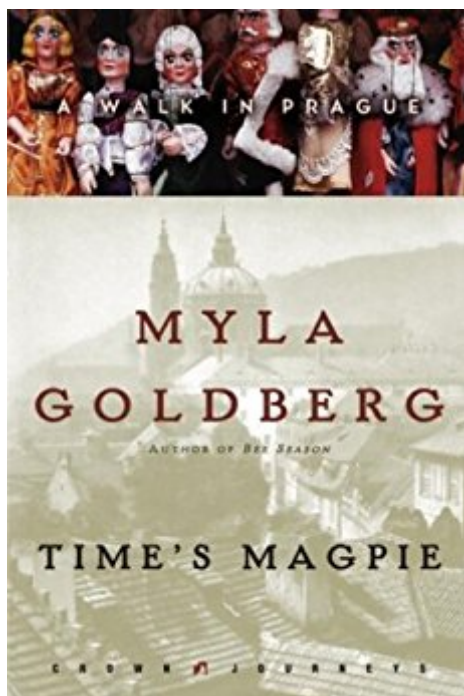


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Time's Magpie: A Walk In Prague (Crown Journeys)



Synopsis

Sometimes a city can be like a bird. Just as the magpie is an inveterate collector, hoarding beautiful eclectic bits to line its nest, so Prague retains fragments from bygone regimes and centuries past to create a city of juxtaposition that is alternately exquisite and bizarre. Prague's personality is expressed as much by its obvious beauty as by its overlooked details. This unforgettable place is brought to life by acclaimed author Myla Goldberg, a former Prague expat, whose first novel, *Bee Season*, captivated so many with its unique voice and exhilarating prose. Myla Goldberg lived in Prague in 1993, just as the process of Westernization was getting under way, the city straddling a past it wished to shed and a future it was eager to embrace. In 2003, she returned to see what the pursuit of capitalism had wrought and to observe the integral ways in which Prague's character had endured. In *Time's Magpie*, Goldberg explores a city where centuries-old buildings have become receptacles for Western values and a generation defined by the Communist regime coexists with a generation for whom Communism is a rapidly fading memory. Wander through the narrow alleyways and cobblestone streets to places most tourists never see—to a neighborhood eerily transformed by the devastating flood of 2002; to an anachronistic amusement park that is home to a discomfiting array of Technicolor confections; and to the cabinets of curiosity in the Strahov Monastery, where hidden among deceptively modest displays of butterfly specimens and ladies' fans are creatures that defy the laws of taxidermy. This imaginative, individualistic journey will show you the odd and unique corners of a city often seeking to erase what its very stones will not allow it to forget. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

I was in Prague many times between 1995 and 2004. This book really told it like it was. I recognized so much and it brought back many memories for me.

A fascinating peeling back the layers of culture and history, a bit off the well beaten tourist path, in one of the world's great cities.

Good for a plane ride. Slightly boring.

MY friend loves Myla Goldberg, as do I. I bought this book for her, it came in a timely manner. I believe she said she enjoyed this book. Maybe one day I'll get around to reading it as well.

This is not meant as a travel guide like "Prague Walks" or a collection of essays about the city like Paul Wilson's slim anthology. Like John Banville's recent "Prague Pictures," it offers one author's own perspective. If you have not been to Prague, the cityscape conjured up here will be elusively imagined as you read Goldberg's energetic digressions. Having lived there a decade ago, when the formerly cheap cost-of-living lured Westerners, she brings no autobiographical recollections but a sense of the savvier long-term resident. She avoids many of the familiar tourist sites such as the Jewish quarter, Hradcany and the Castle, and the Charles Bridge. She favors, as this series stresses, the off-beat locales. It's a quick verbal repast, edible in one or two sittings. Like dumplings and alcohol (as she notes after three decades of this diet the sudden, irreversible transition from ruddy youth to slumped middle-agers among its citizens), it fills you up for the moment but leaves you wanting more nutritious content soon after. She notices a lot more graffiti than I did, but offers insights about the pedestals and skateboarders that remain after the statues topple. (I'm surprised she did not visit the park where the statues loll on display for tourists.) Goldberg marvels too much at the system whereby the Metro's riders go on the honor system amidst plainclothes

fare-checkers--maybe as a Brooklynite she finds this unbelievable? She helpfully lets you know that both the Strahov and Clementinum libraries rope off or keep at a distance from casual visitors much of what beckons enticingly from brochures. The chapter on the bell-ringing at noon sags into archness, however, and that on the nondescript suburb of New Karlin post-flood also adds little to the volume. That on the Strahov's curious cabinets of wonder, by its title, echoes Laurence Wechsler on LA's Museum of Jurassic Technology. It tells you pretty much all you need to know about this once-monastic library, and what in fact can (and mostly cannot) be seen by visitors. Apparently, as with many sights seen through Goldberg's point-of-view, they are better envisioned by armchair travellers rather than in person! Anti-war protests against the second Iraqi invasion seem so recent that it's a bit of a jolt to find a couple of protests by American ex-pats and the Euro-left already committed to bound pages. Goldberg, with her basic command of Czech, uncovers some of the ironies and miscommunications as the Yanks earnestly try to convince the Czechs about their common opposition in a city so marked by popular protests in past decades. (A small mistake on pg. 82: she gives 1944 as the date for a four-day savagely fought uprising against the Nazis when in fact it was just before liberation in early May 1945.) Her chapter on falling into the clutches of the police for a pedestrian infraction is by far the best part of the book. The theatrical nature of the Czech character enacted in public, aided or weakened by Goldberg's limited skill in the cops' own language, only adds to the confrontation and its complications. Here, she's excellent at casting herself in an impromptu role! Then, brief excursions to Karel Capek's grave at Vysehrad and Kafka's at the New Jewish Cemetery (about the only mention of this topic in these pages) add poignancy but appear anticlimactic after the previous chapter, which should've ended the collection. The final chapters, one on the parks along the shore north of the city, another on pubs and clubs and drunks, offer little noteworthy outside of the proclivity for Czechs either to have amazing bladder control (especially considering the bargain price for superb beer) or a tendency to avoid the old lady manning the jakes. This observation dovetails into her earlier related response to fearsome matrons guarding Strahovian artifacts which could have been models for Lewis Carroll's bestiary : "Officiousness is one pre-glasnost keepsake Prague is loath to disown--it is one of the few pleasures working-class Czechs can still afford." (71) All in all, a nervous reverie for those who have visited or have no intention of visiting the city. But not for those who have yet to travel there. Best to check out standard guides, talk to veteran itinerants, and read "Prague Walks" and Ivan Klima's essays collected as "The Spirit of Prague." Goldberg, like her book-jacket picture reveals as its contents affirm, remains too showy an interpreter--she dresses in black, but the loudly-striped leggings give her away instead of camouflaging her presence.

Myla Goldberg's trip through Prague is brief, but enjoyable. Her writing style is amusing, if slightly self-conscious, but it is fluid and evocative. I enjoyed it. As someone who has visited Prague eight times in the last eleven years, I found her observations accurate, honest, and interesting. She sees both the bad and the good of Prague. She mentions a few places I will definitely want to take in on my next visit. Her initial image of Prague as magpie is apt, though she doesn't really take it very far. In fact, my one disappointment is that the book is so short... and there are so, so, so many more things that could have been included. In fact the book feels more like a series of magazine articles than a real book. In fact the final chapter seems to just stop, rather than sum up the experience she has so beautifully described. Still, even if it is brief, it is a joy to read. I will recommend this book to friends.

The first time I visited Prague was in November 1989. I planned the visit prior to the disturbances, but I was swept up in the Velvet Revolution. Although not completely bloodless, it showed how far the Communist regime had been swept aside. I walked the streets described in this book. It certainly is a great city, and I found some of the stories of this book relevant to my own personal experience. This is an OK read about a timeless city. There is much history to describe in this ancient town. The book is an OK read. I learned a little of some areas I missed visiting. It is a short book, so one does not have to invest in a lot of time reading through it.

If you haven't been to Prague, don't buy this book as your guide book. You will be disappointed. But I don't think the purpose of the book is to introduce the city to tourists. But if you've visited the city before and explored, it really brings back memories. It actually made me want to go back and revisit the places the author wrote about. Her writing style isn't exactly my favorite, but it was a good read. If there was a 1 to 10 stars scale, I would give this book 7 stars.

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