Necessary Errors by Caleb Crain (Penguin)

Is it possible to write a novel about a group of intelligent and likeable adults behaving rationally? Or rather, is it possible to keep a reader's interest with such an unpromising cast? After all, most plots are generated by the foibles and failures of the protagonists, their pride and prejudice, their atonement for their wrongdoings, their absolution from their sins, the disgrace they land themselves in through their actions –in short, stuffing up would seem to be the stuff of fiction.

To judge by its title, *Necessary Errors* is no exception to this tendency. And yet, I have seldom read a novel in which the characters are so free of major flaws, and their relationships so civilised and affectionate. Errors there are, yes, but necessary, as the title states, to the business of maturing. (The title is derived from WH Auden's poem, "1929", in which he talks of choice – any choice – as "a necessary error".)

The characters are almost without exception young adults, probably in their early twenties, and few of them have settled into a career. Most of them, including the main character, the young American Jacob Putnam, are teaching at a language school in Prague; few of them know how long they'll stay or where they'll be moving on to. They find their most permanent attachment in each other: not just those who fall in love, but also those who value each other's friendship.

This is, then, a novel of transition—also in the sense that it is set in the Prague of 1990, that is, just as this city was emerging tentatively from Communist rule into the pleasures and perils of capitalism.

Jacob, too, is tentatively emerging – from the closet – and exploring his newly-embraced gay identity. Errors are necessarily made, yes, but in fact he is remarkably fortunate in the two young Czech men he has relationships with in the course of the novel – even though one turns out to be a darker horse than he at first appears.

The sexual encounters, like most encounters in this well-behaved novel, are low-key but satisfying. Especially Milo, the second of Jacob's lovers, who deals with admirable tact and maturity with Jacob's occasional petulance and

with the knowledge that Jacob, like the other ex-pats, will eventually leave Prague for his "real" life, is an engagingly erotic presence.

But if sex provides Jacob's most absorbing exploration in the novel, the abiding theme is friendship. The young people are consistently referred to, without any ironical undercutting, as "the friends". They delight in each other's company, spend their evenings together in whatever new pub a member of the circle has discovered, and are as much taken with each other as with the beautiful city they are discovering:

"Their time together was wonderfully insular: it sometimes felt to Jacob as if the world beyond their table, beyond the ring of his friends, did not exist. … It sometimes felt as if … they were all falling in love with one another, as a group."

The knowledge that this interlude cannot last, that they are fated all to go their separate ways again, serves both to intensify the pleasure and to touch it with sadness. In Jacob's case, his pleasure in his new friends is complicated by the arrival of an old friend from college, Carl, one of the straight men he had been in love with while adjusting to his own sexual identity. Like the rest of the group, Jacob delights in Carl's presence, and yet, that presence is to prove disruptive of the harmony of the group, as he and the beautiful Melinda fall in love with each other – another one of the book's necessary errors, perhaps.

The novel is narrated in the third person, but only rarely with the kind of authorial omniscience that traditionally marks realist narrative. For the most part, the narrative is filtered through the thoughts and feelings of Jacob; his "quest" as he thinks of it, thus forms a central thread of the book. That quest, which he formulates as "trying to come close to the revolution" remains, in truth, somewhat abstract, and I suspect that it is unclear to Jacob, too: he feels that, like the city of Prague, he is in a state of transition, but he is not sure to what or where.

The narrator comments about this quest that "he wouldn't have understood that it took the shape of a story he wanted to live out… Without knowing it, he was looking for people who were heroic, so he could join them".

Jacob, in fact, frequently thinks of his experiences as *story*, for instance his failed first relationship:

"According to one way that he found of looking at it, he had tried to tell a story about himself and a lover, and it hadn't ended well, but rather than feel it as a story with an unhappy ending, he preferred to think he had made an error in the telling."

Jacob's concern with story may stem from his belief that he is a writer, even though he has produced very little actual writing, struggling as he does with the problematic relation of story to life and vice versa. Indeed, on the assumption that Jacob in this respect resembles his author, it took him very long to resolve that quandary: this is Caleb Crain's debut novel, at the relatively advanced age of forty-something. It is one of the postmodern ironies of this novel that it might well be the story its main character was trying to tell twenty-five years ago.

Like his character, Crain spent the year 1990-91 in Prague, and the substance of the novel is the minutiae of daily life in Prague: not just the interactions between the friends, but the business of getting around on the endearingly rattletrap tram system, of finding a shop that sells potatoes or – miraculously! – corn flakes, of contending with a landlord who regards the telephone as a luxury to be very sparingly rationed. The Prague streets and squares and bridges are described with a meticulousness that seems an end in itself, as if Crain is trying to recapture the gritty texture and slightly melancholy mood of that city before it became Europe's Disneyland.

Crain's beautifully plain style is perfectly adjusted to the rather drab realities of a city just disengaging itself from the uncongenial embrace of Communism:

"They had to walk to the head of the street to cross the highway, because of the concrete wall that shielded the neighborhood from it. The night tram's line ran through a field on the far side, a large empty field adjacent to a factory that built engines and industrial machinery. It was lit by street lamps, which looked out of place because there was no street. There were only the tram tracks and the high dead grasses, and here and there curving wet furrows where the wheels of a backhoe or a truck had bitten through the raw soil. At the bottom of the gully a dozen unused concrete sewer pipes were stacked in a shoddy pyramid."

The remarkable powers of observation and recollection on display here are evident everywhere. In dealing with human relations, that minuteness of description traces with great precision every fluctuation of feeling. Here is Jacob, going with Melinda to meet Carl at the airport:

"Carl recognized Jacob and flashed a hello with an open palm. He was walking toward them slowly, weighed down by a red polyester backpack that projected a foot above his head. His mouth had set with the effort of travel, but it began to soften as he approached. His eyes took on the self-consciousness of someone who is delaying a greeting. Jacob found himself aware that he and Melinda probably had the same look of anticipation, which could be mistaken for guardedness. Carl would see Jacob thinner than he remembered him, because of Jacob's illness, and he would see, standing beside him, a beautiful young Englishwoman whose white scarf called out the faintly purple blood that colored her lips."

Jacob sees and interprets Carl, and imagines Carl seeing and interpreting him and Melinda: description, analysis and interpretation merge seamlessly in Crain's deceptively simple prose, so that the most ordinary encounters are charged with unexpressed meanings, as in a Henry James novel. (James is referred to twice in the book.)

There are times, admittedly, when the minute realism of the narrative becomes quite taxing, as, for instance, when we are given what feel like verbatim transcripts of Jacob's language lessons. These are engaging in themselves, especially the scenes with two Czech children and their over-anxious mother; but they are difficult to relate to the more urgent concerns of the rest of the novel, which generally bear on Jacob's relationships and emotional development.

At 472 pages, *Necessary Errors* is a long, slow read, made to seem even longer by the leisurely pace of the writing and the lack of vigorous action. As one character says of a Thomas Mann novel, "Nothing whatever happens for pages and pages, and one doesn't mind somehow."

Indeed, one doesn't mind somehow, when a writer recreates with such skill a charmed period in a charmed city, in such charming company. Though hardly a feel-good novel, *Necessary Errors* is an exhilarating read, for its fineness

of observation and its generosity of characterisation. Take a week’s leave and immerse yourself in it.