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

Anna says

This is not the first time that I've given a book three stars due to reader inadequacy. It took me a long time to get through 'The Foundation Pit' because it's a dense, elusive, and confusing novel. I was somewhat relieved to discover in the translator's afterword that it wasn't just me, as even in the original Russian, with detailed knowledge of Stalinist collectivisation and the bible, it is apparently tricky to understand. Not much happens, yet every sentence is filled with layers of significance. In order to try and convey Platonov's distinctive style, the translation reads quite strangely. The somewhat surreal sentence construction took some getting used to, although it's definitely memorable. There are some powerful images and moments, although overall I found it more difficult and less cohesive than Happy Moscow. Whereas that followed a woman who personified a city, or womanhood, or communism, or all three, 'The Foundation Pit' has a much larger larger cast of characters centred around a huge pit (although a girl seems at various times to personify the future of the USSR).

The subject is the arbitrary brutality of collectivisation, which receives closer focus in the second half. This latter half reminded me somewhat of The Four Books, a novel about Mao's Great Leap Forward. However that was written decades after the fact, whereas Platonov composed 'The Foundation Pit' in the early 1930s. As the afterword concedes, it may never be possible to fully understand it. The reference points of 1930s Soviet Russia are lost or deliberately concealed; criticism had to be so carefully veiled as to be inaccessible without them. Moreover, Platanov supposedly makes a lot of references to the bible. Nonetheless, a reader who can't speak Russian, has no biblical knowledge, and with only a broad understanding of collectivisation can still appreciate the suffering being obliquely described here. As the notes at the end point out, the oddness in the novel actually underplays how surreal life under Stalinism could be, citing the real example of a campaign to collect pond slime for paper making.

My favourite image was of the bear who worked in the forge and was brought along to root out kulaks. The afterword and notes point out both that bears did actually sometimes work in forges at the time, while also suggesting a variety of allegorical purposes it may serve. Its presence is certainly a striking image in a text that otherwise makes it difficult for the reader to know how to visualise events. This is not to say I didn't enjoy the poetry of Platonov's writing:

But sleep required forgiveness of past grief and the peace of a mind that trusts in life, whereas Voshchev was lying there in a dry tension of awareness, and he did not know whether he was of use to the world or whether everything would get along fine without him. A gust of wind blew from an unknown place, so that people would not suffocate, and a dog on the outskirts let it be known, in a weak voice of doubt, that it was on duty.

"The dog's bored. It's like me - living only thanks to its birth."

Nastya the little girl is perhaps the most accessible character to the reader, as she seeks to condense what she sees around her into comprehensible terms. Whether her articulations are right or wrong, they read less like riddles than much of the rest of the dialogue, which has a certain appeal:

Looking at the bear, all blackened and scorched, Nastya rejoiced that he was on our side and not on the bourgeoisie's.

"He suffers too," she said, "so that means he's for Stalin, doesn't it?"

"You bet it does!" replied Chiklin.

I remember reading an essay by George Orwell (in *Books v. Cigarettes*) in which he claimed that totalitarian regimes are incompatible with good literature because, 'The fact is that certain themes cannot be celebrated in words, and tyranny is one of them. No-one ever wrote a good book in praise of the Inquisition.' Perhaps 'The Foundation Pit' demonstrates that any great literature written under a totalitarian regime can only be truly understood and appreciated by those who have experienced said regimes - despite the unlikelihood of their having access to it. To me, 'The Foundation Pit' is highly intriguing but very hard to grasp. Even with a very good explanatory afterword and thorough notes, it remains mysterious.

Rhys says

It has been two years since I read this novel and unlike all the other books I have listed on Goodreads I never wrote a review for this one. I found the book too overwhelming. There was too much I wanted to say about it, and I knew I wouldn't be able to do it justice, because however much I did say, there would always be something left out. In short, I will state that it is the strangest and most disturbing novel I have ever read, but 'strange' and 'disturbing' in a unique way, not in the way that (for example) a horror novel might be, or even an example of transgressive fiction, such as the early works of Bataille. The difference with this novel is that it is not about psychology, abnormal or otherwise, or even about philosophy. It is not about terror for the sake of terror, or even about how life is meaningless. Quite the contrary, it is about a vision, about a political program, about a love of the future, about the deification of a utopian system. The horror comes from the logical application of this vision to life.

Written in the late 1920s when Stalin was tightening his grip on the USSR, it is an anti-Stalin novel, but not from the perspective of one opposed to communism. Platonov takes a different approach. His method is to 'go along' with Stalin's projects but to show how they *ought* to be conducted, with the implication that they are not morally, spiritually, or aesthetically wrong, but that they are in danger of being implemented incorrectly, inefficiently, in only a partial manner. In fact Platonov goes further. He links his arm with the arm of the regime and says, "Come on, we are going this way, let's get a move on!" and the message is that when the programs are *properly* applied they will affect the leaders too, will affect Stalin too, and they will be painful, but that's fine, that is part of what should happen, because to build this utopia of the future many sacrifices will be necessary, enormous sacrifices.

And those sacrifices include time, energy, body and soul. The novel is about the digging of a vast foundation pit for a building. The plans for the building keep getting bigger and bigger, and so the foundation pit must get bigger too. There is a sharp Kafkaesque element to this never-ending work. The building will perhaps eventually house the entire population of the USSR and in a sense it *is* the USSR, the perfect socialist state that has been promised. But the foundation pit must come first and its digging will involve extraordinary violence, both to language and lives.

Everything in this novel is simultaneously real and a metaphor. The girl child who represents the socialist

people to come, the future generations, is helpless in body but strong and callous in mind. Like so many of the other characters, her greatest contempt for destruction and suffering is expressed in the insult, "It is boring," uttered at the most inappropriate and extreme moments. There are tangential ideas that amplify the sense of horror, a sense of horror that originates in the idea of a perpetually increasing work ethic. This is the horror of the Stakhanovite Movement, the 'voluntary' agreement to work harder and harder and to keep increasing one's quotas. Eventually through science, all dead people since the beginning of time will be resurrected, their scattered molecules captured and reassembled, so that they too can be put to work, forever.

There is also a fabular quality that combines with the oratorical absurdities to create a nightmare from which even whimsy proves to be no escape. Animals are forced to become communists too (or do so of their own choosing) and the extremist bear who works in a forge and makes useless horseshoes non-stop is one of the most bizarre characters in all literature. Platonov's critique of Stalin comes not from the position of the anti-communist but from that of the true believer. He is willing to suffer for the future, but he wants Stalin to suffer too. He wants the communist party leaders to do exactly what they claim they really want, rather than pretending while actually making life easier for themselves, and this appalling purity is the weapon (or tool) with which Platonov assails the Dear Father, that tarnished Man of Steel.

Ahmed Oraby says

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Baris Ozyurt says

“ ‘Size, yolda?lar, sendika arac?l???yla birtak?m imtiyazlar sa?layaca??m,’ dedi Pa?kin.

‘?mtiyaz? nereden bulacaks?n?’ diye sordu Safronov. ‘Onu evvela bizim yap?p sana devretmemiz laz?m ki sen de bize sa?layas?n.’ “(s.33)

David Lentz says

Platonov writes with a minimalist style in a stark Russian landscape in the midst of the absolute absurdity of a mindless Communist bureaucracy killing its people to dig a vast foundation pit in the middle of nowhere. The net effect, like the writing of Samuel Beckett, is vulnerable characters searching without hope for meaning, which is absent or unfathomable or beyond their reach. This novel is a moving foray into the theatre of the absurd as the characters deal with the heartbreak and death and the utter absence of opportunity of their everyday lives as peasants. They are merely worked to death by a dehumanizing government machine intent upon killing them with meaningless labor and driven by petty party leaders who demand loyalty despite the overwhelming poverty they perpetuate. The hero, Voschev, is a thinking man who could easily play the role of Vladimir or Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. "It seems to me all the time that there is something special in the distance, or some splendid unattainable object, and I live in sadness." He lives like the stranger of Camus, without hope, and yet he navigates as best he can. Voschev becomes a collector of rags, the lost remnants of dead souls. "All the poor and middle peasants worked with such zest of life as though they wanted to find salvation for themselves forever in the abyss of the foundation pit." Platonov is a man who knows well the abyss having spent a lifetime futilely trying to publish under a repressive Marxist regime. His heroic efforts to earning his living as a writer, despite censorship and cruel repression, are an inspiration to unread writers of serious literature who suffer the same fate of anonymity as a result of the rampant commercialism of American publishing. Our national culture is diminished because serious writers refusing to pander to the dictates of writing for commercial profit go unread. Those who embrace commercial writing produce work astonishing in its vast, vapid mediocrity. We'll look back on our vast catalogues of best sellers and be compelled to ask ourselves, "As a great nation, was this really the best that we could do for our national literature?" This novel takes its readers to the abyss of the foundation pit and yet somehow, decades after his death, Platonov finds that he has managed to climb out of the pit by virtue of the staunch and dogged and staggering will to write serious literature, which his own generation suffered never to read. As millions inside and outside Russia have discovered, Platonov is a real writer: he is a writer's writer. I urge you to discover him, too.

Jan-Maat says

This might be the one book, fact or fiction, I'd recommend about life in the early days of the Soviet Union.

A group of builders are digging out the foundations for a building. The symbolism is clear. What the building will be, is not ever made clear and may not even be important. The men are struggling, down in the foundations, with the implications of the new regime, which is under construction and which therefore has turned the way of life, the way of thinking and all relationships upside down. The future is deeply uncertain, the new world is under construction. That unknown, unvisualised future is not a source of hope or optimism but rather an ominous, looming presence over the novel.

A stray young girl, a survivor from a bourgeois family, is taken-in and fed by the men. Because she, unlike the working men who reached adulthood under the old regime, is literate she becomes incredibly important as a mouthpiece for the new political values that dominate the press.

An amazingly raw and bleak novel beautiful even in its own way. Highly recommended. Beware though reading it is like grating your own heart with a food grater. The most amazing thing is the language, just as Soviet foreign minister Molotov, while not drinking his cocktail, observed that peace is indivisible, change and struggle are also indivisible - everything is political so the choice of words, the use of language itself is deeply political and like Orwell's New Speak seeks to render certain ideas impossible and others inevitable. Of course it is all allegorical and I understand that certain people don't like allegory, but that's their loss.

Mai says

why am i crying?
why am i crying?
why am i crying?

Olaf Gütte says

Ein Roman aus der Zeit nach der Russischen Oktoberrevolution,
eine Zeit des Umbruchs und der Zwangskollektivierung, die Menschen
sehen in der Zukunft nicht als Arbeit vor sich.

Der eigentliche Akteur im Roman ist allerdings die Sprache, eine
Herausforderung für den Leser, alle Figuren sprechen sonderbar und falsch,
"Das ist kein Russisch sondern Kauderwelsch" sagte Stalin 1931.

Ich persönlich fand es ironisch und natürlich vom Autor bewusst eingesetzt.

Vit Babenco says

We always believe that the bright future is just around the corner and we wait for it to come...

"...on the face of each young Pioneer girl there remained a trace of the difficulty, the feebleness of early life, meagerness of body and beauty of expression. But the happiness of childhood friendship, the realization of

the future world in the play of youth and in the worthiness of their own severe freedom signified on the childish faces important gladness, replacing for them beauty and domestic plumpness.”

But the future seems not to be eager to arrive and we live in the distressing present and continue to wait...

“In the church burned many candles; the light of the silent, sad wax illuminated the entire interior of the building right up to the cupola above the hiding place of the sacred relics, and the cleanwashed faces of the saints stared out into the dead air with an expression of equanimity, like inhabitants of that other peaceful world—but the church was empty.”

And then everything seems to be left in the past... But everyone keeps waiting and growing old and then it is time to die...

The Foundation Pit is an absolutely perspicacious allegory.

Building of utopia always begins with an excavation of a pit but despite all the exertions and enthusiasm things never go any further...

Nuno Simões says

'(...) não havia verdade neste mundo, ou talvez ela tivesse existido numa qualquer planta ou numa criatura heróica, mas passou um pobre caminheiro e comeu essa planta ou espezinhou a humilde criatura, e depois ele próprio morreu num barranco outonal e o vento soprou o seu corpo para o nada.'

P. says

I admire Andrey Platonov's ability to bring out absurd hilarity of terrible things. In this way I was reminded a little of Salinger and Melville, but more like a fantastic meal reminds you of other similarly fantastic meals. I've never seen the word "boring" used so strangely and to such effect.

If you're looking for a book that is totally linear in plot, this book is not for you. It goes forward in time, sure, but the characters move here and there almost without reason, and it's never clear how much time is actually passing. And then you will find that one of the characters is actually a bear. Not a talking bear. But a real bear that works in blacksmith's forge and who has a talent for sniffing out kulaks.

If you're looking for a book where the characters speak in amazing political jargon because there's nothing else left for them, then this book is for you:

"'Well and splendid!' said Chiklin. 'But who was it that killed them?'

'That, comrade Chiklin, we wouldn't know. We ourselves live without meaning to.'

'Without meaning to!' pronounced Chiklin--and did the peasant a blow in the face, so that he should start to live with conscious meaning."

Even better, I didn't need to know the real stories about Stalinism to get into this story and its desperation/dread, but reading the book and then the afterword really made me want to learn more. Then today I was reading an article about protests in Tunisia and a sign one of the protesters held that said "Revolutions never go backwards" and I wanted to go there and hand them this book. (or ask them if they've heard of the french revolution). Not to dis hope or change for the better, just to keep in mind the dangers of idealism when it begins to sacrifice common sense.

Here's a passage that I think really combines the absurd with the matter-of-fact, although I wanted to quote the book aloud the whole time I was reading it.

"Snow fell on the cold ground, meaning to remain for the winter; a peaceful shroud covered the entire visible earth for its sleep to come; only around the animals' sheds did the snow melt and the earth become black, since the warm blood of cows and sheep had seeped out underneath the boards, and summer places had been bared. After liquidating all their last breathing livestock, the peasants had begun to eat beef and had instructed all the members of their households to do the same; during this brief time they had eaten beef as if it were a communion--no one had wanted to eat, but the flesh of dear and familiar carcasses had to be hidden away inside one's own body and preserved there from social ownership. Some calculating peasants had long ago swollen up from meaty food and were now walking heavily, like moving barns; others were vomiting continually, but they were unable to part with their cattle and so they destroyed it down to the bone, not expecting benefit of stomach. As for anyone who had managed to eat his stock of life in advance or else released it into collective imprisonment--he lay in an empty coffin and lived there as if confined in a snug home, sensing enclosed peace." (p. 102)

brian says

platonov, an atheist, believed that communism could take hold only if it met and surpassed the needs fulfilled by religion; in other words, the revolution would have to fill the ol' God-Shaped Hole if it wanted to stick around. it didn't. it couldn't. and platonov realized this.

his characters don't. they sublimate themselves in communism to find some kind of spiriual answer. good luck. sisyphus would gladly trade spots with these suckers who devote their lives to digging a pit that will serve as the foundation to a utilitarian superstructure of communism and, in the process, offer absolute personal and collective fulfillment.

when communist Voshchev wakes from a nap out in a field, and finds a dead leaf blown from a distant tree:

Voshchev picked up the leaf that had withered and hid it away in a secret compartment of his bag, where he took care of all kinds of objects of unhappiness and obscurity. "You did not possess the meaning of life," supposed Voshchev with the miserliness of compassion. "Stay here - and I'll find out what you lived and perished for. Since no one needs you and you lie about amidst the whole world, then I shall store and remember you.

"Everything lives and endures in the world, without becoming conscious of anything," said Voschev beside the road. And he stood up, in order to go, surrounded by universal enduring existence. "It's as if some one man, or some handful of men, had extracted from us our convinced feeling and taken it for themselves!"

bleak stuff, trying to find truth in an empty room. but this is our lot, eh? and then late in this short novel:

"there was no truth in the world - or maybe there had been once, in some plant or heroic creature, but then a wandering beggar had come by and eaten the plant, or trampled this creature down there on the ground in lowliness, and then the beggar had died in an autumn gully and the wind had blown his body clean into nothing."

in such passages platonov gets right to the core of what it means to be a human being; to be part of that miserable race which knows it serves no real purpose, is driven mad with that knowledge, and so invents all

kinda things to convince itself otherwise. where platonov is not so successful is everywhere else. *the foundation pit* is a chore to read in the same way *the master and the margarita* is: both books plunge so deep in the symbolical and allegorical that one begins to feel she is reading what exists only as a coded message. when the allegorical overtakes the actual... this reader checks out. (perhaps one is, in fact, reading a coded message intended only to bypass censors; nonetheless, there are different & better ways to go about it) -- i've never bought the brechtian strategy of distancing the reader/viewer in order to offer the opportunity for thought. full-on emotional engagement always seemed the more effective means to alter perspective. and that kinda applies to what platonov's doing as well, eh? maybe i'll resurrect platonov and sit him down with the great coetzee novels as instruction manuals...(then i'll resurrect josef von sternberg, leo tolstoy, joey ramone, michel de montaigne, marlene dietrich, thucydides, jean genet, susan sontag, george orwell, woody guthrie, norman mailer, rainer werner fassbinder, oscar wilde, abraham lincoln and rent one of those ridiculous gambling boats off the florida coast for a wild afternoon...)

Edward says

--The Foundation Pit

Afterword

Acknowledgements and Further Reading

Appendix

Notes

Banushka says

bildiğimiz platonov romanlarından, öykülerinden daha farklı.

anlatımlarıyla, metaforlarıyla tam bir stalin dönemi eleştirisi. bunu hem trajik, hem komik bir biçimde aktarıyor aslında.

görev bilinciyle tutulan atlar, demir döven ayılar, işleri bittiği an mutsuzluğa düşen proleterler...

ve platonov'un dili bilerek bozuk kullanması... önce aşıp çeviride bir sorun olduğunu sandım ama güney çeteo kızı'ndan tan hayatta beklemediğim bu kullanımı, sonradan anladım ki bilerek yapılmış, bu nedenle aslında çevirisi çok güzel. yer yer bozuk, kırık bir dil. express'in ekim sayısında çidem öztürk bu kitapla ilgili çok güzel bir yazı yazmış ve yazarın aslında o kutsal dile dokunarak sovyetleri ele tirdiğini söylemiş. ben önceden okudum ;)

sonuç olarak 30'larda yazılmış bu romanın teke 87'ye dek yayımlanamaması olmasaydı eleştirilerin hakkını gösteriyor.

Steven says

"Now we feel nothing at all - only dust and ashes remain in us." (104)

I appreciate many forms of literature; three particular (and often interwoven) kinds occupy elevated spots: Russian literature, Soviet-era literature, and prison literature/literature of rebellion. Dostoevsky, Grossman, Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov, Koestler – I could go on naming favorite writers that combine some or all of these

categories. One person who fits them rather swimmingly, and whom I had not previously read, is Platonov. I figured that I couldn't go wrong with *The Foundation Pit*, which his major novel and a damning allegory of the Soviet Russian state (Platonov was one of the first Russian thinkers to criticize as inhumane Stalin's plans for collectivization). It wasn't as good as I had expected, however. In particular, Platonov's prose was often clumsy and even difficult to bear in places. To offer just a small example: the words 'boring' and 'boringly' are repeated conspicuously and to eventual annoyance (and without consistency in meaning – referring here to boredom, there more to something like annoyance or even despair) throughout the text. The fact that the English was often awkward, and – to my mind – straightforward to corrected so as to read more smoothly, without apparent loss of meaning, points towards a poor translation; so I'll give Platonov the benefit of the doubt. I'll definitely read more of his work, and will try to avoid the Chandlers' translations.

What I appreciated was Platonov's dense and complex use of allusions and imagery throughout the story. While one of the character's (Voshchev's) desire and search for truth does become tedious through repetition, the philosophical underpinnings of the novel were fascinating (if a little eccentric). There is much to the story, not simply in a historical sense – more than can be gleaned from a single reading. I suppose I'd have to call it a novel that is more valuable than entertaining. To be completely honest, I had to force myself to read it at times, which is a rare occurrence for me.

On the back cover of this Vintage edition is the following blurb from The Times:

"Perhaps the only writer to have advanced Russian prose beyond what had already been achieved by Chekhov."

This claim is simply outrageous to me – at least based on the text of *The Foundation Pit* that I read. I'll have to read more by Platonov to be sure; but I highly doubt that his writing will overshadow the beautiful prose of Vasily Grossman, to name just *one* of the *many* great Russian writers since Chekhov.

Having said that, I admire Platonov's vision, and there are definitely little gems, sometimes quite hidden away from immediate sight, in *The Foundation Pit*.

"Without truth I simply feel ashamed to be alive." (34)

julieta says

Terrifying and sad book. What happens when you take out all individuality from people? You are left with empty caricatures. It is so well written though, you see other things, sadness, but also compassion and humor.

Amazing discovery, Platonov.

Malcolm says

Despite all the image of it being a dull, glum place, the Soviet Union produced a fair number of satirists – although few if any of the really good ones were published in the USSR. Bulgakov's satire is biting, and in

some work subtle, while other work in the 1920s, especially the early part of the decade, was very much of the politically engaged and critical avant-garde, some of it (a fair amount) produced by Party members, true believers in the forthcoming era of liberation that was foretold by the overthrow of the aristocracy and the defeat of the capitalists.

Of course, that is not exactly how things went; the problem is usually presented as Stalinism, which with its monolithism must carry some of the blame, or among some of the more astute (or jargon engaged) the dictatorship of the proletariat – when it might better be seen as not the dictatorship of the proletariat as such but the Leninist notion that the vanguardist Party knew what the proletariat wanted. The result was a mass of the people isolated from the struggle taking place in their names, leading to a great proletarian mass as alienated from their ‘species being’ (to take Bertell Ollman’s term). This problem of alienation is at the heart of the sharp, brutal novel based in the absurdities of the second five year plan. It is made all the more unsettling because Platonov was a true revolutionary believer and had been a loyal Party member – unlike Bulgakov or many of the other satirists.

It is this insider status that makes this novel so fabulous and so subtle because it is a novel of language – the satire rests in the disruptive deployment of the language of the revolution. There is a wonderful moment where the local hierarchy is thrown into a state of crisis because there remains one waged worker in the collective farm, a metal worker in the blacksmith’s foundry who must immediately be organised into a union (a union of one? Surely that is a contradiction). It turns out that this one proletarian member of the commune is not human, is the best in the village at identifying kulaks (who must be annihilated as a class, which does not according to some mean extermination as people, just as a class) and in a sense provides the peasants of the village with their proletarian leadership (because, of course, peasants cannot have the revolutionary consciousness to lead the struggle because they are not workers). Throughout the slightly surreal narrative, this linguistic satire plays with revolutionary jargon to disrupt the heroic status of the workers.

This irony, this disruption of linguistic meaning finds a parallel in the experience of the novel’s characters, who all exist in a thoroughly alienated state: Voshchev, the ‘hero’ drifts into his work having been sacked from a machine shop because he spent too much time thinking and slowed down production; the powerful peasant-turned-proletarian labourer Chiklin finds satisfaction only in physical work – but when he knocks someone down with a well-placed punch he is not responsible because it was not him, but his fist. Katya, the child who provides revolutionary hope spouts clichéd slogans the seem to be centred on denying her status as an orphan child of the bourgeoisie and who despite her love for Chiklin, her protector, only wants her mother. These are not people who have been brought to a higher form of humanity by the socialist revolution.

Finally, there is the foundation pit that Voshchev, Chiklin and their fellow proletarians are digging, a foundation pit for a great communal home for the town so its residents will no longer live in individualist isolation from the people..... a pit that we just know will never be finished for a residence that will never be built..... as a symbol of a revolution that is so clearly failing. Platonov’s true belief was clearly in a bad way by the end of the 1920s when this was written.

Despite the despair, despite the alienation suffered by all in this, it is not a sad or depressing novel – it is absurd, with moments of wry humour, such as on p 39:

“The investigation had dragged on for an entire month and they had even made a fuss about her husband’s first names. Why Leon and then Ilyich? Just whose side was he on?”..... [it is taken for granted that we will know to ask: Trotsky or Lenin?]

The challenge in reading this now is that for many of us, this language, this jargon of the revolutionary party and its functionaries has little resonance – but it is the element of the novel around which the satire turns and relates not only to the levels of signification carried by words and especially this jargon of revolutionary rhetoric, but also in the dual hard and soft form of Russian consonants and the way as a language it functions in both a circuitous and direct manner. Platonov has given us a subtle and powerful novel that while lacking the grotesque satire of some Bulgakov (most obviously, *The Master and Margarita* with its excesses of adherence) or the absurdist accessibility of *Waiting for Godot* should be seen as brutal in its critique of language and nihilistic in its view of better times to come. But in order to see that, we need to pay close attention to the multiple meanings of language. All in all, this is a quite brilliant piece of work.

Jose Moa says

This is a no usual dystopic novel, is rather a totalitarian based reality dystopic novel; is one no easy to read but Platonov is a great writer and its worth the time.

The novel is on the forced intense industrialization and collectivization of the farms in hands of the peasants and his destruction, sometimes physically, as a class in the quinquenal last 20s plan ordered by Stalin (a fanatic genocide that most has made for despregiate socialism as a ideology).

This work of Platonov is a sinister, acid, ironic, poetic and sometimes of black humor critic on the fanaticism and intolerance applied to the stalinism, is also a existential novel where the characters are wandering as zombies with a empty life without meaning, absurd and hopeless, working to the extenuation only to fill his time and give some sense to his world, being his only hope that the future youngs would reach the promised paradisiac land of socialism; the landscapes described in the novel are so sad, bleak and empty as the characters.

The foundation pit is a great hole on which will never be build a great building to dwell the inhabitants of the surroundings and is a simbol of the absurd and emptiness of the meaning of existence that permeates all the novel.

A novel on one of the most tragic episodes of the russian history, and only recently published in Russia and translated into english (there no exist spanish translation, again i dont know why).

As a simple i will transcribe literally some paragraphs of the novel:

"Stalins most important of all, and then-Budyonny. Before they came, when only bourgeoisie lived, I couldnt be born because I didnt want be born. But now that Stalins become, Ive become too!"

"Is the way things are done", replied Chiklin. The dead are all special-they are important people
"Telling me" exclaimed Nastya in atonishment. "I dont know why people go on living. Why doesnt everyone die and become important?"

Did you notice cocks? asked the activist

"There arent any", said Voshchev. "One man was lying in his yard and told me that you ate the last one when you where walking about collective farm and you suddenly felt hunger".

"What must be clarified", declared the activist, "is not who ate the last cock, but who ate the first cock".

"Maybe the first one dropped dead? surmised an assistant activist

"How in the world could he drop dead by himself?asked the activist in astonishment."Are you telling me he is a conscious saboteur

"Marxism will be able to do everything.Why do you think Lenins lying there in Moscow still intact?.He is awaiting Science-he wants to rise again!."

Hendrik says

Es war kein Vergnügen dieses Buch zu lesen, eher eine Quälerei. Keinesfalls will ich damit sagen, dass es schlecht geschrieben wäre. Im Gegenteil, die beklemmende Atmosphäre überträgt sich nur allzu gut auf einen selbst. Mit jeder gelesenen Seite verdichtet sich das Gefühl einer tristen Ausweglosigkeit. Denn in dieser Welt gibt es keine Hoffnung mehr – alle Illusionen einer verheißungsvollen Zukunft sind verloren gegangen. Die Baugrube ist ein Spiegelbild der post-revolutionären, sowjetischen Gesellschaft. Hier versammeln sich alle Archetypen der damaligen Zeit, das Proletariat, die Intelligenz, Zweifler und Überzeugte. Gemeinsam "wollen" sie das Fundament für das ersehnte kommunistische Paradies legen. Doch jede Aktivität erstickt in einer bleiernen Müdigkeit, die sich auf alle legt. Selbst ein kleines Mädchen, die Tochter einer *Bourgeoisen*, das Symbol für den "Neuen Menschen", entpuppt sich lediglich als die personifizierte Grausamkeit in unschuldig-kindlichem Gewand.

Das Buch durfte zu Lebzeiten des Autors nicht erscheinen. Sicherlich nicht überraschend, angesichts der pessimistischen Grundstimmung der Geschichte. Erst Ende der achtziger Jahre kam es zu einer Veröffentlichung. Mich wundert vielmehr, dass Andrej Platonow die stalinistischen Säuberungen der 1930er Jahre überlebt hat.

Bemerkenswert ist auch die Sprache des Romans. Alle Figuren sprechen eine irgendwie "falsche" Sprache. Die Grammatik ist stets etwas daneben. Man merkt, es stimmt etwas nicht. Phrasen aus dem kommunistischen Sprachgebrauch werden abgewandelt in die Dialoge eingeflochten. Dadurch vermittelt sich unterschwellig, die Dysfunktionalität der Handelnden als Subjekte in der neuen Gesellschaftsordnung.

Das ist keine leichte Lektüre, aber zugegeben eindrucksvoll. Ich hab das Buch im Nachgang zu Andrzej Stasiuks *Der Osten* gelesen. Stasiuk hat "Die Baugrube" auf seinen Reisen dabeigehabt. Man versteht warum: Beide Bücher beschreiben das Scheitern einer (derselben) Utopie.

Eddie Watkins says

I read great swathes of this book as absurdist black comedy, and kept imagining the events portrayed as scenes in a marginally avant-garde silent film. Each character is a ghost, or husk of itself, and moves through

the narrative as a reasoning automaton, even if that reasoning is fatally flawed, and is not even properly “reasoning”. Each character is trapped inside its own type-casting, with this type-casting being triple-layered – by the author, by the pervasive authority within the narrative, and by the characters themselves. There is very little breathing room in this book; an arid completely humanly defined atmosphere pervades the book. All of nature is reduced to a human apprehension of its utility, or lack thereof. It is a portrayal of life on earth as a machine existence: bloodless, emotionless, structured by simplistic reason. Yet still I found it funny! Absurdly funny.

My laughter puzzles me. While I think the humor was intentional, when I look at a photograph of the author I am not so sure. Dour Russian; the weight of the world dragging down his jowls prematurely. But humorists do not always laugh themselves. Sometimes the humor reveals so much that is tragic and meaningless that there is no laughter upon return; the laughter so deep and meaningful, so drenched in tragic fatalism, that it can not vent itself from the depths of one’s soul. There is just a subsonic barely perceptible quaking. This is what I suspect happened in Platonov’s case. He set out to write an allegorical satire of the horrors he witnessed, and in the process found himself so bound up in those horrors, horrors perpetuated by an ideology he once believed in (and still did, I suspect, in his idealism), that satire itself became far too constraining, and even his own reasoning abilities could not handle the influx of emotions dredged up by his tackling of the subject through writing, that his only option was to fall back into the arms of aesthetic intuition and write a book beyond all categorical limitations.

So my ultimate appraisal is that *The Foundation Pit*’s absurdism, and its humor, is nothing more or less than intellectual realism; the product of a brain living through absurd situations encasing it like a prison ruled and structured by aberrant reason. The tragic reality is so inherently and unself-consciously absurd that conscious absurdism is the only way to deal with it, but even then it can not be overcome directly and so must be confronted with a variety of tones and tactics bolstered by pure artistic instinct. This is no anti-Soviet tract as dry and obvious as the ideology it’s attacking, but a work of art presented with all its inner conflicts intact.

Briefly, it is the story of a man who is starting life over after being booted from his former job for thinking too much. He has nothing – no family, no home, nothing - but his need to survive, and drifts into an enormous state project to build a tower capable of housing all the country’s workers. The first order of business is to build the foundation pit – a Herculean undertaking – but that’s as far as the project progresses. Involved in this project are a cast of misfits, laborers, engineers, and union bosses, each with his role to play, and each decaying into varying psychoses quite rapidly through the narrative; each character getting buried under the labor required to build a future that never arrives. There is hope in the guise of a young girl, who enters the narrative as if straight out of a laborer’s dreams. This girl will be the only person in the book to enjoy the fruits of the backbreaking labor, but she dies, all hopes dashed.

The allegorical aspects of the book did not quite win me over, especially the girl as representing “hope”. But was the allegory even meant to be convincing, or was the use of allegory itself another layer of satire, a criticism of the communists’ insistence on forcing meaning onto every meaningless activity, like empty branding of itself, a self-perpetuating machine of self-defined meaning? It’s possible it was both sincere and satirical, as the tone of the book is loaded with internal conflict, and so is akin to poetry rather than logical exposition; another reason why I loved it so much.
