



The Red Laugh

Leonid Andreyev

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The Red Laugh is an utterly harrowing and nightmarish depiction of a sort of apocalypse that springs from the chaos, blood, and misery of Russia's humiliating defeat in the Russo-Japanese War, in language that prophetically echoes the horrors to come during the First World War. Centered on two nameless characters, the first a soldier narrator and then later his civilian brother, The Red Laugh presents themes of violence, war, madness, ghosts, and even the quite literal return of the dead. From time to time, we meet the indescribably horrible Red Laugh itself...

The Red Laugh Details

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From Reader Review The Red Laugh for online ebook

Margaret Chelsea says

Tells about the inevitable wicked effects of war. How war could change someone for the worst that could even lead to life comparable to death. It is amazingly easy-to-read to my surprise, considering its morbid theme which is usually partnered with verbosity. It has excellent descriptions that make it achieve its main purpose--to emphasize as to stamp to people's minds and hearts how war is an utter waste of time that started from impaired ideology that backfires into one irrevocable nightmare.

Woolrich13 says

A brilliant nightmarish indictment of war, which, in this case appears to be based a bit on the Russo-Japanese War but only tangentially. The two main characters are a soldier, who returns from the fight badly maimed and half-mad and then his brother, who, following the sad death of his sibling, either descends into utter madness himself or, alternately, is overtaken along with the rest of humanity by a supernatural apocalypse wherein the dead themselves return from the earth to lie there like so much stacked wood on the ground in increasing numbers and the personification of Violence & Death, the Red Laugh itself, stalks the land. Scary, poignant and unforgettable.

Ryan says

Amazing anti-war story. Not many people have read this in recent years, or at least that's my impression. It has zombies, that's good right?

Vit Babenco says

“...Horror and madness.

I felt it for the first time as we were marching along the road – marching incessantly for ten hours without stopping, never diminishing our step, never waiting to pick up those that had fallen, but leaving them to the enemy, that was moving behind us in a compact mass only three or four hours later effacing the marks of our feet by their own.”

The Red Laugh is like *The Triumph of Death* by **Pieter Bruegel** but it is much bloodier and much madder... “His lips twitched, trying to frame a word, and the same instant there happened something incomprehensible, monstrous and supernatural. I felt a draught of warm air upon my right cheek that made me sway – that is all – while before my eyes, in place of the white face, there was something short, blunt and red, and out of it the blood was gushing as out of an uncorked bottle, such as is drawn on badly executed signboards. And that short, red and flowing ‘something’ still seemed to be smiling a sort of smile, a toothless laugh – a red laugh. I recognised it – that red laugh. I had been searching for it, and I had found it – that red laugh. Now I understood what there was in all those mutilated, torn, strange bodies. It was a red laugh. It was in the sky, it was in the sun, and soon it was going to overspread the whole earth – that red laugh!”

Leonid Andreyev was one of the first Russian expressionists and *The Red Laugh* is like *The Scream* by

Edvard Munch – the incessant shriek of overpowering terror...

“It is all nonsense that there are as many brains as there are men; mankind has only one intellect, and it is beginning to get muddled.”

And the triumph of madness is war. And the dead snatch the living and drive them mad... And the mad start laughing and their laughter is red...

Jon(athan) Nakapalau says

One of the first references to PTSD I have ever come across. Powerful narrative about madness brought on by the horrors of war.

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Corey says

Best modern war book written!

Philipp says

What a strange little book.

A collection of "fragments" centered around a pair of brothers. The first brother's path takes him to a nondescript war, which reads more like a fever nightmare without sense or purpose. Soldiers march on without sense or purpose, people fall to the side and die, no-one knows what's going on, enemy soldiers are rarely encountered, soldiers are shot from seemingly nowhere, the skies are drenched in red.

He loses his legs in what may or may not be a friendly fire incident, after which he returns home to his family and brother. His shaking implies shell-shock, and he subsequently loses his mind. The other brother is not a soldier (for some reason), his story is about the reactions of society to the war, the stupidity and craziness of the people supporting it, and the madness of it all.

The descriptions of war - trenches, senseless shelling, fields filled with dead and wounded - made me think the author was a veteran of WW1, but *The Red Laugh* was published in 1904. What a strange book.

Justin says

This is possibly the most powerful anti-war story ever written. I've read it about 10 times and it has yet to lose its edge.

Orcun says

This is not about realistic description of sorrows that war brings – rather, this is an abstraction over war: A madness epidemic, a kind of mass psychosis including both physical and psychological violence capturing not only nameless soldiers of an unknown country, but also those living in nameless cities and waiting news from the front. By pushing this double violence to the extremes beyond the boundary of being ridiculous (or absurd), Andreyev creates an intentionally exaggerated, apocalyptic atmosphere (or vision). I understand this intention and also know that he is the leading figure of expressionism in Russia – but still I could not evaluate this novella as a masterpiece. Well-written text, but not very interesting reading. Maybe I was not in that mood, maybe I should read once more, but not very soon...

Eadweard says

One of the best short stories I've ever read.

" One could see by the unconcerned manner in which he had buried his face in the sharp burning sand, by the whiteness of the palm of his upturned hand, that he was dead, but his back was a red as if he were alive, and only a slight yellowish tinge, such as one sees on smoked meat, spoke of death. I wanted to move away from him, but I had not the strength, and, tottering from weakness, I continued looking at the endless phantom-like swaying files of men. By the condition of my head I knew that I should soon have a sunstroke too, but I awaited it calmly, as in a dream, where death seems only a stage on the path of wonderful and confused visions."

" He told me that no less than two thousand men were lost at that one wire entanglement. While they were hacking at the wire and getting entangled in its serpentine coils, they were pelted by an incessant rain of balls and grapeshot. He assured me it was very terrifying, and if only they had known in which direction to run, that attack would have ended in a panic flight. But ten or twelve continuous lines of wire and the struggle with it, a whole labyrinth of pitfalls with stakes driven in at the bottom, had muddled them so, that they were quite incapable of defining the direction of escape."

" "Are you afraid!" I repeated kindly. His lips twitched, trying to frame a word, and the same instant

there happened something incomprehensible, monstrous and supernatural. I felt a draught of warm air upon my right cheek that made me sway—that is all—while before my eyes, in place of the white face, there was something short, blunt and red, and out of it the blood was gushing as out of an uncorked bottle, such as is drawn on badly executed signboards. And that short red and flowing "something" still seemed to be smiling a sort of smile, a toothless laugh—a red laugh."

Nuno Simões says

Andreiev é, do que conheço, o escritor russo mais injustamente esquecido. e um dos melhores de sempre lá do sítio, já agora. soberbo!

Tanya says

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Noor Morsy says

Horror and madness.

I felt it for the first time as we were marching along the road – marching incessantly for ten hours without stopping, never diminishing our step, never waiting to pick up those that had fallen, but leaving them to the enemy, that was moving behind us in a compact mass only three or four hours later effacing the marks of our feet by their own.

Bryn Hammond says

Written in 1905, upon the first major war of the century (was it?), Russia-Japan – that particular setting being irrelevant; this is a horror-scape devoid of real-world setting, no details except for red and orange uniforms. War takes over the world in this account. There is a sense of its omnipresence; it saturates existence so much that corpses pop out of the ground, in the end. It is a visionary story, both in being nightmarishly constructed and in seeming to prophesy the saturation-level wars of the century ahead.

Damn, I called a Russian writer a prophet. I hate that. They're not Rasputin. But Andreyev derives a 'fantastic realism' from Dostoyevsky, who is cursed to be a prophet of the century after him. It's just the fantastic realism, that projects.

The other story by Andreyev I have read, *Seven Who Were Hanged*, is entirely realistic. That is another protest story, anti-execution while this is anti-war; he makes them step up, beyond the protest. *Seven I*

admire more for craft, and it affected me more, but I'm giving this 5 stars too.

I hear his short stories, in their grotesquerie, are symbols for the hideous circumstances in Russia (Aileen Kelly said this, *Toward Another Shore: Russian Thinkers Between Necessity and Chance*). He died a couple of years after 'loud protest' at Bolshevik victory. He led a troubled inner life, which I think the introduction in my Dedalus edition describes almost contemptuously – along with much of his fiction. The intro writer is out of sympathy with fantastic realism or the grotesque. It says his stories lack human compassion, which is just crazy. The translation (Alexandra Lindem) did not seem bad, although there is no information given about it. Cover is a still from *_Battleship Potemkin_*, the only reason to get this edition.

Alexey says

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Kyley Lowe says

Excellent book about the devastation of war. In only 100 pages it deals with the toll that war takes on the human body mind and spirit. Chilling book! Dark yet powerful

Ina Cawl says

realistic and unheroic portrait of war

Jimmy says

Something was ominously burning in a broad red glare, and in the smoke there swarmed monstrous, misshapen children, with heads of grown-up murderers. They were jumping lightly and nimbly, like young goats at play, and were breathing with difficulty, like sick people. Their mouths, resembling the jaws of toads or frogs, opening widely and convulsively; behind the transparent skin of their naked bodies the red blood was coursing angrily--and they were killing each other at play. They were the most terrible of all that I had seen, for they were little and could penetrate everywhere.

[...]

"He can crawl in under the door," said I to myself with horror, and as if he had guessed my thoughts, he grew thin and long and waving the end of his tail rapidly, he crawled into the dark crack under the front door.

Leonid Andreyev was a controversial and well-known writer, a contemporary of Chekhov and Gorky, but has become virtually unread in the past few decades. This novel shows why. His range is quite limited. There are no actual characters, no real human beings in this book because they are all indistinguishable... there isn't

much of a storyline either. What matters more in this book is getting across a sensation, a single horrific vision.

It's a grotesque vision of war, a bit like watching a contortionist's act, and darkly comical. Andrejev does not do subtlety. The scariest parts of his vision do not come with the physical toll of war, but the mental ones. This book is filled with madmen, every one of them, including the two narrators, as if the focus had long gone out of their eyes, they tumble forward in a sleepy haze, zombies ready to tear at the throat of any shadow that flickers.

"That is the red laugh. When the earth goes mad, it begins to laugh like that. You know, the earth the earth has gone mad. There are no more flowers or songs on it; it has become round, smooth and red like a scapled head. Do you see it?"

"Yes, I see it. It is laughing."

"Look what its brain is like. It is red, like bloody porridge, and is muddled."

"It is crying out."

"It is in pain. It has no flowers or songs. And now--let me lie down upon you."

"You are heavy and I am afraid."

"We, the dead, lie down on the living. Do you feel warm?"

"Yes."

"Are you comfortable?"

"I am dying."

"Awake and cry out. Awake and cry out. I am going away..."

Andy says

This was one of the best things I read all year. It's only about 24,000 words, if you like surreal, dark horror infused with a lot of violence and imagery straight out of a German expressionist film, do yourself a favor and read it.

For me it brought to mind Kosinski's "The Painted Bird" which is quite explicit about the realities of war, but this book is far more horror-focused, surreal, and more fun to read frankly. It's full of moments of profound violence, bloodletting and misanthropy, but it's wonderfully evocative in it's imagery and very unpredictable as well. Andrejev's skill with words gives the horror a dark beauty that's a joy to read, if ya like that sorta thing...

Some sections resemble Poe in their fevered delirium with a palpable feeling of madness. The central theme of the book is about a contagious bloodthirsty madness that spreads from the battlefield, across all of society. The ongoing war seems to unleash something in mankind, something Andrejev hints was probably there all along.

There's many memorable images here. Much of the book is nocturnal, told by stark firelight. At one evocative moment a group of exhausted soldiers sit around a samovar:

"The sunset was yellow and cold; black, unilluminated, motionless clouds hung heavily over it, while the earth

under it was black, and our faces in that ill-omened light seemed yellow, like the faces of the dead. We all sat watching the samovar, but it went out, its sides reflecting the yellowishness and menace of the sun set, and it seemed also an unfamiliar, dead and incomprehensible object."

Beautiful, expressionist, memorable and yet horrific.

In one scene a group of soldiers is sent out to collect the wounded:

"These were the first that we found, and they horrified us. But later on we came upon them oftener and oftener along the rails or near them, and the whole field, lit up by the motionless red flare of the conflagrations, began stirring as if it were alive, breaking out into loud cries, wails, curses and groans. All those dark mounds stirred and crawled about like half-dead lobsters let out of a basket, with outspread legs, scarcely resembling men in their broken, unconscious movements and ponderous immobility."

It's little details like this that make it realistic:

"I was beginning to get exhausted, and went a little way off to have a smoke and rest a bit. The blood, dried to my hands, covered them like a pair of black gloves, making it difficult for me to bend my fingers, so that I kept dropping my cigarettes and matches."

Later the story is told by the brother of the soldier. He sees madness spreading. He watches returning soldiers on a train:

"...I go there every morning now--and saw a whole carriage full of our mad soldiers. It was not opened, but shunted on to another line, and I had time to see several faces through the windows. They were terrible, especially one. Fearfully drawn, the colour of a lemon, with an open black mouth and fixed eyes, it was so like a mask of horror that I could not tear my eyes away from it."

Another great image:

"Something was ominously burning in a broad red glare, and in the smoke there swarmed monstrous, misshapen children, with heads of grown-up murderers. They were jumping lightly and nimbly, like young goats at play, and were breathing with difficulty, like sick people. Their mouths, resembling the jaws of toads or frogs, opened widely and convulsively; behind the transparent skin of their naked bodies the red blood was coursing angrily--and they were killing each other at play."

At one point the brother of the wounded soldier in the story sits in a theater thinking of standing up and screaming fire, and foreseeing the result:

"A convulsive wave of madness would overwhelm their still limbs. They would jump up, yelling and howling like animals; they would forget that they had wives, sisters, mothers, and would begin casting themselves about like men stricken with sudden blindness, in their madness throttling each other with their white fingers fragrant with scent. [...] ...they would be throttling, trampling, and beating the heads of the women, demolishing their ingenious, cunning headdresses. They would tear at each other's ears, bite off each other's noses, and tear the very clothes off each other's bodies, feeling no shame, for they would be mad. [...] For men are always murderers, and their calmness and generosity is the calmness of a well-fed animal, that knows itself out of danger."

This book is full of such deliciously dark, misanthropic passages. My first encounter with Leonid Andreyev

was his excellent short story "Lazarus" which feels like a cosmic horror tale that could have been written today, but this novella is even better.
