

INTERVIEW

IVA PEKÁRKOVÁ

NEW BLOOD
INTO MY VEINS

Iva Pekárková, the Czech novelist, has always been on the run. During her adventurous life she has lived in five different countries and travelled through such exotic destinations as India and Nigeria. She made her living however she could - as a social worker, bartender, or taxi driver - but in the meantime she kept on writing. "Writing is my life, my form of expression," she says. "I was drawn to it at 14 and have been trying to write ever since."

Iva's self-expression has always been essential to her - it was one of the reasons why she fled communist Czechoslovakia for the USA in 1985, just a year before finishing her microbiology degree. There was a rumour that on graduation the police would confiscate passports so that people couldn't travel anywhere for at least 10 years. Iva didn't want to take that risk so she left everything behind. "I was so desperate to leave the country that I sacrificed my university diploma just for some certainty that I would get out of the country," she says.

The only thing she took with her was her first book, *Truck Stop Rainbows (Péra a perutě)* - and even then, only in her mind. (It wasn't until several years later, in Boston, USA, that she finished writing it down.) "I had everything only in my head, so when they were checking me at the border and

Everything that the Czech novelist does or writes about seems to create some kind of controversy. But, as she tells *Klára Smolová*, she loves the world the way it is and that's how she likes to write about it - take it or leave it

almost stripped me down, they didn't find anything," she explains. "I didn't carry anything in a written form, not even my friends' addresses."

Iva returned to the Czech Republic from her American exile in 1997; she continued to write books and contribute to magazines and newspapers. Yet somehow it was America which still kept inspiring her, long after she'd left. And, despite the fact that the newly independent Czech Republic was changing so rapidly she didn't feel the desire to write a book from within that environment.

In fact, she claims, there are no stories in the Czech Republic. "I have the feeling that all stories there are kind of recycled," she says. "With great euphoria we are experiencing something that has been experienced before in many parts of the world, but we're acting like we are the only ones. I don't see it that way." At the same time Iva does admit that this kind of objectivity is only usually possible once someone has experienced different countries, like she has.

Dream fulfilment

Today Iva admits that back then she had no idea that she would be leading the life of a 'Flying Dutchman', moving from place to place and never belonging anywhere - and yet in many ways it is her dream come true. "There are moments when I'm depressed and feel my whole life is shit, that I've disappointed everyone, and just feel I failed," she says. "But then I realise that I live my life the way I always wanted to, so in this respect I am very successful. I have fulfilled my dreams."

Although most of the time it was the urge for change which forced her to uproot and relocate somewhere else, when Iva came to London this year it was to follow her boyfriend Kenny. A Nigerian living in the Czech Republic for the past eight years, he felt the limitations of that country and wanted to try his luck in the multicultural environment of London. "At first I didn't really want to start all over again," says Iva. "But then I thought, 'why not?': I'm still young, I can do this, and at least I'll discover

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JUSTINE WALKLEY/TNT IMAGES

a new environment. And paradoxically, given the London perspective, many stories about Czechs are emerging in the back of my mind. That would probably not happen if I'd stayed at home."

Seeing stories

Iva spent about ten years in the US, mostly in New York, which in her own words is "a fascinating city with stories everywhere you look." However, it is the friendliness of London, and the warm personal relationships she finds here, that bond her to this city. And, after just a few weeks in London, she has found that story ideas just keep popping into her head. "It's bringing new blood into my veins," she says with a teasing smile. Like all the best London writers, such as Charles Dickens or Samuel Johnson, Iva loves to walk the city and observe; it is her intuitive way of discovering places - and people. "One learns the most about people not by asking but by just observing," she says. "Often if you don't ask questions they tell you things anyway, and in a much more interesting way."

Her writing is largely based on her own experience, and written in the first person, which has occasionally caused a stir. When she openly talked about sex in her books, and in columns in the Czech *Elle* magazine, people were astonished, accusing her of writing pornography. "In the Czech Republic women are still not expected to disclose their inner sexual fantasies like this," Iva says shaking her head in disbelief. "If I want to be open with the reader, I shouldn't just push him or her away and lock the door."

She recalls how Czech books, that were censored under puritanical communism, used to anger her. "I had the feeling that the writers were cheating me: they would discuss almost anything in detail, but then they go to the bedroom, close the door and that's it. I always thought, wait a minute, maybe there is something happening there that would interest me too!"

Now with the new inspirations of England's capital city, when will she stir the public once again with a new novel? "I'm waiting for good weather, when I can sit in the park and write," she says.

In the meantime she may have to wash dishes to support herself: writing still doesn't pay all the bills. "I used to be quite annoyed by that," she says. "Now I think it's actually not so bad to do something else apart from just sitting and writing. One gets to know all of life better." ■

IVA PEKÁRKOVÁ

IVA PEKÁRKOVÁ, CZECH novelist, born February 15, 1963. In 1985 she emigrated through former Yugoslavia and Austria to the USA. Her first book, *Truck Stop Rainbows (Péra a perutě)*, inspired by life behind the Iron Curtain, was published by the 68 Publishers owned by the renowned Czech writer Josef Škvorecký, who settled in the US in the '60s. Her bibliography includes: *The World Is Round (Kulatý svět)*, *Gimme The Money (Dej mi ty prachy)*, *The Scarz (Gang zjizvených)*, *My IQ (Můj IQ)*, *Six Billion Americas (Šest miliard Amerik)*, *To India, Where Else (Do Indie, kam jinam)*, *Thirtytwo Chwans (Třicet dva chwanů)*, *Najdza - Stars In My Heart (Najdza - hvězdy v srdci)*.