

## A Prague minute

Kerry Hudson

If you have visited Prague, you will have seen the Astronomical Clock. My husband and I have lived in Prague for 24 calendar months now, but we've tended to avoid that dead centre of the town. We arrived two winters ago, when the streets of the Old Town were always teeming with amorphous clusters of puffa jackets and misshapen thermal hats, bought hastily from souvenir shops selling hemp oil and bongos, all manufactured in China.

Like most tourist cities, you need to extend from the centre to understand Prague. Walk in a straight line 20 minutes in any direction, as though following the freezing filigreed arms of the clock itself, and you'll find the human city. There is a pensioner '*ahojing*' at a baby and telling their harassed mother they look freezing, '*add another blanket*'. A hopeful dog waits outside a red and white *maso* shop. Refuse workers, still in their high-vis overalls, drink their 10am pints outside a pub window. A strong-armed matriarch with a dusty auburn dye-job at the till of the local *potraviny* asks if you need a *taška* or not? Swarms of children – we are in the midst of a baby boom – toddle to and from school, their aimless chatter peeling up into the grey, winter sky.

Of course, when something is dead centre, you will always find it. I realise now that, beyond the impression of a façade of golden cogs and wheels, I

have little recollection of the clock itself. Instead, when I have been there, I have watched the people watching the spectacle of the clock. Some rapt, holding their cameras steady, children with faces upturned so you know their hearts are beating a little faster, some distractedly clutching *trdelník*, chimney bread, while others stand with their hands in their pockets, impatient to check another item off on their itinerary *and when will we get to the Kafka Museum?*

During our first four months here, time passed as normal. Hours, days, weeks, months. We had a life – without office hours or responsibilities – that meant time felt like water, rather than grains of sand.

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Then the clocks stopped. I became pregnant with a much longed-for baby I'd given up hope of ever having. Three days later, Covid arrived in the Czech Republic – the 'Worldometer', online counter we logged onto every day measuring, in rising units of deaths, how truly fucked we all were.

At the beginning of pregnancy, you measure life in days. If your pregnancy is 'viable', your pregnancy hormones should double every 48 hours. After the first month, when you are on slightly safer ground, you measure in weeks. A pregnancy should last 40 weeks, sometimes less, often more, a clock running slow or fast. In the last days, I thought about my baby's developing brain – 250,000 nerve cells per minute. I imagined them going off inside me, tiny fireworks.

While I was counting, everything else was stopping. Shops closed. Then cafés. School and galleries and cinemas. The Prague we had known simply froze. I would walk, a hand on my belly to ward off ghosts, across a

deserted Charles Bridge with its stone gargoyles, empty of hawkers, towards the Astronomical Clock and stand in front of it, a solitary Russian doll, as time passed and stood entirely still.

Months later, I took my baby, only a few weeks old and still more creature than human, to the clock, too. I photographed his beige pram marooned in front of the clock, where tourists usually stood 20 people deep, in the hope that the projection of nostalgia might jar time forward.

But, of course, time was still moving. I saw time pass in my son. His first smile, first deep throaty chuckle. The first time he realised I was not part of him but a separate thing that could stay or leave. They do say when you have a child the days are slow and the years are fast.

At Christmas I took my son to the clock again. There was a Christmas tree, a rainbow of puffa jackets, distracted clutching of chimney bread, a couple squabbling, *and when will we get to the Kafka museum?* Yes, there were surgical masks too, and occasionally the wafting scent of hand sanitiser – so familiar now it almost doesn't smell of anything at all.

The legend is that in 1490 the original clockmaker was blinded so he couldn't replicate the work. As revenge, he disabled the clock. One hundred years later it was started again.

I watched my son, my personal clock face, not looking at the chiming clock but at the people around him responding to it. Learning how to live, minute by minute.

## **Kerry Hudson**

Kerry Hudson was born in Aberdeen. Her first novel, *Tony Hogan Bought Me An Ice-Cream Float Before He Stole My Ma* was published in 2012 by Chatto & Windus (Penguin Random House) and was the winner of the Scottish First Book Award while also being shortlisted for the Southbank Sky Arts Literature Award, Guardian First Book Award, Green Carnation Prize, Author's Club First Novel Prize and the Polari First Book Award. Kerry's second novel, *Thirst*, was published in 2014 by Chatto & Windus and won France's most prestigious award for foreign fiction the Prix Femina Étranger. It was also shortlisted for the European Premio Strega in Italy. Her books are also available in the US (Penguin), France (Editions Philippe Rey), Italy (Minimum Fax) and Turkey.

Her latest book and memoir, *Lowborn*, takes her back to the towns of her childhood as she investigates her own past and what it means to be poor in Britain today. It was a Radio 4 Book of the Week, a Guardian and Independent Book of the Year. It was longlisted for the Gordon Burn Prize and Portico Prize and shortlisted in the National Book Token, Books Are My Bag Reader's Awards and the Saltire Scottish Non-Fiction Book of the Year. Kerry was elected as a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 2020.

A recording of this talk can be found at **[writersmosaic.org.uk](http://writersmosaic.org.uk)**

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