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Thirst



Synopsis

Masterfully translated from the original Russian by award-winning translator Marian Schwartz, *Thirst* tells the story of 20-year-old Chechen War veteran Kostya. Maimed beyond recognition by a tank explosion, he spends weeks on end locked inside his apartment, his sole companions the vodka bottles spilling from the refrigerator. But soon Kostya's comfortable if dysfunctional cocoon is torn open when he receives a visit from his army buddies who are mobilized to locate a missing comrade. Through this search for his missing friend, Kostya is able to find himself.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

I've always believed that the most difficult task for an author is to write a simple story that encompasses some of the most profound and complex issues in life. This particular story centers on the current and remembered life of Kostya (Constantine is the Western version of the name). The story is told as Kostya and two former squad members from a Russian unit that fought in the Chechnya war together search for a fellow member of the same squad who had helped save them from a burning armored personnel carrier (APC). Kostya has been terribly burned in the APC attack and his face is so scarred that a neighbor lady invites him over to terrify her young son into obeying, which Kostya obligingly does. Reflecting on his life while he and his two war buddies search for their friend, we learn of real friendship, coping with multiple hard facts in life and a way to deal with anything that life throws at you. It is not (thankfully) one of those self-help books, but it is literature in its finest sense--honest, piercing and without apology or a Hollywood ending. It is much better than

that, and it is a book worth reading. I came away from it feeling pretty good about humans despite their many failings. The book is not so much about war as it is expectations in life and how to cope, or at least understand, what fate has served up. Kostya expected a father that was loyal to him and his mother, but instead got something much different. He expected to have his own family, but instead was terribly scared and had to learn how to deal with the life of a scarred man who would not attract women and probably would never have his own family. However, at the same time he is given an exceptional artistic talent. He can fix things that he sees in others and what others have lost.

Regardless of what your taste in literature is, consider throwing down a slug of Gelasimov. *Thirst*, his most recent book to be translated from Russian into English, may not intoxicate you, but it will alter your consciousness a bit. If you read solely to cater to your dopamine receptors (i.e. for pleasure alone), it would probably be best to look elsewhere than to *Thirst*. *Thirst* is not without pleasurable moments, but few would call it a feel good novel. So why bother with this short (just over 100 pages) and often grim and gritty novel? Xenophilia and a taste for inclusivity, would be a couple of good reasons. More on them in a moment. The story is not a complex one. Taking place over a few weeks and told in the first person, the protagonist Konstantin and two of his Chechyan War buddies spend a couple of weeks driving around Moscow looking for a fourth war buddy that has disappeared unexpectedly. When the search is resolved, each of the members of the trio returns to his respective life, subtly but significantly deviated from the paths each had been on. Konstantin introduces himself to us while struggling to find the maximum number of vodka bottles that can be fit into his refrigerator. "All the vodka wouldn't fit in the fridge. First I tried standing the bottles up, and then I laid them on their sides, one on top of the other. The bottles stacked up like transparent fish. Then they hunkered down and stopped clinking. But ten or so just wouldn't fit." Konstantin, who suffered terribly disfiguring burns to his face when the armored personnel carrier that he was in was attacked, is obviously a thirsty man. What exactly he thirsts for is the subject of the novel.

Andrei Gelasimov has been feted in Russia and is both commercially and critically acclaimed. This novella is an attempt by Gelasimov to bring his work to the attention of the wider world. It tells the story of Konstantin, who desperate to get away from his father's lack of paternal instinct and an education he could not be bothered with, decided not to be a draft dodger in the war against Chechnya. Whilst there his Armoured Personnel Carrier (APC) is attacked and a hand grenade burns it out. He is mistaken for dead and hence is pulled from the burning wreck last. He has been

terribly burned. After recovery he seeks solace in bouts of heavy vodka drinking. He works alone to earn enough money for these alcoholic bouts, his neighbour uses him to scare her son into obedience, I suppose as a sort of living bogey man. He is also in touch with his old comrades and part of the story is taken up with a vodka fuelled search for one who has gone missing. His life story is also told in flashback, and the narrative is as liquid as the vodka that permeates all of the stories. It does flow despite flitting from childhood, the war and back to the present. There is also quite a bit of dialogue to move the story forward and Konstantin uses his skill for drawing to make things right on paper that are just wrong in the real world. I must mention Marian Schwartz, she translated this work. Whilst I do not judge her academic credentials, I think that her literal translation in places made some of the passages slightly awkward. At one point someone is told to 'move his buns'. I have never heard of that phrase ever, to move your arse or ass would have fitted better. Still that is hardly a deal breaker. I read this in one day as it kept pulling me back to the narrative.

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