

Karel Čapek

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**Karel
Čapek**
(IPA:



Karel Čapek

['karɛl 'tʃapɛk]) (January 9, 1890 – December 25, 1938) was one of the

most influential Czech writers of the 20th century, and a Nobel Prize nominee (1936). He introduced and made popular the frequently used international word *robot*, which first appeared in his play *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* in 1921. Karel named his brother Josef Čapek as the true inventor of the word *robot*.

Čapek was born in Malé Svatoňovice, Bohemia, Austria-Hungary (now Czech Republic).

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Life and work

Karel Čapek wrote with intelligence and humor on a wide variety of subjects. His works are known for their interesting and precise descriptions of reality, and Čapek is renowned for his excellent work with the Czech language. He is perhaps best known as a science fiction author, who wrote long before science fiction became established as a separate genre. He can be considered one of the founders of classical, non-hardcore European science fiction, a type which focuses on possible future (or alternative) social and human

evolution on Earth, rather than technically advanced stories of space travel. However, it is best to classify him with Aldous Huxley and George Orwell as a mainstream literary figure who used science-fiction motifs.

Many of his works discuss ethical and other aspects of revolutionary inventions and processes that were already anticipated in the first half of 20th century. These include mass production, atomic weapons, and post-human intelligent beings such as robots or intelligent salamanders.

In addressing these themes, Čapek was also expressing fear of impending social disasters, dictatorship, violence, and the unlimited power of corporations, as well as trying to find

some hope for human beings. Čapek's literary heirs include Ray Bradbury, Salman Rushdie, Brian Aldiss and Dan Simmons.

His other books and plays include detective stories, novels, fairy tales and theatre plays, and even a book on gardening. His most important works attempt to resolve problems of epistemology, to answer the question: "What is knowledge?" Examples include "The Tales from Two Pockets", and first book of all the trilogy of novels *Hordubal*, *Meteor*, and *An Ordinary Life*.

Later, in the 1930s, Čapek's work focused on the threat of brutal Nazi and fascist dictatorships. His most productive years coincided with the

existence of the first republic of Czechoslovakia (1918-1938). He wrote *Talks with Tomáš Masaryk*-- Masaryk was a Czech patriot, the first President of Czechoslovakia, and a regular guest at Čapek's Friday garden parties for Czech patriots. This extraordinary relationship between the author and the political leader may be unique, and was an inspiration for Václav Havel. He also became a member of International PEN.

Soon after it became clear that the Western allies had refused to help defend Czechoslovakia against Hitler, Čapek refused to leave his country-- despite the fact that the Gestapo had named him Czechoslovakia's "public enemy number 2." Karel Čapek died of double pneumonia on December

25, 1938, shortly after part of Bohemia was annexed by Nazi Germany following the so-called Munich Agreement. He was interred in the Vyšehrad cemetery in Prague. His brother Josef Čapek, a painter and writer, died in Bergen-Belsen concentration camp.

After the war, Čapek's work was reluctantly accepted by the Communist regime of Czechoslovakia, because during his life he had refused to accept a communist utopia as a viable alternative to the threat of Nazi domination.

Etymology of *robot*

The word *robot* comes from the word *robota* meaning "drudgery" or "forced labor" in literary Czech and "work", "labor" in literary Slovak. The origin of the word is the Old Church Slavonic *rabota* "servitude", which in turn comes from the Indo-European root **orbh-*. *Robot* is cognate with the German word *Arbeiter* (worker).

While it is frequently thought that Karel Čapek was the originator of the word, he wrote a short letter in reference to an article in the *Oxford English Dictionary* etymology in which he named his brother, painter and writer Josef Čapek, as its actual inventor. [1] In an article in the Czech journal *Lidové noviny* in 1933, he also explained that he had originally

wanted to call the creatures *laboři* (from Latin *labor*, work). However, he did not like the word, seeing it as too artificial, and sought advice from his brother Josef, who suggested "roboti".

Čapek in popular culture

On the science fiction cartoon show *Futurama*, a planet inhabited entirely by robots was named "Čapek 9", as a reference to Karel Čapek's coining of the term "robot".

In an episode of the science fiction programme *Doctor Who* entitled "The Robots Of Death" (1977), the crazed leader of a group of murderous robots

is named "Taren Capel", which is deliberately similar to Čapek's own name.

A recurring character in the cartoon show *Batman: The Animated Series* was named Karl Rossum. He was an inventor that specialized in robots.

The story 'Big Robots' in *Judge Dredd Magazine* (#257 - ?) features a *Mega City One* tower block named "Karel Čapek" which turned out to be a giant robot.

An outline of Čapek's works

Works which can be considered early science fiction:

- 1920 - *R.U.R. (Rossum's Universal Robots)* (*Rossumovi Univerzální Roboti*)
- 1922 - *The Makropulos Affair* (*Věc Makropulos*)
- *The Absolute at Large* (*Továrna na absolutno*)
- 1922 - *Krakatit* (*Krakatit*)
- 1936 - *War with the Newts* (*Válka s mloky*) - dystopian satire

Anti-Nazi plays from the 1930s:

- 1937 - *The White Disease* (*Bílá nemoc*) - earlier translated as *Power and Glory*
- 1938 - *The Mother* (*Matka*)

Some other works:

- *Stories from a Pocket* and *Stories from Another Pocket* (Povídky z jedné a z druhé kapsy) - a common name for a cycle of short detective stories (5-10 pages long) that shared common attitude and characters, including *The Last Judgement*.
- *How it is Made* - satiric novels on the life of theatre, newspaper and film studio.
- *The Gardener's Year* (Zahradníkův rok, 1929) is exactly what it says it is--a year-round guide to gardening, charmingly written, with illustrations by his brother Josef Čapek.
- *Pictures from the Insects' Life* (Ze života hmyzu), also known as *Insect Play*, with Josef

Čapek, a satire in which insects stand in for various human characteristics: the flighty, vain butterfly, the obsequious, self serving dung beetle.

- *Apocryphal Stories (Kniha apokryfů)*, short stories about literary and historical characters, such as Hamlet, a struggling playwright, Pontius Pilate, Don Juan, Alexander arguing with his teacher Aristotle, and Sarah and Abraham attempting to name ten good people so Sodom can be saved: E.g. "What do you have against Namuel? He's stupid but he's pious."
- *Nine Fairy Tales: And One More Thrown in for Good Measure (Devatero Pohádek a ještě jedna od Josefa Čapka*

- jako přívazek, 1932)*
- *Dashenka, or the Life of a Puppy* (Dášenska čili Život štěněte, 1933)

Selected bibliography

- *The Absolute at Large*, 1922 (in Czech), 1927, The Macmillan Company, New York, translator uncredited. Also published June 1975, Garland Publishing ISBN 0-8240-1403-0,
- *Apocryphal Tales*, 1945 (in Czech), May 1997, Catbird Press Paperback ISBN 0-945774-34-6, Translated by Norma Comrada
- *An Atomic Phantasy: Krakatit* or simply *Krakatit*, 1924 (in Czech)

- *Nine Fairy Tales: And One More Thrown in for Good Measure*, October 1996, Northwestern Univ Press Paperback Reissue Edition, ISBN 0-8101-1464-X. Illustrated by Josef Capek, Translated by Dagmar Herrmann
- *R.U.R.*, March 1970, Pocket Books ISBN 0-671-46605-4
- *Tales from Two Pockets*
- *Short story collection, Mystery* (nsf) Translated by Norma Comrada June 194, Catbird Press Paperback ISBN 0-945774-25-7
- *Talks With T.G. Masaryk* Non-fiction. Biography of Masaryk, founder of Czechoslovakia.
- *Three Novels: Hordubal, Meteor, An Ordinary Lifes*

NSF? Translated by M. and R.
Weatherall

- *Toward the Radical Center: A Karel Capek Reader*. Collection of stories, plays and columns. Edited by Peter Kussi, Catbird Press ISBN 0-945774-07-9
- *War With the Newts* 1936 (in Czech), May 1967, Berkley Medallion Edition Paperback. Translated by M. & R. Weatherall, March 1990, Catbird Press paperback, ISBN 0-945774-10-9, October 1996, Northwestern University Press paperback ISBN 0-8101-1468-2

External links

- Overview
- A comprehensive website on

Čapek

- Karel Čapek, 1890--1938 - brief biography, with information about the writer's plays and novels
- Further links
- Karel Čapek page at *Catbird Press*, a publisher of several Čapek translations
- Works by Karel Capek at Project Gutenberg
- RUR and War with the Newts in English translation
- Čapek in English translation by David Wyllie
- The monumet of Karel Čapek

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