. But it's a long book, and its fractured structure tries the patience of some readers. I just led a discussion of "Engineer" earlier this week in Pinedale.

I also adore "Hourglass." I led discussions of "Hourglass" in a couple locations last year. In Pinedale, at the previous session, I had gone to great lengths to explain what they were going to encounter with "Engineer" (complexity; sheer length) and had suggested reading it in blocks rather than all at once. I told them outright that if they waited until the weekend before the meeting, they wouldn't get very far into the book. I also acted as something of a cheerleader for the book, telling readers in advance that "Engineer" is one of the pivotal books of Eastern Euro lit, is standard reading in most modern Euro lit courses, etc. The result: most all readers (one exception, I think) had finished "Engineer."

With difficult books, I think the discussion leader should expect to do considerably more lecturing than normal. I personally tell the group up front that I'm going to dissect the book for them more than usual, and then I do so as needed. Often, the group does a great job of exegesis on difficult books without my help, and I always want to give them a chance before I dive into it. But I think the group likes a good, explanatory lecture as long as everyone is aware (especially the discussion leader) that discussion rights are not being lifted from the group, and that a lecture isn't the normal model for the meeting.

I think it's fruitful to work extra hard with the difficult books to lay out broad, humanities issues that grow out of the story, because it's often easier for the group to segue back into a book from a big issue than vice versa. For instance, with "Engineer" I point to the relationship between memory and history, the concept of ideology in politics and reading, the role of literature in our understanding of the world, the mechanism of comedy in relation to history and tragedy, etc., and as these topics are taken up by the participants, the talk inevitably turns back to the text for examples, and voila, they're discussing the book.

Finally, I would like to put in a plug for tough books in general. I don't think I need to list the reasons for the bd folks why stretching our comfort, familiarity and ease levels is not only a good idea, it's crucial to our mission, if we have a mission. Tough books can be great "stretching" vehicles, but they do need to be carefully positioned with reading groups, or they'll just flop. If a tough book isn't introduced with enthusiasm and encouragement, it doesn't

get read and even if it does, it doesn't get attended to. I personally was sorry to see "Hourglass" go, but I was glad to see it replaced with "Engineer."

You know, there's another comment I might add to this. When a group is selecting a series for the upcoming year, which they usually do at the last or second to last meeting, I think it's important for the discussion leader to tell them outright, "The Eastern Europe series is demanding, and at least a couple of the books require hard work, but it can also be the most fascinating and rich series if we all go into it with those expectations." That, to me, is part of our task of raising the bar for our readers.

Peter Anderson

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Although I dislike the word "lecture" in association with a book discussion group, I like Peter's remark that extensive comments from a discussion leader can be occasionally appropriate "as long as everyone is aware (especially the discussion leader) that discussion rights are not being lifted from the group, and that a lecture isn't the normal model for the meeting."

I also like his comments in praise of "tough books." Our business is, as he says, to "stretch" readers. I would only add that there are limits to the amount of "toughness" that's appropriate. Any book that requires me to--plain and simple--TALK TOO MUCH is pushing that limit.

How much is "too much"? Now there's a question for you... All I know is that the more I talk, the less WE talk.

Rick Kempa

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Previously, I discussed the difficulty of this book for discussion groups, what I do to try to encourage strong readership of difficult books and the importance of keeping difficult books on the reading lists of various series (please refer to my extended comments in BD archives).

The Pinedale group found this book very challenging, although all but one of the dozen readers in attendance had [not?] finished the book. The ensuing discussion was lively and energetic. I spent a lot of time unpacking the book, which is to say I delivered an informal lecture on it, its author and its political environment, and shared a number of insights from the book's ample backlog of critical commentary.

Peter Anderson

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All but one of the participants had read the book. I outlined some issues as general topics and gave a brief history of 20th century Czechoslovakia and emigration, and a bit on my brief meetings with Skvorecky. We discussed the moral issues inherent in life in an occupied and/or totalitarian system, tragedy v. comedy, and the role of humor in endurance. We returned several times to the question of the writer as a passive observer or as moral

witness. We returned to the questions inherent in being deprived of one's nation/culture. Several participants were struck by the irony of the ending, in which Lojza identified himself with the narrator as a "writer," while Lojza is probably the most "engineered" soul and the narrator the least. Everyone felt we had probably raised only a small percentage of the issues the book presents and truly addressed only a few of those.

Stephen Lottridge

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The Lander group met with ten people present to discuss *The Engineer of Human Souls*. Success! I was worried about this discussion having read the previous comments by discussion leaders. However, all but one person had read (and finished!) the book and everyone was glad they had read it. I appreciated the online sources cited by previous discussion leaders. There is an excellent review in THE NEW YORK REVIEW OF BOOKS, "Home from Homr," Sept. 27, 1984.

The Lander readers read carefully, made lists of characters to keep them straight, questioned the translation (we talked about the difficulty of translating the book and what might have been missed), wanted more historical context, and drew numerous comparisons to the world situation today. We spent some time on the writer, Lovecraft, and the reason for including him. I will have to research this. We all loved the humor. The group spent a lot of time discussing the horror of war and occupation and the difficulties of being an émigré. There was interest in rereading the book and delving into earlier "Danny" novels. I gave biographical background of Skvorecky and then simply served as resource. I know that in two hours we didn't get to everything important/significant/symbolic about the novel. I couldn't have unpacked this novel completely anyway, at least not with one reading. But I don't think that's necessary for the book to have served its purpose. We were glad we read it, it will stay with us through the rather passive (but happy) character of Danny, we will each get something different from the novel, and we know more about Eastern Europe and its people, including its émigrés, than we did before we read *ENGINEER*.

Barbara Gose

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I'm forwarding a message from Dennis Coelho about "Engineer of Human Souls" because a number of you have commented on its relative merits and difficulties (and those of the novel it replaced "Hourglass") in the last year and a half. Dennis led the Eastern European series in Pine Bluffs last year and was one of three or four discussion leaders who found "Hourglass" a little too much for readers in this particular context. I thought some of you who've led this series in the past two years might like to respond to his comments. Would anyone like to argue, for example, that we return to the original selection for the series in the coming year (i.e., "Hourglass")?

Thanks, Dennis, for taking the time to read and comment on "Engineer!" It's really helpful to hear a reaction from someone who's read both novels.

Judy

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Dear Judith: I finished the book, I must say that I really enjoyed it. But I fear that the very things which made me like it are the very things which make it inappropriate for community reading groups.

The book is written by an academic for an academic audience. It is filled with puns, word plays, and oblique references in at least four languages, especially German and Latin. The author has titled each of his chapters after an American author, i.e. Poe, Twain, Hawthorne, etc. And it is a testament to the skill of both the author and the translator (from Czech) that these chapters "work." Each chapter is filled with discussion of the moral aspects of each author's work, along with sections of the chapter written in the style of the chosen author. There are many other narrative tricks, as when (for example) the main character (and narrator) makes an analysis of "stream-of-consciousness" writing as part of his own stream of consciousness.

So, what to do? I'd recommend starting over with this series. If you include "Engineer" then the series has become a mini-course on Czech lit, and even with something else, it is still over-balanced with Czech materials. If this is to truly reflect the Eastern European experience, then it needs to include Hungarian, and Polish (especially the last two), and Romanian, and Bulgarian, and Ukrainian, and Byelorussian materials. In spite of the fact that I liked "Wall Jumper," you can not really stretch the political geography of Eastern Europe to include Germany (no matter how hard they tried before 1945).

Let me know what you think. Dennis

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Here are a couple comments on discussions of works in the Eastern European series, the first, from Joanna Tardoni (WWCC group in Rock Springs):

[We] had only a short three-week period between our last discussion and this one, so I was not surprised when only four had finished the [book]. We did have a lively discussion about the character of Danny and his life in Kostelec compared to Toronto. He seems to remain outside and non-committed, but an observer of everything. We discussed the four major parts of the novel and spent some time looking and rereading some of the letters, especially Rebecca's letter near the end of the novel. Several times the group recognized connections to other books in the series, particularly *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* and *Closely Watched Trains*, and even *Cafe Europa*. The group enjoyed the humor and ironic meanings within the novels. We discussed how much this series has given us a closer appreciation of the individual struggles against communism. This novel's title carries a

particular ironic meaning since "human souls" cannot be "engineered" as Stalin dictated. The human spirit finds many ways to survive against an oppressor.

Joanna Tardoni

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## Hourglass

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The group found this to be a strange and difficult book to understand and discuss. We discussed the possibility that the translation was part of the problem. As a group we did not really find significant issues. Certainly it is a study of one man's sense of reality - that reminded several of Kafka's writing. We were struck by the earthiness of the language and subject matter, unusual in a book written by an American.

Robert Kothe 11-18-03

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We had a lively discussion, though only 1/2 of us had finished the book and only 3 of us enjoyed reading it. I wish I had suggested to group members that they read the letter at the book's end first.

We talked about technique--Kis says technique is half of writing. We tried to arrange the events in E.S.'s life chronologically, and we talked about why Kis chose to tell this story in this particular stream of consciousness/interrogative manner. We talked about the relationship between dreaming and reality, reader and writer, what one is reading and reality, memory and reality. Kis tends to blend the lines between the real and the surreal. We talked about how we as readers are affected by that blending.

This book raises a lot of interesting questions, and we grappled with these:

- 1) Does art (E.S.'s letter or writing might be called art) give significance to the obscure?
- 2) Is this a hopeful book? Is E.S. a hopeful person?
- 3) How do Kundera and Kis use opposing forces? Lightness and darkness, good and evil, rational and emotional. Are they making similar points?
- 4) Are truth and beauty opposing forces (aesthetics vs. morality)? Compare to UNBEARABLE LIGHTNESS.
- 5) Is this a "nostalgic" novel? Kis says of the times, "There was a lot of cruelty but also much beauty."
- 6) How might Kis's style in this book have been affected by other Holocaust literature? How does he deal with the problem of writing an "original" Holocaust story when so many have been written?

Carol Bell (Cody group)

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This book seemed to trouble or put off most of the members in the group. Several participants had informed Allison earlier that they were not coming because of their inability to complete the book or their dislike for it. Among those members who came, half of them admitted to not finishing the book but were interested to see where the discussion would go. Of those who had finished it, there was near universal dislike for the author's writing style and the disjointed organization of the book. I realized that might be the context for our discussion beforehand so I read the book twice and gave some serious consideration to how to conduct this discussion. The breakthrough discussion on what most impacted you as a reader from the book did lead to a fruitful discussion of the imagery of the text and the subtle development of characters. This open atmosphere led to various self and group discoveries of the layers of complexity and the interplay with historical forces and variables in the book. The divisions between sanity, insanity, and dreams were a favorite topic of discussion. One of the more interesting components was our exploration of E.S. as a person with all of his peculiarities and foibles. The context of the Holocaust and its psychological impact consistently entered into our treatment of developments in the story. I worked to provide the members with different perspectives on how to read the story's symbolism and characterization of events which seemed rather fruitful. I was surprised that we spent over two productive hours on this text which no one seemed really eager to discuss at the onset. Several of the members noted the value of our discussion in changing their sentiments about the book ("Now I can see why it is such an important book"). Everyone in the group made references to the previous text (*Cafe Europa*) and made advances in recognizing some of the common themes and techniques used in East European literature. I believe that the foundation has been laid for the later discussions.

Erich Frankland (Casper group)

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A group of five gathered for the last discussion of our series. Two of us had finished the book, and the other three had started it but found it slow going or incomprehensible or both! We spent some time in discussion about the difficulties the book presented and also the rewards it revealed. The other person who completed the book (besides me) was very enthusiastic and compared its narrative, or lack of it, to abstract expressionist painting, in which examining the whole yields better understanding than examining the parts. I brought along some critical reviews of the book and I think it helped all the readers to have some background about Kis' father, Kis' other writings, etc. I think we were unanimous in believing that this book is one that demands several close read-throughs to really do it justice. We also discussed the book in light of the series as a whole and as a representative specimen of contemporary Eastern European literature beyond the scope of this series. I think the group is looking forward to next year.

Julianne Couch

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This book elicited the same sorts of responses that it seems to have in other communities. Some folks had made little attempt to finish the book--one barely started it. But 3 or 4 were quite enthusiastic about it. One man said he just "let it flow"--and found by doing so it was an enjoyable book to read. He had convinced his wife it was a good technique! Others commented on the "poetry" of the writing. We did discuss "madness" and concluded that other people were, but we certainly weren't. This discussion got pretty funny. I think all participants recognize the importance of the book and realize why it's included in the series. The more artistic were fascinated by the portrayal of contrasting images and we all agreed we were glad we hadn't lived in the places where the persecution took place.

Norma Christensen

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I wasn't eager to begin this discussion because I found the book so difficult. I knew it was Kis's tribute to his father & James Joyce, but it was tough going. Then the poetry hit me and I was hooked. Our discussion was glorious! One lady had an interview he'd given in 1986. Another expounded on the poetry and how it was like viewing modern art and its facets. I discussed the holocaust and how the fragments were indeed like sand passing through the neck of an hourglass. It all melded into a delightful evening. We laughed, we mourned his pain and we shared important insights into a book with "terrible beauty."

Victoria Vincent

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Since this is the hardest book of the series to read, I had spoken at length about it at the previous meeting. I told the group outright that it was written in a difficult style: drifting, dream-like at times, non-chronological, and with a massive gray area between reality and imagination. I asked them to work at it and finish it even if they found themselves lost or perplexed.

I think my warnings paid dividends, because most all the group finished the book and came prepared to discuss it. Even those who hadn't finished it seemed engaged. Several of the group liked the book very much. Here are some of my notes, which might be of interest to other discussion facilitators:

Kis generally acknowledged two principal literary influences, Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges. Comparisons may be drawn between the styles, anxieties, subjects, perceptions and lives of these writers. "Hourglass" is the last of a trilogy of novels Kis wrote about his father's life, disappearance and death at Auschwitz. (The previous books were "Early Sorrows" and "Garden, Ashes"). The novel is the author's imagining of his father's imaginings. It comprises in some ways the author's lifelong struggle to come to grips with what happened to his family, and his failure (perhaps) to do so.

Kis deliberately chose to replace a single-style narrative with a polyphony of voices and literary devices. In some ways, this could be seen as a reflection of the multiplicity of levels on which the Holocaust caused destruction. The story, in other words, isn't relatable in a single voice, even when the story is about one person. "Hourglass" is about attempting to see and cope with what's coming, about the presumptuous act of attempting to imagine someone else's existence. When do we think another person is crazy? When do we decide we ourselves are crazy? How crazy (irrational) is our normal thought process?

The narrator's contradictions make the reader intensely nervous. The reader feels like the narrator is self-destructing, or like he's trapped in some sort of nightmare.

The novel is written in four "types" of chapters which are fragmented and scattered. The chapters intensify as they progress. The concluding letter (which I understand is "real," one of the few artifacts Kis possessed of his father) serves as both the concluding explanatory and the point of departure. The novel is circular. So is the web of thought and emotion it constructs.

Finally, here are some questions I offered the group prior to our session:

Where's the line between reality and imagination, between dream and nightmare, in this work? How does the narrative differentiate between those, or does it? Have there been times in your own life when you found it tough to differentiate between reality and unreality?

Look for descriptions of lighting in this prose work (beginning with the very first paragraphs). How does lighting play into the narrative itself? In other words, what do differing senses of lighted-ness seem to mean? What other symbols leap out at you? What do you make of the imaginary conversations/ interrogations the E.S. recites? How would you describe Kis's development of character? How would you describe the novel's curve of suspense? How does this book make you feel after you've finished it?

Peter Anderson (Alta group)

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I was thankful that "Hourglass" came last in this case, because it is the most technically difficult and perplexing of the books in the Eastern Europe series, and I wanted time to acquaint the participants with themes and tendencies in Eastern European fiction. I also wanted to prime the pump a little, which I did at the previous session by telling the group outright that "Hourglass" is a difficult book to understand, that it would take some time and concentration and that it would reward careful reading.

Despite pre-encouragement, only about half the participants finished the book. Still, we had a great discussion of it. I think this has been the case elsewhere, as well, according to the reports I've seen--the book that frustrates the most can also be the best to talk about.

A fruitful discussion topic: Danilo Kis is enormously loved and widely read in Europe. Does that indicate anything about the difference between Europe and America?

I did a lot of background reading relating to Danilo Kis. For people leading this series, I recommend (among others) the book "Homo Poeticus," a collection of lucid essays and interviews with Danilo Kis, edited by Susan Sontag. In this book, Kis gets deeply into "Hourglass" and into his thoughts, feelings and philosophies about writing and Eastern European culture and history.

Peter Anderson

## **Disturbing the Peace**

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One theme that runs in several of the books, both fiction and non-fiction, in this series, is interesting contacts people have with government bureaucracy and the strange decisions that people that are part of the bureaucracy make in dealing with the smallest change from the norm. We felt that Havel was especially interesting since he was not only a writer, but also a political activist and President of the Czech Republic.

Robert Kothe 4-20-04

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This was a surprisingly energetic discussion. I started by giving some background information on the man, and then I discussed the fact that nearly all critics of his literary endeavors praise his work in the political essay, a genre he has come to dominate in the recent past. We talked about the difficulty in assessing his literary stature since neither his essays nor any of his plays are included in the WCH text, a great disappointment.

This led to a more general discussion of the transitory nature of a literary career based on anti-communism. Look at the late careers of Solzhenitsyn, Walensa, Gorbachev, Brodsky, and other critics of the ancien regime. Once the wicked totalitarian monster of Marxism left the stage of history, it seemed that he took his spotlight with him since the interest in these and other émigré figures has diminished in direct relation to the moral integrity of their opposition to the party in power. For example, Havel (confidant of both Bill Clinton and Bush II) gave an impassioned speech over Radio Marti in September beamed in translation to the oppressed in Cuba, a speech which was completely ignored by the American media. Sic transit gloria mundi!

We searched without success for some comparable intellectual figure in American politics, past and present, coming no closer than Woodrow Wilson in academic respectability, if not political and moral stature.

Finally, we were able to connect many of Havel's experiences to the fictional trajectories of the major characters in Kundera's Unbearable Lightness of Being, with which we started the series. Closely Watched Trains

is next, at 85 pages an easy read, but I warned people about the upcoming *Engineer of Human Souls*, which is unexpectedly excellent and entertaining, but over 600 pages. Too bad they couldn't get both texts at the same time, or perhaps get the large book at few weeks earlier. I am not optimistic that they will complete it in four weeks.

Dennis Coelho, Jan. 2004

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Several members of our smallish group found the book tough going and had not finished reading it. That didn't stop them from being impressed by Havel and inspired by many of his ideas. I gave them further background on Havel by reading a few excerpts from *THE PATRIOT'S REVOLUTION*, a book recommended by another scholar. The bulk of our discussion covered the nature of hope and the nature of power, as described by Havel. The group made a very interesting connection concerning the play "The Laramie Project," which is being staged in Laramie this week. The connection there concerned the writer, and the creative person in general. We discussed whether spiritual and moral leadership has been abdicated by clergy and political leaders and taken up by "artists" and what it meant. What the group viewed as a positive contribution by artists, they also acknowledged was repudiated by some who charge "cultural elitism." We concluded examining the question of "Who has the power: dissidents or the president" over the last several decades of American history. (We also decided instead of meeting in a brightly lit library, we would meet in a backroom over shots of vodka--more appropriate for talking of Eastern Europe!)

Julianne Couch (Laramie library group)

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We had an exciting discussion of *Disturbing the Peace*. It started when the librarian relayed to us the report given by a member who couldn't be there. The absentee said the book was boring! No one else agreed with her and the discussion took off with reasons why it was a stimulating book. Everyone agreed it was an excellent book and certainly spelled out things about the Eastern European experience. Several people quoted favorite passages which led to in depth discussion of what the particular passage had to say.

Generally, Havel's life is the epitome of what we should all be about instead of succumbing to the "woe is me" attitude and knuckling under to an authority which, if nothing else, is self-serving. We analyzed the different philosophies of Havel and of Kundera. Several folks had taken things off the internet and shared that. One person had a world atlas and we examined the changing shape of Europe in the past years. Some humor was injected when some members tried to examine the relationship between Havel and Olga.

One thing we wondered about and haven't been able to find the answer to - What is Havel's health like at the moment. Someone had very recently read a short, short article that he was in the hospital with pneumonia. None of

us have been able to find follow up information on that. Do you know?

Norma Christensen (Basin group)

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Does anyone know the answer to Norma's question about Havel's health? J.

According to an Agence France Presse article dated March 6 from Prague: "The Czech president, 64, only left hospital 10 days ago after his latest health scare, which forced him to cut short a foreign trip due to a severe relapse of chronic bronchitis."

So he sounds better, but the same article says his wife is now ill with flu.

Deb Koelling

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My group discussed Havel a few sessions back and I learned at that time that he'd had part of a lung removed due to lung cancer and was intermittently "poorly." I don't know anything else that may have transpired in recent weeks. I'd be interested in knowing how he is doing. Somehow I feel personally interested in him after having read the book.

Julianne Couch

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A few weeks ago, the group in Basin inquired about Vaclav Havel's health. Here is an up-to date report from Nancy Effinger, who has been living in Prague for the past few years. Nancy, a former WCH board member, was the director of the Teton County Library and is, I'm sure, familiar to many of you.

Bob Young

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I wish I had been in Basin for that discussion. It sounds wonderful. And thank you for inquiring about President Havel's health. Here is the story as I understand it.

A lifelong smoker (as many Czechs are, unfortunately), President Havel underwent surgery for lung cancer in late 1996. The doctors removed a malignant tumor along with half of one lung. I guess there was quite a little scandal over his post-operative care in Prague. Finally Dr. Robert Ginsberg from Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center was called in to sort things out and (probably) saved the President's life.

In April, 1998, while on holiday in Austria, he underwent emergency surgery and had 30 centimeters of perforated bowel removed. Since then he's had a lot of respiratory and abdominal problems and has been in and out of the hospital. I'm not certain but I believe he's continued to smoke. With only 1.5 lungs he's prone to pneumonia. About every 3 months it seems there is a little piece in the

newspaper about his latest stay in the hospital. My general impression from what I've read is that the man doesn't take care of himself. Czechs like cigarettes and beer and he's very Czech. (We do have the best beer I've ever tasted so I can't fault him on that count.) His new wife Dagmar has more confidence in faith healers than traditional medicine so I'm sure that plays a role in the care he receives though I don't know to what extent.

There was a biography written in 1999 by John Keane called "Vaclav Havel. A Political Tragedy in Six Acts." I've just started reading it but I find it interesting that one of the last chapters is titled "Decline." Unfortunately President Havel's popularity is declining along with his health. I don't understand it all; I still have the romantic image of the playwright/President. I do know that the Czech friends I have who were all active in the Velvet Revolution are disillusioned and just roll their eyes and shake their heads when I mention him. Also, it's been twelve years since the Velvet Revolution. A whole new generation is coming of age and they don't know the Havel that their parents did. Most of them barely remember or never knew Communism.

I prefer to think of President Havel as he was in his best years. I respect and admire him and still hang onto the hope that someday I'll get to meet him.

Best regards from Prague,  
Nancy

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There seemed to be some trepidation or even dislike regarding this book among some members, so I was expecting the "worst" for this discussion. Instead, many of those who attended regarded this as their favorite book and wanted to read more by Havel. Those who were not quite sure about the book at the outset requested the extra days left to read it again or in some cases finish reading it. The book provoked a lot of discussion and comparisons with the previous texts, especially *cafe Europa*. Our discussion covered many areas from how the book revealed the intricacies of Czech culture and absurdist authors, the power of Havel's language, the universals raised by his responses (the dehumanizing aspect of modern life, the perennial struggle for hope and purpose), and the powerful impact that communism had upon the individuals of Eastern Europe. There was a near unanimous sentiment that the second chapter was kind of distracting and dissuaded some from reading further. The other four chapters seemed to resonate with most who had completed the book. The group seemed to like the inclusion of nonfiction within the series though several felt that this would have been a great first or second book to have read. Havel's contributions to the moral and political transformation in Eastern Europe really struck home for all who read the book. It is interesting to note that many of the members had been to a discussion on Martin Luther King prior to our meeting and the carryover impact on these two men's thoughts and contributions was very interesting.

Erich Frankland

This book would have been a great one with which to begin this series. Through the book and our discussion of it, we finally began to solidify our understanding of the history of Czechoslovakia. Also, because Havel discusses the major themes in his writings and the writings of others (namely Kundera) in *Disturbing the Peace*, the autobiography is also a good beginning for a discussion of what, if anything, makes Eastern European writers unique.

Our discussion of this book was rather meandering. We each pointed out passages in the book that we found meaningful, and then we discussed them. This led to a discussion of the nature of hope based on Havel's writings (on pg. 181) on the difference between hope and optimism. Someone pointed out that Havel's idea of hope requires a certain kind of "leap of faith." It is almost a spiritual choice to believe in the rightness of some action that is not based on any sort of proof or certainty that one's actions will have positive outcome. We found it interesting that a political activist and leader would so easily talk of issues of spirituality and politics in one breath.

This led naturally to a discussion of Havel's writings (pg. 10-15 or so) on our "global crisis." According to Havel, this crisis is a spiritual crisis caused by the "anthropocentrism of modern man" and our inability to believe in a source of higher meaning. Most of the group members tended to agree with Havel. Part of Havel's discussion of this subject includes an indictment of bureaucracies of all kinds. We talked about how American philosophers like Wendell Berry agree with Havel. We also talked about how these ideas are in opposition to our move toward a "global economy." Is it possible, in a global economy, to maintain personal relationships with one's community, one's work, one's fellow workers in today's economy? Havel says not. Again, most of us agreed with him.

We talked about Havel's ramblings about Kundera. We were pleased to note that most of what Havel says about Kundera, we agreed with or discovered on our own in our earlier discussion of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. We too found Kundera to be a "victim of his own skepticism" and we also pondered the idea of *Unbearable Lightness* as alibi for the Czech people and their failure to resist invasion time after time.

Toward the end, we spent some time talking about whether or not it works to mix fiction and non-fiction books in a discussion series. We couldn't agree on an answer, though we did agree that it is often difficult to compare a book like Havel's to fictitious works like *Hourglass* or *Closely Watched Trains*.

Carol Bell

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Like reading an extended magazine article, one reader commented. Another observed that she was often bogged down by the litany of details, names, dates, and events, which brought agreement from a majority of the group, although all indicated that the book was fascinating and revealing of the man and his time, nonetheless.

Another comment: the book seemed created for Havel's people, not for outside observers. It seemed, another participant said, as if we were guests at a party where we didn't know anyone, or know the rules. We spent a fair amount of time comparing Havel to Kundera, and unpacking the philosophical differences between them, which was fruitful. We also spent a good deal of time talking about absurdity, hope, paradoxes and perseverance. Havel lived his personality, one reader pointed out, and his personality turned out to be just the ticket for the time and place.

Peter Anderson (Jackson group)

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A much different reaction to this book than with the Jackson group. Readers floundered with the same issue of overwhelming detail, but as one put it, "This is a book which gets better as it goes along." An accidental history, was how one participant described the work, which was compared to the haphazard way life unfolds in reality, as opposed to the narratives in history books, which sometimes seem to suggest a great plan behind events. The group did a fine job of relating the book to local events, finding interesting comparisons between here and there. Readers appreciated Havel's discussion of suicide. We discussed the psychological and philosophical impact of that segment of the interview. We also spent time talking about his frustration, both as politician and as individual.

We also talked about the notion of progress--if there is such a thing, what it is, what it isn't, and how civilization goes about creating what we might describe as progress.

Peter Anderson (Alta group)

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I began by bringing Czech and Havel history up to date. Then a participant asked for more information on the Theater of the Absurd. While no one had read Havel's plays, several people knew a great deal about Absurdism. Thus, a spirited discussion took place on the topic.

The participants enjoyed and were enthusiastic about the book. Topics discussed included communism in Eastern Europe, Havel's courage, the differences between being a "dissident" and a politician (president), Havel's relationship with his wife, but especially drawing comparisons to our current situation. This discussion grew out of our "take" on Havel's view of what society should be like. As the library was closing, I said, "but what of his views on suicide, or religion?" But, alas, we were out of time. Great discussion.

Barbara Gose (Lander group)

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Our final discussion of the year, per our tradition, was held over a fine lunch in a local restaurant. We spent the better part of our discussion talking about political leadership. We debated why Havel emerged as a leader, and what about him seems so very different from leaders in our own culture. We tried to get at the personality of the man as it

appears to western readers of his essays. I described Havel's history since the publication of this collection, and what I know of the current political and social situation in the Czech Republic. There's an English-language newspaper called the Prague Post which posts material online. It's fun to share up-to-the-minute accounts of Czech politics with people discussing this book.

Predictably (and desirably), the discussion turned to the lack of inspirational, intellectual leaders in our own country. We spoke of the fearful circumstances which so often, unfortunately, seem necessary to draw out great leaders, and we touched on what happens to those Churchillian leaders after the circumstances which bring them to the limelight have passed into quieter times.

Peter Anderson

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Notes for reading: *Disturbing the Peace*

This is an easy and engaging book to read, filled with the rich, vibrant history of the Czech Republic since Prague Spring. Havel was right in the middle of it all, to say the least. I think the best suggestion I can offer concerning reading *Disturbing the Peace* is to focus on:

The difference between the public man and the private man. Ask ourselves questions like "Do expectations of (and admiration for) leaders differ in former eastern bloc countries and in the United States?"

How has art (in Havel's case, drama) played into the Czech revolution and does art function at a similar level in America?

Is "politics with conscience" a naive idea and will that idea get crushed as Czech democracy matures?

What is the nature of political courage? Does it seem that anything in American politics is worth dying for these days? Would any of our political leaders risk their lives for what they claim they believe in? Would you?

Please make notes to share in discussion of questions and responses in the book that seem especially remarkable or perplexing, that get to the heart of Vaclav Havel or Eastern Europe in general, or that speak personally to you.

Peter Anderson [These "scholar notes" were distributed before the group read the book.]

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Our group had a wide range of comments about the interview method in which the book was organized. Most thought that the book provided quite a unique and personal insight into communism and the social climate around it. Some compared Havel's book to *Cafe Europa* in showing the deteriorating individual freedom. Many important comments were focused on Havel, the drive and spirit devoted to his views, his sense of injustices, his imprisonment, and his final leadership role as president. I provided a brief overview of his plays and his use of parodies and jokes about the Germans and political chaos. The metaphor for communism (a hard crust) and the ability of these writers to crack that crust moved us to

look more closely at key passages, such as Havel's view of an "ideal society," of a "regimented society," of "depersonalization," and, finally, of Milan Kundera's views. The overall meaning of the book illustrated that Havel believed that if a person picks one action that gives a result, it can change the course of history. This book gave us all an inspirational view of hope against suppression. I ended the discussion with a few passages from Havel's January 1, 2002 address.

Joanna Tardoni

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Several thought Havel's book was a fitting summation of many of the themes we had discussed, including the topics of the relationship between cultural/political influence and individual choice in values and identity formation; the nature of freedom and how it is expressed; the relationship between individual/collective spiritual life and cultural/political structures; the cultural, moral, and spiritual issues in emigration; the advantages and weaknesses of authoritarian and democratic systems; the collective costs of personal acts of bravery or cowardice, and vice versa. Two participants thought Havel came off a bit smug or self-serving, but others pointed out that the "I" is all important in autobiography.

Stephen Lottridge

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Readers initially noted their individual reactions to the book's structure and tone. One reader enjoyed the content and structure, but felt Havel's tone to be too self-centered and somewhat pompous, which was "off-putting" for her. Others strongly disagreed, noting Havel's openness and pointing to specific instances of self-deprecating humor.

Those opening remarks sparked a lively exchange in which readers focused primarily on the place of the book within the series and its contribution to the theme, appropriate since this is our final selection for the year. Havel's focus on civic values and on the significance of the individual in making democratic processes work recalled our first discussion which centered on Cafe Europa. This led to a discussion of one recurring topic generated in this series: the influence of past political systems on current attitudes and on civic involvement, both in Eastern Europe and in the United States.

All agreed that many of the selections offered us new perspectives as well as glimpses of Eastern European life not generally viewed through the lens of western propaganda. Several commented on the dark, pessimistic undercurrent which seemed to run throughout the series and which contrasts with various selections' somewhat optimistic themes. The concept of "absurdity" in modern life was explored. Most agreed that *Disturbing the Peace* was a good choice for closing this series, and a bit of time was spent on evaluating the selections in this series. Group members appreciated the opportunity and the challenge this

series provided, but noted some selections' length and complexity may have been a factor in declining attendance.

Note: Other groups may find the following recent articles useful:

1. in *Economist*, 09/30/2000, Vol. 356. Issue 8190, p. 158 "Vaclav Havel, a Disappointed Czech" This article discusses Havel in light of anti-globalization protests in Czech Republic, his sympathy for protesters' goals and his hatred of communism. Some commentary on the outlook for his political future (available full text on WYLDcat via EBSCO database)

2. in *UNESCO Courier*, Dec. 2001, p10, 6 p. "Vaclav Havel" (a transcript of a 1990 interview with Havel in which he shares his opinions on the social and political role of intellectuals, comments on the differences between the role of intellectuals in the East and the West, and assesses the state of the world community.) (available full text on WYLDcat via EBSCO database)

3. Chamberlain, Lesley. "Play it Again, Vaclav" *World & I*. Aug. 2001, Vol. 16 Issue 8, p 76. This article concentrates on Havel's plays, on his characteristics as a dramatist, on the relevance of his work to the communist setting, and on the reflection of the normalization of the Czech society in his plays. (available full text on WYLDcat via EBSCO database)

A good wide-ranging discussion of the book, which gave us a solid appreciation of Havel's courage and commitment and steadfast belief in the power of the individual to make a difference.

Regarding sources, there are plenty of articles in periodical databases that are helpful in giving some perspective on Havel's place in history. The official website of the Czech Republic, with its links to Havel's speeches, is useful. I wanted to read some news magazine reports from the eras that Havel writes about, but didn't have time.

Rick Kempa