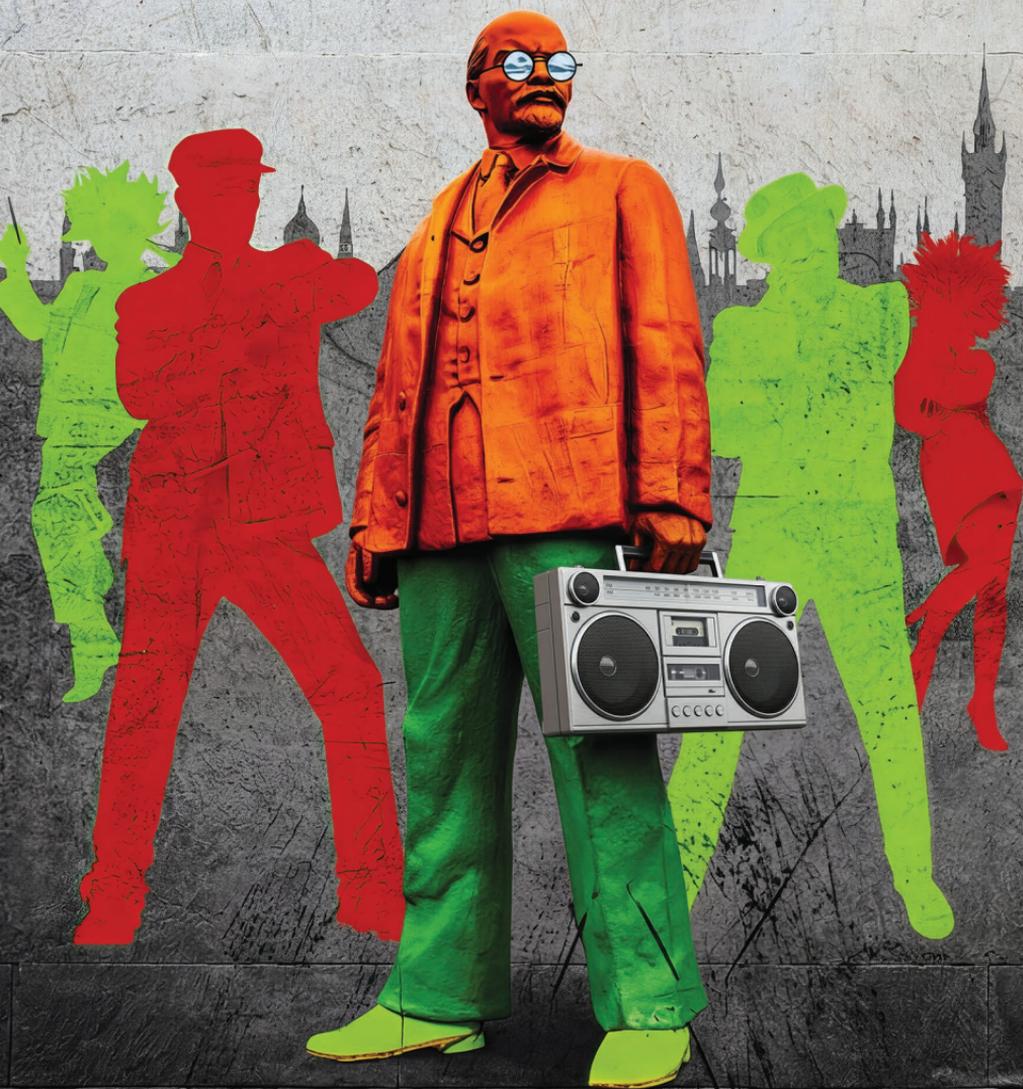


Karel Veselý

Fu(n)k Bomb



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Fu(n)k Bomb

FU(*N*)K BOMB

by Karel Veselý

Translated from the Czech and Introduced by
Charles S. Kraszewski

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**We Know What's Good for You.
Oh Yeah? Fu(*&*)k You!
Karel Veselý's *Fu(*n*)k Bomb***

Charles S. Kraszewski

When Erin Brockovich gets involved, you know it's serious.

'You're going to be told it's safe, you're going to be told not to worry', Brockovich told the residents of East Palestine, Ohio, on the evening of 24 February 2023. She was speaking about a recent train wreck in their town, which contaminated the area with toxic chemicals. Later in the crisis, government officials decided to burn off the residue of the spill — five railroad cars worth of nasty business — thus releasing the poison into the air above the evacuated town in the American Midwest. 'That's just rubbish', she continued, referring to those governmental assurances, 'because you're going to worry [...] Don't expect somebody to give you the answers. Unfortunately, this is not a quick fix. This is going to be a long game'.¹ I am not making light of a tragedy that has disrupted the lives of many innocent families, nor am I belittling the importance of an environmental activist. Far

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¹ Alistair Dawber, 'Erin Brockovich warns residents of long-term health risks after Ohio train crash', *The Times*, 25 February 2023, online: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ohio-train-crash-brockovich-east-palestine-l9vr9lg20>, accessed 25 February 2023.

from it. To make plain what I'm driving at, I need to set this in the context of another environmental tragedy.

On 26 April 1986 — and so, thirty-seven years before the East Palestine incident — the Chernobyl power plant melted down and exploded in the most infamous nuclear accident the world had ever seen to that date, releasing radioactive poison into the atmosphere, and potentially contaminating half of Europe. 'Most infamous' now, but had the Soviet government of the time had their way, we would never have heard of it, or, at most, it would have been reduced to a nefarious rumour, easy to deny by a totalitarian government adept at screwing down the lid tightly over bad news. If not for the Swedish nuclear authorities catching a whiff of unusual radiation levels in the atmosphere, and then confronting the Russians with their discovery, threatening to reveal the news if Russia refused to herself, people from Pripyat to Vladivostok, and westwards to Lisbon, would have gone on living their lives without the least notion that anything potentially dangerous might fall from the heavens onto the fields of leafy vegetables they were shortly to consume.

I was in Poland at the time, and although I was a rather faithful reader of the local newspapers — such as they were — like the *Echo Krakowa* and the *Dziennik Polski*, it was from a cabbie in Warsaw, where my wife and I happened to be, organising visas to Brussels at the West German and Belgian embassies, that we heard of the event. This must have been three days after the explosion, for in an old diary I see that I have written under 28 April: 'Nuclear eruption (emergency) in the Ukraine. Norway, Sweden and Poland covered with the Cloud. Veggies must be washed, milk not too safe'. And that's it. On the ill-fated day itself, I find that I 'spent 2 fruitless hours trying to buy tickets to movie *Amadeus* (in front of Wolność and Kijów)' — i.e. standing in queues in front of the sold-out cinemas where it was running, and after that, I

have nothing noted down until 3 May when I wrote that our dog was bitten by a neighbour's dog at my in-laws.

I can't say for sure when the official media, controlled at the time by the Communist régime, finally revealed to the population at large what had happened on the territory of the none-too-benevolent hegemon to the East, before whom they genuflected as a matter of course. I can say that the man responsible for bringing the news to the Polish nation, the Party's press officer, Jerzy Urban, himself admitted in a 2019 interview² that it was Radio Free Europe that first broadcast the news, which had been suppressed by the Polish Communist authorities — according to Urban, 'so as not to ignite an [unnecessary] panic'.

In that same interview, Urban mentions the threat posed by radiation to milk, and how because of the relative amounts of grass ingested by cows and goats, goats' milk was the safer option. What he doesn't mention is what I remember him saying on the official televised news in early May — again, a Communist Party official speaking on Communist-controlled media — responding to an offer by the Americans to donate so many tonnes of safe powdered milk for the children of Poland. Poland — or rather, the Communist régime that controlled Poland — had refused the offer, he said, because that milk was 'politically contaminated'. Yes. That's right. Urban and the Reds would rather have Polish children drink good, honest (potentially radioactive) 'Communist' milk (be it from goats or cows) than safe, nutritious, powdered milk, lest the

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² Krzysztof Połaski, "Czarnobyl". Jerzy Urban wspomina katastrofę w elektrowni w Czarnobylu. Jak bardzo serial HBO mija się z prawdą? *Telemagazyn*, 21 June 2019, online: <https://www.telemagazyn.pl/artykuly/czarnobyl-jerzy-urban-wspomina-katastrofe-w-elektrowni-w-czarnobylu-jak-bardzo-serial-hbo-mija-sie-z-prawda-73200.html>, accessed 25 February 2023.

Poles ever get the idea that anything coming from the corrupt capitalist world might be beneficial.

Of course, this wasn't the first time that politics had the last word over common sense. In 1947, for example, 'the Soviet Union [...] told Poland to refuse Marshall aid',³ which cut off the one Allied nation that could have made the best use out of the money that set an enemy's (Germany's!) ruined economy on the way to miraculous growth, condemning Poland to a third-world spiral from which it would not emerge until six decades later.⁴ The fact that 'Ronald Reagan's milk' might save children's lives was not as important to the Communists as the fact that Ronald Reagan had ulterior political motives

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³ Jan Zamoyski, *The Polish Way* (London: John Murray, 1987), p. 376. While the United States was pouring money into rebuilding the economies of Western Europe, Stalin's USSR was milking its satellites of what little goods they had. In the case of Poland, Zamoyski goes on to state that 'at a conservative estimate, some 5,000 million dollars' worth of Polish coal was given away free to the Soviet Union between 1946 and 1955, at a time when coal was virtually Poland's only means of acquiring much-needed foreign currency'.

⁴ Czechoslovakia was no exception here. In an about-face worthy of the pen of Hašek, in 1947 the Czechoslovak government first accepted, and later rejected, the Marshall Plan (the European Recovery Programme) 'under direct Soviet pressure' (Eugene K. Keefe, et al. *Area Handbook for Czechoslovakia* [Washington: Foreign Area Studies, Government Printing Office, 1972], p. 46. And this was *before* the Communist *Machtergreifung* of 1948. Petr Jokeš sums up the situation in Czechoslovakia: 'An important step was taken [...] in 1947, when the USA proposed to the nations of Europe the famous project for economic recovery known as the Marshall Plan. In Czechoslovakia, as well as in Poland, after all, Stalin was permitted the last word — and he gave a resounding *nyet*. Jan Masaryk, the son of the deceased President Masaryk and popular minister of foreign affairs, upon returning from Moscow where the dictator's decision was announced to him, stated that he had travelled there as a representative of an independent state, and returned as Stalin's slave'. Petr Jokeš, *Czesi: Przewodnik po historii narodu i państwa* (Kraków: Avalon, 2020), pp. 350–351.

for making the offer. And then — cynical as usual — Urban made a ‘generous counter-offer’ to the Americans. Poland, he said, was willing to send a transport of sleeping bags to keep the numerous homeless people on New York streets warm at night.⁵

I’m not qualified to speak of the threats posed by nuclear melt-downs hundreds of miles away, or what levels of radiation are harmful, or safe, to people and animals affected by exposure to radioactive fallout for longer or shorter periods of time. I’ve also never been in a position of such authority that would make me pause and wonder — *Is it in the public interest to announce something that might cause a panic?* I must be honest enough to admit that what I reflectively assume to be the perfidy of a Communist government willing to expose the population they oversee to danger, just so as to cover up the truth of their own ineptitude, might well be the prudence of a Creon such as I praise in the opening scenes of *Oedipus Rex*. ‘Shouldn’t we go inside and discuss this first?’ says Creon to his impetuous nephew / brother-in-law when the latter says ‘Speak! Tell us what the oracle said!’ upon his very public return from Delos, in the presence of the common people gathered before the palace. But the reason I’m recalling these two events, separated by almost four decades, is that they more than adequately illustrate the difference between an open, Western society, and a neurotic, paternalistic totalitarian régime from the East. The chemical accident in New Palestine was in the news as soon as it happened — CNN doesn’t give

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⁵ A quick internet search (<https://wykop.pl/wpis/17708543/13-maja-1986-roku-jerzy-urban-w-odpowiedzi-na-przy/>, accessed: 25 February 2023) tells me that the broadcast in question (Urban’s official announcement to the Polish people) took place on 13 May 1986. Of course, as usual, humour, the defence of the defenceless, took up the gauntlet, with wags quipping ‘Item for the classifieds: Seeking to exchange large apartment in Warsaw for sleeping bag in New York’.

a damn about whether or not 'Breaking News' will cause a panic — the Polish Communist government waited several days before they admitted what had happened in Chernobyl to a population that, by and large, had already learned of the catastrophe through the grapevine. The governmental response to the accident in Ohio was immediate, even if it was criticised by others as bumbling or inadequate; the Communist response to the Chernobyl disaster was first to sweep it under the rug. In that 2019 interview with Jerzy Urban, we learn that when the Polish government finally got through to Moscow with questions, seeking guidance, the Soviets said 'yes, there is a spike in radiation; it might be coming from us, and then again it might not'(!) And finally, to get back to Erin Brockovich, the response to the aftermath of the recent catastrophe — overlooking here those who used New Palestine for their own political ends, such as a former President of the United States who visited the area just to use it as a stick with which to whack the current administration — comes from below: private individuals, an environmental activist without any sort of official portfolio, pointing her finger at the officials we look to for help, and at their own obfuscating Jerzy Urbans. There may be Erin Brockoviches in totalitarian societies as well, but a) their protests will go unreported, or b) when we do hear about them, we learn that they have been arrested and imprisoned. In Communist Poland, Erin Brockovich's name was Anna Walentynowicz; not long ago in Putin's Russia it was Aleksei Navalny. And there are thousands of others we've never heard of.

This is the context in which I can't help but read Karel Vešely's absurd novel *Fu(*n*)k Bomb*. The whole premise of the work — a funk group created by order of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in order to get people smiling again? To foster a 'new Socialist revolution'? — is in the best traditions of Czech absurd humour, stretching from Havlíček-Borovský and Hašek through Havel

and Kohout. But it is also a painful reminder of what Central Europe was like under the radioactive cloud of that train-wreck known as Communism, which hung over the area from 1945 until 1989: ineffective, often absurd solutions to real problems were decided by a handful of old men in a room, while spontaneous responses to the same problems — arising from the so-called dissident sphere — were ignored, mocked, and whenever possible, quashed by the powers-that-were. ‘Cinema has its pornography’, states Štrougal explaining the birth of the unlikely project, ‘with which it makes a puppet of a man by appealing to his libido, and I believe that there must exist something similar in music — a musical composition that would be capable of steering humanity in a desired direction’. Only a Communist would look to pornography as a model for social engineering.⁶

For sure, Madison Avenue, that very capitalist phenomenon, does this as well: from those well-known glossy photos of ice-cubes in whiskey adverts which (supposedly) attract customers to the product, subliminally, by somehow suggesting ‘sex’ with the shadows of their indentations, to the ham-handed commercials telling us ‘to be good to ourselves’ and ‘treat ourselves’ to something we ‘deserve’, be it a new car, or a vacation getaway. But those attempts at directing us affect only a narrow, specific aspect of our personality, and like the genetic superbug invented in the Bond film *No Time to Die*, they can infect only a certain part of the population. A teetotaler isn’t likely to be swayed to rush out and buy a litre of Scotch, sexual insinuations or no sexual insinuations,

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⁶ It is to be noted that, shortly after the fall of the Communist régime in Poland, Jerzy Urban founded a contrarian rag titled *Nie!* [No!], which often featured soft-porn photos of scantily-clad lovelies. Subliminal messaging, for sure: follow us, and get this; what does the ‘clero-fascist’ group that took over have to offer you? Snapshots of John Paul II?

and a person who knows that he just doesn't have the money for a new car can't be manipulated into buying a Lexus, however much he might be told that he 'deserves' one. The chilling thing about the totalitarian brainwashers is that they are determined to control — subliminally — the whole person, and every one of them, affecting his entire behaviour as a 'societal unit'.

It would be easy here to laugh at the failures of centrally-planned economies, where the projections for just how many items of a given sort are to be produced over the next five years — which, due to the fact that one cannot predict the future (COVID anyone? Russia's war on Ukraine?) often leads to an abundance of unnecessary items, and shortages of what people really need at any given moment. In a normal free market economy, such shortages are made up by entrepreneurs (missing here, officially) who see the opportunity to make money and 'give the people what they want'.⁷ Such 'rational planning' is as much astrological voodoo as are those fantastic formulae of Jiří's father, which systematise the unsystematisable: the moods of human souls.

The logarithms of Jiří's old man are one of the driest jokes in this novel full of dry Czech humour. But the *unfunny* foundation that such plots are based on — horrifying and infuri-

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⁷ See Hannes Adomeit, *Imperial Overstretch: Germany in Soviet Policy from Stalin to Gorbachev: An Analysis Based on New Archival Evidence, Memoirs, and Interviews* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft mbH, 2016), for a more detailed discussion of the problem. On p. 187, for example, he speaks of 'The structural deficiencies of the system [leading] to a plethora of activities at the margin or outside the legal framework and a thriving "second economy", which 'were advantageous to the consumer since they mitigated the rigidities of central planning and alleviated supply and distribution shortage'. All the same, the general response of the Communist government would be to penalise the 'shirkers' and 'idlers' and 'social parasites' in the name of ideological purity (p. 187).

ating — is the paternalism of the totalitarians which can be summed up in the phrase: ‘sit quiet, we know what’s good for you’. For example, during the recording of the band’s second album *Hope*, Štrougal comes up with the bright idea of cramming his mobile studio into the apartment of a typical worker’s family. He wishes to capture the sounds of the daily life of a worker’s flat as sampling illustration for a musical passage illustrating the exploitation of a typical worker in a capitalist society:

This time, the idea was for the band to unpack its studio in the flat of any representative of the working class to hand, to draw inspiration from his or her unvarnished daily life for one of the songs. At first, I found the idea a little strange. But Dobrý, of course, immediately signed on and offered the family of his uncle from Polička.

Passing over the snide paradox of illustrating the daily life of a slave of *capitalism* by recording the daily life of a worker’s family living in the supposed utopia of Communism (Czechoslovakia, 1989), let us note Štrougal’s reaction to Jiří’s protests at the havoc (emotional and material) that the band is wrecking upon the innocent family in the name of art:

‘Comrade, what’s going on here — it’s out of bounds already’.

‘And what sort of bounds, exactly, are you referring to?’

‘We can’t simply terrorise the common people like this!’

‘No? I think we can. Our album is more important than the comfort of some worker or other...’

That made me even more angry:

‘What? I can’t believe that you’d say such a thing, Comrade... Isn’t it for the most common workers that we’re making this revolution of ours?’

‘You can’t make an omelette without breaking a few eggs. There’s nothing to be done about it. Jiří, we’re doing something great here — something, the importance of which exceeds the existence of this one family. And so they too must bow before our art’.

Of course, this attitude is as old as mankind. It is the sting in the tail of Konrad’s ‘Great Improvisation’ in *Forefathers’ Eve*, the monumental text of Polish Romanticism, in which the inspired bard demands ‘soul’s rule’ of God:

I want to rule as Thou dost — always, secretly:
What I will — let them but understand,
Do it directly, and count them blest
With each task, and should they protest,
Then let them suffer for it, and be damned!
Let people be to me as word and thought:
Bricks of song-structures to be willed and wrought!
Such is, they say, Thy governance!
My mind is clear: Thou knowest I do not prate —
If Thou wouldst give me equal influence
Upon the souls of men, I would create
My nation as a living hymn —
And better scales than Thine would I employ —
Thy song is grim,
And mine would be a hymn of joy!⁸

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⁸ Adam Mickiewicz, *Forefathers’ Eve*. The English translation is mine (Glagoslav, 2016).

The difference is — Mickiewicz's Konrad is *possessed by the devil* at the moment he utters these words (a fact conveniently glossed over by Polish critics, who like to concentrate on the patriotic élan of the great Romantic hero) — Mickiewicz himself is quite aware of the impossibility of Konrad's request. Not only can he not share in God's influence over mankind, but the very fact that he asserts that 'they say' (who, exactly?) that God moves us around like chess pieces deprived of free will is heresy of the first order. And anyway, even if he were successful in creating 'a hymn of joy' out of his nation, it would be a nation of automatons, not human beings. But Communist Europe, in the 1980s, was just such a paternalistic tyranny, in which the 'omniscient' Party believed that such a thing was possible. They 'knew' what was good for the common man. It's no surprise that Štrougal should speak so dismissively about eggs and omelettes here, as despite all the 'edginess' of his fictional persona, he is just as true a believer as the actual person upon which he is (so incongruously) based.⁹ Marx, Štrougal insists, even after the abject failure of his projects, 'never made a mistake'.

For a western reader unfamiliar with Communism, the curious thing about this novel, I reckon, is that Jiří himself is no dissident. Like the heroes of Solidarity, for example, or, closer to home, Aleksander Dubček who wished to put a human face (a mask?) upon the basically inhuman (Communist totalitarianism), he wanted to reform the status quo from within. Unlike the reformers across the northern border of his country, however, Jiří never comes to the realisation that

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⁹ He is one of the really-existing humans upon which the author bases some of his characters. The historical Lubomír Štrougal (1924–2023) was Prime Minister of Czechoslovakia between 1970 and 1988 — and far from funky. Antonín Panenka (b. 1948) is a Czech football hero, who indeed triumphed over the Germans in that cup match; other historical characters in the novel may be found in the glossary.



About the Author

Karel Veselý (born 1976) is a Czech music journalist and writer. He studied English and Philosophy at the Faculty of Arts of the Masaryk University in Brno. Debuting in fanzines devoted to science fiction, metal and techno music, he moved into cultural journalism, which he has been his daily bread since 2008. His work has appeared in various Czech media such as *Aktuálně.cz*, *Alarm* and *Full Moon*, and he is a longtime collaborator with Czech Radio. His first book, *Hudba ohňa* [Music of Fire], a history of African-American music, was published in 2010. In 2017 he contributed to the book *Planéta Nippon* [Planet Nippon], dealing with Japanese pop culture, which was nominated for the Magnesia Litera award in the Non-Fiction category. In the same year, he made his debut as a novelist with *Bomba Funk*. In 2020, the book *Všetky mačky sú šedé* [All Cats are Grey, co-authored with Miloš Hroch] appeared, which maps the theme of sadness in Western popular music over the last forty years. In 2022, he published his second novel, *Metal*, a dystopian fiction inspired by the bleak visions of black metal music. He has also contributed to the books *Kmene* [Tribes], *Kmene 90*, *Made in Japan* and *Fordlandia*. He is a contributing screenwriter of the documentary cycle *Rapstory*, which plotted the history of Czech rap for Czech Television. He is the author of the podcasts *Čierne slnko* [Black Sun] and *Rapspot*. Married, with two children, he splits his time between Znojmo and Prague.



About the Translator

Charles S. Kraszewski (born 1962) is a poet and translator, creative in both English and Polish. He is the author of three volumes of original verse in English (*Diet of Nails; Beast; Chanameed*), and two in Polish (*Hallo, Sztokholm; Skowycik*). He also authored two satirical novel *Accomplices, You Ask?* and *At the Tone* (San Francisco: Montag, 2021, 2024). He translates from Polish, Czech and Slovak into English, and from English and Spanish into Polish. He is a member of the Union of Polish Writers Abroad (London) and of the Association of Polish Writers (SPP, Kraków). In 2022 he was awarded the Gloria Artis medal (III Class) by the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Poland and in 2023 was presented with the ZAiKS (Polish Society of Authors) award for translation into a foreign language.

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*Fu(*n*)k Bomb* (original title *Bomba Funk*, 2010) is music critic Karel Veselý's debut novel – a “grotesque mystification” in the great Czech tradition of dry, absurd humour, from Havlíček-Borovský and Hašek to Havel and Kohout. Set on the eve of the 1989 Velvet Revolution, it playfully imagines an attempt to save Communism in Czechoslovakia through the mobilising power of funk music.

Jiří, a naive true believer working at a provincial cultural institution, is unexpectedly summoned by President Gustáv Husák, who fears the rising dissident movement. Husák unveils his oddly logical plan: win back the youth by creating a funk band inspired by “the music of oppressed Black America,” combining irresistible dance rhythms with ideologically sound Socialist lyrics.

Taking on the mission, Jiří embarks on a surreal musical adventure that becomes both the project of his life and a harsh education in the realities of Party politics. Despite high-level backing, internal power struggles threaten the band's success, and the group – Funky Leninz – paradoxically finds itself pushed into a dissident role while trying to defend the status quo.

Both a witty portrait of late-1980s Prague and a loving homage to funk and Czech underground music, *Fu(*n*)k Bomb* offers a sharp, humorous commentary on Czechoslovak culture and history at the moment of its transformation.

Translated from the Czech and Introduced by Charles S. Kraszewski

