



The Emperor

Ryszard Kapuściński, William R. Brand (Translator), Katarzyna Mroczkowska-Brand (Translator)

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Haile Selassie, King of Kings, Elect of God, Lion of Judah, His Most Puissant Majesty and Distinguished Highness the Emperor of Ethiopia, reigned from 1930 until he was overthrown by the army in 1974. While the fighting still raged, Ryszard Kapuscinski, Poland's leading foreign correspondent, traveled to Ethiopia to seek out and interview Selassie's servants and closest associates on how the Emperor had ruled and why he fell. This "sensitive, powerful. . .history" (*The New York Review of Books*) is Kapuscinski's rendition of their accounts—humorous, frightening, sad, grotesque—of a man living amidst nearly unimaginable pomp and luxury while his people teetered between hunger and starvation.

The Emperor Details

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From Reader Review The Emperor for online ebook

Monica says

Great historical book describing the mood of the palace in Ethiopia under the rule of Haile Selassie. Excellent in its description of mood. You actually see the insanity and chaos that Selassie created and nurtured in his palace and metaphorically throughout his country. And by the end of the book, you understand how the King of Kings was destroyed by the monster he created. The style was unlike any book I'd read in the past. It was really well done.

Tyler says

The Emperor baffles any ready description. A Polish journalist, Ryszard Kapuscinski, renders an account of the last schizophrenic years of Ethiopia's ancient kingdom and the demise of its emperor, whose ways are not our ways, to say the least. Reviews may not suffice to say exactly why or how the book works, but I'll add mine anyway to the others that have noted its mystique.

The book's structure takes a straightforward path. The author interviews courtiers, associates and servants of the Emperor Haile Selassie in the months just after his dethronement. Selassie's reign is recounted in parts, each starting with Kapuscinski's observations about the situation at hand, followed by comments from the relevant courtiers to furnish color, detail and insight.

The tapestry woven from these remarks and the writer's added observations depict an esoteric mindset. I've often wondered: When humans left their tribes to create the world's first civilizations, what were those societies like? I don't mean the art they created or the decrees of their leaders – I mean, did the people think and act like us? The fabric of the story gives us that answer, for Ethiopia was just such a place. And the answer is a mind-boggling no.

What we find is a land so ancient it's not even medieval, a place where even feudalism would represent progress. But make no mistake, it is still a fully developed civilization, not some savage prehistoric amalgam. Kapuscinski knows he has stumbled into something unique, a culture whose primeval foundation neither lends nor refuses itself to any obvious interpretation. In this emperor, this court, and this society, a primordial human drama demands its stage.

Such a provenance makes conclusions or judgments about Ethiopia impossible to categorize. The declivities of class and hierarchy within this kingdom exceed anything known to man. An antediluvian social structure showcases the raw exercise of power at its stripped-down worst, absent any modern guile. By design, mediocrity trumps merit as a tool to balance power and maintain social order, turning the country into a kind of Ayn Rand novel come to life. Such an order inevitably clashes with the outside. But more decisive are the its own internal contradictions.

The several speakers whose contributions build the story relate the details with elegance. In these vignettes lie much of the book's narrative power; the interviewees tell what they know with a delicate economy that, page-per-page, conveys more detail, plot and feeling than any book I can recall. Here's one such description, of the increasingly opaque autocracy:

"... People seemed unable to control things; things existed and ceased to exist in their own malicious ways, slipping through people's hands. Everyone felt helpless before the seemingly magic force by which things autonomously appeared and disappeared, and nobody knew how to master or break that force."

This speaker later accentuates the dissipation gripping Selassie's final decade:

"...Even conversation deteriorated, losing its vigor and momentum. Conversations started but somehow never seemed to be completed. They always reached an invisible but perceptible point, beyond which silence fell. The silence said, Everything is already known and clear, but clear in an obscure way, known unfathomably, dominating by being beyond helping. Having confirmed this truth by a moment of silence, the conversation changed its direction and moved on to a different subject, a trivial, second-rate, second-hand subject."

The elliptical way the speakers tell their stories adds to the book's kaleidoscopic dazzle. Their many points of view make truth a perspectival quest. No immediate verdict emerges upon the rule of Ethiopia's last emperor; his sycophants both attack and defend his rule, and they're right in each case. Yet all the while the reader can detect a bigger picture getting lost in the details. Under Kapuscinski's journalistic guidance the gripping reality of this society emerges to recruit one's sense of the grotesque. This regime outclasses modern ones in some ways: No violent purges or collective bloodbaths ever occur. But the extremes of hierarchy leave the tragic fates of the many to deface a benighted land.

Kapuscinski tells an amazing story amazingly, and his journalist's sense of having discovered an unprecedented subject is dead-on right. The writing speaks for itself. Its object is unique. The story is a spellbinding discovery. *The Emperor*, in short, has all the qualities of a perfect book. You cannot go wrong choosing it to read.

Dana says

H?bkový poh?ad do sveta, v ktorom absolutisticky vládne jeden ?lovek. Najviac sa mi pá?ili popisy toho, ako sa v takomto prostredí fyzicky menia osoby, ktoré sa dostanú k moci. Aj preto, že som si tieto prejavy všimla aj v našich reáliách, dokonca na ?u?och, ktorých osobne poznám.

Druhé, ?o ma nadchlo, boli popisy vládcových stratégií, ako sa udrža? pri moci. My si z týchto praktík robíme ?asto sstrandu a nevieme, ?i ide o náhodu, alebo vedomú snahu a tu nám to naservíroval Rišár bez servítky ako zjavne vedomú vec: rozde?uj a panuj, obklopuj sa neschopnými a skorumpovanými, nikdy ni? naozaj nepovedz, vy?erpaj protivníkov nezmyslami.. at?.

K tejto knihe sa ešte ur?ite vrátim.

A vy si ju môžete poži?a? v Karloveskej knižnici.

Linh says

Cu?n sách này khó x?p lo?i. B? ngoài nó là m?t phóng s? v? nh?ng ngày tháng cu?i c?a tri?u ??i hoàng ??Haile Selassie, v? hoàng ?? cu?i cùng c?a Ethiopia, trong tri?u ??i Solomon kéo dài liên t?c 700 n?m t? n?m 1270 t?i n?m 1974. Haile Selassie (H.S.) c?ng nh? các v? vua c?a tri?u ??i Solomon, t? nh?n là dòng dõi c?a vua Solomon ng??i Do Thái (thông qua n? hoàng Sheba c?a Ethiopia ???c nh?c ??n trong Kinh Thánh). B?n thân Haile Selassie c?ng làm hoàng ?? trong 44 n?m, và lúc này ? tu?i 80.

M?c dù b? ngoài là phóng s?, nh?ng Kapuscinski không vi?t theo cách vi?t phóng s? thông th??ng, mà tác ph?m này là t?p h?p các l?i k? c?a nh?ng nh?n v?t trong tri?u ?inh H. S. v? cách th?c v?n hành c?a tri?u ?inh, cách cai tr? dân chúng, cách hoàng ?? chi ph?i nh?ng phe phái trong tri?u ?inh, c?ng nh? s? ph?n kháng và cu?i cùng là l?t ?? v??ng tri?u c?a m?t nh?m s? quan quân ??i (thân C?ng s?n). Có th? coi tác ph?m này là ? gi?a fiction và non-fiction vì b?n thân nh?ng l?i ch?ng c?a nh?ng ng??i k? l?i cho Kapuscinski d??ng nh? ???c ch?n l?c ?? ph?c v? cho ý ?? c?a tác gi?, cho m?t cái storyline và các ý t??ng mà tác gi? mu?n tri?n khai (và c? v?n phong c?ng t??ng t? nhau, và có th? th?y là v?n phong c?a tác gi?). Hình th?c k? câu chuy?n qua các l?i ch?ng này sau này c?ng ???c m?t s? tác gi? khác s? d?ng theo cách t??ng t?, nh? Haruki Murakami trong Ng?m và nh? v?n ???c gi?i Nobel Svetlana Alexievich trong Chi?n tranh không có g??ng m?t ph? n?.

V? ý t??ng, có th? th?y ?ây là m?t nghiên c?u v? ch? ?? chuyên ch?e ? m?t n??c th? gi?i th? ba. Nh?n v?t H.S. d??ng nh? c?ng ch?a nhi?u mâu thu?n: ông là minh quân hay h?n quân? M?t nh? c?i cách hay m?t v? vua chuyên ch?? là nh?n t? ?óng vai tr? ?n ??nh, duy trì t?nh dân t?c c?a n??c Ethiopia hay là k? k?m h?m s? phát tri?n và ti?n b?, m? dân và tham nh?ng?

Tuy nhiên, d??ng nh? Kapuscinski, v?i t? cách m?t công dân c?a m?t n??c phát tri?n và "v?n minh" h?i có ph?n ?ánh gi? kh?c nghi?t v?i v? vua này và ch? ?? quân ch? c?a ông. C?ng có th? vì ch?a có ?? lùi v? th?i gian vì Kapuscinski vi?t cu?n sách này khi ch? ?? quân s? v?n ch?a hoàn toàn ki?m soát nh?n ??c và th?c hi?n nh?ng chi?n d?ch thanh tr?ng kh?c nghi?t. Ch? trong vài n?m sau ?6, ch? ?? quân s? Derg ?ã th?c hi?n chi?n d?ch Kh?ng b? ?? tàn b?o (mà n?n nh?n ngoài các quan ch?c ch?nh quy?n c?, c?n bao g?m các ??ng C?ng s?n và XHCN kh?c) d?n t?i cái ch?t c?a kho?ng 500 ng?n ng??i. Và ti?p theo ?ó là cu?c n?i chi?n Ethiopia (gi?a ch? ?? quân s? Marxist v?i phe n?i d?y c?ng theo Marxist) di?n ra trong g?n 15 n?m làm 1,5 tri?u ng??i ch?t n?a. N?u so v?i nh?ng cái gi? ph?i tr? b?ng m?u ?6 và s? t?t lùi v? kinh t? do n?i chi?n g?y ra thì ch? ?? quân ch? c?a H.S. xem ra v?n là m?t c?i bình yên b? ?ánh m?t.

V? d?ch thu?t, b?n d?ch c?a Nguy?n Chí Thu?t nói chung t?t, nh?ng m?c m?t s? l?i kh?ng ?áng có ho?n toàn có th? ki?m tra (và ? ?ây c?n ph?i nói v? vai tr? m? nh?t c?a bi?n t?p) khi l?n l?n gi?a hai nh?n v?t c?m ??u ??o ch?nh n?m 1960 l?c th?i ng??i này là anh trai ng??i kia, l?c th?i ng??c l?i. M?t l?i n?a là khi ?? c?p t?i các s? quan Derg, d?ch gi? d?ch th?nh "các s? quan v?ng Derg" trong khi Derg là ?y ban, vi?t t?t c?a ?y ban. Quân s? cai tr? Ethiopia sau cu?c ch?nh bi?n n?m 1974.

Martyna says

Ta ksi??ka nie jest reporta?em, tylko bardziej esejem o istocie w?adzy. Najlepiej wida? to w warstwie j?zykowej, wszyscy bohaterowie mówi? tym samym g?osem, wida? ?e to styl Kapu?ci?skiego, a nie

autentyczne wypowiedzi dworzan.

Troch? mnie irytowa?a przesadna literacko??, najbardziej chyba pod koniec te pi?trz?ce si? bez ko?ca cz?stochowskie rymy "Lepiej nie skaka?, ?eby potem nie p?aka?. Lepiej nie gard?owa?, ?eby nie ?a?owa?." Wg mnie odzieraj? one ksi??k? z autentyzmu; zreszt? nie ma co liczy?, ?e dowiemy si? z niej du?o o Etiopii samej w sobie. Od faktów wa?niejsze s? tu gry s?owne, symbolika, uniwersalne tezy na tematy polityczne. Ale jako dzie?o filozoficzne, alegoria, w której na miejsce Cesarza mo?na sobie postawi? ró?ne postaci z historii, podoba?a mi si?.

Boris Maksimovic says

Iako je Kapuš?injski proglašen za novinara XX vijeka, iako je ispratio 27 državnih udara, pu?eva raznih vrsta, revolucija i nasilnih i manje nasilnih promjena vlasti, iako je ?etiri puta stajao pred strelja?kim vodom i za dlaku izbjegao smrt - gotovo je nemogu?e do?i do njegovih knjiga na srpskom.

Sre?om, žena me je iznenadila engleskim izdanjem Penguin. Do sada sam zapravo samo jednu pro?itao na srpskom, a to su "Putovanja sa Herodotom".

Ovo je knjiga o vladavini Hajla Salasija kroz o?i njegovih dvorjana, a to je zaista prava rije?, jer je njegov dvor zaista bio konstituisan na jedan gotovo srednjevjekovni na?in i kao takav nije imao ni najmanju namjeru da se mijenja, što im je na kraju svima došlo glave.

Kapuš?injski je u danima nakon svrgavanja Hajla Salasija po Adis Abebi krišom tražio i slušao preostale dvorjane sakrivene iza navu?enih zavjesa koji su u smrtnom strahu od postrevolucionarne vlasti jedva nalazili hrabrosti da mu se otvore. Što bi rekli oni clickbait naslovi, ono što je ?uo ?e vas šokirati.

?itajte Kapuš?inskog, ne?ete se pokajati.

Ma?a Cimermanová says

Som rada, že sa v?aka vydavatelstvu Absynt dozvedám o nových témach. Túto knihu by som si ja v kníhkupectve asi do rúk nezobrala, ale asi by som mohla dos? ?utova?, že o ?o som prišla. Príbehy ?udí ma vždy fascinovali a zaujímali. A práve v tejto knihe mi ponúkajú iný poh?ad na vec a ukazujú ako dokážu ?udia vidie? svojich vladárov.

Huy says

Ryszard Kapu?ci?ski luôn bi?t cách xóa nhòa ranh gi?i gi?a các th? lo?i, phóng s? c?a ông h?p d?n nh? m?t cu?n ti?u thuy?t, chân dung v? Hoàng ?? và nh?ng s? ki?n l?ch s? c?a ??t n??c Ethiopia ???c ông k? l?i qua l?i k? c?a r?t nhi?u nhân v?t ???c ông ph?ng v?n gi?u m?t, gi?u tên s?ng ??ng và ??y nh?ng tr?n tr? dù ông luôn khách quan, không can thi?p quá sâu vào câu chuy?n hay tâm trí ng??i ??c.

Conrad says

From the waning Gomulka regime forward, Kapuscinski fashioned a journalistic career out of exceedingly subtle swipes at the pretenses and tragicomic self-deception of Soviet-style Communism. The Emperor is aimed at Haile Selassie, who Kapuscinski paints as a vapid, self-important ignoramus.

How much of this is actually Selassie and how much is carefully picked in order to make fun of Stalin or Khrushchev or even Gomulka is up for debate, but that's exactly what makes this book a masterpiece: I can't think of a more bitter catalog of the pathologies that accompany political power, and by the end it doesn't matter all that much who's in the limo, surrounded by Quislings and sycophants.

One of the mysteries of this book is whether dictators like Selassie come into being due to good timing, canny manipulation, or people's gullible belief that they can change their own nature. Kapuscinski refuses to take sides on the question of which comes first, the Hitler or the Reich; he's more of a muralist than a satirist, which is part of what makes *The Emperor* so satisfying. I can't recommend this book highly enough.

Hadrian says

Fantastical story of the life and fall of Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia. Dialogue seems tad polished to be from real interviews, and seems to me to be a pointed allegory for the Soviet Union.

Quân Khuê says

Không kém, nh?ng không hay b?ng Du hành v?i Herodotus và G? Mun.

SoLe Puella says

Fenomenalna ideja da se o nekom vladaru piše iz perspektive onih koji su ?inili njegovu poslugu i za njega radili.

Adam says

The Emperor is a bizarre and at time grotesquely comic portrait of the last Emperor of Ethiopia Haile Selassie. It is also a detail and evocative exploration of tyranny. Kapuscinski in a much more impressionistic mood details the rule and fall of another tyrant the last Shah of Iran in the Shah of Shahs. By focusing on tyrants of U.S. client states he uses a trick employed by other Iron Curtain writers (Ex. Kadare) to critique autocracy in general as in general most dictatorships are the same whatever the ideological coloring. Both these texts are brutal, but starkly beautiful with fabulous impressionist writing that for all its dreamlike imagery and angular occurrences is filled with a passion for the innocents caught in the whims of brutal leaders and rebellions. Arguments can be made against these books as history and reportage, but as literature they remain luminous masterpieces, fluttering torches from the dark nights of the late 20th century.

Kapuscinski writes in a mixture of tragedy, farce, poetry, whimsy, fantasy, and reportage, an impressionistic or surrealist tapestry of history that resonates with as much myth as headlines, what Adam Hochschild calls "Magic Journalism". Go to other writers for the facts, go Kapuscinski for something more.

Renga Hutchinson says

I often wondered what the atmosphere would have been like in Selassie's final years as Emperor of Ethiopia, what factors led to the decay of his empire and the methods taken to depose him. If these interviews are credible then Ryszard Kapuscinski has shed light on the matter. 'The Emperor' portrays the human side of Haile Selassie - as a creaky and venerable old man with both faults and weaknesses - which is a stark contrast to the symbol of humility in power and all-conquering lion, that he usually is presented to us as.

James says

The most penetrating, compelling book on the nature of power and the inevitability of its dissolution within the framework of human nature, Kapuscinski's book should be taught -before- Maciavelli in any self-respecting Political Science class.

L. says

Na pocz?tku zachwyty, potem znu?enie. Doceniam kunszt, form? i styl, ale to chyba nie m?oj ?wiat. Ani sama Etiopia, ani Kapu?ci?ski.

Andrew says

I suppose the American frame of reference for The Emperor is probably the "new journalism" stuff from the '60s-- Truman Capote, Tom Wolfe, Hunter Thompson, all that. So I liked all those guys a grip when I was in high school, and now that I'm a bit more grown-up, I can appreciate Ryszard Kapuscinski. Rather than writing about kids dropping acid, he writes about the utter insanity of the court of King Haile Selassie at the twilight of the Ethiopian Empire.

And rather than being strict reportage, you get the sense of everything converging on this single piece of writing. History, ritual, materiality, memory, myth, and injustice are all laid out bare.

Donna Kirk says

Salman Rushdie wrote about him: "One Kapu?ci?ski is worth more than a thousand whimpering and fantasizing scribblers. His exceptional combination of journalism and art allows us to feel so close to what Kapu?ci?ski calls the inexpressible true image of war".

Sam says

A little lesson in the blurred lines between reportage and fiction - a "detailed account" of the fall of Haile Selassie given by the ministers and servants who once waited upon him. Not, of course, that you'd ever believe these are direct transcriptions of interviews, or that Kapuscinski hasn't modified and tailored these accounts as he sees fit, unless you believe all of the ministers speak in an identical fantastical ironical language. I suppose if you have narrow ideas of what constitutes nonfiction you might find this sort of thing offensive, but if you've already signed on to the concept that monkeying with the truth a little is the soul of all narrative, fictional or otherwise, it's easy to give yourself over to the story provided here. Of particular note are the amazing accounts of Selassie's court pre-disillusion, and the accounts of the men who propped up the emperor's legs (on account of him being short in stature) and therefore believed that they were personally responsible for "supporting the empire."

Really, though, every sentence here is a winner, and the level of irony is so delicious it's difficult not to try and extend your lunch break to finish each section. Also, according to those in the know, a winking satire of Communist bureaucratic wrangling! Also, according to others who are also in the know but don't agree with the first people in the know, written as a Marxist propaganda tract to expose the futility of Western-sponsored capitalist schemes. However will we discern the truth?! But from my resolutely non-partisan perspective, a grand old time indeed.

Rowena says

A 3.5 star rating perhaps. This book contains accounts from those close to Ethiopia's last emperor, Haile Selassie. It chronicles Selassie's opulent lifestyle and his subsequent downfall. It speaks to the undoing of African leaders. I've always been intrigued by Selassie and was interested to know more about him.

The Emperor is a very dramatic account of Selassie's and I did get a slightly clearer idea of who Selassie was. He was very progressive in many ways, and he was quite eccentric as well. Overall he was painted as quite the despot in this book, something I'd never really heard been said about him

Kapuscinski managed to interview those close to the emperor, albeit anonymously, and put their thoughts into this book. However, the accounts sounded a bit too fictional to me. That's not necessarily bad but I was looking for something more substantial and something that didn't sound so one-sided.

I also felt that the book didn't have a logical start; I expected everything to go chronologically, from start to finish. Perhaps this is my own error for having a wrong idea about what this book was trying to do.

In my opinion, Kapuscinski is better suited to write short anecdotes and make anthropological observations while on his reporting assignments. I'd really enjoyed Kapuscinski's last book, *The Shadow of the Sun*, and had thought this would be just as enjoyable. I feel that someone like Emperor Selassie (and roads are named after him all around Africa after all) is deserving of a more factual, in-depth, properly-documented account. I wanted to know why he is so revered in the Rastafarian community for example, but this account didn't go into that.

This book whetted my appetite for learning more about Selassie and Ethiopia. It was hard for me to accept the content as the Ethiopian people I know speak highly of Selassie. So many questions, not enough answers
