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*Evgenij Vodolazkin , Lisa Hayden (Translator)*

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It is the late fifteenth century and a village healer in Russia is powerless to help his beloved as she dies in childbirth, unwed and without having received communion. Devastated and desperate, he sets out on a journey in search of redemption. But this is no ordinary journey: it is one that spans ages and countries, and which brings him face-to-face with a host of unforgettable, eccentric characters and legendary creatures from the strangest medieval bestiaries. Laurus's travels take him from the Middle Ages to the Plague of 1771, where as a holy fool he displays miraculous healing powers, to the political upheavals of the late-twentieth century. At each transformative stage of his journey he becomes more revered by the church and the people, until he decides, one day, to return to his home village to lead the life of a monastic hermit – not realizing that it is here that he will face his most difficult trial yet.

*Laurus* is a remarkably rich novel about the eternal themes of love, loss, self-sacrifice and faith, from one of Russia's most exciting and critically acclaimed novelists.

## Laurus Details

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# From Reader Review Laurus for online ebook

## Hugh says

I hope this doesn't come across as meaningless hyperbole - this book is extraordinary and the translation is brilliant. There are some fine detailed reviews here already, notably those by Antonomasia (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>) and Paul Fulcher (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>), and I accidentally left my copy on a train just after finishing it, so I'll confine myself to a brief overview.

This is the story of Arseny, a humble 15th century Russian who begins life as the orphaned grandson of a village healer. After his grandfather dies, he saves an orphan girl and takes her in, but when she dies while giving birth to their stillborn son, he begins a series of travels and adventures as a form of penance, becoming increasingly saintly in the Russian holy fool tradition. The story follows many of the conventions of mediaeval myths, so we are expected to take all sorts of miracles at face value, and also says a lot about Russian orthodoxy and what it demands of its saints. Things get stranger when his Italian travelling companion appears, since he has detailed visions of the future including many 20th century events, some of which shed light on the author's own motives, and allow him to discuss ideas with the knowledge of 20th century science. The story frequently lapses into archaic speech, for which the translator has cleverly found old English equivalents.

I am probably just scratching the surface of what could be said about this book, all I can say is read it for yourself.

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## Ana says

I was very surprised to realize that this book has been published only recently, because the writing is consistent with an end of the 18th century style, and not only in its mimetic qualities, but rather in its actual construction. The author chose a medieval character and a travel across Russia towards the Holy Land in order to talk about God and the belief in God. The writing is exquisite, an absolute pleasure to read, and the characters are very, very nicely developed.

P.S.: Many thanks should go to my friend who let me borrow this book from him. You were right!

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## booklady says

A new Medieval Russian novel—well new for me and new considering seventy years of Communism has precluded this type of literature. When I first read about *Laurus* in a favorite book catalog I can't begin to tell you how excited I was. *Real* literature has returned to Russia, and who knows how to write romantic (in the old sense of the word) travelogues like the Russians? C.S. Lewis would be thrilled. He might even bend his one-old-book-for-every-new-book rule in this case.

*Laurus* is about one man's life's quest for atonement. Along his journey Laurus changed his name four times and each change represented a radical shift in his circumstances and perspective. It's a beautiful tale; chock full of ponder-able quotes, herb-lore, wise souls, Russian Orthodox customs and beliefs. Here are a few of

my favorites:

‘Do not fear death, for death is not just the bitterness of parting. It is also the joy of liberation.’

‘It is just that memory should not be too long. That you know is not for the best. After all, some things should be forgotten.’

‘You have dissolved yourself in God. You disrupted the unity of your life, renouncing your name and your very identity. But in the mosaic of your life there is also something that joins all those separate parts: it is an aspiration for Him. They will gather together again in Him.’

Can’t remember when I have read a novel as profound as this.

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## Razvan Zamfirescu says

Spicuiri din recenzia finala care se gaseste pe blogul meu

.....

*Am cugetat la titlul romanului care spune din start c? este un roman neistoric, Vodolazkin subliniind c? a pus o sticl? de plastic într-o p?dure din Evul Mediu pentru a sublinia faptul c? Laur nu este un roman istoric. Da, Laur este un roman anistoric. La fel ?i Laur/Arseni/Ustin/Ambrozie. Plutesc deasupra timpului, sunt prezen?i lâng? tine, sunt prezentul rememorând trecutul ?i viitorul. Anistoric nu în sensul gândit ?i propus de Nietzsche, ci anistoric în sensul de roman care trece dincolo de ce presupune capacitatea noastră de percep?ie a timpului – un roman care curge precum nisipul din clepsidr?, clepsidr? pe care o întorci imediat înapoi ca s?-ncerci s? vezi nisipul cum curge din nou...*

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## Gorkem says

### Rus Gerçeküstücülüğü

Eugene Vodolazkin Rusya'da son yıllarda adın? fazlasıyla duyuran ba?arılı bir yazar oldu?unu uluslararası edebiyat dergilerinde okumu?um. Özellikle Vodolazkin'in Laurus ba?arıs? ve Rusya'da çok prestijli oldu?u ifade edilen 2 önemli ödül sahibi olmas?, uluslararası anlamda da ele?tirmenlerce övülmesi bu kitaba kar?? ilgimi üst seviyelere ta??d?.

Vodolazkin, özellikle Ortaça? Rusyas? konusunda uzmanla?m?? bir tarihçi aslında. Bu nedenle de bu kitabın olu?turuldu?unu ortaça? kurgusu, dinsel, spiritüel ö?eler, mistik ve gerçeküstü olaylar kitapta s?rtmay?p olu?turulan dünyay? çok ilgi çekici k?l?yor. Laurus konu olarak, bu çerçeve içerisinde gerçeklik

alg?s?n? çok fazla dejenere etmeden farklı bir fantastik dünya içerisine sokuyor bizi.

## Konu

Vodolazkin'in ana karakteri, yetim kalan özel güçlere sahip olan Arseni'nin hac? ve ayn? zaman iyile?tirici (the healer) güçleri olan, do?adaki tüm bitkilerin hangi hastal?klara iyi geldi?ini bilen dedesi Christopher'in Arseny'yi kendisi gibi yeti?tirilmesi ile kitab?m?z ba?lı?yor. Ve Arseny'nin dedesini kaybedip iyice güçsüzle?en köyünün kurtulmas? için yolculu?a ç?kmas?yla bamba?ka bir hale geliyor.

## Sonuç

Bu müthi? kitap Türkçe'ye kazand?rabilinir mi bilmiyorum. Fakat kazand?rıl?rsa gerçekten gerçeküstücülükten ho?lanan Türk okurlar?n ad?na inan?lmaz keyif verici olacak.

Laurus metin olarak çok zor bir metin. Nedeni ise, kitapta baz? konu?malar?n ortaça? Rusças? ile yaz?lmas?, baz? ortodox ve incil göndermelerinin olmas?n?n kitab?n anla?ıl?rlı?n? az da olsa etkilemektedir. En az?ndan hristiyanlık göndermeleri ad?na!

?ngilizce okumak isteyenlere öneririm.Okumadan önce amazonda ön okumalar?na bir bakman?z? kesinlikle öneririm

Türkçe okumak umuduyla!

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## Vit Babenco says

“And then there is the fish with many legs. No matter what color stone it swims up to, it takes on that color: if it is white, it turns white, if it is green, it turns green. Some people, child, are the same: they are Christians with Christians and infidels with infidels.”

*Laurus* is an unexpected conjunction of magic realism and hieroglyphy and the book is tragically poetical.

“Ustina was not separate from his love for her. Ustina was love and love was Ustina. He carried it as if it were a candle in a dark forest. He feared that thousands of greedy night-creatures would fly toward that flame all at once and extinguish it with their wings.”

The main hero was presented with a precious love, like a gift from above, but he couldn't keep it, his love was dramatically lost. So ever after, tormented by his guilt and grief, he lived trying to redeem this irretrievable loss by healing the others and attempting to be impeccably righteous.

“What is this? the new abbess asks those present, herself most of all. Is this the result of our brother Ustin's therapeutic measures or the Lorde's miracle, appearing independently of human action? Essentially, the abbess answers herself: one does not contradict the other, for a miracle can be the result of effort multiplied by faith.”

He heals not just with profundity of his faith but also with the power of his will and the purity of his spirit... “A city of saints, whispered Ambrogio, following the play of the shadow. They present us the illusion of life. No, objected Arseny, also in a whisper. They disprove the illusion of death.”

But who can draw that borderline after which sinful existence ends and sainthood begins?

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## Calzean says

This is an impressive read. In 15th Century Rus', Arseny becomes a healer, spiritualist and holy man. The book charts the four parts of his life - as an orphan living with his Grandfather who is also a healer and then lives with Ustina who dies in child birth, he then wanders and becomes a holy man, he journeys to Jerusalem, years later he returns to his birth place.

Through this there is humour, naturopathy, old language, debates on time and when the world will end, prophecies, jumps to future events, spirituality, Arseny trying to find reason for the death of Ustina, belief, plague, pestilence and life in Medieval Russia.

A wild ride on every page.

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## Janet says

IT'S HARD TO WRITE saintly characters. Alyosha in The Brothers Karamazov is the least interesting of the brothers. Everybody reads the Inferno, but how many make it to Paradise? Yet Eugene Vodolazkin, whose second novel, Laurus, won both Russia's Big Book and Yasnaya Polyana prizes in 2013, succeeds gloriously, giving us not just goodness but an actual saint — a fictional wonderworker in the 15th century. A scholar of medieval literature at St. Petersburg's Pushkin House, the Institute for Russian Literature, Vodolazkin propels us headlong into the strangeness and wonders of medieval Russia.... Read the rest of my review here:

<https://lareviewofbooks.org/review/th...>

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## Simona says

Un roman incredibil despre timp, despre vindecare și despre mântuire prin iubire, scris într-un sublim registru tarkovskian.

După părăsirea mea, meritul cel mai important al acestei cărți este că reușește să se facă dezirabil și digerabil atât pentru evlavioși cât și pentru liber-cugetători, fiind lipsit de orice aroganță excesiv moralizatoare.

Spun că este o carte *despre timp*, deoarece arată cum și de ce anume nu există timp fizic, ci doar veșnicia. Pentru Creator nu este nimeni mort, însă doar planul existenței fizice este cel în care putem acționa și putem evolua.

Spun că este o carte *despre vindecare*, fiindcă arată cum procesul vindecării nu se epuizează în timpul duirea trupei, nici nu se reduce la despovărea sufletului de păcate, dar spune și de unde anume vine eliberarea completă.

Și în fine, este o carte *despre mântuire prin iubire*, fiindcă Arseni împlinește, în trista și chinuită lui existență pământească, exact sintagma ce face diferența între Legea Veche, a lui Moise și Legea Nouă, a lui Iisus Hristos: "Poruncă nouă: iubii-vă unii pe alții așa cum v-am iubit Eu".

Adulat sau repudiat, Arseni este ca este singurul responsabil pentru toate relele ce îi se întâmplă în viață, dar nu încetează să îi iubească și să îi aline pe toți, buni și răi, cucernici sau păcătoși, sperând iertare pentru sine și mântuire pentru Ustina, de a cărei moarte se învinuiește până la sfârșitul zilelor.

În glorie sau în mizerie, amărât sau fericit, slujește până la sacrificiul suprem aproapele, apoi pășește lumea în opoziție publică, dar împăcat cu sine și îndumnezeit pe deplin.

Superlativul apoteozei creștine, nu-i așa?

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## Douglas Dalrymple says

An unusual and interesting, but finally unsuccessful book, I think.

*Laurus* has been compared by at least one critic to *The Name of the Rose* and by another to (of all things) *Canterbury Tales*, but it seems to have nothing in common with these beyond the fact that it too is set in the Middle Ages. As a fictional portrait of a medieval saint, *Laurus* might be better compared with Frederick Buechner's *Godric*. As a work of fiction written by a medievalist (and hence with a whiff of authenticity to it), you might compare it to Frans Bengtsson's *The Long Ships*. I'm afraid, however, that *Laurus* loses badly by each of these comparisons.

I'm not sure whether to blame the author himself or the translator. From what I understand, the translator had a difficult job here. Vodolazkin apparently falls sporadically into a medieval style of Russian in the original, which the translator tried to capture with bits of archaic English spelling and diction; but then there are jarring modern phrases and references scattered throughout as well. I did find the first 150 pages and the final 30 rather excellent. In between, however, there are unnecessary characters, aimless brief episodes, bits of comic relief that feel out of place, and seemingly pointless references (mostly through an Italian character subject to prophetic visions) of future twentieth-century events that bear little relation to the main story. It begins at a certain point to feel like self-indulgence on the part of the author.

Like the main character himself, who goes through four names and life stages in the course of the tale, *Laurus* is disjointed, out of sync with itself. In that respect it does read like certain medieval documents (the *Travels* of John Mandeville or of Marco Polo come to mind), but I'm afraid that, to my mind, it fails to satisfy as a novel.

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## Caro M. says

I loved it. Simple and brilliant, this novel is one of those you don't get to read every day. It's one huge metaphor of time and human life itself, but at the same time it's a chronicle of life of the particular human. And it breaks your heart and makes you smile at the same time. The language is easy and beautiful, and the trick of using Old Russian language mixed together with modern words gives an extraordinary effect, sometimes puzzling, sometimes comical.

Strongly recommended.

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## Paul Fulcher says

*"There were, however, those who did not want to come to terms with death but also reflected on ways to overcome it, even in the case of a universal end. It was among these people that a rumour began to spread, saying Amvrosy possessed the elixir of immortality. That Amvrosy, when he was still Arseny, had allegedly brought that elixir from Jerusalem."*

...

*Fearing that there would not be enough elixir for everyone when the time came, some people settled by the monastery walls and built themselves some semblance of housing. They imagined the monastery could function like a new ark that might take them in if the necessity arose.*

*Amvrosy came to see these people when their numbers topped one hundred. He looked at their squalid housing for a long time and then signalled to them to follow him. After entering the monastery's gates, Amvrosy led them into the Church of the Dominion of the Mother of God. A service was finishing in the church at that same time and Elder Innokenty walked through the royal doors of the iconostasis carrying the Communion chalice. A ray of morning sun broke away from a grated window. The ray of sun was still weak. It slowly fought its way through the thick smoke on incense. It devoured barely perceptible dust motes one by one: once inside, they began swirling in a pensive Brownian dance. The ray of sun brightened the church as it played on the silver of the chalice. That light was so brilliant that those who entered squinted. Amvrosy pointed to the chalice and said:*

*The elixir of immortality is in there and there is enough for everyone."*

Laurus is ostensibly a hagiography, telling the story of a (fictitious) 15th Century "Holy Fool" ("*the gaze of someone whose state of mind differs from what is generally accepted*"), except he is anything but a fool:

*"He came into the world in the Rukina Quarter, by the Kirrilo-Belozersky Monastery. This occurred on May 8 of the 6,948th year since the Creation of the world, the 1,440th since the Birth of our Saviour Jesus Christ, on the feast day of Arsenius the Great. Seven days later he was baptized with the name Arseny.*

...

*He had four names at various times. A person's life is heterogeneous, so this could be seen as an advantage. Life's parts sometimes have little in common, so little that it might appear various people lived them. When this happens, it is difficult not to feel surprised that all these people carry the same name. He also had two nicknames."*

Those four names are 1. Arseny, his given birth name and one he reverts to following a period as. 2. Ustin, a name he assumes, in c.6964 after he leaves his home town following a traumatic event, which haunts the rest of his life, and becomes a largely mute, Holy fool. 3. Amvrosy, the name he takes as a monk in 6995 as he anticipates the possible end of the world in the 7000 and 4. (Spoiler alert - it doesn't happen) Laurus, as he goes into seclusion from 7000 to his death in 7028.

And the nicknames are "Rukinets", after the quarter where he was born, and more widely "Doctor", since Arseny's true gift is as a healer. At any early age he is inducted by his Grandfather Christopher into the mysteries of herbal medicine, but Christopher, and subsequently Arseny, realise that the herbs are merely a medium both for God's power and also the words of those involved:

*"Christofer did not exactly believe in herbs, more likely he believed God's help would come, through any herb, for a specific matter.*

And talking of Arseny:

*"It is thought that the word vrach, for medical doctor, comes from the word vrati, which means to say an incantation. The role of word was more significant during the middle ages because of the limited selection of medicines.*

*Doctors spoke. They knew certain methods for treating ailments, but they did not pass up opportunities to*



*address disease directly. Uttering rhythmic phrases that outwardly lacked meaning, they said an incantation over the illness, smoothly convincing it to abandon the patient's body.*

*Patients spoke. In the absence of diagnostic technology, patients needed to describe, in details, everything occurring within their ailing bodies.*

*The patients' relatives spoke. They clarified their loved ones' statements or even amended them.*

*The defining trait of the person under discussion is that he spoke very little. He remembered the words of Arsenius the Great: I have often regretted the things I have said, but I have never regretted my silence. Most often he looked wordlessly at the patient. He might say only, your body will still serve you. Or, your body has become unsuitable, prepare to leave it; know that this shell is imperfect."*

Laurus is more than a mere pastiche of a traditional hagiography, in particular it's self-aware of it's status as a 21st Century novel. This is most manifest in the character of Ambroggio, with whom Arseny makes a lengthy and hazardous pilgrimage journey to Jerusalem. For Ambroggio he can see the future, particularly the distant future, as well as the past.

At times his premonitions are a little forced e.g. when they walk past O'wi?cim ("*Believe me, O Arseny, this place will induce horror in centuries.*") even the acknowledgement that while they await the end of the world, elsewhere (unknown to most) the New World is being discovered ("*On the one hand, a new continent would be discovered, on the other, the end of the world was expected in Rus'*", the year 7000 corresponding to 1492 in our modern calendar.

But they work most successfully, and strikingly, when the stories are at a more micro level - premonitions of the fate of buildings down the ages or stories of relatives or people in centuries to come. This fits with one of the novels key themes - that the linear progression of time is merely an error of our limited perception.

Similarly the text contains the odd deliberate anachronism - an appearance of "*yellowed plastic bottles*" in a 15th Century scene, like archaeological detritus but from the future. And the language of the novel blends elements of Soviet-era bureaucratese, archaic biblical language and the odd flash of 21st Century slang ("*you're not like, you know, allowed to beat Holy fools*").

The translation by Lisa Hayden (<http://lizoksbooks.blogspot.co.uk/> and <http://www.goodreads.com/user/show/11...>) copes wonderfully with the book's challenges, and was deservedly shortlisted for the Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize.

The end of the novel, the last 28 years of Arseny's life, is very compact, as he himself loses the sense of linear time.

*"I no longer sense unity in my life, said Laurus. My life was lived by four people who do not resemble one another and they have various bodies and various names. What do I have in common with the light-haired little boy from the Rukina Quarter? A memory? But the longer I live, the more my reminiscences seem like an invention."*

And the story is brought fittingly full circle, allowing Arseny/Laurus a redemption of sorts, and also re-echoing an earlier scene where the young Arseny gazes into a fire and sees the elderly Laurus "*who is sitting by the fire and sees the face of a light-haired boy and does not want the person who has entered to disturb him.*"

One of the main pleasures of the book to me was the sympathetic treatment of the main character. He displays a similar mixture of strong religious faith but also honest doubt, humility and intellectual curiosity as Rev Broughton in Marilynne Robinson's wonderful Gilead.

Strongly recommended

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## Antonomasia says

A book in a genre I've hardly read since my age hit double figures: stories of the saints. *Laurus*, the life of a fictional fifteenth-century Russian folk healer, holy fool, pilgrim and eventual monk is essentially an invented example; baptised Arseny, he adopts a number of names through the phases of his life, culminating in 'Laurus'. Miracles and prophetic visions are presented as a matter of course, as in the life of a saint, not the mode of fantasy or magic realism familiar to non-religious English speaking readers. It's strangely fresh - if, that is, literal hagiographies are something you haven't encountered for a long time and are long past being tired of. Unlike a traditional saint's life written for the faithful, the narrative doesn't refer to God as an active force, though characters' religious beliefs are certainly part of the story. It's a clever approach that makes it possible for the book to appeal to believers and to atheists. (Or at least to atheists with a touch of sympathy for mysticism - this book may frustrate readers with a strict preference for realist fiction, or who are continually infuriated by the religious - or who like their fictional magical systems to come with clear rules. Those who grew up reading religious stories may see as I did that this *is* a familiar 'magical system' from a time before we read about most of those others. Unspoken mystery, more than logic or rules, is its governing principle.)

*Laurus* is also an intoxicatingly atmospheric work of historical fiction. Late medieval + plague + folk religion/magic are home territory for me as history topics - in Western Europe, particularly England, that is. Russia is less familiar, though I know a little, a fair bit of it from W.F. Ryan's *The Bathhouse at Midnight*. (It's been a while since I looked at it, but still highly recommended.) Everything in *Laurus* that was not intended as deliberate anachronism and evocation of the slipperiness of time (like plastic bottles among the debris of a spring thaw) rang resoundingly true of the era. Whilst I gained a strong sense of trust in the narrative and research - the author is an academic specialising in medieval Russian literature - I still craved to know the accuracy of local details (e.g. Did people use that herb for that? Is that exactly how stoves were?) but not knowing for sure about these bits and pieces, being unable to nitpick as I might have with an equivalent novel about an English cunning-man, meant that I could get more fully lost in the story *qua* story. And with mysticism, that is most definitely part of the objective. The strength of religious and magical beliefs in *Laurus* are such that it feels like a more powerful evocation of the medieval world-view - in so far as someone of the C20th-C21st century has any business with an opinion on such an ineffable, lost thing - than is most historical fiction, which de-centres religion for contemporary preferences.

The original novel interpolates occasional phrases of medieval Russian with a bulk of more timeless narrative, and the odd deliberately contemporary word. The translation renders medieval forms via the easily readable means of extra 'e's on the end of some words and some 'y's instead of 'i', although a handful of archaic vocab is also present, including the adorable 'flittermouse'. I'd have liked to see something bolder done with these olde worlde bits, phrases or adaptations from Langland and Chaucer perhaps, although several decades too early; Chaucer would be beautifully appropriate for the pilgrimage episode. (Though it's not as if I know *The Canterbury Tales* well enough to swear that there's no phrase of it lurking in *Laurus*.) I can understand why publishers would play it relatively safe with the language, despite recent acclaim for *The Wake* and its cod-Old English; the audience for new translations is not huge anyway and difficult wordforms

may put off a few more readers. (One editing choice that did seem odd, however, was to keep several Polish place names in transliteration of Russian whilst other towns were given their general, local or English names correct for the time. It was good to see the inclusion of a map - more novels should have them; although what was really needed was not the map of Europe and the Near East, which readers with decent general knowledge know anyway - but one showing the Russian towns and villages Arseny travelled around.)

Skimming some blogs about *Laurus* and Vodolazkin, not long after starting the book, I noticed the author had wanted to write about 'a good man', in deliberate contrast to the darker or ambiguous lead characters in many contemporary novels.

This particular type of moral approach these days is uncommon in Western literary fiction. If the Anglo lit world has a dominant moral paradigm at the moment, it's about the representation of diversity and especially feminism - the other significant strand being aesthetic or hedonistic, not much different from Wilde's stance over a hundred years earlier, that books are not [morally] good or bad, they are well or poorly written. A novel by a white male author about a white male lead character inevitably has limited traction with the audience that chooses and judges books primarily by diversity criteria. Arseny's journey and good works are essentially, from the modern perspective, about atoning for an abusive relationship (in his teens, his girlfriend Ustina was, to his great sorrow, buried in unconsecrated ground - and possibly actually died - as a result of his possessive and controlling behaviour towards her in life): it's a clear and clever acknowledgement of current standards that sits rather well in a medieval context without using tired tropes of overly modern historical fiction. (I wasn't entirely convinced by his not marrying her when he grew up steeped in religion, a world where *human children come to life only at christening - if death occurs before that day, it lasts for all eternity*, but as the book wore on, this creaky hinge felt increasingly irrelevant in such a large story.) The book would lose points with some of those diversity focused readers - a group I for one, find it hard to get away from online, and who are more successful at laying unwanted guilt on me over my continuing hair-splitting disagreements and stubborn attempts to plough my own furrows than was any religion foisted on me in childhood - because, whilst it is acknowledged, in a fascinating fusion of contemporary values with historical context *By destroying Ustina, I deprived her of the possibility of discovering what You placed within her, of developing that, and compelling a Divine light to shine.*, the book concentrates on Arseny's story. (I believe the derogatory term is '300 pages of manpain'.) From the current popular feminist perspective, Arseny's lifelong devotion to Ustina's memory (which Western medieval Christianity might have considered heretical), and its being the cause of good works, is going to be ambiguous. I think it's best seen in a medieval literary context: Ustina is to Arseny what Beatrice and Laura were to Dante and Petrarch. (These days, norms are very different. These days we also meet, and see images of, so many more appealing people than a medieval person would have: for most, after a few years even the strongest lost love fades and no longer seems quite the centre of life it once did. I also loved the way the author showed during the relationship, how immersion in a partner, when one feels otherwise completely alone in the world, is not necessarily the beautiful thing old poetry might imply: if it's there, there's probably also a fear of loss, and even if there is no violence, these attempts at fusion with another independent creature can end up unethical and hurtful rather than lovely. I'm not sure I've read any fiction better in understanding why someone might feel like this, of the wonder of it when brand new, and that it can go on to cause a horrible mess.)

The shape of time is perhaps the most metaphysical theme of *Laurus*. Theoretical philosophising over the nature of time isn't something that necessarily engages me a great deal; I tend to take what I need from other disciplines and find philosophy superfluous. In history, I am perfectly satisfied with linear time; in psychology I see how time may feel as if it exists in parallel when memories are sparked by something in the present, or as if it is circular when one finds drawn-out situations recurring with remarkable similarity. But metaphor, "is", rather than "as if" is fine too, emphasising the realness of those feelings in the immediate moment. Not just about one's own life but about places: 500 years ago, this was forest, feeling what it might

be like if one's chair were surrounded by trees, on soft ground, the air colder. In 100 years time, this might be under shallow water. Or back there might be covered in dense housing for millions more people. I think about this anywhere I spend much time - but characters in this book actually get, sometimes, to see. (Which I find wonderful, as some readers of superhero comics might the powers in those; the amount of information we can now find is vast, but how exhilarating to be able to see *more*, beyond the horizon.) Most curious are the visions of what, as far as I can tell, are ordinary Russians of the twentieth century and snippets of their lives. But why not? (I would like to have heard what fifteenth century men made of these moderns' outfits, gadgets and social roles, but that would have deviated from the non-judgemental yet almost holy tone of the narrative, which may be the only way to carry out such frequency of miracles under the nose of the present-day, predominantly rational reader.)

Bringing together the strands of religion, the struggles of daily life, and attempts to determine the future, eschatology is also presented as a worthy area of enquiry among the characters - as indeed it was - and, perceptively, as an understandable mass response at a time when most lives were filled with uncertainty, distress and upheaval. The palpable relief of its all being out of one's hands, and going to end soon is presented overtly here with greater empathy for the people than I remember textbooks having (its being one of the few areas on which historians of a couple of decades ago still appeared to look down on people of the past).

Whilst my knowledge of contemporary Russia is sketchier than that of its history, coming mostly from a few documentaries and one recent book, I feel that *Laurus* is one of those novels reflective of its time and place of writing: of the popular resurgence of mysticism, and of folk traditions, the latter partly as a facet of Russian nationalism. *Laurus* is carefully positioned in emphasising the spiritual and aesthetic components of this tendency to celebrate the country's cultural distinctiveness, without being overtly political in a way that may alienate the hawkish or the liberal. (Pilgrims are attacked whilst travelling abroad - but on one occasion it is by other Russians. The central character helps and stands up for the unfortunate; none of these whom we hear of individually is from a group that would be controversial for the Russian right - gay people or Muslims, for example - but there is space for the liberal to infer that he would help those people, because that's what his brand of goodness means from that position, especially if we grew up with the sort of liberal Christianity that frequently asserted Jesus would.) Arseny's origins near Belozersk, one of the fabled five original Russian cities, cement the idea of him as a personification of essential Russian tradition. My early feeling that the novel had something to do with the country's sense of itself was confirmed by the closing lines, from a conversation including a Danzig merchant:

*You have already been in our country for a year and eight months, answers blacksmith Averky, but have not understood a thing about it.*

*And do you yourselves understand it? asks Zygfryd.*

*Do we? The blacksmith mulls that over, and looks at Zygfryd. Of course we, too, do not understand.*

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## Dragos C Butuzea says

### un roman beton!

mi-a fost târ?e s? scriu despre romanul ?sta, dar frate! deja a trecut o groaz? de timp ?i tre' s? scriu, altfel o s? uit de el total. am c?utat ceva pe net, pe bloguri, dar cucu, nimeni n-a avut pân-acu?i sânge-n barabule s? scrie (excep?ia e aici, la valeriu gherghel).

## de ce mi-a plăcut?

**1. e o carte plină de speranță, luminoasă** - chiar dacă se petrece în evul mediu rusesc întunecat, de dinaintea lui Ivan cel Groaznic, unul plin de ciumă, de mizerie, dar și de mistică. personajul e plin de speranță și de voință de a face ceva.

**2. e scrisă brici** - propozițiile sunt scurte, percutante, arhaismele și neologismele se pupă uimitor sexy, verbele dinamizează acțiunea - și sî nu cumva sî lîsîm de izbeliște menționarea adrianei liciu, care a izbutit o traducere aleasă?.

**3. n-o închizi fîr sî ai bucurii la ea** - imposibil sî nu-și aprindă câteva beculuțe, sî nu-și zgârie câteva-ntrere pe creier.

## despre ce-i vorba?

ni se dă un bîrbat de prin secolul 15 și ni se povestește viața lui. decorul e-al rusiei înapoiate, sîpate de ciumă și tembelite de credințe pîgîn-cresătine (ortodoxe, firește). personajul e crescut de bunicul, un vraci - și aici suntem dași pe spate de cunoștințele autorului despre plantele de leac arhaice, o enciclopedie - pe care-l urmează în aceeași activitate. apoi tânărul se-ndrîgostește de-o copilă de pripas, o ascunde și-i face un copil. ei bine, tragedia vieții lui e că fata moare la naștere cu tot cu copil. ceea ce-i apăsător conștiința și, gata, intriga-i formată.

așa că personajul va trebui s-o ia prin lume, sî strîbată spațiul și timpul, sî se salveze prin fapte pe el însuși, dar și pe cei doi morți - femeia și copilul.

romanul este unul de formare (bildungsroman), personajul se transformă, din vraci (arseni) devine nebun, din nebun (ustin) devine pelerin, din pelerin, călugăr (ambrozic). din călugăr, pustnic (laur). și din pustnic, devine mort.

## ce probleme ne sunt puse de către autor?

apărut acum doi ani în rusia, acest roman, **laur**, a câștigat **cartea mare** (?????? ?????), cel mai important premiu literar rus, dar și premiul **iasnaia poliana** (în memoria lui tolstoi). după mine, romanul merită asupra de măsură pentru că autorul, evgheni vodolaskin e dat în pitpalacul mî-sii!

la 50 de ani, e om de ?tiin??, specialist în medievistic? ?i literatur? rus? veche. ?i mai ?i cite?te, c?ci e la curent cu ultimele tehnici literare.

folosindu-se de mentalitatea religioas? proprie acelui ev mediu întunecat când, cum spuneam, oamenii se tembeau de credin?e p?gâno-cre?tine, ?i de misticisme, autorul / cititorul e liber s? cugete la câteva teme esen?iale, s?dite beton dintotdeauna în mintea omului:

„ce ne face s? fim oameni, care e rela?ia dintre carne ?i spirit?“

„unde e Dumnezeu, undeva în afar? sau în noi în?ine?“

„e credin?a un moft sau un sprijin?“

„fericirea depinde de noi sau de lumea dimprejur?“

„ce e timpul, un continuu sau fragmente dispartate?“

„spa?iul e l?untric sau e o nevoie exterioar?“

„avem oare obliga?ia darurilor ce ne-au fost date?“

„ce e lumea?“

de?i se folose?te de religie, f?r? s? fie mistic, romanul e mai degrab? unul filozofic.

de?i e un roman al c?l?toriilor, chiar ?i a celor interioare, el se folose?te de locuri temporale ?i spa?iale doar pentru relativizarea, dar ?i pentru bog??ia discursului literar.

de?i nu d? o solu?ie - ideea c? totul e pierdere de timp e mereu reiterat? -, romanul pune întreb?ri. alegerile faptelor noastre e numai a noastr?, dar mântuirea apar?ine lui Dumnezeu.

exist? multe referin?e la timp în carte ?i o poveste contemporan?, intercalat? de autor (de altfel, în mod ironic, vodolaskin face multe inser?ii contemporane în textul s?u „medieval“, bun?oar? include în peisajul medieval ?i o sticl? de plastic), se sfâr?e?te cu afirma?ia c? totul e o „curat? pierdere de timp“.

la fel, ?i c?l?toria personajului principal e o pierdere de timp: providen?a îl alege înc? de la-nceput, ?i e de mirare pentru cititor cum toat? via?a / c?l?toria lui curge f?r? gre?, cum trece el ca prin urechile acului prin toate pericolele. parc? singurul lucru care-i mai r?mâne de f?cut sfântului este s?-?i piard? CUMVA timpul. mânat de obsesia mântuirii. mântuire care îi e deja dat? (cam protestant? idee pentru un autor ortodox).

?i noi, cititorii, am putea spune c? ne vom fi pierdut timpul citind cartea, îns? vom fi câ?tigat prin lucrurile despre care se vorbe?te în ea. cu mult mai u?or într-un astfel de roman, petrecut în evul mediu, a?a cum ne spune însu?i autorul pe primul flap al copertei:

Sunt lucruri despre care este mai u?or s? vorbe?ti în contextul unei Rusii str?vechi. Despre Dumnezeu, de exemplu. Dup? p?rerea mea, leg?turile cu El erau mai directe pe vremuri. Mai mult decât atât, pur ?i simplu existau. Acum natura acestor leg?turi îi preocup? doar pe pu?ini, ?i asta este nelini?titor.

iar despre spa?iu, citim:

Ce în?elegi tu prin drum - nu spa?iile care r?mân în spate? Ai ajuns cu întreb?rile tale pân? la Ierusalim, de?i ai fi putut s? le pui, s? spunem, ?i de Mân?stirea Sfântul Kiril. Nu spun c? sunt nefolositoare c?l?toriile: ele au sensul lor. Nu fii doar asemeni dragului t?u Alexandru [cel Mare], care a avut un drum, dar nu a avut un ?el. ?i nu te l?sa atras peste m?sur? de mi?carea orizontal?. (p. 269)

### **fast check**

or??elul pskov este acela unde ?arul ivan cel groaznic a venit, dup? ce-o f?cuse la novgorod, s?-i m?cel?reasc? locuitorii ?i unde legenda spune c? un nebun întru Cristos (?i personajul nostru va trece prin acest avatar), nikola salos, l-a salvat direct de la ?ar. i-a ar?tat o bucat? de carne crud? ?i i-a zis s-o m?nânce. ?arul a refuzat, motivând c? ?ine post. aa, nu m?nânci carne, ?ii post, da' sânge de om bei! demult ai uitat nu numai de post, dar ?i de Dumnezeu! t?u!

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## **Lark Benobi says**

When I got to the end of Laurus I thought: "this is the best book I've ever read." I've had that feeling before with other novels and I hope I will have it again in the future but even so Laurus will remain one of the most perfect and memorable experiences of my reading life.

It probably changed my experience to have read "The Confession of St. Patrick" before reading Laurus. Unlike Augustine's Roman intellectualism, St. Patrick's Confession describes a chaotic reality where the spiritual and the physical worlds are so intertwined that they sometimes interact in brutish ways--as when Patrick writes:

"The very same night while I was sleeping Satan attacked me violently, as I will remember as long as I shall be in this body; and there fell on top of me as it were, a huge rock, and not one of my members had any force."

St. Patrick describes the Devil as a force that can reach through from the spiritual world and manifest itself physically in this world, and the same sort of Christianity is at work in Laurus. In both Ireland and Russia Christianity developed without the mitigating rationality of Rome. This faith is visceral and unforgiving and absolute. Demons and angels are corporate. Faith healers are real. Holy fools are venerated. Future and past events can appear in dreams, and the consequences of sin and virtue are made manifest in this life: in the health of the body, in good or bad events, in the weather and the seasons.

The world view described with such tender care in this novel is very foreign to mine, and yet the writing is so grounded in physical detail, and so consistent throughout the novel, that I bought into it completely and was immersed in it entirely as I read.

I cried a lot. Even for the donkey. It's an amazing novel. It got to the absolute heart of me.

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## **Susan says**

This is a surprising, deep and mystical novel; set largely in medieval Russia but branching out to different places and sometimes different times. We know that Arseny was born in 1440 and was brought up by his grandfather, Christofer. When his grandfather dies, Arseny becomes the local healer and, one day, brings into his humble home a young woman – Ustina. When she dies in childbirth, he begins a life travelling and trying to make atonement for her death.

You will have to decide whether Arseny, who is known by several names throughout the novel, is a Saint or Holy Fool. He is revered by some, beaten by others, as he heads out across Europe and even to the Middle East, on pilgrimage. The author manages to recreate a feel for the medieval period which, although it includes visions of future times weaved in seamlessly, is a time of pestilence and plague. It is also a time when religion is all pervasive and Laurus is a man untouched by the disease around him; protected and strangely innocent.

This is a very immersive read and it felt almost strange at times to emerge into the present when you feel yourself so much in the past. A very intriguing novel, which has much to offer both the individual reader and book groups.

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## **Alex says**

O carte absolut geniala, o traducere nemaipomenita. Face parte din acel gen de carti in care traiesti, care te termina psihic,

care te face sa plangi, care te faci sa simti fericire, care te face sa iti pui intrebari.

Este scrisa superb, complex. Nu cred ca exista vreo propozitie sau vreun cuvint care sa fi fost puse asa de florile marului in cartea asta.

Cred ca maine as reciti-o, dar mai asteapta nu stiu cate la rand.

Arseni-Ustin-Ambrozie-Laur !

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## **Matt Sheffield says**

This book was not what I expected and my expectations of its quality were high. So when I began to travel along with the pilgrim, Arseny, I was initially left scratching my head at all the seemingly strange events that did not seem to be building toward anything. But then I read this quote from the author, Vodolazkin: "There are two ways to write about modernity: the first is by writing about the things we have; the second, by writing about those things we no longer have." "Laurus" is a book about the things we no longer have. A world infused with God, where living in the mystery brings purpose rather than mere confusion, and a life of love that is sorrowful yet always rejoicing. To inhabit the world of "Laurus" and feel a pang of longing for something of the beauty and mystery in our modern place is to have read this book well.



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## Lisa Hayden Espenschade says

I loved this book when I read it last year and love it even more now that I'm translating it. Vodolazkin's medieval setting, humor, and mix of contemporary language and old language make for a fun and pretty indescribable book about a man who's a healer, holy fool, pilgrim, and monk.

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## Lynne King says

*When I read Laurus in early 2013, I had no idea I'd ever translate the novel. I simply read the book, enjoying Eugene Vodolazkin's mediaeval Russian setting and following the emotional and physical journeys of his main character, a man who seems to live four lives in one.*

*The more I read, the more Laurus bewitched me, keeping me up at night with accounts of pestilence, apocalyptic thoughts, mediaeval winters and pilgrimage. It wasn't just the plot that fascinated me though. Vodolazkin's language - which blends archaic words, comic remarks, quotes from the Bible, bureaucratise, chunks of mediaeval texts, and much more - reflects the novel's action. Like the story itself, which sometimes judges what we think of as the natural order of time, the novel's language spans many centuries, creating a kaleidoscopic effect that Vodolazkin develops in such a way that it feels utterly natural. Anachronisms and archaic vocabulary have a way of popping up in the book like forgotten items you find when the snow melts in the spring.*

Lisa Hayden's translation states it all. This is a magnificent saga about Arseny, a herbalist, a doctor, who cannot save his beloved Ustina and her child. He is desperate because of this and his life continues to be an atonement. Ustina continues to be a part of the work as Arseny includes her in all of his discussions. The work is amusing, witty, philosophical and religious but the beauty of it all is that it describes the Russian mentality and the era.

I am incapable of writing a review on this masterpiece. I always find that when I really love someone or something, that I cannot translate my thoughts into words.

So all I can say is that this is a magnificent work and definitely on a par with Lawrence Durrell and Umberto Eco. I applaud this author.

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