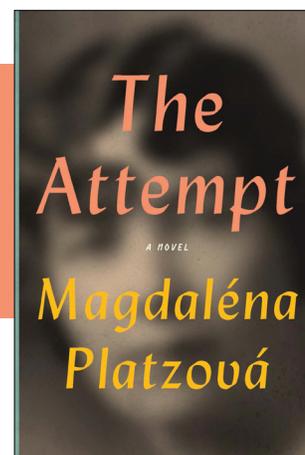




The Attempt

A novel by Magdaléna Platzová,
translated from the Czech by Alex Zucker

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“*The Attempt* is historical fiction at its best. Through its narrator’s archival approach to his material, the book explores the intimate lives of a pair of fervent idealists, as well as a robber baron and his family. The result is a vivid, poignant narrative about political upheaval, both in the past and the present.” —**Siri Hustvedt**, author of *The Blazing World*

“In her resonant and lucid tale, elegantly translated by Alex Zucker, Platzová weaves together the story of her hero’s search and an imaginary reconstruction of the passionate history that haunts him, and suggests the enduring power of ideals even after they have been shattered.” —**Caleb Crain**, author of *Necessary Errors*

INTRODUCTION

When a Czech historian becomes convinced he’s the illegitimate great-grandson of an infamous anarchist who attempted an assassination while living in the United States, he travels to New York to investigate. Arriving in Manhattan during the height of the Occupy Wall Street movement, his research takes him further back into the past—from the Pittsburgh home of a nineteenth-century US industrialist to 1920s Europe, where a celebrated anarchist couple is on the run from the law.

Based on the lives of Alexander Berkman and Emma Goldman, *The Attempt* is a novel about the legacy of radical politics and relationships—one that traverses centuries and continents to deliver a moving, powerful story of personal and political transformation.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

“There is no way of life that accords with our conscience,” writes one of my characters, Josef, just before he takes his own life. *The Attempt* is my attempt to refute this desperate statement. It is a quest for hope. There are many contradictory ideas and emotions in my novel and there are passions too, but in the end they always bring us to the same questions: What is important in life? Is there a way to live well without harming other human beings and nature?

I began with two lines of inquiry. One was about the life and family of the Pittsburgh industrialist Henry C. Frick (John C. Kolman in my book), whose collection of art we can admire in New York. The second line of writing circled around Alexander Berkman (Andrei B.)—the young anarchist who, in reaction to the Homestead Steel Strike suppression in 1892, attempted to assassinate Henry C. Frick. Berkman was a close friend of Emma Goldman (Louise G.) and she too found a place in my book.

To follow the path of my heroes, the story had to move from America in 1919—the year of Berkman and Goldman’s expulsion (recently described from the other side in Clint Eastwood’s movie about Hoover, *J Edgar*)—to revolutionary Russia, then Berlin and southern France. It was an exciting journey and it allowed me to piece together a complex and lively picture of history up to Hitler’s arrival and the Spanish Civil War.

My contemporary, literary alter ego in *The Attempt* is the Czech historian Jan Schwarzer, who suspects he may be the great-grandson of Andrei B. Besides investigating the past, he lives his own self-discovery in New York, which, in the end, takes him to Zuccotti Park, where his friends have become part of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

I wrote *The Attempt* in New York City and could not have conceived it anywhere else. I started to write it in 2009. When the Occupy Wall Street Movement happened, all the bits of the story I had begun in 2009 made sense. Here was the real and living





continuity I was looking for, a clear line from people like Berkman and Goldman to the present day. In this particular moment, when American society is becoming increasingly polarized between two opposite, even contradictory visions, it seems more important than ever to understand the past as we imagine the possibilities for our shared human society.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

1. *The Attempt* revolves around a real event: the attempted assassination of Pittsburgh industrialist Henry Clay Frick, in 1892, committed by a young anarchist. Did the novel reveal something new to you about this period in American history?
2. The central character of the novel, Andrei B., is a sensitive, compassionate man, yet at the same time he is a would-be assassin who thinks that in certain, very specific circumstances, violence, even taking a person's life, may be justified. Is his argument convincing? How do you reconcile his nature with his actions?
3. The character John C. Kolman is a merciless industrialist and businessman who tries to compensate for his wrongdoing by collecting art and donating to charity. Can he be redeemed through art and philanthropy? What does his relationship with his daughter Eleanor reveal about his character?
4. The character Louise G. wonders about the greed she encounters in American society. To her, average people seem like bottomless holes, who never have enough of anything. What is the effect of greed on society in this novel? How does it motivate the characters?
5. Much of the second half of *The Attempt* (after the anarchists are expelled from the United States) involves state bureaucracy and the relationship between the state, its citizens, and asylum seekers. How do the characters experience exile and the struggle to find a place that will accept them? What is the novel's message about the psychological effects of oppression and being unwanted in a country? In what ways do even democratic societies wrestle to be open and "free"?
6. What contrasts does *The Attempt* draw between American society (its values and politics) and that of Russia and Europe? Does knowing that Magdaléna Platzová, an Eastern European author, wrote this novel while living in New York, provide any additional perspective?
7. One of the themes of world anarchism prior to World War I that received the most attention was the proclamation of "free love." How do the characters in the novel experience "free love" in their lives? Are ideals like "free love" still valid today?
8. On page 67, an expert on the anarchy movement is quoted as saying, "Every good person deep down is an anarchist." What does this mean in context? Did the novel change your image of anarchists and the anarchy movement?
9. The novel both begins and ends with the narrator visiting the site of the Occupy Wall Street movement. What were the strengths, weaknesses, and legacy of the Occupy protests? Were they similar to earlier movements, as described in *The Attempt*?
10. *The Attempt* oscillates between the large and the personal, the societal and the intimate. Do you think change has to happen on a national or societal level to matter? Or is individual change just as important over the long term?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Magdaléna Platzová is the author of six books, including two novels published in English: *Aaron's Leap*, a Lidové Noviny Book of the Year Award finalist, and *The Attempt*, a Czech Book Award finalist. Her fiction has also appeared in *A Public Space* and *Words Without Borders*. Platzová grew up in the Czech Republic, studied in Washington, DC, and England, received her MA in Philosophy at Charles University in Prague, and has taught at New York University's Gallatin School. She is now a freelance journalist based in Lyon, France.

GO BEHIND THE SCENES

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