Yellow Blue Tibia

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Russia, 1946. With the Nazis recently defeated, Stalin gathers half a dozen of the top Soviet science fiction authors in a dacha in the countryside. Convinced that the defeat of America is only a few years away—and equally convinced that the Soviet Union needs a massive external threat to hold it together—Stalin orders the writers to compose a massively detailed and highly believable story about an alien race poised to invade the earth. The little group of writers gets down to the task and spends months working until new orders come from Moscow to immediately halt the project. The scientists obey and live their lives until, in the aftermath of Chernobyl, the survivors gather again, because something strange has happened: the story they invented in 1946 is starting to come true.

Yellow Blue Tibia Details

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From Reader Review Yellow Blue Tibia for online ebook

Lea says

Either I loved this book, or I didn't love it, or it was some third thing.

But (really) I loved it, and you'll just have to read the book to understand the first sentence of this review.

In 1946, science fiction author Konstantin Andreiovich Skvorecky, along with a group of other writers, is given the task of inventing an alien invasion scenario by Josef Stalin. Stalin believes that America's defeat by the Soviet Union is imminent, and he wants to invent a new enemy that the Soviet people can be united against.

So begins the utterly wonderful Yellow Blue Tibia by Adam Roberts.

Konstantin stumbles through the next 40-odd years, mostly drunk, until he runs into an old friend -- another former SF writer who was also part of Stalin's project -- who informs Konstantin that the imaginary scenario they came up with all those years ago is actually coming true.

From that point on, Konstantin is involved with numerous misadventures as he struggles to understand what is going on in the world around him. He is charming and funny, and my favorite parts are his conversations with others. There is a dry wit to these conversations that seems wholly Russian, and a wealth of authentic details of life under Communism.

I can't say much more about this book without giving something away, so I'll end before I spoil it.

Konstantin Skvorecky, yellow blue tibia!

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nostalgebraist says

This is good, full-form Adam Roberts, which is to say it seems at first like a fairly conventional if unusually well-written high-concept SF/thriller story, only to take a whole bunch of unexpected turns and introduce a huge amount of ironic self-awareness and humor and general weirdness until you have absolutely no idea where Roberts is going to go next. Which is pretty exhilarating. There are points in this book that felt as truly open-ended as anything I've ever read. Roberts is positioned in this ideal middle point between genre fiction and literature, irony and straightforwardness, optimism and cynicism, etc., so that he's capable of doing pretty much anything, and in fact often seems to do just about everything, all in the span of a single book.

Among many other things, this Janus-like quality allows Roberts to use some astonishingly ludicrous plot elements without breaking suspension of disbelief. Some of the plot twists in Yellow Blue Tibia are *so* surpassingly silly that if I told you about them right now you probably wouldn't believe me, or rather you wouldn't believe that I was endorsing a book that included them. But Roberts can actually pull this stuff off, thanks to his impeccable writerly grace and his sense of self-awareness (you could never accuse him of *not knowing* how silly this stuff is). Plus, he's a science fiction historian and most of the crazy concepts he uses have their origins in clever jokes or observations about the genre.

This could easily have gotten five stars, but I've docked it a star for featuring two very irritating and one-note supporting characters. Their names are Saltykov and Dora, but they might as well just be known as "the guy with Asperger's Syndrome" and "the massively obese woman," because these traits are mentioned *incessantly* any time these characters are around, almost as often as their actual names are. They're presented as though they're comic relief characters, but I have a hard time believing that's what Roberts was actually going for. For one thing, they aren't funny. For another, much of the rest of YBT *is* very, very funny, so it's not as though comic relief is actually *needed* in the scenes these characters appear in. Knowing Roberts, I imagine these characters are some sort of response to one-note comic relief characters in existing science fiction. I just don't know what sort of response he intended. If taken as a parody of Jar-Jar Binks and his ilk, these characters far are too close to the original, and get way too much screen time, to be worthwhile. Writing things that are bad on purpose is always risky, and in this case I don't feel like expending much energy trying to figure out the secret twist that makes Saltykov's constant mentions of his condition (he must have uttered the phrase "I have a certain syndrome" 20 times or more over the course of the book) clever rather than tiresome and borderline offensive. Everything else here is great, though.

Fiona says

Adam Roberts is firmly establishing himself as one of my new favourites. This is the second of his that I've read, and while I didn't adore it as fervently as I did *Jack Glass* , but still, I did like it a lot. He seems to be extremely good at concept, and with concepts this good, it's difficult to make them pay off, but he is a veteran novelist and a sci-fi historian, and they damned well do. (Incidentally, I see that he's got a new one out this month about the ethics of eating meat. I am SALIVATING.)

On the front of my cover of *YBT* is a quote from Kim Stanley Robinson saying this should have won the Booker Prize in 2009. Now, that was *Wolf Hall* year, so I'm perfectly happy how that one turned out, thank you very much - but I take his point. Roberts writes in a very literary style for something that is so obviously going to be judged by the fact that it has aliens as the plot conceit. He deals with complicated, interesting ideas in a very intelligent way, and if Margaret Atwood can manage to get the post-apocalyptic fallout of genetic modification on the shortlist (2003? was it really eleven years ago? - the boyfriend is reading my copy at the moment, I should really go back to it again after he's finished) then Adam Roberts certainly deserves a place also.

But also, you know that I am a plot-happy reader, and you know that I like my Cold War Russia and my conspiracy theories. If you read the blurb for this book and think it sounds like a pretty cool idea, the best thing I can do is assure you that it is extremely well handled, well-written, fascinating to boot. I would love an imagination like this guy, and also to be half as eloquent and ruthless with my prose. Put him straight on the list with le Guin, Christopher Priest and the ever-fragrant Ms Atwood as another one whose back catalogue I'm going to work my way through, slowly, grinning broadly and savouring every page.

UPDATE 13/11/14: Weird thing about *YBT*. I keep coming across it in places, and people seem to either love it or hate it. If they love it, they love it because it is so superficial, it feels like you're some kind of insect walking on the surface of a pond, and the only thing between you and drowning is the tension of the surface of the water, so you're having to tread really carefully, and under your feet you can see the flicker of something big and dark that might be god-know-what. (Does that make any sense at all? I guess not. I'm trying to say that the uncanny tension caused by that superficiality is intentional, and intelligent, and probably the most important thing about this book.) And if they hate it, they can only see that this is not like Actual Russia, it is not like Actual Russian Sci-Fi, it is running rough-shod over a whole magnificent

tradition that deserves a lot more respect. I've just found this by Lavie Tidhar which I nodded along to. But I can also see why it made Catherynne Valente want to up-chuck.

If this were trampling over a literary tradition other than Russian, I wonder what I'd make of it. As it is, I think I appreciate more what some people didn't like about *YBT*, but I still think it was great.

Ben Babcock says

This is a very odd book. It's the kind of love-child that might result from someone distilling Umberto Eco and Kurt Vonnegut. Adam Roberts takes on the spectre of Soviet Russia and, at the same time, explores how science fiction shapes and is shaped by the issues at work in the society of its time. *Yellow Blue Tibia* is not your typical work of alternative history.

At the end of World War II, Stalin gathers some of Russia's greatest science fiction minds and asks them to create an alien menace that will keep Russia unified following the defeat of the Nazis. Just as abruptly, this secret project gets scrapped and the writers are told to forget it ever happened. Konstantin Skvorecky does exactly this for another forty years, but in 1986 his life takes a turn for the surreal. He runs into another of his writer comrades from that project, Jan (aka Ivan) Friedman, now a colonel in the KGB. He encounters two Americans, and a Russian physicist-turned-taxi-driver, who are somehow involved in a plot to blow up Chernobyl. Nobody wants to explain anything to Skvorecky, and somehow he gets wrapped up in a conspiracy that might be of his own making.

The convoluted conspiracies that lie beneath the surface of *Yellow Blue Tibia* remind me of *Foucault's Pendulum*. After Colonel Ardenti's mysterious visit to the publishing house, the various characters of the Templar conspiracy start coming out of the woodwork for real. A similar thing happens here, with Friedman's reappearance triggering the landslide of events that culminate in Skvorecky and Saltykov's mad drive to Kiev. Don't get me wrong: there is no way Roberts' writing comes even close to Eco's, and I don't think it would be fair to either of them to say that he's trying to emulate that style. No, my comparison here is entirely one of content; both authors tackle the curious effect that conspiracy theories have on reality. Roberts draws from the rich, conspiracy-laden background of Soviet Russia, where people really did disappear for decades without explanation.

Roberts' style reminds me more of Kurt Vonnegut. Characters enter and exit the narrative in a meandering way, pausing to deliver exposition or advance the plot before disappearing back into the space between pages. Motivations are thin or bizarre at best. What is Friedman really after—does he believe in this conspiracy, or he is merely cynically manipulating it? Whose side is he on, after all? How did Saltykov become embroiled in all this? This is where *Yellow Blue Tibia* probably fails some people, for Roberts refuses to tie up all the loose ends and turn in a conventional five-act narrative where everything is resolved and clear-cut.

I think this book truly shines in two ways. First, as I already mentioned, there is the connection to the ethos that pervaded Soviet Russia. Second, it is, somewhat, a commentary on science fiction in the twentieth century.

I won't pretend to be an expert at twentieth-century history, let alone Russian history, so the extent to which I can comment on this remains superficial. But it seems to me that the society of Russia following World War II is the perfect setting for Roberts' tale. This wouldn't necessarily work in another country where

freedoms and civil liberties are more rigorously observed. But in Soviet Russia, there is just enough of that sense of ahistory for Skvorecky's own self-doubt to be believable. At first, he patently rejects the idea that the story he and his fellow science-fiction writers developed could actually be coming true. It is, after all, absurd. But as evidence piles up and more people in positions of authority insist that it is the case, he begins to doubt himself. It's not a matter of proof or persuasion but simply the persistent reminder that, in Russia, nothing is as it seems, and there is the truth and then there is the truth as told by the Party.

There's a great scene in the middle of the book, when Skvorecky visits a club and is asked to deliver a speech on UFOs, that demonstrates this concept. Skvorecky refuses to talk about UFOs on the grounds that he does not believe they exist. Yet his audience refuses to swallow this reasoning, choosing instead to believe he is speaking in circles lest he get in trouble with the KGB and the Communist Party for speaking of something that is not sanctioned. Roberts demonstrates the lengths to which some people had to go to get their point across without running afoul of censors and secret police.

Yellow Blue Tibia also explores the relationship between science fiction and society. Science fiction has often had a rocky relationship with authoritarian/communist regimes—why depict a future society that isn't communist if communism is supposed to be the answer to all our problems? Skvorecky and his fellow writers are oppressed yet, at the same time, valued by Stalin and his cronies. And Skvorecky meditates upon how science fiction has changed since the end of World War II. The science fiction of the 1930s and 1940s is significantly different from the science fiction that followed—the difference due in part to the spectre of nuclear apocalypse now lingering over every writer's pen. No longer was science fiction only about colonies on the moon or aliens from Mars. Suddenly, *humanity* had the power to destroy all life on Earth quite easily (and even accidentally). It might have been the first time when, globally, something that had only been science fiction was suddenly very, very real.

If you're looking for a quick and easy read, look further, for *Yellow Blue Tibia* is not it. Similarly, it's not quite the deep and moving work of introspection that Eco or Vonnegut might produce. It's somewhere in between … easy enough to read but not necessarily easy to comprehend, and enjoyable if you are willing to go along with it. I don't know if I would recommend it for people who gravitate towards alternate history, but if you are interested in Soviet Russia or science-fictional conspiracies, you should definitely give this a try.

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kingshearte says

Konstantin Andreiovich Skvorecky was one of a group of Russian SF writers called together by Josef Stalin in 1946. Stalin, convinced that the defeat of America was only a few years away, needed a new enemy for Communism to unite against. Skvorecky and the others were tasked with creating a convincing alien threat; a story of imminent disaster that could be told to the Soviet peoples.

And then after many months of diligent work the writers were told to stop and, on pain of death, to forget everything; everything they had imagined, everything that had happened, ever being asked.

Little is known of what happened to the writers subsequently but in 1986 Skvorecky made a dramatic reappearance at Chernobyl claiming that everything that he and the others had written was coming true.

His assertion was widely disbelieved but Skvorecky claimed (tastelessly many believe) that the Chernobyl disaster and the destruction of the Challenger space shuttle conformed to the pattern set by Stalin's scenario.

Skvorecky believes the alien invasion is ongoing.

In addition to being questionably punctuated, I found this blurb to be rather misleading. To me, at least, it implies that the Chernobyl disaster will happen fairly early in the book, and the rest will deal with Skvorecky trying to convince people that it was caused by aliens. Perhaps there would be mounting evidence to support this, that would be explained away by the rest of the world while the aliens continued their conquest. Perhaps there'd be some question as to whether these things were really happening, or if Skvorecky was just suffering from some kind of delusions. Something like that, though, is what I expected from the book.

That is not what the book was about. For most of the book, Skvorecky doesn't even believe in aliens, and certainly doesn't run around trying to convince other people that they exist. And Chernobyl doesn't even happen until abut 3/4 of the way through the book. The blurb would be more accurate if it added something to the effect of, "This is the story of what happened to Skvorecky that led him to this realization," or something, because that's really what it is. And while none of that is really Roberts' fault (assuming he had nothing to do with the blurb, which is my understanding of how these things usually work), I don't know if I would have even read the book if it had been accurately described.

But I did, and it was... not really my thing. It was somewhat reminiscent of another author, but I can't quite put my finger on it. It's not quite Pynchon (it wasn't *that* incomprehensible), and it's not quite absurdist. One review I read compared it to Bulgakov, so that might be it, but it's been a while since I read Bulgakov, so I can't be sure. In any case, there was a certain ridiculous futility to much of it that I might be inclined to describe as Kafka-esque had I actually read any Kafka, but it just didn't really do it for me.

Apparently it's brilliant satire, but really, hasn't satire of Soviet bureaucracy kind of been done to death already? Apparently there are also many witty insights and observations about the sci-fi genre generally, but I didn't really see that, either. One example that at least two reviewers held up of this was a doctor claiming that she doesn't read sci-fi because she's not a teenaged boy or someone who builds plastic models. In fact, she claims, as a mature woman, she is the exact opposite of a sci-fi reader. This is a brilliant observation? More like an over-used, cliché-ed stereotype.

Then there are the two American Scientologists who show up and feature prominently in the book. As the religion was founded by a sci-fi writer, aliens do play some part in it, but it was never made clear why they were relevant to this story. You could write it off as just a piece of character description, except that it was brought up numerous times that these two were Scientologists. No idea why. Nor do I fully understand why the aliens were so keen to keep Dora (one of the Scientologists, who apparently has some sort of reality-influencing ability) alive. Obviously, her ability affects the way things turn out; that much was clear. But what do the aliens intend to do with that ability? Exactly how will they use it for their benefit? This was really never made clear.

As for the aliens themselves, according to the author's note, they, and this book, were kind of his stab at an explanation for why reports of UFO sightings and abductions are so widespread despite no real evidence of them. If this is the case, though, I would think you'd play up the aliens' role a bit more throughout the book, instead of just tacking on this random bit of exposition at the end explaining the aliens and the way they exist (they're able to exist in many alternate realities simultaneously), which made the book seem like just a bunch of set-up for this revelation. A revelation that, by the way, comes across as rather anti-climactic, and left the reader with no real resolution. It pretty much leaves it at "Yep. Aliens are here." Which is presumably the

part where Skvorecky would now go and claim that Chernobyl was an alien attack.

And in case you're wondering, yes, "Yellow Blue Tibia" does mean something, and is explained. Why was it chosen as the title of the book? That, I couldn't tell you. I also couldn't tell you why Roberts calls the tibia a bone in your arm when it is clearly a leg bone.

Genia Lukin says

“Comrade! Have great news, Comrade!”

“What is news, Comrade?”

“I have written book about Russia, Comrade!”

“Horosho! Wonderful news, Comrade! We drink Vodka now!”

“But there is bad news, Comrade.”

“What is bad news?”

“It is SF book.”

“Is OK, Comrade. We still drink Vodka, you no tell anyone it is SF. But... Comrade?”

“Da, Comrade?”

“You don’t know anything about Russia.”

“Is OK, Comrade. I wrote book… in English. Nobody know about Russia. I make book with communists, and everybody says ‘comrade’ all time!”

“Horosho, Comrade! Is cunning plan! Now we raise bottle of Vodka and drink health!”

* * *

I hope the average reader enjoys my impersonation of Adam Roberts’ impersonation of Russians, because, really, this is about as deep as it gets. I have long since forsworn, with much pain, reading all novels about anything Russian at all that was written by Westerners, and should have continued to listen to the little voice of reason that said ‘you speak Russian natively, you spent your childhood in the good ole USS of R; this is a really really bad idea.’ And I suppose this book for the average Western reader may be okay, even engaging, but, as I mentioned already, I have the distinct misfortune to be Russian (worse, a Russian-Jew – you will see why ‘worse’ shortly), speak Russian, read Russian, and have been, God forbid, alive, if somewhat oblivious, in the Soviet Union of 1986.

Yellow Blue Tibia has a sort of interesting premise – which is what lured me into this honeypot in the first place – in which a group of Russian Science-Fiction writers named Frenkel, Kaganovski, Rappaport, and Skvorescy – all of them purely Russian except for the “Slav” Jan Frenkel, of course; at least the author got

that bit more or less right – get an assignment from “Comrade Stalin” (in person) to invent a threat large enough for the world to unite behind – a sort of Invent Your Enemy mélange supervised by the helpful and friendly Party on a dacha somewhere while the authors of “despised pulp” discourse on doing something truly important for a change.

With the men Kaganovski and Rappaport in the room poor Jan Frenkel with his typically Slavic last name gets chaffed for being a Slav. Forgive me for being pedantic by the way, but what nation is “Slav” precisely? Slovak? Slovene? Yugoslav? I desire to have the country Slavia pinpointed for me on a map of Eastern Europe, and its capital named. Anyway… Everybody discourses on science fiction a lot, and then is told to forget all about it. Something like fourty years pass. Suddenly, the narrator, for all he knows the last surviving member of the Conspiracy Posse begins finding out that his plans and writings are coming true and that they may have been true even earlier than he thought!

Okay, so far so good – a decent premise for a Sci-Fi flick, in a different cultural milieu. The problem is, of course, the cultural milieu. I still cannot decide what precisely the author was trying to do with it, and whether he had written a truly terrible rendition of Russia as he (doesn't) know it, or a genuinely wonderful parody of Hollywood Cold War era films. I was trying to be lenient and go with the latter, but from all I’ve read it seems that my clemency has been misplaced and so, with trepidation, I must conclude it is the former.

I really cannot describe how much “the former” this book is. As far as could determine, the author’s research began and ended with the stories of a friend who may have been in Moscow once, and the reading of the Wikipedia articles on Stalin, Chernobyl, and maybe Communism. The truly mind-bogglingly sad part about this entire debacle is that this genuinely interesting premise could actually *work* had the author done his research right, and placed the story in real USSR/Russia as opposed to a Hollywood film of it.

You see, the fact is, Science-Fiction in Russia is a respected branch of literature, its authors figures of some cultural significance. It has, historically, been innovative, subversive, conforming, asserting, intriguing, all in equal parts, and much of the Eastern European tradition of science fiction became part of the literary canon. Science fiction would have been a wonderful venue for promoting a strange, government-funded conspiracy, precisely because it was not, like in Western culture, despised and marginalized, but rather because it was important. Of course, the author doesn't know that. Or, if he does know that, he doesn't bother to tell his Western readers that. Instead his authors are busy hiding the fact that they’d ever written “SF”, when they do write SF are busy feeling degraded by doing so, and, in general, channel the spirit of (presumably) Roberts himself, who really needs to justify to a derogatory public why his work is intellectually worthwhile.

It was not officially *sanctioned* of course – in fact, too much speculation was anti-revolutionary, and escapism meant people dug less potatoes today – but then, what was? Sanction by the government doesn't make something mainstream, and lack of sanction doesn't unmake it – the opposite, in fact, I’d say.

“Science Fiction is for nerds” is a Western sentiment. It grates strangely in any sort of novel set in Russia, especially to a Russian reader. So do a thousand and one annoying stereotypes that the author just can’t seem to see past, like, for example, the fact that there is “no word for teetotaler in Russian”. There is, by the way, it’s ??????????, if you wanted to know, and while it is, admittedly, less in common circulation, it’s entirely unremarkable as to register and usage. It’s even in Word Spellcheck. Or like the number of times people say “comrade”. Seriously, this is not difficult. ‘Comrade’ was an address designation, much like “Mr.”, “Mrs.” or “Sir/Ma’am.” Comrade Jones would, therefore, simply be Mr. Jones, and not some mystical whatever-it-is. The number of times the word ‘comrade’ is to be used in conversation is, therefore, easily deduced – as many times as one would use the words “Mr./Mrs.” Would two old acquaintances be calling each other comrade? Well, you tell me. Would they be calling each other “Mister”?

This utterly bizarre idea that Russia is somehow stilted, held in Amber, made caricature, is extremely prevalent in the Western world. There is in general this notion that countries outside of the Western sphere of influence cannot possibly be modern, cannot have advanced with the times. Their culture is held in stasis by the most pervasive stereotypes people have, and just stays there. So, for instance, it is universally known that in Israel we ride camels with Uzis slung over the saddle, and live in tents, and Russia, of course, involves people driving around in troikas. Even if they are permitted to possess actual internal combustion vehicles, a necessity in a science-fiction book that involves nuclear reactors, I suppose, it is still somehow assumed that they listen to balalaika music and spend time kicking their heels in embroidered shirts crouched over the floor going 'Hop! Hop!'.

For instance, why do people in 1986 still refer to Stalin as "Comrade Stalin" with hushed reverence? It's been 34 years since his death. Khrushchev and the Big Thaw happened. Gorbachev and the Perestroika are well under way. Sure, it was still Soviet Russia with secret police and draconian communism, as well as severe deficits (that word figured prominently in my childhood, even) but I never heard Stalin referred to as "Comrade Stalin" by any adult in my vicinity, and I can only assume that this would be the case even for such august persons as two ex-sci-fi writers. And the music on the radio? The Red Scarf, of course. Because everything is red in Russia, and music apparently stopped circa 1950. Russia doesn't produce rock (it does) or pop (it does) or any sort of modern music that might be on the radio at the time and can be discovered with a brief rummage around the internet (Time Machine? Alla Pugachova? Bravo? Aquarium? No? Damn.)

And what's with the cutesy [square brackets] that indicate the presence of English every, single, time? Apparently quotation marks used to indicate speech are not good enough for a foreign language anymore, and the readers are considered to be insufficiently intelligent to understand that a certain bit of dialogue happens in English, and the majority of it happens in Russian. A Russian author, in this case, would probably just write the English parts of the dialogue in English and translate them in footnotes, but even barring that, it seems like the average reader is capable of realizing who speaks what.

Even putting aside all this cultural balderdash, there remains the tremendous problem of the ideas and cultural critiques presented. Stalin was inhuman and thus an alien? Good job dismantling the problem of human evil into its small components and providing a wonderful solution we can all live with. Hitler, of course, is a human tyrant because he only killed "the other" – something which, I am sure, the people of his own party dead in countless purges would be thrilled to discover – but Stalin was an alien because he was less discriminating. History will now take its hat off for the new conclusions and insights we've finally achieved. And then to top the outrage of this triviality, people in reviews dare compare it to Bulgakov, one of the most culturally aware, clever, and insightful writers of Russian history, in a way that leaves me simply breathless with rage. It's rather like comparing a bodice-ripper to Lolita and getting away with it.

Even the concept of aliens showing up and manipulating quantum states is not entirely original – though it isn't bad and is one of the books' better points – and has been previously done by Neal Stephenson (much better, by the way) in Anathem. Oh, and love is the answer to everything.

That's not to say that the author hadn't gotten a couple of things right – the fact that his group of SF authors consists of flagrantly Jewish last names, for example, even though he manages, somehow, to avoid mention of the fact at all, throughout the book, and, indeed, somehow assumes them to be "Russian" and perfectly in step with the regime, in 1940s anti-Semitic, Slavic-power-mad Russia of the war and post-war years – shows that he did some looking about. He also introduces the readers to the flagrant plagiarism that writers with access to foreign language literature often used in order to "appropriate" such works as Pinocchio, The Wizard of Oz, and other works I may not even know of offhand.

Which makes it even worse, because clearly when the author wanted to – he could. But for whatever reason, he didn't. once again I try to give him some leeway and suggest tentatively that the book is, in fact, a parody of Hollywoodian Cold War films about Russia, in which case I will gladly revise my review, but so far I have no evidence to suggest that this is a comedy besides the narrator's repeated assurances that he is droll (he's not).

Tl;dr version: it feels like the author didn't bother, so I don't see why the readers should.

Scott says

Adam Roberts is the Tesla Model S of Science Fiction. Smart, technologically impressive and capable of 0-60 in three sentences.

When you ride with Roberts you can expect smooth prose-suspension, hair-raising action-sequence cornering and perfectly plotted cup holders for every sea... OK, OK I've pushed the car analogy too far. Suffice to say that Roberts is one of the most interesting writers working in 21st century Science Fiction, a big, prolific talent with a an imagination to match.

From his debut 2000 novel *Salt* to *Stone*, *Bete* and *New Model Army* I have been consistently amazed by Robert's work, and even his lesser books, such as *On* and *Polystom* are interesting reads in unique settings filled with memorable set pieces.

In *Yellow Blue Tibia* Roberts once again uses a completely different setting from his other works, this time situating the action in the Soviet Union, during the period of 1946-1986. He nails this setting, along with the portrait he creates of his compelling central character Konstantin Skvorescy.

Roberts has a knack for characters that are outside the norm, and Konstantin is true to form - he is an aged, damaged, recovered alcoholic with facial scars that he earned by getting drunk and setting his own beard alight. He is no Mary Sue (unless your dream is to become wheezy and require a breather after dragging your geriatric self up a handful of steps), but continuing a long tradition of writers creating characters that are themselves writers (write what you know...) Konstantin is a former Science Fiction author, a career that see him drawn into events that imperil both the USSR and the wider world.

In 1946 Konstantin and a group of war-weary Soviet science fiction writers are summoned to a dacha (a Russian holiday home) in the countryside by sinister government men. When they arrive they are met by Stalin himself, who of course terrifies the assembled writers (as he would any normal person). Stalin informs them that with the defeat of Germany, the USSR will need a new foe that the people can be rallied to fight. The United States will not be sufficient in this role, so the assembled writers must invent a new enemy, and that enemy is to be extraterrestrial.

Konstantin and the others toil away at this task, spinning a tale of energy based aliens made of radiation, who plan to invade earth and begin by destroying the Ukraine. They complete a rich and convincing story, but upon its completion they are abruptly sent home, warned never to speak of the project again on pain of death.

Nearly forty years later, Konstantin, aged and wrecked by years of alcoholism and poverty, stumbles across Jan Frenkel, one of his fellow writers from the dacha. Frenkel tells him something that sets off a life-threatening chain of events- the story they wrote together was somehow more than a fiction, and the

cataclysmic events they wrote about are coming true.

A tired and defeated ironist, Konstantin is a committed nonbeliever in the fantastic and extraterrestrial, but the events he becomes central to challenge these beliefs, and everything he knows about the world.

There are slight shades of *The Thing Itself* in the narrative of *Yellow Blue Tibia*, in its treatment of the visible and invisible forces around us, and the burnt out nature of that book's facially scarred protagonist, but the similarities end there.

This is a ripping yarn, a real page-turner and yet another standout book in Roberts ever-growing body of work.

I rate Roberts as one of the must-read SF authors of this century, a constantly inventive, always surprising writer prepared to take risks and write concept based novels that don’t sacrifice story on the altar of ideas.

Read him. Buy his books. They deserve a proud position on your shelves.

Daniel Roy says

Yellow Blue Tibia is a strange, delightful beast. At times it can be a farce, a satire of Soviet-era Russia, a reflection of the role of SF in society, a thought experiment on the cultural phenomenon of UFO sightings, and a conspiracy novel. The tale truly shines when it combines all of these elements at once.

Roberts' tale manages something truly rare in SF: it instills a sense of skepticism in the reader, which lasts throughout the book. It's never truly clear if we're reading a SF tale, or the story of people deluded into believing in aliens. The mystery at the heart of the book kept me engaged at every page, even when I felt the action slowed down or meandered. The unpredictability of the story is truly refreshing in a world of worn-out tropes and predictable tales.

Another strong aspect of *Yellow Blue Tibia* is the dialogs. Roberts has an ear for character arguments and misunderstandings. To read Roberts' characters talk is to witness just how tragic and funny it can be when two characters utterly fail to get their point across to the other. The dialogs go on and on, but they're hilarious and unpredictable, and never boring. Some key scenes in the novel reach utter brilliance for their perfect blend of humor, witty dialogs, and dramatic tension. The car chase, as well as the ending itself, are two perfect moments in the novel where Roberts transcends all the genres he tries to blend.

There are a few points on which *Yellow Blue Tibia* fails to achieve true greatness. The most important one is its story and pacing: although the set pieces and the dialogs keep the reader fully engaged, the overall plot meanders around and moves at a haphazard, sometimes frustrating pace. Character motivations are unclear, and the protagonist basically gets pushed around by the requirements of the plot. Likewise, although some characters are funny and complex, others are mere sketches or caricatures. The biggest offender is Dora, whose only characteristic of note is that she's fat and American. As hard as I try, I can't find anything else to say about her, and yet she's one of the most important characters in the story.

An important criticism of *Yellow Blue Tibia*, leveled notably by Catherynne M. Valente on her Livejournal, concerns the setting's verisimilitude. Valente argues that Roberts has utterly failed to capture the culture and mindset of Soviet-era Russia, to the point that she despised everything about the novel. Verisimilitude of

foreign settings is usually of huge importance to me; I found similar problems with The Windup Girl's Thai setting, for instance, so I understand where Valente is coming from. But being totally ignorant of Soviet-era culture, I have to give this novel a pass on the matter. Furthermore, I believe that the novel's satirical nature makes its anachronisms and cultural faux-pas more forgivable. It's clear, for instance, that Roberts was not trying too hard for historical accuracy when he gave one of his characters Asperger syndrome. This leads me to believe that Ms. Valente largely missed the point of Roberts' novel. And unless you're familiar with Russian culture, I doubt you'll have a problem with the novel's verisimilitude yourself.

Yellow Blue Tibia has its flaws, but overall it stands as a truly unique piece of SF literature that keeps you guessing until the end. It's part Foucault's Pendulum, part SF nostalgia, and when it gets into high gear, it's one hell of a hilarious adventure.

Sarah says

This book had some big issues, but I have to admit there was something about the tone and the language and the characters that kept me going. I loved Saltykov, even if his mysterious syndrome hadn't actually been a specific category of diagnosis at the time this novel is supposed to have taken place, and even if some of his symptoms seemed more like OCD than Asperger's. I loved the narrative voice. I loved the way the action sequences were written.
After that? There's pretty much just one woman in the novel, and her personality is a little underdeveloped. There are some speedy recoveries from typically unspeedy injuries. I've seen some criticism of some of the Russian cultural aspects of the book, though I wouldn't have noticed the errors myself.
The right book for the day I was reading it, in any case.

Nikki says

I have no idea what I just read. It probably doesn't help that I'm sleep deprived. Does it help if I say that I enjoyed it anyway? It was almost easier to read in this state: something in my sleep-deprived head clicked with the narrative quite well. I'm curious to read it again sometime when I'm not sleep deprived, as well, though. (And I'm sure you're all curious to see me review it when I'm not sleep deprived.)

I think it's really best read to understand what the experience is like. I can't pitch it to you better than to say that if you read the first chapter and get intrigued, then you should take it home with you, because you'll read the whole thing (and possibly still not know what to think about it). It's about the Soviet Union and it's about science fiction writers and it's about love and it's about aliens, and it may not be about any of those things. It's funny and cynical and may even give you warm fuzzies.

Trigger warning: references to cancer, unexplained swellings and such. I didn't have too much of a problem with it, but my anxiety is pretty well medicated right now. It helps that (view spoiler). (Totally minor spoiler, but.)

Edit: Cat Valente really didn't like it -- summary: the cultural stuff is all hideously wrong. With that in mind, I'm taking this down a star.

Veeral says

A friend inquired about the reason for my rating of some books as 4 starrers instead of 5 starrers even though I have marked them as my favorites. So, here is the reason:

This started as a game for me, and it still is. What I actually do is rate a certain work on a scale of 0-5 in different categories that I have created. I take an average of all the categories to arrive at the final rating. And for Goodreads, I round off my overall ratings for a particular book for the site. Mind you, some categories here are closely related but that hasn't stopped me from rating the books I have read in the past, so there is no reason why that should hinder me now.

I would not give general description for any book in my reviews (if I write them at all) as it is already available on Goodreads.

And since I have babbled about my rating "games" in my profile, I think it is about time I wrote my reviews as such; much to the chagrin of all my friends here at Goodreads.

Title: 'Yellow Blue Tibia' by Adam Roberts

At first I was like "What kind of a name is that?" Then mightily aware of the extent of my English vocabulary, I picked up the dictionary and found that "tibia" means "the inner and thicker of the two bones of the human leg between the knee and ankle". It doesn't help much, does it? I thought the same. But don't worry, the meaning is revealed in the novel (at a very later stage) and I am not going to ruin it for you.

Moreover, this book is hard to classify. Surely, it is classified as a science fiction, but it reads more like a mystery.

Beginning: (4 out of 5 stars)
What with today's modus vivendi (did I say that right?), our attention span has shortened considerably, so it is important that writers engage your mind right away, otherwise that book would be shelved in the "did-not-finish" shelve (shelf?).
But 'Yellow Blue Tibia' starts on a high note with "Comrade" Stalin making an appearance in the very first chapter.

Overall Pace: (4 out of 5 stars)
The first 4 chapters have an average pace compared to the pace between chapters 5 and 16 (that is, until the end of the part 2). Part 3 is bit of a drag. And some chapters might seem confusing at first, especially chapters 2, 3 and 4, but I would advice you to persist as things start getting interesting from Chapter 5 onwards.

Characterization: (4 out of 5 stars)
The protagonist – Konstantin Andreiovich Skvorecky's character is very well developed. He is sarcastic, witty and despite his predicament – calm.
Other character to watch out for would be Saltykov who has some kind of a "syndrome", and as a result he refuses to make any physical contact with another human being, especially males.
All in all, the book contains well fleshed out characters.

Humor: (4 out of 5 stars)

Generally I don’t rate books like this under this section. But I would have to make an exception in this case. Skvorecky with his wry wit makes you chuckle more than a few times. The scenes where he is interrogated by the militia investigator and then by the KGB agent in the car are very funny indeed.

Suspense: (4 out of 5 stars)
There are so many layers to this story that you cannot presume anything.

Thrill: (4 out of 5 stars)
There are plenty of close calls, especially for Skvorecky.

Tension: (3 out of 5 stars)
Somehow, the dry wit of the protagonist dissolves some of the tension out of the plot.

Twist: (4 out of 5 stars)
There were so many twists in the story that at one point I was on the verge of being overwhelmed.

Action: (4 out of 5 stars)
The book contains a lot of action considering that the protagonist is an old and fragile man.

Plausibility: (4 out of 5 stars)
Given the plot, the characters behaved as per their “design”, that is, in hindsight, you won’t call bull shit to any of their actions except for one instance when Saltykov decided not to jump a red signal even when a greater danger (of being shot) lurked at them.

Climax: (4 out of 5 stars)
The end would make your head spin but not in the wrong way. That would be anti-clockwise. It would spin your head clockwise. *Or it could be some third thing.*

AVERAGE RATING: 3.91. Say, 4 STARS.

David Hebblethwaite says

This is Adam Roberts’s tenth novel, which of course means there were nine before it. Nine that I haven’t read. How on Earth have I allowed this to happen? If they’re all as enjoyable as Yellow Blue Tibia, I have been missing out.

Yellow Blue Tibia is presented as the memoir of one Konstantin Skvorecky, a science fiction writer who was gathered together, along with four others, by Stalin in the aftermath of (what I know as) the Second World War. Stalin charged the writers with the task of creating a new enemy — an enemy from outer space — which the ruling party could claim to be fighting, thereby strengthening the prestige of communism. The authors come up with some outlandish nonsense about ‘radiation aliens’, and hammer out a future history — but the project is promptly cancelled, and the writers instructed never to speak of it again.

Skvorecky sees neither hide nor hair of the others until 1986, and a chance encounter with another of the group, Ivan Frenkel — who claims that the story they constructed four decades previously is now coming true, beginning with the Challenger disaster (caused by radiation aliens!!). Sounds ridiculous, of course: but

then Skvorecky (who works as a translator) meets the American James Coyne, who insists something similar — and then dies in mysterious circumstances.

After various turns of the plot, we find Skvorecky racing to Chernobyl, along with Ivan Saltykov, a nuclear physicist turned taxi driver who says he has Asperger's syndrome (though he never gets to name it in full), and ceaselessly reminds people of the fact; and Dora Norman, Coyne's hugely overweight compatriot. And, after Skvorecky survives a grenade attack against all the odds, things start to get really strange…

My strongest abiding memory of Yellow Blue Tibia is how much of a pleasure it was to read. Though not (I would say) primarily a comedy, it is nevertheless one of the funniest books I have read in some time: witness, for example, the scene in which Skvorecky is first translating for the two Americans, and frantically trying to think of acceptable ways to 'translate' his colleague's insults.

More than this, the novel also provides plenty to think about. Roberts bases his fiction on a paradox about UFOs: there are so many reports of them, yet such a paucity of evidence for their concrete existence. The author's fictional solution to this paradox is fascinating to think about; I particularly like the wayhe takes some well-worn ideas and spins something fresh out of them.

Roberts also effectively plays tricks with the narrative. Skvorecky undergoes a pre-frontal lobotomy during the novel, which subtly alters his narrative voice, and disrupts his sense of the passage of time, something Roberts exploits to extend the mystery of his plot. Skvorecky stresses at the beginning that '[t:]here are no secrets in this book', but of course there are — they're just hidden from the narrator as much as from the reader (reading back the paragraph I've quoted from, I also discovered several subtle hints that seem innocuous at first, but change in meaning once you've read the book).

Another strand of Yellow Blue Tibia concerns parallels between science fiction and communism; but lacunae in my knowledge of history and politics prevent me from really getting to grips with it. A further strand that I did appreciate, though, was the love story. It might seem unexpected to find such an element in this novel, but its title refers to a phonetic way of saying, 'I love you' in Russian — and it is indeed central to the story.

One recurring feature of Yellow Blue Tibia is that a character may say that something can be in one state or another (one could go somewhere accompanied or alone, for example), but that there could (and, in some instances, could not) be a third option. Well, I finished the book with a big smile on my face. Or it could be that I finished it with my imagination fizzing over at the possibilities Roberts put forward. Then again, it was probably both.

Yaroslav says

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Joe says

This was an interesting book. I randomly picked it up off the library shelf because the cover and premise intrigued me. Soviet Union: 1946. Stalin forces a group of science fiction writers to outline a realistic alien invasion scenario. Stalin wants to unite the Soviet people against this 'other' threat. Then, before their ideas can be enacted, the project is scrapped and disposed of. Then, 40 years later, the predictions these authors made appear to be coming true.

This book is a love letter to science fiction, specifically why we are drawn to it. Is it merely escapism? Is it a cautionary tale? Is it something to aspire to? Something to fear?

Don't be put off by the seeming nonsense title "Yellow Blue Tibia." When you find out why, you're sure to smile. Quite funny with a sweet love story to boot.

Quotable Quotes:

"Science fiction was my passion when I was young. Because science fiction is about the future, and when we are young we are fascinated with our future worlds. That's natural, since when we are young we possess no past, or none worth mentioning; but we possess and endless future stretching before us. But I am no longer young. When we are old, the future vanishes from our life to become replaced with death. Accordingly we become intrigued, rather, with the past. We have the same escapist urge we had as youngsters, but it takes us back, into memory, instead of forward into science fiction."

"The truth is the war bashed the science fiction out of me. The war and after the war. The things that happened. The imagination is like any other part of the body; it can be healthy and strong, or it can be broken, or diseased, and it can even become amputated. Science fiction is the Olympic Games of the imaginatively fit. After the war I was too injured, mentally, to partake."

"She was laughing. And every now and again she threw a great bale of smoke over her left shoulder like a worker clearing spectral snow with an invisible shovel."

"Poisonous and decadent nonsense, imported mostly from the USA, with films such as 'Warring Stars' and "Intimate Embraces of Three Different Kinds', and other such pornography."

Benjamin says

If nothing else, Adam Roberts is not afraid to make enemies by speaking his mind. His 2006 academic The History of Science Fiction takes aim at some of the most popular academic theories of science fiction (Suvin's cognitive estrangement, Damien Broderick's megatext and object-focus, and Samuel R. Delaney's reading protocols); Roberts ditches these theories for an alternate theory that argues that science fiction really begins with Greek stories of fantastic travels; that sf takes a historical nose-dive with the rise of Catholicism; and that sf is ultimately a Protestant structure of imagination. (And, although he actually points to real-life Catholics, he'll emphasize elsewhere that he's not really talking about people of those religions having special affinity for those genres. So, make of that what you will.)

Roberts is a critic as well as an academic, so if he thinks that a book is not so great, he'll be happy to tell you. For instance, he was not too happy with the shortlist for the 2009 Hugos, claiming that most of the categories featured a lot of mediocre work that was probably chosen for the wrong reason--for instance, Scalzi's book got the nod because he writes a pleasant blog. And we can all agree that sometimes, nominations may be influenced by extrinsic factors; but we can all agree on that without setting up a normative theory of aesthetics, which is kind of what Roberts does. This line might be the center of his argument: "Because if you can actually read the excellent *The Quiet War* and then read the pleasant but mediocre *Zoe's Tale*, and not see that the former is a much much better novel than the latter, there must be something wrong with you." Succinct, in its way: You have an undiagnosed illness that results in malformed aesthetic judgments. Not much to say after that, is there?

That's all by way of background--stuff I found while reading others reviews of *Yellow Blue Tibia*, though I could add some more background, like: whenever I see Adam Roberts on the message boards that I frequent, he's humorous and not self-righteous, and he engages other people in discussions. In other words, I didn't care for his academic work on sf, I don't much like his theories of aesthetics, but he seems like a nice guy. So I'd like to think I come to this book with clear-ish eyes.

And this is what I found (plot edition): at the end of World War II, Stalin gets a bunch of science fiction writers together to mock up some plans for an alien attack to help unify the USSR with a shared threat; and then the plan gets scrapped; our narrator, Konstantin Andreiovich Skvorecky, enters a downward spiral, until 1986, when he meets another of the sf conspirators who now works for the UFO division of the KGB and tells him that their old story is coming true; and then the rest of the book is whether or not an invasion is happening and which side Skvorecky is going to take. So, all in all, there's a Philip K. Dickian plot, with the added wrinkle of it being a historical setting of paranoia.

And this is what I found (theme edition): not to give away the plot, but the question of whether or not aliens are invading is something of a quantum physics question--like Schrodinger's cat, let's say: the aliens are and aren't invading, but we'd have to look to make sure. This question of multiple possibilities becomes an annoyingly persistent refrain at the end of the book, when Skvorecky constantly wonders to himself if something is or isn't happening, or if there's maybe a third option. But this issue actually comes up much earlier in the book since Skvorecky is that most quantum of writers, an ironist--someone who says something, but doesn't always mean or not mean it. As the main antagonist, the writer-cum-KGB agent, tells Skvorecky, literature should be serious--"One story, not the ludicrous branchings of possibilities and ironic alternatives."

(Curiously, Roberts lost the BSFA award that year to Mieville's The City & The City, a book which similarly deals with certain questions of alternative and there/not-there-ness.)

In addition to uncertainty/irony/quantum physics, the other major thematic element is the related issue of science fiction and its history. ("Related," I say, because sf is usually a game about multiple probabilities, as

Damien Broderick makes clear in his argument about megatext, i.e., the idea that sf reuses of the same trope builds up a layering of possibilities--so if you write a story about Venus, that story is going to be historically situated with all the other stories about Venus, etc.) Now, this is a book deeply involved in sf as a historical force and a community; for instance, one Russian sf writer confesses to plagiarizing "The Grasshopper Lies Heavy," which is the name of an sf book inside Dick's sf The Man in the High Castle; and two major characters are Scientologists, which is a very sfnal religion developed by an sf writer. (A writer who often got made fun of inside sf in very obvious ways; Dick actually has a story that involves a crazy prophet named Elron Hu, whose honrorific is Bard, as in: Elron Hu, Bard.)

And several reviewers have commented on the relation of Communism and science fiction (taking as true that Communism is based on a fictional science of history, a reading which I have some issues with). To wit: both sf and Communism may be involved in Utopian projects that ignore the suffering of people on the small-scale and lead to large-scale horror, as in: "“A realist writer might break his protagonist's leg, or kill his fiancée; but a science fiction writer will immolate whole planets..." (15). I'm not entirely sure it's necessary to kick around Stalin and 1986-style Communism these days, when firefighting is occasionally targeted in America as a socialist enterprise; but I take the critique here as pretty good--sometimes the big picture obscures the little picture.

(On the other hand, it seems to me that the reverse is true: sometimes it seems like the big, long-term issues, like global warming, are shunted aside because of very real, short-term suffering.)

And this is what I found (quality edition): I largely agree with Abigal Nussbaum's review when she writes "I found it interesting rather than likable or unlikable. Beneath its farcical surface, it seems deeply cynical about both science fiction and the revolutionary impulse." Now, farce is all well and good, and I enjoy bumbling KGB agents and autistic-spectrum cab drivers and grossly fat Americans, but these characters all seem cardboard without any particular reason for their shallowness. What is this farce in the service of?

In some ways, the farcical surface here seems lifted from better Russian books, like The Master and Margarita. And the cynical undercurrent here seems aimed at nothing in particular. It's like if I wrote a book today satirizing the Cathar Heresy when there are no serious religious Cathars in the world.

Just as a final opposing view, I want to note that "Yellow Blue Tibia" is a phonetic guide as to how to say "I love you" in Russian. So maybe this is a book ultimately about love as a great decider and it's really about how love banishes uncertainty.

But if you want to read a book where that's the theme, you can be my guest, though I suspect it means that, as Roberts would say, there's something wrong with you.
