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*Oksana Zabuzhko , Oksana Zabuzhko*

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Date : \_\_\_\_\_

ISBN :

Author : Oksana Zabuzhko , Oksana Zabuzhko

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## From Reader Review ??????? ??????????? ? ??????????? ???????

### for online ebook

#### Elen Tkacheva says

Woman's emotions and feelings as they are. Oksana has nothing to hide from her readers and you could be sometimes shocked by her honesty. Very bright and vivid modern Ukrainian language.

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#### Antonomasia says

The first full-five-star book I've read in 2016: a breakneck ride through twentieth-century Ukrainian history, the experience of writing in a neglected language, and a tortured relationship between two tortured Ukrainian artists in America, told in spectacular twisty-turny extended-sentence prose by a brilliant author and poet that more of you GR experimental fans should be reading.

Don't just unbury books, stop good ones getting buried in the first place! Which I've been wanting to say in a review for a couple of years, ever since someone on a forum recommended *The Museum of Abandoned Secrets* as one of the best things she'd read for a long time; I was blown away by the opening chapters, but 700pp+ tomes are not my forte as they are some of yours, and besides I wanted a better background in Russian lit before tackling the full thing. (If you're one of those who never looks beyond friend reviews, please read this anyway.) Particular potential for burying exists because most of Zabuzhko's English translations\* are published by AmazonCrossing. Complete Review fans will probably know that AmazonCrossing is now North America's biggest publisher of translated literature. Whilst some of their genre / popular stuff has found a sizeable audience, the few more literary and experimental texts have been starved of the oxygen of publicity, unmentioned in the blogs, lit journals and broadsheet reviews that cover works issued by respected, ethically unambiguous independent publishers, making sure at least some of the right readers are aware of them, and that they aren't consigned to low-star ratings from randomly-selected Vine members who never liked this sort of fiction in the first place, and drive-by Kindle Unlimited subscribers who took a punt on it. (A recent exception, which suggests things are changing a little for newly translated AmazonCrossing works, is South Korean novella *Nowhere to Be Found* which was longlisted for the U.S PEN translation Prize and has been talked about on a couple of blogs.) Zabuzhko is a fantastic writer who, although lauded in Continental Europe with the Angelus Prize, should have as much respect and attention in English. *Fieldwork in Ukrainian Sex* is a narrative conscious of its own psychology, and I'm tempted to connect this probably financially rewarding, but otherwise unfortunate choice of publisher in the current global *lingua franca* with a compulsion to enact the following: *even if you did, by some miracle, produce something in this language “knocking out Goethe’s Faust,” as one well-known literary critic by the name of Joseph Stalin would put it, then it would only lie around the libraries unread ... for who knows how many dozens of years until it began “cooling off”...*

*if the stream of public attention doesn’t pick them up in time and carry them to the surface, they sink like stones to the bottom and become covered by mineral waxes that can never be scraped off, just like your unsold books which gather dust somewhere at home and in bookstores, this same thing has happened with most of Ukrainian literature.*

Presciently - in fact talking of something else, she says *there was even a response in—wow!—the Times Literary Supplement* - but TLS mentions of Zabuzhko, including a write-up of this book, are paywalled and thus less influential than the lone [one-star] Amazon UK review.

I was tired of waiting for myself to get round to *Museum of Abandoned Secrets* and, in finishing it, finally earn the licence to harangue you about it; I was tired of waiting for the optimal time to try Kindle Unlimited for a month or two so I could read the much shorter *Fieldwork* inclusive with that. But fuck paying £7.99 for not very much of interest and timing things right, £1.98 for this book alone made a lot of sense: that's the right price from the reader/consumer viewpoint for a sub-200 page ebook you may only read once. Yes, I'd have rather paid a non-Amazon retailer the same, and yes I've heard the arguments in favour of novellas being as pricey as doorstops, but I think publishers, even those of stuff you love, should be a long way down the list of charity concerns after more urgent needs.

This is a ranting, angry, digressive book, so why not shoehorn a couple of paragraphs of my own rant in too?

Zabuzhko's volleys of anger are set apart from a hundred other rage-fuelled, more-or-less feminist fictionalised rants by the magnitude of her intellectual force and wit, and her (and her translator Halyna Hrynn's) verbal dexterity. I rarely go in for this sort of very womanly angry book, that swappiness that scares some people as if there were going to be a gorgon's head, not mere paper pages, between the covers. No gender has a monopoly on writing the fucked-up relationship story anyway; my favourite example is Alfred de Musset's [likewise under-read and brilliant] *Confession of a Child of the Century*. Zabuzhko's ranting is brilliant ranting of any type, and the quality of writing deserves to win out over any minor reservations over the topic. And personally, I'm somewhat more comfortable with feminist novels from other cultures because I don't feel as if their generalisations imply I had negative experiences I never actually did, unlike the Anglo-American texts that have alienated and annoyed me.

*Fieldwork*'s semi-autobiographical narrative opens in a scuzzy kitchen, with decaying detail and violent metaphor that recalls the flats inhabited by *The Young Ones* or *Withnail*, boys who always had more interesting things to do than housework: the units' *tacked-on doors determined to open every time you turn your back like a loose jaw on a paralyzed face... both plants have the appearance of having been watered with sulfuric acid for the last three weeks*. It's hard to say the unsaid these days, but I kept seeing it in this twenty-year-old novella, even when she surveys the cooking: *these chickens always look much happier than live ones, simply radiating a deep blush of pleasure at the prospect of being eaten*. This blistering sarcasm creates glamour from its very absence: *in fact the possibilities are endless, but you just need one thing—for there to be someone sitting on the other side of their fucking counter, in which, incidentally, a colony of ants seems to have made a home, because every once in a while you've got something crawling around on the Formica that really doesn't belong in a hygienic American home, nor in a non-American one, come to think of it—someone to whom you could serve all this good stuff as you smile your cover-girl smile*. Those first few pages introduced me to a rhythm that would become familiar through the book: I would feel as if in the company of a kindred spirit, as if in reading, I was also speaking paragraphs I wish I could have written; then appear a some new facet of the narrator's mental torment or relationship dysfunction and her downright dreadful partner, far worse than my own experience, or on some entire other spectrum full of its own pitchblack corners.

Zabuzhko's narrator switches between first, second and third person as she speaks of herself, creating a stream of consciousness as comfortable as a pair of worn-in boots. Once observed, this technique is genius of a kick-oneself obviousness. To many frequent readers, or aspiring writers, of fiction, the occasional vanity thought-lapse into narrating oneself in third person is as much an ingrained part of mental activity as speaking of "I", or of exhorting oneself or generalising about self and supposed others as "you".

A man as muse to a female artist - including when the relationship is stormy - is an idea that's getting more exposure now than it used to, but I've never yet seen it so well described as by Zabuzhko: *every poem was a delightful bastard baby of one prince or another with a bright star on his forehead, the star, of course,*

*inevitably went out, the poem remained.* With that metaphor she makes it sound more natural than with the genders the other, stereotypical, way round.

But bloody hell, what an awful man is this painter she falls for. Her reasons for being drawn to him - well beyond *masturbation...* *will give you neither poems nor children* - are understandable to those who've experienced a love affair as a *primal*, fated encounter with a soulmate:

*we became brother and sister long ago, long before we met, because it was in search of you, my love, clearly in search of you that these incomprehensibly opaque lines of poetry rushed out of me, barely catching their breath, through all the years of my chaotic youth...*

*it would be only with someone as screwed up as herself, no, far more screwed up—in a plaster cast, with draconian debts and trails of police summonses, my sorcerer-brother, we are of the same blood you and I... this guy was digging the same grounds as I was, and the only one I'd ever known to do it ... better than me: deeper, more powerfully, and damn, just plain fearlessly... he simply floated along in the stream that I could access only occasionally.*

*The first one ready-made—whom she did not have to teach Ukrainian...*

*this was the first man from your world, the first with whom you could exchange not merely words, but simultaneously the entire boundlessness of shimmering secret treasure troves...*

*he's one of yours, yours—in everything, a beast of the same species!*

Such heights of intoxication often lead the lover to ignore what, in the absence of potent chemistry, would have been major reservations, but here there were more than most: from my list of highlighted quotes, the word "warn[ing]" jumps out again and again. Even to one who has ignored such things on a smaller scale, and who knows the process well, the magnitude of what can be disregarded is, at first glance astounding. (But through the author-narrator's analysis of her origins in a more sexist, more violent culture and family, she later explains it.) This story dispels another assumption, or over-generalisation, about such fiery relationships: it's very much *not* the case that the narrator is overwhelmed by continuous sexual desire for her paramour, it is not that wanting him physically becomes, for a time, almost synonymous with consciousness, as in many experiences and narratives of the madly-in-love. That early use of the word "brother" perhaps was telling. Though he is hardly brotherly of course, becoming hectoring and occasionally violent, and there are rows, verbally vicious on both sides, about plenty else as well as sex.

I've no idea how common is the following commonality, but I was taken aback here, seeing set down in someone else's writing for the first time something said to me several times - from decent people and from rotters. I thought that by now, I'd know if men telling their girlfriends they were brave was considered a widespread phenomenon (where there is no birth involved) - but there are always conversations and rubbishy articles one can miss. "*You're a brave woman!*"—and... "*I see in you an ability to survive under any circumstances*", exes say to her at different times in her life.

Joy and fear, America and Eastern Europe are invoked and mingled in their dealings: *lovers galore, a wonderfully high-bouncing trampoline* echoes *Gatsby*'s epigraph; yet *he passed through her territory like the Tatar hordes* - and too often the latter, and fear, leading to a physical exhaustion - *a feverish-nauseous trembling scattered over her entire body that hadn't subsided for over a week* - more draining than the typical physical overwhelm of falling in love.

It's interesting to finish writing this review whilst reading Elena Ferrante's quartet: Zabuzhko is more explicit in connecting violent relationships - and automatic assumptions about reproduction that, though near in history, may be alien to the twenty-first century secular Anglo-American - to her national history and culture; Ferrante almost never generalises, simply telling her characters' story - she shows without telling - but the same principle invades their relationships as soon as they get married, as described by Zabuzhko: "*take me*" *always means: "take me together with my childhood"*.

Oksana, more than the sensible Elena coolly analysing her environs, knows gothically passionate love as a literary meme that infected her: *They never taught us, all our literature with its entire cult of tragic love—Ivanko and Marichka, Lukash and Mavka, my students were enthralled and declared Forest Song superior to Midsummer Night's Dream, you bet—they somehow forgot to warn us that in reality tragedies don't look pretty. That death, no matter what form it takes, is first and foremost an ugly business.*

That allusion apart, I was so taken with Zabuzhko's writing that I forgot I must be missing references to books I hadn't read, until her fellow Ukrainian Bulgakov was invoked in a dreamlike scene near the end: *the demonic assembly constituted no clear threat, rather it gave the impression of a ritual somewhat reminiscent of a Brezhnev-era party meeting and in fact treated her with a kind of friendly acceptance,...only a gigantic cat, turning into a neon-blue shadow of a cat, hopped around from pedestal to pedestal for some time still before he too went up in smoke*

Whilst I daresay some Ukrainians in the years between Communism and the Crimean crisis preferred not to dwell on their country's near-chronic history of living under a yoke or threat of one, stuck between the Russian bear and Europa, Zabuzhko's account of it (and mirrored in family and relationship) is anything but cowed, expressed with an irresistible vigour:

*and what is there in Ukraine, Ukraine is Chronos chomping away at his children, tiny fingers and toes, I'm supposed to sit and wait for what, to suck a frog's tit, or rather that of a menopausal diaspora gramps—the Antonovych prize?...*

*Eastern fatalism, oh yes—the Russians have it; we're in worse shape, we, actually, are neither here nor there, Europe has managed to infect us with the raving fever of individual desire, faith in our personal "Yes I can!"—however, we never developed a foundation for such faith, those structures that might support that "I can!" and thus have tussled about for ages at the bottom of history. The lucky Americans she meets on her 90s writer-in-residencies (although they probably manage to allude to race with more tact than this denizen of a very white country that previously had little contact with culture outside the Eastern Bloc) are unfamiliar with subjugation to limitless, metaphysical evil, where there's absolutely nothing in hell you can do—when you grow up in a flat that is constantly bugged and surveilled and you know about it, so you learn to speak directly to an invisible audience: at times out loud, at times with gestures, and at times by saying nothing, or when the object of your first girlish infatuation turns out to be a fellow assigned to spy on you.*

In four years of owning this Kindle, I'd never before encountered the message "you have reached the clipping limit for this item". That's how much I liked and wanted to quote this book. And that's why I don't have quotes from late in the book, where the author-narrator's father appears, a brutalised former prisoner (like his father before him), a man who tries to be reasonable, but has dodgy physical boundaries that have the effect of sexual abuse even if they don't fit its legal definitions. And... well - Ukraine - boundaries... obvious. The narrator, in her early thirties at the time of her emotionally destructive yet artistically inspiring relationship, evidently sees herself as an adult who did something stupid in which history had its role, like an addict who has now quit; she has too much strength and insight to be just a victim (if and when I get round to her later books, it'll be interesting to see how her themes developed in the ensuing years) but it was hard not to see this girl, another Ukrainian in the states, for less edifying reasons, as emblematic: *a very young, scarcely eighteen-year-old prostitute with flowing chestnut-colored hair, attractive in that puppy-wet, bright, untarnished folk-song beauty that you can still find among girls in Volhynia and Podillia—and the poor thing, dead drunk:... "She's still a child and has no idea what's happening to her"*

The premise underlying this book sounds potentially defeatist (especially with the country continuing to wrestle its demons, but there is such strength and skill in the writing, that it feels anything but. I found it positively invigorating, because surely there is hope if one can express oneself as Zabuzhko does.

\*A Kingdom Of Fallen Statues, essay and poetry collection, appears only to be available in a handful of American university libraries, and Amazon are scheduled to publish a book of Zabuzhko's short stories, *Oh Sister, My Sister*, in 2017. There are also bits and pieces in anthologies, which she alludes to in *Fieldwork*.

Indebted to two recent LRB reviews by Jenny Turner, when I was flailing about for inspiration on how to write about raw, personal books without getting enmired in lengthy comparisons with one's own experience. Didn't manage it quite so smoothly, but they helped.

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### **Sarah says**

Whoa. Full-on, but short: a ranting gallop through Ukrainian nationalism and feminism, fully realised. Quite painful throughout (and also because for a moment I wondered if it was really just a version of 50 Shades of Grey... which it definitely isn't, but let's say it's the very distant other end of the spectrum from that, but indeed on the same spectrum.) A little confusing in parts (2nd-person, 3rd-person, missing time references) but ultimately illuminating and it merits another read.

I read it in Lviv, Ukraine, where Sacher-Masoch was born (he of the Masochism), and my guidebook is a bit coy about why Lvivians are proud to claim him... this book might explain that.

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### **Sofia says**

I'm stalled - I seem to have lost my desire to loose myself in her words.

She is sarcastic, sharp and unfortunately rambling in her tug of war, with the love and hate she feels for her country, her man, her life. It was one of those times that I kept looking forward to a full stop or oh yes the end of a paragraph. What kept me reading was the flashes of insight which I cherished and wanted more of.

stopped at 50%

half a BR with Ira

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### **Julie A says**

This is a tricky one to pin down... I think it can best be described as a master class in philosophy delivered in a slightly torrential form.

This is one of those books that screams for big conversation because the ideas presented here are incredibly deep and conveyed extremely articulately. It's a book that really begs for a night of discussion with friends over many bottles of wine.

As it is, the friends of mine who would be interested in such a discussion are all currently abroad, but it did lead to very interesting WhatsApp discussions about soul compartmentalization and language...

It's not so much a book to love or hate. This isn't really a traditional narrative. Like "Museum", Zabuzhko uses her characters as vehicles to convey her ideas. The ideas are the true stars of this program.

I enjoyed it very much. I really had to stop and think about what she was presenting. I've been vaguely distracted all week, trying to sort out my views on her arguments. It's hugely engrossing in that way - but this isn't a novel, or something to speed read. This is gritty and tough and absolutely requires the reader's full attention. It's demanding and insistent, and will not abide any passivity.

Actually, now that I'm thinking about it, if you were ever in a situation where you needed to assess compatibility with someone, reading this together would probably be the fastest and most thorough way to do so.. A literary Pre Cana... This book is the perfect launching pad for all big discussions.

## **Victoria Moroz says**

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## Yooperprof says

A brilliant Eastern European poet learns the hard way that it can be hell to be a relationship with a painter. Not a conventional novel, more a prose-poem "rant" with aspirations to be the Ukrainian "Second Sex." Zabushko riffs on Ukrainian history, men and women, and the negligible place of poetry in today's society. Perhaps more of a three star than a four star book, but it's unusual, and Amazon Crossing deserves credit for publishing a bold book in translation.

?????? ???? says

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## Michelle Lawrence says

This is a really dense, heavy novel. It's a sort of confessional stream-of-consciousness memoir of an romantic/abusive relationship that fell apart. There's a lot in there about the artistic process, Ukrainian culture, and human relations in general; how this relationship reflects larger Ukrainian societal and cultural patterns. This book is overbearing, and it can be too hard to follow -- it jumps around so much. There are some real gems in here, though, and the experimentation with narrative form is appreciated, but I can't recommend this to the casual reader. I'm probably the intended audience (outside of Ukrainian readers) and even I found this novel hard to like.

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### **Jdu FFH says**

Ja mensen, een boek over Oekraïne en seks, wat is dat nou weer? Nou, een doldwaze rit langs een verknip liefdesleven en de niet-bestaande literatuurgeschiedenis van een nog maar kort bestaand land. Alsof je Bloodlands van Timothy Snyder en Fifty Shades of Grey tegelijkertijd leest.

Zabuzhko schrijft in het Oekraïens, en dat is dus niet hetzelfde als Russisch. Nu is dat inmiddels voor vrijwel iedereen wel duidelijk en zijn die landen zelfs al vier jaar min of meer in oorlog met elkaar, maar in 1996 was dat nog anders. De Sovjet-Unie was pas vijf jaar daarvoor opgehouden met bestaan en de bewoners van die voormalige unie waren nog bezienswaardigheden wereldwijd, zeker als ze uit één van de nieuwe republieken kwamen. Zo ook Zabuzhko, die dit boek schreef in Amerika, waar het zich ook voor een deel afspeelt.

Het begin van het boek gaat over een verwoestende relatie tussen twee Oekraïense kunstenaars, die het gelukt is om zich te ontworstelen aan de middelmaat in het doormodderende land. Een relatie tussen twee kunstenaars vol met moeilijke sex en suïcidale scenes in de jaren '80, Zwagerman en Easton Ellis hoor ik u denken, maar dat is het toch niet. De Oekraïensheid van beiden zorgt er voor dat beiden zich bij elkaar 'thuisvoelen', de relatie is geen hedonistisch snoif- en seksfeest maar juist een verlangen naar een niet-bestaand, verboden land dat er ooit was maar nooit meer zal zijn.

De geschiedenis van dat land komt in de tweede helft van het boek steeds meer op de voorgrond. Het gaat om de onvrije Oekraïne, waar iedereen familie heeft verloren aan hongersnood, goelag en oorlog, waar Oekraïens praten verboden was, waar de Grote Geschiedenis alle persoonlijke levens blijvend en drastisch beïnvloedt heeft. Dit in tegenstelling tot Amerika, waar iedereen geïnteresseerd is in persoonlijke geschiedenissen van beroemdheden, die ook nooit meer zijn dan dat: persoonlijke geschiedenissen, zonder al te veel met de Grote Geschiedenis van doen te hebben.

en dat alles in een lange rant, zonder hoofdstukken, lineaire verhaallijn of iets wat daar op doet lijken. Ga er maar aan staan.

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### **Kathrin says**

Typically stream of consciousness writing is not my cup of tea and I struggled with the book in this respect. Nevertheless a pick for me, because some of the writing while harsh is beautiful... so harsh content but beautiful writing. I am not surprised that this book was considered revolutionary at the time and still is.

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### **Risa Miller says**

It was really hard to grasp the flow of the writing style at first, but I really do like how it allows for Oksana to be so open with what she writes. I like how she wasn't concerned about political-correctness, rather, the book is more comparable to a diary. I think all women can relate to parts of the book in some way or another - it's comforting (and tragic) to know we go through it together. I don't think I'd read it again; but the book offers great explanation to the backing behind feminist ideals, exposing them in a non in-your-face way.

‘understanding’ is a good word to go with the book.

Jen says

This book is amazing. It took a little bit to get into. I struggled in the first 50 pages. You can not skim this book. Don't even try. The prose style is rather unforgiving, but that really is the point. The point is to chew it. To go slowly. To go back and forth over sentences and phrases.

This is a painful, occasionally hard to follow narrative of the grotesque end of a love affair punctuated with small and devastatingly perceptive mini-treatises on writing, art, trust in other humans, the state of being a writer trapped in a native language that no one speaks, the state (as Zabuzhko describes it) of being trapped between non-existence and an existence that kills you.

In another review, someone else wrote "?????? ?? ?????? ??? ?????? ?????? ?????? ?????? 10 ????? - ?? ?????, ?? ??? ??????? ?? ?????? - ? ?? ??? ????? ???????????, ?? ? ??? ?????." Oh, but I do. I know all of them. They are all people I have met. They are all people I recognized from my life in Ukraine. They are all people I recognize from my life in the US. They are all people I recognize in myself.

I think I won't be satisfied until I read this at least 2 more times.

Helen says

Difficult to read both because of subject matter and the way it is written. But I picked it up to get a perspective on The Ukraine, which it gave me in a thought-provoking and self-assured way.

**Lodyk Vovchak says**

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### **Oksana Uskova says**

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### **Mykola Kuzmin says**

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### **Halyna Yakubovich says**

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### **Oleksandr says**

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**Tolu Agunbiade says**

What attracted me to reading this book was, of course, the name. Although a short book (~170 pages), this is a dense stream of consciousness type book with long sentences, no chapters, and context switching without warning. It took me a little bit to get into the book and understand what was going on, but I also cut the book some slack since it is a translation. Overall, a decent read.

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