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Yuz Aleshkovsky , Tamara Glenny (Translator)

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One morning in 1949, Fan Fanych, alias Etcetera, is summoned from his Moscow apartment to KGB headquarters, where he is informed that he will be charged with a crime more heinous than any mere man could ever devise. Comrade Etcetera will be tried for "the vicious rape and murder of an aged kangaroo in the Moscow Zoo on a night between July 14, 1789, and January 9, 1905." Every moment in the nightmarish and hilarious account that follows lives up to the absurdity of this accusation. A seductive KGB agent attempts to convince Fan Fanych that he is a kangaroo; he finds himself in the dock at a spectacular show trial; is sent to a camp full of dedicated old Bolsheviks pathetically attempting to maintain their beliefs in the face of every new atrocity; encounters Hitler in Berlin and Churchill, Roosevelt, and Stalin at Yalta, where he is privileged to witness the famous conference as it was really conducted. Kangaroo is a savage, cleansing satire in which Yuz Aleshkovsky confronts the hypocrisy, the cruelty, and the tragic failure of the Soviet regime. His phantasmagoria is faithful to reality, for, as Dostoevsky knew, it is impossible for "realism" to portray a society whose corruption is literally fantastic.

Kangaroo Details

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From Reader Review Kangaroo for online ebook

Julia Simpson-Urrutia says

Slipping into Yuz Aleshkovsky's novel is like sliding onto very thin ice. It is a giddy, clammy-palmed experience. The confusion, fortunately, dispells, as the essence of all the mad symbolism descends upon the reader's consciousness. In *Kangaroo*, the ice is fraught with cracks, and the cracks multiply as the reader progresses; the hero virtually begs for the cracks to give way, but they never do.

More than one Soviet author has done his or her utmost to convey the sense of living on thin ice that people from the USSR talk about--a sensation that has perpetuated itself into the Putin era. It is worth comparing a story published in the late 80s with present day thin ice.

On the surface, *Kangaroo* is totally unrealistic. The hero, Fan Fanych, otherwise known by a handful of aliases, is an international criminal who has an "understanding" with a KGB officer named Kidalla. The understanding is that Fanych should be saved for a very special day. Fan Fanych waits for years to be arrested, and he gets edgy as dozens of ripe moments pass by. The irony of his patient waiting is that he takes for granted that he will be dragged off for something he didn't do while he is allowed to go scott free from real transgressions.

The day finally arrives in 1949 and FF is asked to pick, out of 10 computer made-up cases. FF picks the "case of the vicious rape and murder of an aged kangaroo in the Moscow Zoo on a night between July 14, 1789 and January 9, 1905." After FF chooses his crime, he learns that the case was generated to fit his personality. The detail of the computer (and political system) garbling the case description proves that the same must garble everything.

The choice of a kangaroo as victim elicits the concept of a kangaroo court, which is an illegal mock court run by criminals inside a prison to enforce domination. The metaphor works and the story is entertaining if insane. Each new scene in the novel is piquant and imaginative. FF, as it turns out, is one of those types of people who couldn't harm a fly, even taking bizarre pity on a bedbug. The reader never sees the protagonist commit a single crime.

As an interesting aside, Yuz Aleshkovsky, born in 1929, was drafted into the Soviet navy in 1949 and apparently broke the Soviet navy code, for which he subsequently had to spend four years in prison. He wrote children's books after that but moved to the USA in 1979, where he still lives. His adult novels never had a chance of being published in the Soviet Union. So it is with totalitarian regimes. (I reviewed his book in the Saudi press in the late 80s.)

Ben says

One of the most hilarious and wicked satires of Soviet society available to English readers. The story is bizarre, a foul-mouthed, first-person narrative about a man who finds himself put in a Stalinist show-trial for the rape and murder of a kangaroo named Gemma, in a St Petersburg zoo sometime between 1789 (the French Revolution) and 1905 (the first Russian Revolution). The wicked language is a feat in itself. I kept bursting into laughter as I read this book in the student office, getting strange looks from fellow students.

The translation is excellent, giving the book almost a film noir vibe at times. Some background in the Stalin era of Soviet history, I think is essential in order to grasp the depth of the humour - it's uniquely Russian for much of the story. Might come off as sheer nonsense otherwise.

Jonfaith says

Written in a wayward, oral style, the official term is *Skaz* --which to an American reader, which is what it might be if Holden Caulfield was sent to the gulag and upon his release finds himself less concerned with the crummy than with the shitty lies at the core of the Soviet Experiment.

A career criminal/confidence man is hauled in by the KGB dragnet just after the end of the Great Patriotic War (WW II) charged with the rape and murder of a kangaroo sometime between 1789 and 1905. The satire escalated as the criminal receives shock treatment where upon his reality begins to fissure. He's sent to the camps where his delirium finds him in detente with Hitler and Churchill before suddenly becoming aware that Stalin's right foot is espousing counter revolutionary slogans. The criminal—upon escaping that contradiction— finds himself involved in a film production of his exploits, does this situation explain his previous experiences? Periodically point of view appears to surface, coming up for air before an ribald episode combusts in a shower of literary bewilderment. Kangaroo is a denouncement in the greasepaint of self criticism.

Blogbaas Van 'tVliegend Eiland says

7/10

Stephen says

One of the funniest novels I've read.

asli says

This is far more recent than most Russian literature I've had the pleasure of reading, yet equal in quality. All in all, absolutely hilarious. I do believe it would need to be read more than once for every layer of satire to be fully grasped and taken in.

Rus Segety says

One of the greatest satires/farces ever.

Kirstie says

This is written in the style of Skaz, which is a Russian term for a "particularly oral form of narrative" I learned this from Wikipedia, which is always right of course (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skaz>) and I couldn't help thinking: "Wow. Skaz is way cooler than Ska."

Anyhow, this is quite a satire and has an element of absolute absurdity to it but at the same time, because Aleshkovsky uses the names of actual political leaders, one does question how much of the text is based on reality with veiled metaphors (some more veiled than others). Aleshkovsky could have taken this the way of Kafka's *The Trial* but he is way more playful and creative than that, even though sometimes it's more difficult for the reader to actually follow what is happening in the text. One gets the sense that it's difficult for the protagonist to figure out what is happening in his real life anyhow and in that way, it has tinges of experimental fiction.

Basically, the gist is this-the main character (written in first person as if telling a friend Kolya over a series of drinks what his experiences were throughout the novel) is not such a bad guy but he does owe the cops a favor. It just so happens that there is a computer that generates random crime possibilities and, when forced to pick between the mundane and the common crimes and the most bizarre crime imaginable, he of course picks the crime in which the perpetrator rapes and murders a kangaroo at the zoo.

What follows is experiments on him in terms of the human psyche and film as the best device for propaganda. The police officer Kadilla goes through all manners of experiments to try to convince him he's a kangaroo, has truly committed this crime, and even is soaring through space. He even has to deal with his own turned clothes turning on him. Our protagonist also seems to have issues with time and his own sense of personal history as he remembers and even seems to experience all these interactions he had or witnessed with Hitler and Stalin during the second world war. Stalin's foot turning on him is particularly amusing. And of course, what would a prison camp assignment for killing rats in the dark be without discovering that dormant third eye in the back of one's head.

This is the kind of book you'll want to read again after you study Soviet history and read 100 more novels written by famous Russians.

Some memorable quotes:

pg. 3 "That year-1949-I was the unhappiest man on earth. Maybe in the whole solar system. Of course I was the only one who knew this, but then personal unhappiness isn't like being world famous-you don't need the recognition of all mankind for it."

pg. 26-27 "...and I guess we're not meant to untangle the skein of world history. We didn't pull it off the knees of that old granny, Life, and tangle it up. It was some little kitten. So let the kitten untangle it..."

pg. 97 "I guess men always envy anyone any kind of eternal existence, even an agonizing one."

pg 122-123 "I'm a weird strange kind of guy. I'm beginning to understand a whole lot about what's happened in my life, Kolya. But what I don't get is this deep, warm, quiet laugh at what you'd think would be the worst moments of your life. What does it mean? My soul's alive and well, undamaged by the devil's worst weapon, despair? It's alive and chortling over the forces of evil's frantic activity, safe, knowing it's invulnerable? Is

that it or not?

pg. 143 "I told him if you subtract the enthusiasm of the twenties from the enthusiasm of the thirties, all that's left is ten years for counterrevolutionary agitation and propaganda."

pg. 150 "We got this epilepsy epidemic from Dostoevsky. I can't think why Belinsky and I didn't liquidate him then. None of this would have happened." (From the character Chernyshevsky who in real life died waaaaay before the second world war.)

pg. 159 "But what's a pretty girl with no money to do about stockings? Or shoes? She ages five years the first time they're reheeled and twenty the second. It's just no fun to walk around anymore. Don't even mention stocking runs. Those runs make a woman's heart bleed like real wounds in men's hearts."

pg. 169 "So I don't offend anyone, I'd like to be a farmer in the Antarctic, where they still don't have political parties."

pg. 173 "I tell you, Kolya, you should never turn anything. I certainly don't want to get to the Last Judgement to find me and Karpo Marx accused of trying to change the world. No thanks! The world doesn't forgive men who try to turn it inside out."

pg. 184 "I sing my favorite little ditty

The streetcar floats through the sea,
The phonographs sound sad,
Inside his little railroad car,
The tsar resigned. Too bad."

pg. 224 "In a word, pain strips a lot of superfluous stuff from a man."

pg. 237 "...believe me, Kolya-I can see you believe me by your sad eyes-you couldn't tell the two kinds of pain apart. Human suffering is no better by a single tear or scream or faint than a butterfly's or a cow's or an eagle's or a rat's. That's the only thing I'm sure of."

pg. 264 "Kids these days. There's no souls inside 'em, only tapeworms"

pg. 265 "Jesus, I get so pissed at all the people who can't believe in a higher reality, who deny or tragic, joyful existence, even if they're basically decent types."

Rob T says

Kangaroo caught my eye in Chicago's Myopic books because it was published in Russian in Ann Arbor

before being translated and published by FSG. The book takes a really cruel satirical take on Stalinism that's pretty spot-on, except that I'm reading it many years too late. The prose is a first-person stream-of-consciousness monologue—not my favorite style—and it seems pretty dated. I enjoyed the ending much more than the beginning, but I'm not sure I'll return to Aleshkovsky.

Patty says

I was attracted by the idea of this novel. Then I was stopped in my tracks by the synopsis on the back. It says "metaphysical terror." I don't like metaphysical terror. But OK, I wanted to see what it was up to, so I decided to read it anyway. And I do have some friends who like metaphysical terror, so maybe I'd read it and even if I didn't like it, I'd be able to recommend it to them. But the novel is not at all terrifying.

The protagonist is a petty crook, and proud of it. When faced with an alarming series of events that are so absurd they could only be stalinism, he employs a really very effective and ridiculous coping mechanism. He takes them seriously. He not only admits to a crime that he did not commit (raping and murdering a kangaroo in the moscow zoo, sometime between the years 1796 and 1904), but he finds a way to make himself culpable for it, thus effectively keeping control over his life, squalid and humiliating though it may be. Sometimes the character almost seems crazy, but when looked at in the light of the absurd-but-true events surrounding him, he comes off as incredibly sane.

Angelique says

Eh. I don't know if it's a bad translation or what. It seemed all over the shop. Wasn't as amusing as I thought it was going to be and seemed like a bad version of The Hundred Year Old Man Who Climbed Out of Window and Disappeared.

Tony says

After reading something... unfulfilling... it was nice to sink into something that is sort of like a homecoming for me, as I grew into literature under the guidance of essentially every novel and most short stories and plays from 19th century Russia. Despite being more recent than most of the 20th century Russian fiction I've had the chance to read, the voice is immediately familiar - a manifestation of an immeasurable debt to the likes of Gogol, Kafka and Bulgakov - and the imagination is there too. A great deal of the novel is devoted to underscoring the absurdity of Soviet life,

I thought the ending was just a tiny bit weak, but overall it was consistently what I wanted. thanks, comrade!
