

# **The Prague Orgy Study Guide**

## **The Prague Orgy by Philip Roth**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Prague Orgy Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Pages 3-11.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Pages 12-17.....</a>	<a href="#">5</a>
<a href="#">Pages 18-23.....</a>	<a href="#">6</a>
<a href="#">Pages 24-31.....</a>	<a href="#">8</a>
<a href="#">Pages 32-39.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Pages 39-44.....</a>	<a href="#">10</a>
<a href="#">Pages 45-53.....</a>	<a href="#">12</a>
<a href="#">Pages 54-67.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Pages 67-73.....</a>	<a href="#">15</a>
<a href="#">Pages 74-86.....</a>	<a href="#">16</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">18</a>
<a href="#">Objects/Places.....</a>	<a href="#">22</a>
<a href="#">Themes.....</a>	<a href="#">24</a>
<a href="#">Style.....</a>	<a href="#">26</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">29</a>
<a href="#">Topics for Discussion.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>



# Plot Summary

In *The Prague Orgy* by Philip Roth, protagonist and narrator Nathan Zuckerman is a Jewish American novelist who travels to Prague, Czechoslovakia in early February 1976 to obtain the unpublished manuscript of a Yiddish writer. Zuckerman meets eccentric Czech writers who obsess over sex and the authorities spying on them. While in Prague, Zuckerman explores the meaning of literature and Judaism.

The novel begins in New York 1976 when Zuckerman meets Sisovsky, a banned Czech writer living in America. Sisovsky explains that his father was a great hero killed by the Gestapo. The father was a genius writer who wrote stories in Yiddish, which were compiled into a manuscript. However, Sisovsky's estranged wife, Olga, will not give it to him. He wants Zuckerman to travel to Prague to retrieve them.

Zuckerman goes to Prague and meets Bolotka, a Jewish Czech writer whose writing is also banned. Bolotka serves as a guide around Klenek's, a house where orgy parties take place. The house is bugged so the authorities can spy on the party goers, who are viewed as dissidents. The people at Klenek's are writers and other artists who fulfill their sexual fantasies there. Zuckerman meets Olga at Klenek's. She begs him for sex and asks to marry him. Olga is also a great writer who is famous for her stories, showing her vagina to everyone and drinking.

Bolotka takes him to his apartment. Zuckerman sees how writers live in squalor in Prague. He meets Olga at his hotel the next day. However, Zuckerman is warned by a Czech student that the authorities are creating a case against Zuckerman for conspiring with dissident Czech writers to hurt the Communist regime. He tells Zuckerman to leave Czechoslovakia at once. Zuckerman is shocked. He abruptly tells Olga his real reason for traveling to Prague and asks for the manuscript. She is outraged and says no.

Zuckerman takes an important trolley ride to Bolotka's apartment where he has insights on his Judaism. He feels connected to Eastern European Jews. Bolotka tells him not to worry. The authorities are not after Zuckerman. He can do whatever he pleases in Prague.

On a whim, Olga gives Zuckerman the manuscript and tells him to tell Sisovsky and his mistress she gave it to him without asking for anything in return. Zuckerman returns to his hotel and within 15 minutes the authorities confiscate the manuscript. They put him in a black limo. Novak, the Minister of Culture and a successful writer, tells Zuckerman that Novak's father, who honors each occupying regime, is a true hero. Zuckerman is dropped off at the airport without the manuscript. He boards a flight to Geneva, Switzerland to connect to New York. At passport control, the agent says Czechoslovakia is honored that Zuckerman visited, but now he must go back to America.



# Pages 3-11

## Pages 3-11 Summary

In *The Prague Orgy* by Philip Roth, Nathan Zuckerman is a Jewish American novelist and the protagonist and narrator. He goes on a quest in Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1976 to retrieve the unpublished manuscript of a great Yiddish/Czech writer. During his time in Prague, he encounters eccentric writers and artists who are obsessed with sex and the fact they are being spied on by the Czech police. He explores the meaning of Judaism and literature on his journey.

The novel opens in a hotel room on January 11, 1976 in New York City. Nathan Zuckerman, an American novelist, meets Zdenek Sisovsky, a Czech writer whose writing is banned in Czechoslovakia. Sisovsky flatters Zuckerman, saying he is a great American writer. He refuses to tell Zuckerman why his book is banned, but Zuckerman presses. Sisovsky explains his satirical book is banned because the Russians chose to ban it. He also explains that if he stayed in Czechoslovakia, the authorities would not let him write or speak in public. Writers and intellectuals become persecuted in Czechoslovakia because Czechoslovakia accepts the Soviet occupation. Sisovsky says he is in doubt. He can be Czech in Czechoslovakia, but not a writer. However, in the US, he is only a writer. He introduces his mistress, Eva Kalinova, saying she is full of hate, but was a famous Chekhovian actress in Prague. She cannot act here because she does not speak perfect English.

## Pages 3-11 Analysis

The discussion of Sisovsky's doubt is social commentary on the Soviet occupation of Czechoslovakia and the Communist regime in general. As the Soviets occupy the country, many citizens lose various freedoms. To Sisovsky the worst loss is the loss of the freedom of speech. He chooses to leave Prague because he does not have this freedom there. Yet this is problematic. Though he is free in the US, he does not have an identity as a Czech person. He does not have his native language or culture in the US. This is also social commentary on how when someone moves to the US, he loses a part of who he is. In the US, the person is identified by his job, not by the things that matter.



# Pages 12-17

## Pages 12-17 Summary

Sisovsky tells Zuckerman that Jewish demons pursue Eva. In Prague, Eva is married to a beloved Czech actor. However, Eva falls in love with Mr. Polak, a Zionist agent, and leaves her husband. The Czech people hate her for being with a Jew. Eva begs Sisovsky to stop telling the story, but he continues. Then the Czech Vice-Minister of Culture accuses her and her family of being Jews because she plays Jews, such as Anne Frank, on stage. Eva shouts for Sisovsky to stop and starts to cry. The authorities fire the Vice-Minister for the way he interrogated Eva. Eva says she is weak because she surrendered to these bullies. Sisovsky says she is with another Jew now and this ruins her. She leaves furious and crying. Sisovsky explains to Zuckerman she is sick and tired of hearing Sisovsky tell this story.

## Pages 12-17 Analysis

This story of Eva leaving her husband for a Jewish man foreshadows the narrator's self-discovery of his Jewish roots. As the book begins, the reader knows Zuckerman is Jewish due to his name and because Sisovsky says so. However, Zuckerman does not comment on his Judaism, because perhaps, he is not ready to. At this point in the novel, Zuckerman listens closely to the anti-Semitic behavior in Eva's story. Right now he is merely an observer within Judaism, but later on, he will be a participant.

Exploring one's Jewish identity is a popular theme throughout Philip Roth's novels. Growing up as a Jew himself in a time when Jews were persecuted, Roth explores the idea of what it is to be Jewish in many of his books such as *American Pastoral* and *The Plot Against America*. The Jewish identity, whether strong or weak, shapes the identity of his Jewish characters, and Zuckerman is no exception.



## Pages 18-23

### Pages 18-23 Summary

Sisovsky explains Eva cannot return to Prague because she cannot act there. She is better off in New York selling dresses. He says the Czech authorities let them both go because they wanted to leave.

Sisovsky's father was a Jew, but he looks like his mother, who is not a Jew. Sisovsky's father writes hundreds of stories in Yiddish about Jews. He dies in 1941. Sisovsky tells the story of his father. During World War II, a Gestapo officer favors Sisovsky's father because he is a chess champion. Every night the officer comes to his father's house and they play chess. The Gestapo do not bother the family. In another town, another Gestapo officer has a Jewish dentist who fixes his teeth. The dentist lives in peace as well. One night, the officers get into a drunken fight. The father's Gestapo officer shoots and kills the dentist. In turn, the dentist's Gestapo officer shoots and kills Sisovsky's father.

The father writes in Yiddish because he is Jewish first. Only a Czech writes in Czech. The father writes a story called "Mother Tongue." It is about a Jewish boy who speaks textbook German, flavorless Czech and simple Yiddish. Sisovsky says his father belongs to nothing, even worse than the great Czech writer's Franz Kafka's homelessness.

Sisovsky says he is related to Zuckerman and that is why he wrote to Zuckerman. He says his father would have never been published in Czechoslovakia because of his Jewish stories. He was an amazing writer. His last ten stories are about the Nazis and the Jews, and the chess playing Gestapo officer. Sisovsky explains that his wife in Prague has possession of the stories and will not give them to his mother. She will not destroy them because she is a writer too. She is also known for her vagina and drinking. Her name is Olga. Sisovsky says she will fall in love with Zuckerman and she will give him the stories.

### Pages 18-23 Analysis

Sisovsky parallels his father's not belonging to that of Franz Kafka. Kafka, a legendary Czech writer who writes *The Metamorphosis* and *The Trial*, is well-known for being a foreigner in Prague. He moves to numerous locations all over the city, and he is a German-speaking Jew who lives in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, or the present day Czech Republic. This Kafka reference symbolizes how a Jew is never at home in his own country. Like Kafka, neither Sisovsky nor his father are welcome in Prague, and neither is any other Jew. Instead, Jews continue to wander, without a homeland, and when they settle, they are still considered outsiders.

The idea of the wandering Jew alludes to Biblical times when Jews wandered through the desert in search of their homeland of Israel. This concept of wandering serves as a symbol for Jews for being an unsettled or unwanted culture. Jews wandered for years, and according to Sisovsky, they still wander, even in the US.



# Pages 24-31

## Pages 24-31 Summary

It is February 4, 1976 in Prague, Czechoslovakia. Zuckerman is in Prague. He goes to Klenek's. It is a residence of the filmmaker Klenek, who cannot work in Czechoslovakia, but the government allows him to live there so they can tax his earnings. Zuckerman meets Bolotka. Bolotka says Klenek's is used for orgy parties and that the house is bugged so the government can spy on the parties. The best orgies are in Prague. Fifteen year-old girls attend the orgies. No drugs allowed, but whiskey and all types of sex are fine.

They pass a Jewish cemetery and finally arrive at Klenek's. Zuckerman sees all types of people there, but not fifteen year-old girls. Bolotka explain who is there. Mr. Vodicka is a great writer who is scared of everything, especially the government. Zuckerman meets Olga, Sisovsky's wife. Bolotka says Olga writes love stories and Czech citizens adore them. She wrote a bestseller called *Touha*, or translated as *Longing*. Olga says she is frightened of everything. Mr. Vodicka asks Olga to show her vagina to a young, gay boy. Olga says Zuckerman wrote a book about having sex, yet he is afraid to have sex with her.

## Pages 24-31 Analysis

Klenek's represents the fringe society of artists in a Communist country. They are the dissidents and troublemakers, according to the government. They are watched and spied on because their ideas are dangerous to society. The Prague Orgy or orgy parties that occur at Klenek's symbolize the freedom of artistic expression that is suppressed in a Communist or occupied society. The orgy is not only about sexual freedom, but it is about the freedom to express oneself amongst the population. The freedom to have sex is one of the few freedoms the artists have left in Czechoslovakia, so to have orgies is to truly be free.

The idea of the government planting bugging devices in Klenek's introduces not only the notion of spying, but also of voyeurism. The government hears the orgies and enjoys listening to them. Thus, the government spies on freedom and enjoys it. This idea symbolizes the hypocrisy of enjoying freedom, but yet when one is close to freedom, it must be stopped. In a true Communist society as described by Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin, the state eventually falls away and everyone is equal and free. Yet, in reality, this is impossible in Communism. The reality of Communism is people must resort to orgies to express the only type of freedom left to them.





## Pages 32-39

### Pages 32-39 Summary

Olga agrees to show her vagina to the young, gay boy, but she must see his genitals first. He shows her and she says the government videotapes her. This photo of her will be put on television. Bolotka tells Zuckerman there are only microphones at Klenek's, not cameras. Bolotka says Olga's lover is now in an insane asylum and loves it because he can write poetry all day long. Zuckerman asks how can they all live in such chaotic country? Bolotka answers adaptability.

In the bathroom, Olga shows her vagina to the boy and Mr. Vodicka. The boy screams in horror and Mr. Vodicka is curious. Mr. Vodicka and the boy stay in the bathroom. Zuckerman tries to leave, since he is meeting two writers at a bar, which is a cover for why he is really in Prague. Olga begs him to stay and have sex with her. She says she will be interrogated by the authorities for hours about him, but will not get to sleep with him. Bolotka says if the authorities question him about Zuckerman, he will say Zuckerman visits to sleep with fifteen year-old girls. Olga says Zuckerman should marry her and take her to America. Bolotka says she would kill herself in America. Olga responds she will steal a Russian tank and shoot herself tonight.

### Pages 32-39 Analysis

Mr. Vodicka and the young, gay boy are symbols of a hidden sexuality in Prague. In repressed societies, especially in Communist societies, homosexuality is not permitted. Thus, Mr. Vodicka represents the ultimate fringe of society. He is not only a writer and artist, but he is also gay. Even in the freedom of the orgies at Klenek's, Mr. Vodicka and the boy must remain in the bathroom to have sex. This shows that even as free as The Prague Orgy is, there are limitations such as homosexuality. In the realm of free sexual expression, not everything can be accepted and free.

Olga symbolizes the repressed, Eastern European woman of Communist times. She has no freedom in regard to her everyday life. The authorities watch her closely, yet she exaggerates their existence. At Klenek's there are only microphones, according to Bolotka. He is most likely correct, since it is 1976 in Prague. However, she says there are cameras. The paranoia overtakes her and she believes the authorities stalk her. Her mindset is of a person who lives in an occupied, Communist society for too long. She is the Eastern European woman who struggles to live everyday, and her mental health suffers because of it. Olga is a product of her direct environment, and she is a symbol for the result of Communism.



## Pages 39-44

### Pages 39-44 Summary

Zuckerman goes to Bolotka's apartment. Bolotka lives in squalor, but he says girls love to have sex with him here because it is exciting. Bolotka asks to try on Zuckerman's tweed suit to feel like a rich, American writer. He has a wife and children, but his wife hates him. The police threaten to throw him out of Prague and Czechoslovakia, but he refuses to leave because he has 16 girlfriends.

Bolotka tells Zuckerman the story of his life while he tries on his suit. Bolotka is nineteen and enters university to become a lawyer. He does not like law and wants to switch to Fine Arts. He arranges an interview with the school. The school takes out his record, which is huge. Bolotka says he does not understand how that is so because he is so young. The school tells him he cannot switch to Fine Arts because the citizens invested money in him as a lawyer. The university kicks him out. He is fine with this because he does not have to become a lawyer.

He has books and his childhood friend, Blecha. Blecha drunkenly admits one night that the authorities pay him to spy on Bolotka. Blecha is a terrible writer, so Bolotka suggests that he write his own reports. Blecha agrees and pays him half the money. Everything is fine. Blecha works on his dream of becoming a National Artist, while Bolotka writes his own reports. Yet he does such a good job that the authorities promote Blecha. Blecha is terrified. Bolotka teaches him to write plainly, and insults Blecha by asking him how he will become a National Artist in writing when he cannot even write a simple report. Blecha gets angry and says creative talent cannot flourish in such rigid writing.

Blecha is a National Artist now. Recently, he meets Bolotka in a bar and says he will help him with the authorities as long as he stops telling the above story. Bolotka tells Blecha he does not tell it, but people know just by reading his work.

### Pages 39-44 Analysis

The scene of Bolotka trying on Zuckerman's suit symbolizes a transfer of power. They are trading places or trading power positions for a while. As Bolotka tries on the suit, he has a long monologue about his plight in Prague. Without this transfer of power, Bolotka's story might seem unbelievable, but this shift gives him the upper hand. Bolotka is an authoritative voice in the novel as he explains to Zuckerman the realities of life in Prague.

Bolotka is a representation of what Zuckerman would be if he was a writer in Prague. He is poor, but loves to write. He earns nothing from his writing. Like Zuckerman, he has a cool, collected demeanor and supplies a witty answer for everything. He is the Czech version of Zuckerman. This is how Zuckerman would survive as a writer in a Communist country.



This transfer of power with the suit and Bolotka as a representation of Zuckerman foreshadows that Zuckerman may not get out of Czechoslovakia. He may end up here, like Bolotka, and be forced to give up his writing.

Blecha symbolizes the artistic integrity of Communism. He cannot write, but since he works for the authorities, he is crowned a National Artist. Bolotka tells him that everyone knows he cannot write. This is how Communism works. It is not how talented the person is, but how well connected to the state that determines his status.



## Pages 45-53

### Pages 45-53 Summary

It is February 5, 1976 in Prague. Zuckerman awakens to a phone call from Olga, who is in the hotel lobby. She comes to his room. She tells him prudence is not his strong point. He points to a bugged chandelier. Olga says loudly, so the authorities can hear, she wants to marry Zuckerman because she loves him, not for his money. She asks him to tell her all the reasons he loves her. He humors her and tells her he loves her sense of reality. She scribbles on a notepad for Zuckerman to speak louder, clearer and slower so the authorities can understand his English. He continues to humor her and says he loves her wit, beauty, flesh and when they make love.

They go to the lobby. The hotel desk clerk approaches Olga and asks for her identification. Olga makes a scene, accusing the clerk of assuming she is a prostitute. She tries to pay him off, but he wants the identification card. She tells him to call the authorities on her and that he will lose his job for harassing a woman. The clerk says Zuckerman has a note waiting for him. The note is from a Czech student named Oldrich Hrobeck, who says he wants to discuss American writing with Zuckerman. He asks to meet at the hotel.

Olga and Zuckerman sit down for breakfast in the hotel dining room. Olga demands to switch tables because she is sure this one is bugged. She tells Zuckerman she slept with someone else last night. She goes to the bathroom to vomit. Zuckerman follows, but Oldrich Hrobeck stops him. Oldrich tells Zuckerman he must leave Prague at once. Oldrich and his professor were questioned because of Zuckerman. The authorities believe Zuckerman is a spy who plots with Czech troublemakers against the Communist regime. Zuckerman replies he is an American citizen.

### Pages 45-53 Analysis

As the chaos continues, Olga's behavior is a motivation to stand up to the Communist regime, although she does so in an outlandish way. Threatening the desk clerk with losing his job is the only way she knows how to fight back in this Communist society. She has the option to remain silent, but she does not. Either her motivation is simply caused by fatigue or she uses this opportunity to take a stand.

As the novel continues, the reader sees these characters are not mentally stable. Zuckerman seems to be the only stable character. The lines continue to blur between truth and reality, especially the difference between who tells the truth and who does not. Bolotka, the authoritative voice of the novel, is no longer there. So from the Czech standpoint, the reader has no authority. Zuckerman's word is now the only truth.



# Pages 54-67

## Pages 54-67 Summary

Oldrich Hrobek gives Zuckerman examples of other Westerners who have been arrested even though they are innocent. Oldrich says the authorities want Zuckerman, but Zuckerman does not quite believe him. Oldrich tells him to meet him at the train station in five minutes and then leaves. Olga returns looking worse. Zuckerman wants to talk to her in private, but she refuses to look afraid and will not leave the breakfast table. She says he should smoke a cigar. This will show the authorities he is not afraid.

She gives an example of when the authorities lured her into an office building to have sex with her. The officers did not turn the lights on in the building because they were afraid. One officer said, "Everything is observed where the lights are on" (p. 56). They have breakfast and Zuckerman smokes a Cuban cigar. Zuckerman tells Olga he wants Sisovsky's father's stories. He tells her suddenly because he must leave the country. She is mad. She expresses her disgust for her husband and his mistress. Zuckerman says he is leaving Prague with the stories.

Olga says he should take pity on her, not on her husband, Sisovsky. She says the Gestapo officer shooting story is a lie. Sisovsky's father was killed in a bus accident. He hid in the bathroom of his Gentile friend during the war, and the friend brought the father cigarettes and whores. Zuckerman does not believe her. She calls him a sentimental and idiotic American Jew. Zuckerman asks what good the manuscript is unpublished. She replies that Sisovsky can live off his mistress, an actress that no one can hear in the theater.

Zuckerman goes to the train station, sits in the cafe and orders coffee. Oldrich is not there. He observes the workers and janitors, whom Bolotka says are writers and teachers. They are now the new menial class. For a second, Zuckerman imagines himself cleaning Penn Station. A young workman stares at him. Zuckerman leaves and the workman follows him.

Zuckerman hops on a trolley into the city. He thinks about being Jewish as a nine year-old. He would collect coins from his neighbors on behalf of the Jewish National Fund. He thinks of the Jews without a homeland. He feels the plight and struggle of Jews is to be honored and respected. He says storytelling is life for those in Prague. The stories are weapons against the Communist regime. Zuckerman's Jewish ancestors are from Poland.

He shakes the workman and meets Bolotka. He shows Bolotka Oldrich's note. Bolotka says not to worry; the authorities are only scaring Oldrich and his professor. The authorities are scared of Zuckerman, so they spy on Oldrich and the professor. Zuckerman worries about them. Bolotka says not to be sentimental. Everyone in the hotel, including the desk clerk, is a cop. Oldrich is fine. It is all routine. Zuckerman asks



Bolotka once again if he is in danger, and if Bolotka came to New York, Zuckerman would look after him, so he expects the same treatment. Bolotka says to ignore the note. He was once jailed for a ridiculous crime, but was released soon after. Bolotka says Zuckerman is free to do anything he wants in Prague. Bolotka will arrange it for him.

## Pages 54-67 Analysis

The characters seem to unravel in this section, including Zuckerman. This is the first time the reader sees Zuckerman lose his cool. Usually, he is a passive observer and supplies a witty answer for everything. However, he is now scared. Bolotka steps in again as the rational and authoritative voice—one that Zuckerman believes. At this point in the story, the reader is not sure of which way the story will go. Is Bolotka really telling the truth and Zuckerman is not in danger at all? Or is Zuckerman in immediate danger?

Zuckerman's trolley ride symbolizes his discovery of Judaism. Like the ride, he does not know where he is going or where he comes from, but by the end of the ride, he realizes that Judaism should be honored and that he is an Eastern European Jew. Therefore, Zuckerman symbolizes an evolved Jew, one who has escaped persecution and lives freely in America as a Jew. Like his ancestors, he now wanders through Prague, without an immediate homeland. Thus, his Jewish self-discovery comes about from this sense of feeling lost.



## Pages 67-73

### Pages 67-73 Summary

It is the afternoon. Zuckerman questions himself about why he is in Prague and why he has to secure the manuscript. He wonders if the manuscript is even that good and if retrieving it is worth the trouble. Olga and Zuckerman have a conversation. She says she wants to marry him. He wants the stories. He offers her \$10,000 for the stories. She says nothing is worth it. He says she does not care about literature. She says she loves literature, but not as much as keeping things from Sisovsky. Olga says Sisovsky will publish the stories under his own name, not his father's. Zuckerman says he can make sure that does not happen. He offers for her to marry one of his friends, but she wants to marry him.

Olga says Zuckerman wants to be a hero to the Jews—that is what he gets out of retrieving the stories. However, she will go to prison for smuggling a manuscript to the West. Zuckerman gets the idealism prize and she goes to jail. She gives Zuckerman the stories in a wrapped candy box. She says the hell with everything. She does not want money, to marry Zuckerman's friend or to sleep with Zuckerman. She does not even care if Sisovsky publishes the stories in his name. All she wants is the satisfaction of Zuckerman telling Sisovsky that she gave them to him for nothing and to tell Sisovsky's mistress too.

### Pages 67-73 Analysis

Olga remarks that "To be fucked is the only freedom left in this country" (p. 73). Thus, The Prague Orgy symbolizes freedom, since sexual acts are the only freedom left. However, she also speaks metaphorically here. It is not just a sexual freedom. However, "to be fucked" can also mean for someone else to deceive and hurt another person. Olga has the freedom to do this to her husband, Sisovsky, but chooses not to do so. Instead, she chooses the higher road, and completes her journey of self loathing. She can now move on now that she rids herself of Sisovsky, his mistress and the manuscript.



# Pages 74-86

## Pages 74-86 Summary

Zuckerman returns to the hotel. Within 15 minutes, two policemen confiscate the manuscript. The hotel desk clerk comes along too and says the policemen must search his belongings. Zuckerman refuses and demands to phone the American Embassy. Instead, he is told to pack his bags and board the next plane out of Czechoslovakia. He refuses again, but the hotel clerk warns him the policemen will use brutality to remove him. The clerk says the policemen will drive Zuckerman to the airport, but Zuckerman asks how is he sure they will not drive him to jail instead? The hotel clerk answers that he will have to trust them. Zuckerman thinks Olga had a change of heart and told the authorities on him, or the authorities called her.

In the back of a black limo, Zuckerman sits with a cop named Novak. Novak asks if he knows Betty MacDonald. Zuckerman's mind runs wild. He thinks Sisovsky tricked him too. Betty MacDonald wrote *The Egg and I*, an older American bestseller that is virtually unknown in 1976, but Novak thinks it is a masterpiece. Novak says there is no paranoia about writers in Czechoslovakia. He is a successful writer. The country loves their writers. He is the Minister of Culture. It is his job to make literature accessible and align the aims of literature with Communist values.

Novak says the writers that Zuckerman associated with in Prague are moral deviants, parasites and outcasts. They do not represent the ordinary Czech citizen. They will destroy Czechoslovakia if left to their own devices. Novak gives an example of Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, and Zuckerman thinks he is being shipped off to Russia. Zuckerman demands to be taken to the American Embassy, but Novak says he has committed crimes. Novak says the writers who make the Soviet regime mad are actually the enemies. His father, a simple machinist, is a hero. The father praises each occupying regime, but he does not praise the current reforming leader. In the end, his father says he is nothing but a dirty Jew. The father is a realist who understands his place and his country's place in society. He is the Czech hero.

Zuckerman goes through customs. He will fly out the country to Geneva, Switzerland and then fly to New York. Zuckerman says once he is over the fear, he grows angry at being thrown out of Czechoslovakia. He is mad because he only had begun to hear all the Czech writers' stories and he does not have the manuscript. There is yet another undiscovered Jewish writer.

He wonders if Novak's story about his father is yet another fabricated father story, such as Sisovsky's own story. He realizes that he has been toyed with by all these Czechs. They saw him coming a mile away.





Zuckerman hands his passport to the agent, who says Zuckerman is a Zionist agent, it was an honor for him to visit Czechoslovakia and now he must return to his little world of America.

## Pages 74-86 Analysis

Novak's story confirms that there are many unreliable characters in the story. The reader ends the novel not sure of who tells the truth and who does not. Novak's story is another convenient and sentimental father story. It demonstrates a point, but who knows if it is true? The reader begins to think that every Czech man has a version of this story of his father as a hero. In the end, Olga may be correct because Sisovsky's father story may not be true.

The only reliable narrator is Zuckerman. He observes and then participates and then grows fearful of his fate. He believes he is duped by all these people and that might be the case. However the interesting part is that no one wants money from him. Instead, they all want to tell their story, and Zuckerman, as a great storyteller, will pass on their stories to the West. Thus, *The Prague Orgy* is a compilation of all their stories, so they are successful in being heard. Though Zuckerman has not secured the manuscript, he comes back to America with stories to write, and he is successful after all.



# Characters

## Nathan Zuckerman

Nathan Zuckerman is the protagonist and narrator of the novel. He is an American novelist who travels to Prague, Czechoslovakia, which is under Soviet occupation, in 1976. Zuckerman travels to Prague to retrieve the manuscript of a great, now deceased Yiddish writer. The manuscript remains unpublished. He travels on behalf of the Yiddish author's son, Zdenek Sisovsky, who asks that Zuckerman goes to Prague to retrieve it.

Zuckerman is an American Jew and a famous novelist in the United States. The Czechs he meets in Prague treat him like a celebrity. He witnesses the insanity of the writers and artists he meets in Prague, since everyone is obsessed with sex and the idea of being watched by the police at all times. Zuckerman observes all these instances with casualness and he supplies the right, sarcastic answer for everything. His goal is to secure the manuscript and he is oblivious to everything else, even when Olga, Sisovsky's wife who has the manuscript, offers herself to him. He is not interested in sex and orgies, making others think he is a prude.

He is on the quest for great literature, although he does not know how great it is because the manuscript is in Yiddish. His drive is to secure this manuscript to be published in the US, so the voice of a lost, Eastern European Jew can be heard. By the end of his journey, he thinks of his Judaism and how important it is for Jews to be published. Only when Zuckerman thinks he is about to be arrested does he abandon his casual, sarcastic demeanor and show fear. Therefore, the character of Zuckerman goes on a self-journey to find himself as a Jew and a lover of great literature.

## Zdenek Sisovsky

Zdenek Sisovsky is a Czech writer whose writing is banned in Czechoslovakia by the government. He meets with Zuckerman in New York City in 1976. He is related to Zuckerman and writes him a letter. He admires Zuckerman's writing very much and would like for Zuckerman to help him. Sisovsky's father was a great Yiddish writer who wrote about Jews. He wants his father's writings, but cannot retrieve them from his wife Olga. He wants Zuckerman to travel to Prague and retrieve them on his behalf.

Sisovsky loves to tell stories, in particular his father's death story and a humiliating story about his mistress, Eva. Sisovsky has a cruel sense of humor because he tells Eva's story despite her being in tears and telling him to stop. He also uses a great deal of flattery to convince Zuckerman to go to Prague and secure his father's stories. Most importantly, Sisovsky is a fellow Jew and a fellow writer, thus he can relate to Zuckerman and talk on his level.

Sisovsky left Prague because he no longer had freedom of speech. He considers himself weak for leaving Prague without a fight, but he also does not think he is a



coward. In the US, he is not Czech because he does not have his native language and culture. In the US, he is only a writer. He speaks a high form of English to make up for his Eastern European heritage. The reader sees him as a kind of trickster or scammer, and the reader is not quite sure if Sisovsky tells the truth or lies.

## **Bolotka**

Bolotka is a tour guide of sorts for Zuckerman while at the orgy party at Klenek's. He provides Zuckerman with information about Klenek's and explains to him how the orgies happen. He shows Zuckerman around the party and finally introduces him to Olga, Sisovsky's wife and the woman who has the manuscript.

Bolotka lives in squalor in an old, decrepit apartment in Prague. However, he likes living there and will not leave. The authorities try to kick him out of Czechoslovakia because of his books, but he refuses to go. He likes living in his apartment because he has sixteen girlfriends who like to have sex in squalor. He has a wife and children, but his wife hates him. As a young adult, Bolotka studies to become a lawyer, but wants to switch to Fine Arts. The university kicks him out. Bolotka makes money writing spy reports about himself for his friend Blecha.

Bolotka tries on Zuckerman's suit to feel like a rich, American writer. He is a poor writer in Prague and is not interested in changing his situation with his family or living conditions any time soon. He is also an authoritative voice for both Zuckerman and the novel, since he seems to tell the truth of every situation.

Bolotka is the go-to guy for Zuckerman as the authorities follow him. Bolotka comforts Zuckerman, telling him the authorities cannot touch him. This last piece of advice to Zuckerman comforts him, but the reader is not sure if it is entirely true.

## **Olga Sisovsky**

Olga Sisovsky is a great writer in Prague. The Czech people adore her love stories. She writes a bestseller named *Touha* or *Longing*. *Touha* represents her life, since she is in longing for everything. She is Sisovsky's wife, but is most known for her stories, showing people her vagina and her drinking habit. She meets Zuckerman at Klenek's and begs him to sleep with her. She also has extreme paranoia about the authorities spying on her, and thinks there are cameras watching her at Klenek's when there are only microphones.

Olga continues to beg Zuckerman to have sex with her. This *touha* or longing is a constant theme in her life. She never seems to get what she wants. She was once very beautiful and so were her stories, and she had the best legs in Prague, but now she is old, bitter and angry. Her anger over her husband Sisovsky leaving her for another woman consumes her. She will not give him the stories because of this.



As the novel continues, Olga's mental stability wavers. She makes a scene in the hotel over showing her identification card. She constantly thinks everything is bugged, including the breakfast table in the hotel. Olga's rash personality leads to her biggest decision, which is to give the manuscript to Zuckerman. However, it may be her rash personality again that turns Zuckerman in to the authorities. As with Bolotka, she turns into an unreliable character. One does not know if she lies or tells the truth—that is up for the reader to decide.

## **Eva Kalinova**

Eva Kalinova is Sisovsky's mistress. She is a famous Chekhovian actress in Prague, but in the US, she is a dress seller. Eva leaves her Czech husband for a Jewish agent, and then for Sisovsky, another Jew. The Czech people shun her because she takes up with Jewish men.

## **Klenek**

Klenek is a film director who currently directs a film in France. He cannot direct in Czechoslovakia, but the government allows him to live in Prague so they can tax his earnings. His house in Prague, called Klenek's, is used for orgy parties and is bugged by the Czech police so they can spy on the parties.

## **Mr. Vodicka**

Mr. Vodicka is a great writer who is afraid of everything, especially the Czech government. At Klenek's, he asks Olga to show her vagina to a young, gay boy and then has sex with the boy in the bathroom.

## **Kouba**

Kouba is a Communist hero who is at Klenek's. He is stupid and thinks Communism is the best life for everyone.

## **The boy**

The boy is a young, gay boy who shows Olga his genitals. She in turn shows him her vagina. Mr. Vodicka and the boy go into the bathroom to have sex.



## **Blecha**

Blecha is Bolotka's friend from childhood. He spies on Bolotka, but is not a good enough writer to write the surveillance reports. Bolotka does it for him and then teaches Blecha how to write. Blecha is now a National Artist writer.

## **Oldrich Hrobek**

Oldrich Hrobek is a Czech student that leaves a note for Zuckerman at the hotel. He tells Zuckerman the authorities ask both he and his professor about Zuckerman. He warns Zuckerman to leave Czechoslovakia immediately or he will be arrested.

## **Hotel Clerk**

The hotel clerk demands Olga's identification card. He is actually a policeman planted in the hotel to spy on guests.

## **Novak**

Novak is the Minister of Culture and a successful writer in Czechoslovakia. He rides with Zuckerman to the airport and tells him another sentimental father story. He believes his father is a Czech hero because he honors the regime and that the Czech writers Zuckerman meets are artistic outcasts in society.



# Objects/Places

## Oxonian vowels

Oxonian vowels are a reference to education at Oxford University in England. To say someone speaks with Oxonian vowels is to say he speaks the highest and most educated form of English.

## Klenek's

Klenek's is a tiny, seventeenth century residence on Kampa Island, right off the Charles Bridge in Prague. The film director, Klenek, owns it. It is a place where orgies take place. Klenek's is bugged so the Czech police can spy on everyone who goes there.

## Charles Bridge

The Charles Bridge is the famous bridge in Prague. It stretches over the Vltava River. It is a popular tourist destination.

## Vltava

The Vltava is the river that runs through Prague.

## Kampa

Kampa is also known as Kampa Island. It is right off the Charles Bridge in Prague. Kampa is a quiet, lovely, residential area that is referred to as the "Venice of Prague."

## Touha

Touha is the Czech word for lust or passion for life. Touha is the name of Olga's bestselling novel. It translates to Longing in the book.

## Bugging device

A bugging device is an undercover surveillance mechanism used to spy on citizens. In Soviet times in Czechoslovakia, the Czech police planted bugging devices in citizens' private homes to listen in and spy on the population.



## Identity card

An identity card is a citizenship paper that citizens carry in the Soviet Union. It serves to identify the citizen correctly, much like a passport or driver's license. An identity card is used by citizens of the country. If the Soviet police stop citizens on the street, they take out their identity card to identify themselves.

## Loo

The loo is a British word for bathroom or toilet.

## Slivovitz-larded tea

Slivovitz-larded tea is a tea with slivovitz, or plum brandy. Slivovitz is commonly drunk in certain Eastern European nations such as the Czech Republic.



# Themes

## Exploration of Judaism

A major theme in this novel is the exploration of Judaism. This theme occurs frequently in Philip Roth's novels. The narrator is usually taken on a literal and emotional journey of some kind to figure out what being Jewish means to him. In *The Prague Orgy*, Zuckerman travels to Prague to figure out how being Jewish affects his life. On the trip, Zuckerman hears the stereotypes of Jews and hears the stories of how Jews struggle. He has not gone through this struggle in his life. However, in Prague, he does. Like the Jews in the Bible, he wanders aimlessly throughout Prague. He does not have a place to call home. He is on a quest to secure the manuscript, or stories written by a Jew.

As he journeys, he hears the stories of other Jews and how they suffer under this regime. This brings him closer to his ancestral roots of being an Eastern European Jew. He is caught up in the struggle in Prague, just like his ancestors. Riding the trolley, he feels a pull toward his Jewish self and mulls over his childhood as a Jew. As he rides the trolley, he does not know where he is going or where he comes from, both literally and metaphorically. By the end of the trolley ride, he feels he is immersed in the struggle. He feels Jews should be honored for their history and stories. He discovers his Jewish self, one who is now a complete Jew because he struggles as well and he continues to tell of the struggles in his writing.

## Homelessness

Homelessness is a theme of this novel. Zuckerman meets Sisovsky in a hotel in New York, not in his own home. As the book starts, Zuckerman is already homeless in his own city. Sisovsky is also homeless because he is a foreigner in America. He does not have his language and culture there, thus he feels without a home. When Zuckerman arrives in Prague, the other characters are homeless as well. For example, many Czech artists use Klenek's as a home of sorts, but it is a superficial home to supply sexual encounters and alcohol. It is also bugged and spied on by the authorities. One cannot feel totally "at home" in Klenek's because there is no security. Even the filmmaker Klenek is homeless because he is off shooting a movie in France. The reader never meets Klenek in his own home.

When Zuckerman goes to Bolotka's home, it is only a false one. His real home is with his wife and children, though his wife hates him. Bolotka settles for this second rate home of squalor and filth. Zuckerman, Sisovsky and Bolotka are all Jewish and do not have homes in this novel. This is an allusion to the wandering Jews in the Bible. The homeless Jew is not new in history. Instead, it carries on in Prague. Zuckerman only has a superficial home in Prague as he stays in a hotel. Even the hotel is not what it seems, since it is bugged and Zuckerman is spied on. Jews cannot be comfortable in a





home of any kind, no matter how superficial or stable, because someone is always watching them. A Gentile is always ready to persecute a homeless Jew.

## Sex is Freedom

As Zuckerman travels to Prague, he sees the plight of people living under the Communist regime. The people struggle in all areas of their lives except for one: sex. Klenek's serves as a place for sexual encounters and that is where the Czech artists, writers and others who gather there feel most free. The regime cannot forbid the act of sex, thus it is still a freedom. People openly engage in sexual orgies at Klenek's to feel happy and alive. However, the whole time the authorities spy on them with planted microphones. However, this does not bother them as long as they have their one last freedom. The authorities enjoy this freedom too because they listen in on the orgies and enjoy what they hear.

Olga uses sex as freedom; she constantly asks Zuckerman to sleep with her. Zuckerman is a way out of the country for her. If she lures him in and sleeps with him, she will marry and go to America with him. She will be free. Also, Olga shows everyone her vagina, which is a form of sexual expression. She cannot write what she wants or speak freely, but she can show her vagina, which is a freedom still allowed to her. She loves this freedom and takes advantage of it often. She also has sex with many people and in doing so she continually expresses her freedom. Sex is freedom in the Prague Orgy and not even the regime can deny this freedom.

# Style

## Point of View

The point of view of the novel is first person. This point of view is a very close first person of the protagonist Zuckerman. He is at first an observer, only reporting the things happening around him. Then as the book progresses, his point of view becomes one of an active participant. He answers back and interjects his opinion at times. He is a reliable narrator compared to the chaos going on around him, especially since the reader doubts what other characters say because their stories are too unreliable. Thus, this first person voice of Zuckerman proves to be authoritative and reliable.

The point of view wanders into Zuckerman's head from time to time. This usually occurs when he ponders over a difficulty, such as his exploration of Judaism or his fear of being arrested. A long inner monologue occurs on the trolley ride as he discovers his Judaism. The only part where the point of view changes is in pages 67 to 69. This section begins from a third person omniscient point of view and reads like background in a play or movie script. Then it switches back to Zuckerman's first person point of view. This whole section is in italics as well, giving a very close perspective on Zuckerman's doubt. Then the next few pages are in play or movie script form as Olga and Zuckerman have a question and answer session without exposition. To end the section, the italicized third person narration morphs into first person again. Roth changes points of view here as a device to really get inside Zuckerman's head. The point of view mixture is the closest the reader will get to Zuckerman's most private thoughts.

## Setting

The novel is set in New York City 1976 in the first small section when Zuckerman and Sisovsky meet. The rest of the book is set in Prague, Czechoslovakia in February 1976. Zuckerman moves between many places, but in Prague, he starts out at Klenek's. Klenek's is a house owned by a film director that is used for orgy parties. Klenek's is located in the lovely residential area of Kampa Island, right off the Charles Bridge in the central part of Prague. Klenek's seems like a normal house, yet the authorities plant microphones inside to spy on the party goers. Zuckerman then continues to Bolotka's apartment, which is a low class dwelling. Bolotka lives in a small apartment in squalor.

Zuckerman wakes up in his hotel, a nice place that is also bugged. The room has a chandelier, but there are otherwise no defining qualities. The dining room of the hotel seems like any other dining room. Zuckerman goes to the train station, which is old, but normal for Eastern Europe. Teachers and writers and others like them, clean the train station, which is abnormal for him as an American. As he travels to Bolotka's apartment by trolley, he has an inner monologue about Judaism, so the reader does not receive many details about this setting. Occasionally, there is a detail here and there—for example, a Jewish cemetery on the way to Klenek's and the old time trolley cars and



medieval streets of Prague. Roth does not focus on setting; instead, he only includes a few, sparse details that show up intermittently.

## Language and Meaning

The language of the novel is very informal. There is a lot of swearing, especially "fuck", which is used constantly throughout the novel by Olga. Roth constructs the sentences to show literary, but concise writing. The dialogue is straightforward and informal. It is only when Zuckerman has his reverie about Judaism on the trolley does the language become more literary and formal. Throughout the novel, the language is not without rules as the author writes in a grammatically perfect way. The sentences follow grammar rules and complex rules of literature. It is a literary novella. The characters do not speak in Czech, although there are a few lines of German when Novak and Zuckerman speak.

The language overall is tight and well-constructed. Descriptions are sparse. Roth concentrates on using the language to tell the stories of the people. He uses language that everyone can understand so the stories are not lost in translation. Anyone with a decent command of English can understand the characters' stories and decipher meaning from them. When Zuckerman has his reverie in the trolley and the writing becomes formal and literary, Roth uses this to convey complex thoughts. The reader must pay attention and dissect each sentence to understand what Zuckerman is thinking. The meaning comes from understanding what Roth is trying to saying to his reader. Roth also uses the language of Olga in particular to convey a sense of panic and rage. She is a hysterical woman who swears. It is the same with Eva Kalinova. Through language, they are both enraged women who suffer from their plight in Prague and cannot handle their respective lives. Thus, the meaning one can extract is that women are hysterical, unreliable figures in Roth's novel.

## Structure

This novel is comprised of no distinct sections or chapters. Instead, it only has a few breaks that signal a major change of time. The three main sections that signify a time change are New York, January 11, 1976; Prague, February 4, 1976; and Prague, February 5, 1976. Therefore, the novel jumps from New York to Prague immediately. Roth uses the New York section to explain why Zuckerman travels to Prague and then immediately puts the reader in the action in Prague. The book is 85 pages long, more of a novella than a full novel. There is an occasional break, or extra space or two, between lines to signify a change in place, but it is rare.

The plot of the novel is simple and without subplots. It has a linear time line. The novel is about Zuckerman's quest to retrieve the manuscript in Prague. He meets various Czech characters, who guide him through Prague until he finally receives the manuscript from Olga, but the authorities take it away. Then he leaves Prague.



The novel's pace is normal and moves moderately. It is neither fast-paced nor slow. It is the right speed for a modern day reader. It is a moderate read with some difficult vocabulary interspersed throughout the story. There is swearing. The plot engrosses the reader in this world of sex, Communist Prague and eccentric writers and artists. The story moves in linear fashion with Zuckerman only having one memory of his childhood. The Czech characters tell the back story through dialogue. The novel is entertaining.



## Quotes

"You Americans think in terms of one year or two; Russians think in centuries" (p. 8).

"The truth is that as time goes by, the population slowly accepts its fate" (p. 8).

"I am not exaggerating his excellence. He was a deep and wonderful writer" (p. 22).

"Since the Russians, the best orgies in Europe are in Czechoslovakia" (p. 25).

"If it weren't for sentiment, Zuckerman, one person would not pass another person a glass of water" (p. 32).

"The whole country is drunk" (p. 34).

"Prudence isn't your strong point" (p. 46).

"I know these Czech police—blow a little smoke in their faces and you'll see how brave they are" (p. 56).

"Everything is observed where the lights are on" (p. 56).

"Am I getting drastically paranoid or am I getting the idea?" p. 60).

"In Prague, stories aren't simply stories; it's what they have instead of life" (p. 64).

"In this nation of narrators I'd only just begun hearing all their stories; I'd only just begun to sense myself shedding my story, as wordlessly as possible snaking away from the narrative encasing me" (pp. 83-4).



## Topics for Discussion

Discuss Judaism. How does the novel portray Jews? Are they likeable or dislikable characters? What are the strengths and weaknesses of these Jewish characters?

Discuss persecution. In the novel, Jews are persecuted. Are Jews still persecuted today in any part of the world? How? Are Jews still persecuted in America today, or are they accepted members of society?

The Communist regime stifles the Czech people. What are the values of Communism? Do you think Communism can work if executed correctly, or is it always a doomed form of government? What modern day countries still employ Communism and how do they fare as a society?

If you were a Czech artist in Prague in the 1970s, how would you react to the Soviet occupation? Would you try and flee the country or would you stay and fight for what you believe in? As a writer, could you write what the regime wanted or would you try to publish your own writing?

How would you define freedom? In Eastern Europe in the 1970s, freedom meant something very different than to those living in America today. How would you define freedom in regard to the characters in *The Prague Orgy*? Are they free in any way beside sexual freedom? How?

Who are the heroes of *The Prague Orgy* and why? Sisovsky and Novak describe their fathers as heroes, but are they? Do you think Zuckerman is a hero in any way? How about Olga, is she a heroine in her own right?

Do you think Zuckerman and Roth have told the stories of Prague people efficiently? Do you receive a sense of their plight from the novel? Which character do you think has the saddest story and why? Which character is the most hopeful and why?