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Sergei Dovlatov

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From Reader Review ?????????? - ?????????? ??????? for online ebook

Viktor says

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Michael Lieberman says

Bottom line: Not as funny or moving in English as the hype promises. I don't know how it reads in Russian, but in English translation much of the language felt too much like farce and the story line was not sufficiently intriguing to hold my interest.

Sergei Dovlatov (1941-1990) comes highly praised by his contemporary, Nobel Prize winning poet Joseph Brodsky and is described in a NYRB article by Masha Gessen as a great creator of sayings and humor in Russian—his effect on Russian is said to be comparable to "Casablanca's" and Mark Twain's on English. The story is partially autobiographical and follows a hard drinking journalist/writer who takes a job at an Alexander Pushkin theme park called Pushkin Hills. The book is not without poignant moments; one involves the pain of emigration for writers with its loss of an audience of knowledgeable native speakers. In PH the dilemma is compounded by the writer's being almost unknown in his native country. Here the humor is biting and palpable: "Who needs my stories in Chicago?" "And who needs them here?" one of the characters rejoins.

But much of the humor and wit are obscure or lost in translation:

One day I fastened a photo of Saul Bellow over the desk.

"Belov," asked Tanya. From Novy Mir?"

"The very same," I said.

(Most of us miss the humor even when we go to Wiki and try to piece together a laugh from the surname "Belov" and the literary magazine Novy Mir.)

And that's the problem for the reader in English: Dovlatov's highly praised language and its cultural resonance doesn't come through. I have given the English language translation three stars for educated American readers; I have no idea how Dovlatov reads in Russian.

To be fair, there is a rousing Afterword by James Wood on all of Dovlatov's work. It is much more generous.

Katharine says

I love Dovlatov. His pithy and humorous depiction of life in the late Soviet Union is always exactly right. Indispensable reading for students of the Russian psyche.

Nikolay Berezikov says

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Charlie says

Another tragic and sad Russian book; I felt transported to the location and could feel the pain; some bits of humor as well. I think I may be over my enjoyment of sad Russian literature for a bit.

Diane S ? says

3.5 Boris is a failure, he is an alcoholic, an unpublished author, recently divorced and is not sure where his life will take him. So he takes a job as a guide at the Pushkin preserve, where everyone loves Pushkin.

This is a very quick read, so much of the book is dialogue, both ironic and pithy observations of dialogue. Seems he is a rarity at the preserve, he is male and many of the women seem to love him. Will he find his sense of self there?

First read for me by this author, will definitely look for more of his books.

Caroline says

What's more, Misha's speech was organized in a remarkable way. Only nouns and verbs were pronounced with clarity and dependability. Mostly in inappropriate combinations. All secondary parts of speech Mikhail Ivanovich used at his sole discretion. Whichever ones happened to turn up. Never mind the prepositions, particles and conjunctions. He created them as he went along. His speech was not unlike classical music, abstract art or the song of a goldfinch. Emotions clearly prevailed over meaning.

...

Misha's overtures were reminiscent of the Remizov school of writing.

He called gossip women rattletraps. Bad housewives - majordomos. Unfaithful women - peter cheetahs. Beer and vodka - sledgehammer, poison and kerosene. And the young generation - pussberries...

"Copper-trouble pussberries be hullabaplonking an' God knows whatsa at the center..."

Outstanding writing, outstanding translation.

Dovlatov was a dissident writer who was never published in the Soviet Union and eventually emigrated to the United States in 1978. He died in 1990, so he just saw the collapse.

This is a novel that was written in the US, and is semi-autobiographical. It is also very, very funny, and very Russian--it is permeated by vodka and melancholy. The work has been masterfully translated by his daughter.

Boris Alikhanov, an alcoholic unpublished writer, takes a bus to the Pushkin Preserve in the vicinity of Pskov near Estonia, in search of a job as a tour guide. Along with the jokes, the wordplay, the irony regarding life in the Soviet Union, genius character sketches, and explorations of the core issues of life, Dovlatov interweaves literary criticism. After finally giving in to the administrators' corporate Pushkin worship, his hero tackles the interviewer Marianna's question of "Why does he love Pushkin?"

"Pushkin is our belated Renaissance. Like Goethe was for Weimar. They took upon themselves what the West had mastered in the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Pushkin found a way to express social themes in the form of tragedy, a characteristic of the Renaissance. He and Goethe lived, if you will, in several eras. Werther is a tribute to sentimentalism. Prisoner of the Caucasus is a typically Byronic work. But Faust, for instance--that's already Elizabethan and the Little Tragedies naturally continue one of the Renaissance genres. The same with Pushkin's lyricism. And if it's dark, then it isn't dark in the spirit of Byron but more in the spirit of Shakespeare's sonnets, I feel. Am I explaining myself clearly?"

"What has Goethe got to do with anything?" asked Marianna. "And the same goes for the Renaissance!"

It turns out the correct answer was: *"Pushkin is our pride and joy. He is not only a great poet, he is also Russia's great citizen."*

He gets the job, and things go rather well until the failings of his past catch up with him. Amid reflections on how language is connected to nationality, whether one can recognize non-tragic love, how can an artist survive without compromising himself, whether love of inanimate objects is immoral (*I believe that their love of birch trees triumphs at the expense of love of mankind.*), the KGB, and much more, Boris finds himself forced to make a heart-wrenching choice. Love and his Russian soul cannot both win.

And yet, the choice is nestled amidst so much laughter. The staff of the preserve mirrors most Soviet bureaucracies, and outrageous characters abound. Boris delights in taking flight from questions posed in all seriousness by the officious. His stories of the obtuse tourists he guides through the Pushkin shrines remind one of *The Island of Second Sight*. The depth of the story comes from his building, in so few pages, so many characters who are foolish, or laughable in other ways, but who are also kind, insightful, generous, or in some other way human in a way that makes them endearing as well as amusing.

It is hard to find a short quote that does justice to the writing; the jokes need the set-up; I am so tempted to just type in all 139 pages.

Early in the book, Boris has been drinking on the trip to the preserve, and the bus makes a stop:

The tour guide was eating an ice cream in the shade. I approached her:

"Let's get acquainted."

"Aurora" she said, extendign a sticky hand.

"And I am," I said, "Borealis."

The girl didn't take offense. "Everyone makes fun of my name. I'm used to it... What's the matter with you? You're all red!"

"I assure you, it's only on the outside. On the inside I'm a constitutional democrat."

"No, really, are you unwell??"

"I drink too much...would you like a beer?"

"Why do you drink?" she asked.

What could I say?

"It's a secret," I said. "A little mystery..."

And one might say that this book is a mystery story, in search of the answer to that question.

Very highly recommended. I'm going to press it on everyone I know.

Bettie? says

Looks fab...

Chaitra says

Two words. Hilarious, poignant. That pretty much sums up this novella about dissidence, dissolution (of one's life and of Soviet Russia), and drink. Glad I read it. 5 stars.

Laura Leaney says

I love this book, the author, the whole ironic "almost dissident" voice. Funny and compassionate, the writer Boris Alikhanov (based on Dovlatov) cannot get published in Soviet Russia. He has left his wife and daughter to work as a tour guide at the Pushkin Hills Preserve, staffed by very strange devotees to Pushkin. The writing is hilariously understated and brimming with sad truths. When Boris gets to the Preserve he has not yet been trained as a guide. Here is a slice of excellence:

"Do look at the guidelines. Also, here is a list of books. They are available in the reading room. And report to Galina Alexandrovna that the interview went well."

I felt embarrassed.

"Thank you," I said. "I'm sorry I lost my temper."

I rolled up the brochure and put it in my pocket.

"Be careful with it - we only have three copies."

I took the papers out and attempted to smooth them with my hands.

"And one more thing," Marianna lowered her voice. "You asked about love..."

"It was you who asked about love."

"No, it was you who asked about love...As I understand, you are interested in whether I am married? Well, I am!"

"You have robbed me of my last hope," I said as I was leaving.

If you don't laugh at this, don't read this book. If you pick it up, know that there is a lovely little piece by James Wood in the back. I wish I could write like Dovlatov. I wish he were still alive.

Rich Goldblatt says

Humorous short story by an under appreciated author Sergei Dovlatov. Add a star if you a student of Russian literature and politics.

Tuck says

hilarious dialog novel of a kind-hearted sap, who loses everything to his drunken ways. forced to seek some sort of employment, he gets a gig as a tour guide a pushkin hills preserve (not that fantastic really, really). a fast and informative read into the life essence of russians: too much vodka and heart.

Michael says

"What's your pleasure?" a waiter asks. "'My pleasure,' I said, 'is for everyone to be kind, humble and courteous.'"

Narrated in the first person, we get hilarious observations on rural life in pre-collapse Russia; but underneath the jokes there are ruminations about art, writing, censorship, exile, love, and life in general.

With it's numerous notes, I feel like I missed less that I might have, but still feel I missed a lot due to my limited knowledge of Russian political and cultural history.
