

Experiencing the Prague Summer Program 2008
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I arrived in Frankfurt, Germany, following a two hour delay in Washington D.C., and thought to myself, what am I doing, where am I, and how will I communicate? Another four hours of waiting and an hour flight, and I would be in Prague, Czech Republic, hailing a taxi and looking upon a city with buildings both romantically ornate and influenced by the squared, block existence of communism. The theme of this year's Prague Summer Program was The Myth of Innocence: Childhood as Cultural Phenomenon. And I could imagine that this city, with its literary history – Kafka, Rilke, Rimbaud, Klima, Lusting – would inspire reflections as to what it means to have survived and recreated one's own childhood experiences.

As an MFA candidate in fiction, or poetry, or even creative non-fiction, it is the perfect time to apply for this program, especially if one has writing which one wishes to include in a thesis manuscript. The quality of the workshop experience in the Prague Summer Program is entirely enriching and extremely helpful. I had the pleasure and privilege of participating in a three day a week, three-hour workshop headed by Stuart Dybek, who is the recent recipient of the 2007 MacArthur Fellowship, as well as other prestigious awards. Two stories per class were workshopped, with criticism and insight given by the other students, and lessons and short lectures on craft given by Mr. Dybek as he saw fit within the discussion and creative process of the story. The atmosphere was relaxed, unpretentious, and focused on what it means to be a good storyteller as well as an adept writer of fiction. Once workshop was finished we, the students, as well as the instructors, were free to roam the city, sit in cafes and restaurants, alone or with our peers, and worry only about writing, and whether or not to order a beer or two with lunch.

Aside from the workshop experience was the lecture series, which presented authors and intellectuals whose work or discussions were concerned with the myth of childhood. It was an honor to sit in the same room with Ivan Klima, one of the great contemporary Czech writers, and hear him speak of self-publishing under the threat of imprisonment and bodily harm. Hearing him speak brought a renewed strength and importance to his works, “Love and Garbage,” “No Saints or Angels,” and “Judge on Trial” among others. It is difficult to fully convey the presence of these writers and their experiences. How does one explain the nostalgia of Arnost Lusting speaking of his fondness for a woman while living in a concentration camp? How does that story transfer? It does not, the closest thing would be to read Lusting’s writing, “Love the Green Eyes,” and “The Thief of Luggage.” Other exemplary speakers were Lynn Freed, “everything we write will do some damage,” and “life is a mess, fiction is orderly”; these are two quotes which stay with me. Patricia Hampl’s talk of American innocence, and her experience of being a young woman abroad during the cold war and encountering a man from Palestine, who urged her to return to the U.S. and demand that “her” people help his, and she unable to respond because who was she and what could she do to help.

Though a bit nervous and sleep deprived through my travels I was greeted warmly by the dorm assistants at Kolej Komenskeho and quickly introduced to the streets of Prague. The Prague Summer Program was an opportunity to focus on revising stories while receiving constructive feedback, and also having the time to explore and experience such a spectacular and beautiful city. Applying again requires no second thought.