



# Satantango

*László Krasznahorkai, George Szirtes (Translator)*

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Already famous as the inspiration for the filmmaker Béla Tarr's six-hour masterpiece, *Satantango* is proof, as the spellbinding, bleak, and hauntingly beautiful book has it, that "the devil has all the good times."

The story of *Satantango*, spread over a couple of days of endless rain, focuses on the dozen remaining inhabitants of an unnamed isolated hamlet: failures stuck in the middle of nowhere.

Schemes, crimes, infidelities, hopes of escape, and above all trust and its constant betrayal are Krasznahorkai's meat. "At the center of *Satantango*," George Szirtes has said, "is the eponymous drunken dance, referred to here sometimes as a tango and sometimes as a csardas. It takes place at the local inn where everyone is drunk. . . . Their world is rough and ready, lost somewhere between the comic and tragic, in one small insignificant corner of the cosmos. Theirs is the dance of death."

"You know," Mrs. Schmidt, a pivotal character, tipsily confides, "dance is my one weakness."

## Satantango Details

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Author : László Krasznahorkai , George Szirtes (Translator)

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### ??? ??? says

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### Hadrian says

Satantango, or Satan's Tango, is a wandering, twisted, dark, exhausting snarl of a book. It takes six steps forward, and six steps back, leaving chaos and the blackest of humor.

The novel is an allegorical story of a dance with the devil - the characters in their bleak little rainy hole of a village futz around, and every time they try and move forwards, the inertia of their lives drags them back. They dream of the fool's prophet, Irimias, and regress further. Sink into the earth.

It's more than Eastern Europeans Being Depressed. Seriously. Just read some of the sentences out loud.

But the plot and all those things are secondary to the astonishing language and detail of the author. The sheer mass of the text is first intimidating, then wholly absorbing. Krasznahorkai has an astonishing grasp of the slowness of memory and time.

4.5 stars. To reread.

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### Edward says

--Satantango

*A Note about the Author*

*A Note about the Translator*

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### brian says

krasznahorkai's hard at work on the next few in the series:

- #2 Beezelbuballet
- #3 Mephistophelesamba
- #4 Azazelambada
- #5 Antichristarantella

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- #6 Luciferumba
- #7 Belialimbo
- #8 Asmodeusalsa

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### **Chuck LoPresti says**

A stunning read. Just as Breughel paintings are revered for their almost musical composition, Krasznahorkai's long-awaited (in English at least) *Satantango* unfolds like a piece of music – a tango – in style – but not in tone. And also like Brueghel's peasants – Krasznahorkai's failures scrape along through the mud in a shambling mess of drunken sin and debauchery – but somehow are never not worth your attention. *Satantango* is populated by only failures and false prophets. It also works like a desiccated and transmogrified Wizard of Oz where imagination leads to failure, little girls kill animals, humans fall more easily than ambulant scarecrows and your friends kick you in the face when you need it least. “There’s no sense or meaning in anything. It’s nothing but a network of dependency under enormous fluctuating pressures. It’s only our imaginations, not our senses that continually confront us with failure and the false belief that we can raise ourselves by our own bootstraps from the miserable pulp of decay.” Furthermore in Krasznahorkai’s words, “to distinguish the bad from the good” – this is probably what makes any difference in the face of such perpetual decay. This basic premise is reinforced by an almost Buddhist like animism that animates nature with the same fate – or does it serve to unanimate humans into animal forms? This point was reinforced when Bela Tarr decided to open his movie of this book with an extended scene of cows engaged in desultory mating and mud-wandering – just the same and no better than humans. Spiders scamper throughout the work and spill right over to the cover design – reinforcing this same concept. Although there is very little that would be considered pleasurable to be found here – there is something of a very profound admonition that is made palatable by the sheer prowess of the writing and translation. Another salient point of comparison would be an organ composition by American Robert Bates, *Charon’s Oar* (hear it here at about the 29:45 mark of the program - <http://pipedreams.publicradio.org/lis...>) that never left my head while reading this. Not that there’s anything wrong with Vig’s music for the film – and the dark and cyclical patterns of the music are similar in both pieces – but like *Charon’s Oar* – you can almost feel the steady hand of Krasznahorkai slowly churning the waters of the Acheron with an experienced form that is the product of years of practice. The repeating swirls of tone in Bates’ work are a suitable soundtrack for the coiled decay of reality in *Satantango* – and also like *Satantango* it is immense, important and engaging. Sin after sin follows debauchery and depravity and nobody escapes except a youth that longs to transcend earth to return to her dead father’s side in what is possibly the most crushing and horrible scene of cruelty and despair I’ve read this side of Ledig, Platonov and Shalomov. Even when a seemingly magic event unfolds before the eyes of unworthy spectators its thaumaturgical prowess is stilted by simple self- denial and craven disbelief. A further anti-Oz appears in the notion that such magic resides with our grasps and by simply being aware of this – you can take that magic – shove it in your pocket and suffocate ‘til death – leaving absolutely no value of anyone but to serve as a demonstration of the murder of hope. And yet again – it ends like Proust, Farrell and Rezzori with the notion that all such life and memory is only what we, as writers, bother to record. I guess when four of your favorite writers remind you that writers should write, it’s time to stop dancing, mix your palinka a little weaker and get to writing before you die. Reality will slowly fade for all of us and those that have read Krasznahorkai might be less confused when it happens.

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## Dem says

**Satantango by Laszlo Krasznahorkai has received numerous great reviews and write ups but for me this was a very depressing and claustrophobic read. Longlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize in 2013 but it was the cover that caught my attention as I browsed in a book shop and I am a sucker for a great cover.**

*In the darkening embers of a communist Utopia, life in a desolate Hungarian village has come to a virtual standstill when the charismatic Irimias long thought to dead returns home.*

When I started this novel it felt like someone had torn out the first 50 pages of the book and I had to figure out who the characters were and what exactly was going and to be honest the further along I read the more frustrated I became and at the half way mark I decided I couldn't take any more of this depressing and bleak novel no matter how much of a masterpiece it is considered in Hungary.

Another major issue I had with this book was there was no paragraph breaks which makes it very difficult reading and along with poor characterization and no sense of time or place this one was a non runner for me and sadly goes on my very small DNF list.

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## Ema says

I am reading *Satantango* at my parents' house. A communist block of flats, tiny cubicles with thin walls, through which the noise of a Tv set penetrates from my neighbor upstairs. Later on, my mother comes in my room and falls asleep on my bed. Poor mom, she is always so tired... Soon, the muffled noise of the Tv intermingles with my mother's snores. I am expelled from the depths of evil; I leave behind the colony, the putrid rooms, the decay. I come back to my banal reality. I glimpse at the half-eaten cake, the orderly room, my warm feet. I hold the book open with my toes, fingers plucked deep in my ears. Slowly, word upon word, I can hear once again the rumbling of thunder, the incessant tapping of rain. Shadowy hands pull me once more inside the sickening gloom and despair. I am back in the colony, caught up in a maddening Satan's tango.

Back to Bucharest, I finish the novel. Rain has followed me around, accompanying my reading of *Satantango*. I couldn't have arranged for a better setting for this bleak, absurd novel, which dragged me through a world in a deepening state of decay. Civilization seems to have been erased, people decimated by an unknown plague, with only an isolated community which survived an apocalypse.

For a long time, I had no notion of time and space, nor of the purpose of me being there. No explanations, no causes, only a sour taste in one's mouth, as a sign of impending death. The few people left in the colony retreat, powerless, in the face of an abstract disease, incapable of defending or saving themselves. Everything around them crumbles and rots. Paint flakes, roofs collapse, mold creeps along walls, furniture and clothes. Unseen spiders weave their cobwebs in silence, trapping objects and beings alike in silvery cocoons, in an attempt to preserve, to hold the world still.

It is a life adrift, Sodom and Gomorrah on a smaller scale - men crave for their neighbors' wives, young girls sell their bodies, the school master no longer teaches the young, the doctor no longer heals the sick. Nothing works anymore - the mill and the shops are deserted, the fields are abandoned. The only one standing is the tavern, where people gather to drink and dance madly until dawn.

The inhabitants dream of escaping, of leaving their colony behind. Thoughts of starting a better life elsewhere fade away the minute they take shape. They place their hopes in an outward salvation. One day, a tragedy befalls them, followed by a miracle witnessed by few, but they can't read the signs; their minds are too numbed, their souls too hardened to understand. And when the much awaited savior arrives, they abandon every shred of reason and follow him blindly. In his hands, the once hopeless puppets return to life, as he infuses them with hope and renewed energy. Docile, they walk the road their master puppeteer has chosen for them.

Krasznahorkai's prose has a hypnotic, overwhelming power. I allowed myself to be carried away by his words, by the rhythm of his long, winding phrases. Slowly, I immersed into the suffocating world of the colony; I could sense the moans of collapsing houses, the lament of an eternal rain, the weaving of cobwebs, the advancing of mold. I could almost smell the heavy stench of mud and putrefaction, oozing from the crumbling walls and the skin of their helpless inhabitants.

In twelve steps of a dance executed in circle, the narrative opens and closes with the mysterious ringing of bells. Behind a window, safely tucked under blankets, there is a hand that writes in notebooks. Reality and imagination commence to overlap; it is either a descent into madness or an ascent towards truth.

\*Spoilers below, most likely\*

In so many ways, *Satantango* is not a dystopia. It is, in effect, real life. Crude, unforgiving life, in which we can bring the apocalypse onto ourselves through our ignorance, indolence and depravity. Page after page, I started to realize that the unnamed plague, the unmentioned disaster did not happen from external causes. The so-called catastrophe was brought by the people themselves, through their laziness, vice and fatality. Dehumanized, hopeless, they linger in a state of lethargy; their will is paralyzed. It is the kind of disease that is eating them from the inside; they have condemned themselves. Instead of relying on their own powers, they hope for salvation from elsewhere; they ultimately subject to a higher will, because it is always easier to be led than to lead. Ironically, the salvation they await for could mean, in the end, a further downfall.

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### **Jonfaith says**

A powerful open text, one rife with both fire and human failures. As I quipped early, it's a Faulkner noir in the Magyar mud. What ripens and stings is more akin to Beckett: a waiting for IKEA, with ideological trappings.

The novel opens essentially with a bell in the night. Then it rains.

The contemporary reader will ascribe a historical arc to the symbolism, unfortunately the novel was written in 1985. INXS didn't script the Velvet Revolution. Many phenomenon are repositioned after the fact.

The novel in translation appears in the wake of Bela Tare's imperious adaptation. The language is a live wire amidst the sodden decay. This should be pursued at all costs.

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## Nora Barnacle says

Jasno mi je zašto mahom dobija petice, kao što mi je jasno zašto ljude oduševljava "Sto godina samo?e", ali (baš kao i "Sto godina samo?e") nema ono što meni treba za 5.

Jedan od glavnih saveta koji neki veoma cenjeni predava? daje svojim ?acima, polaznicima neke ekstremno elitne francuske kulinarske škole je „kad valja, oduzimaj, nemoj dodavati“.

E, da je mla?ani Laslo Krasnahorkaj taj savet imao na pameti dok je pisao ovaj roman, moj književni ukus bi pred njim ni?ice pao u naklon. Ovako, trojka za ideju, malo za zamisao i malo prevodiocu i/ili redaktoru prevoda (sude?i po COBISS-u, Marko ?udi? je tu prekaljeniji ?inilac), pa neka bude ?etvorka na tanušnim, staklenim nožicama.

Satantango je, neosporno, interesantna ideja sa više aspekata: stilski i kompoziciono, najpre. Priznajem, uspeo je da me pošteno nasamari, te sam do polovine htela da ga zafrlja?im u sva ?etri ?oška ku?e odjednom i ozbiljno se nosila mišlu da prevodiocu Zoltanu Moguš?iju pošaljem dopisnicu sa tekstom „Smatrajte se opsovanim“.

Kroz prvu polovinu knjige se trebalo, doslovno, probijati kroz nevi?eno kofuznu sintaksu, hiperbatone uklještene me?u anastrofe i kojekakve retorske aždaje razbacane po, mutant - duga?kim re?enicama, a sve to u sablasnoj, dogvilskoj atmosferi i po ?udljivoj jesenjoj kiši, nose?i na le?ima teški oblik ravni?arske depresije u akutnom stanju.

Ispostavilo se, recimo, da je to sve to i te kako imalo svrhu, da je prevodilac (ili redaktor), zapravo, dobro obavio sumanuto zahtevan posao i da, preko toga, ima izuzetno, izuzetno bogat re?nik.

Ipak, poduhvati ovog tipa, zamešateljstva svakoraznih sastojaka zavrtložena u nekakvim misti?nim maglinama i sli?ni Hazarski re?nici, mom ?itala?kom senzibilitetu nisu po meri. A ovde se ne radi o kafi koju neko piće sa še?erom ili bez (to - non est disputandum), ve? me, naprsto, nije ubedio, tj. ono mu?enje od prvih 150 strana nisam naplatila.

Pojedini elementi su prenaglašeni beskrajnjim seciranjem (pa onda još jedan krug nazad, ako neko nešto slu?ajno nije zapamatio), drugi, pak, nedovoljno razvijeni, gomila epizoda koje do kraja ne dobijaju smisao, insistiranje na misti?nosti gde god se u?ini da bi moglo biti dosadno, onda nekakvi snovi, pa mišomor, pa ma?ke, pa tango, pa pauci, pa lebdenja, kurve, prepisan odlomak iz Pinokija i tako...razgranato na sve strane, da jadni ?italac može samo da promalja nos iz tog nekog šiblja, pa šta uhvati, to mu je.

Ne mogu da prihvatom obrazloženje da je ovo sve baš tako trebalo da bude, imaju?i u vidu kako je zaokružena pri?a (da ne spojlujem), jer znam nekoliko uspelijih rešenja prikazivanja radnje iz ...hm... druga?ije vizure.

Neka krajnji sud bude da po sred ovog romana zjapi veliki procep izme?u dve piš?eve želje: da u isto vreme zaintrigira fabulom i da nas fascinira formom i aluzijama. To, ako je i izvodljivo, radi se ceo život (pa nastane Uliks), ili zahteva da se rodiš kao hipersenzitivni stilista (kao Bernhard) ili, što je možda najlakše, da budeš Umberto Eko pa da ti svašta prili?i i bude dozvoljeno, jer, prosto -sve znaš. ?ak i kroz zakrpu „mag?ni realizam na ma?arski na?in“ meni i dalje mnogo promaje duva iz tog procepa, ali to ve? est disputandum – Makondo mi izaziva reumu, vrtoglavicu i povra?anje.

Krasnahorkaj je solidan pisac, no, pre za neku kratku formu, rekla bih, gde je okvir unapred nametnut i gde pronalaženje mere ne mora biti od presudnog zna?aja. Sam to teško nalazi.

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## Bettie? says

Sátántangó (1994): film only

Description: *In a small dilapidated village in 1990s Hungary, life has come to a virtual standstill. The autumn rains have started. The villagers expect to receive a large cash payment that evening, and then plan to leave. Some want to abscond earlier with more than their fair share of the money. However they hear that the smooth talking Irimias, whom they thought had died, is coming back. They are apprehensive that he will take all their money in one of his grandiose schemes to keep the community going.*

Dancing in the pub

17:05:2015: shortlisted for Man Booker International: <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2015...>

**"Visionary" Hungarian writer Laszlo Krasznahorkai has been announced as the winner of the sixth Man Booker International Prize.**

20:05:2015 He won!

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## Dajana says

Ovaj roman je dokaz da je 2016. godina, sve i da ništa drugo više nije bilo prevedeno, uvela u naš ?itala?ki i kulturni krug neverovatno remek-delo.

Uvek imam problem sa knjigama koje su slavne jednako koliko i filmovi, ali ova knjiga je u?inila da se prvi put zapitam šta bi bilo da su Tarkovski i Felini živi, pa da i oni daju svoju filmsku verziju ovog dela. Neverovatno mi je i dalje da je ovo bilo ?iji prvi roman (ili mi je sad ve? od silnih debitantskih grozota otupela želja da ih ?itam), a još više da se prevod tek sad pojavio, 30 godina nakon originala, i da je samo još Melanholija otpora prevedena, koju ?u potražiti ve? od ponedeljka (izeš ispite i školu :D).

Prikaz pišem pre svega jer imam upozorenje za sve ?itaoce: ne ?itajte prvo predgovor, pa delo jer je kod nas o?ito praksa da se brka šta ide u predgovor, a šta u pogovor. ?itava 'misterija' dela, koja se otkriva na poslednjih nekoliko strana, ve? je na tre?oj strani predgovora raskrinkana i baš ubije uživanje (sre?a pa ja mrzim predgovore :D). Iako pozdravljam pregled Krasznahorkaijeve poetike u predgovoru Marka ?udi?a, toliko me je iznerviralo prepri?avanje ovog romana, a još više ostalih dela koja nisu prevedena i sad ?u se samo nervirati dok ih ne prevedu ili ?u otvoriti izdava?ku ku?u i naterati tatu da mi ih prevodi kako zna i ume. :D (tata je Ma?ar, prim. aut.)

Krasznahorkai ima stil koji bi bio maestralan sve i da na 500 strana opisuje šestostranu prizmu iz svih perspektiva, a takvi pisci su, po mom mišljenju, oni koji niti povla?uju ?itaocu, niti su pretenciozni u meri da ni njima nije jasno šta su napisali. Uvek imam problem sa autorima koji bi da se rvu sa opštim kategorijama i koji tekst pretrpavaju opštim imenicama, ali Krasznahorkai je imao sjajne u?itelje u Beketu i Kafki (ali i u Džojsu, presimpati?no je kad pominje slinavku i šap o kojoj je Džojs pisao u nekom ?asopisu za sto?arstvo!) i jednu paraboli?nu pri?u, krcatu mitom, intertekstom, biblijskim referencama, pretvorio u fabulu koja je vrlo ?vrsta i funkcioniše sama po sebi. U vezi sa tim je i ?injenica da, bar za mene, književno delo mora samo za

sebe da bude vredno, a ne samo kad ga neki kritičar rastuma? ili kad se, da citiram Gombrovića, kulturne tetke late pera da filtriraju i nametnu? itala?ki doživljaj. Krasnahorkai ne piše za kulturne tetke.

Ne?u da prepričavam radnju da ne bih nekom uništila ovaj neverovatni kišni svet u kojem je sve moguće, a verovatno ništa nije, a možda vam se i u?ini da ste videli nešto?ega nema. :)

Obavezno štivo!

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## Declan says

Contains spoilers.

If I change one letter in the famous dictum of Julian of Norwich I can, I think, reach the core of László Krasznahorkai's world-view: All shall be hell, and all shall be hell and all manner of things shall be hell.

In Satantango, as in The Melancholy or Resistance and War and War, we are presented with worlds without pity in which all hope is vested in a single possibility which, once realised, begins to make everything much worse than it was and then, of course, there are always other people....

The influence of Beckett seemed to me to be stronger in this, his first novel, than in the other two and I imagined George Szirtes smiling to himself as he gave an Unnamable character the words: "I'll go on", but if this is the world of Godot, then it is one on which the worse thing possible happens: Godot turns up! For as long as the characters are waiting there is hope that everything can change but what can be expected of a figure such as the deeply ambiguous Irimiás who is described as "an angle of hope to hopeless people with hopeless difficulties"? Disappointment is inevitable; despair assured. For the downtrodden people who live in the ramshackle buildings of a former estate change can only come from without. They have no agency over their own lives and nature is actively imposing its will, turning roads to mud; growing weeds in the unvisited rooms of houses, forming rust and mildew at every opportunity. So surely something must happen to change their misery into rapture? So it is that their collective yearning for a golden tomorrow becomes invested - in every sense - in Irimiás. And what a wonderful speech he makes:

" I want now to gather together a few people in order to establish a model economy that offers a secure existence and binds together a small band of the dispossessed, that is to say...Do you begin to understand me?...What I want is to establish a small island for a few people with nothing left to loose, a small island free of exploitation, where people work for, not against each other, where everyone has plenty and peace and security and can go to sleep at night like a proper human being..."

Who would not want to be a part of this ideal? All the hope of communism or religious fundamentalism can be ours, and this time it will work. Won't it? The highest ideals will prevail.

There are many other aspects to this exceptional book too: the way in which Irimiás correctly identifies the collective culpability of the entire community in the death of Esti and the fascinating figure of the doctor and the ultimate matter of agency. I know that I will continue to think about this book for months and probably years.

In style this is a more straightforward read than Krasznahorkai's other translated novels because he had not

yet begun to form those amazing labyrinthine, chapter-long sentences which are a constant feature of the later books. The translation, by Georges Szirtes, is good although I was a tad disappointed that, where there was an option, he always chose American English so that we get a lot of ass (about the only body-related word I like less is boobs) and a character exclaiming "I'll be darned". But that's a small matter and, if you haven't already done so, nothing should stop you from reading this novel and if you haven't previously read any of Krasznahorkai's work, then this is the book to start with.

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### **ferrigno says**

Il romanzo è diviso in due metà piuttosto nette. Nella prima parte Krasznahorkai descrive una comunità di stracciati dediti più che altro al bere e al furto reciproco, senza piegare nulla. Lo stile è macchinoso, con lunghi periodi pieni di subordinate, evocativo più che illustrativo. Dai fumi stilistici e non, emergono immagini da girone dantesco. La povertà non basta a fare un inferno, per quello occorre la miseria e "miserabile" si adatta perfettamente a descrivere molti dei personaggi del romanzo. L'ambientazione è perfetta: gli edifici sono devastati, la pioggia perenne trasforma tutto in fango, marciscono perfino le erbacce. Alla fine della prima parte, quasi tutti i personaggi convergono verso l'unica bettola dove si ubriacano e ballano un tango disperato che finisce per assumere i contorni di un sabba per evocare il demonio.

Che infatti appare nella prima riga della seconda parte.

Non mi sembra casuale che la scrittura si trasformi radicalmente, passando da una struttura ipotattica a una paratattica appena dopo la comparsa del "demonio", senza soluzione di continuità. Nella prima parte non succede nulla, nella seconda si passa all'azione: il cambiamento stilistico è perfettamente calibrato, visto che l'ipotassi è perfetta per rendere lo stato di meditazione entropica associato all'inattività, mentre la paratassi va bene quando dall'infinito potenziale dell'inazione si passa a: fare 1-una cosa concreta.

L'autore continua ad astenersi da ogni spiegazione e al lettore è richiesta una intensa partecipazione, consistente nel mettere insieme il puzzle che Krasznahorkai ha rovesciato sul pavimento. Il puzzle contiene, tra l'altro, varie tessere "speciali", simboli non facili da decifrare. L'enigma principale è quello del medico. Il fatto che sia l'unico a preoccuparsi della bambina e rischi la vita per salvarla, ne fa un personaggio speciale. C'è una relazione tra questa unicità e il finale del romanzo?

Il romanzo sembra incompiuto, ci sono tanti di quei nodi non sciolti da irritare il lettore. Si potrebbe aprire uno di quei gruppi di lettura in cui si cerca di stabilire come chiudere le varie linee narrative e che interpretazione dare ai simboli disseminati qua e là, ma temo che l'operazione non abbia senso. Certo, si può trovare qualche soluzione razionale, "logica". Ma è saggio estrapolare soluzioni logiche da un romanzo in cui accadono cose irrazionali?

Comunque, bellissimo. Ho già voglia di rileggerlo.

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### **RK-isme says**

Once again, I wrote a full review and then, as I was about to save it, I accidentally changed screens and deleted it. It was brilliant. It really was. I spent two hours on it.

I even made some great connections to Goethe's Faust (Easter bells announcing the resurrection and 'Walpurgisnacht') and to Nietzsche's eternal return.

I believe that I have captured the spirit of the book by deleting the review. Absurd.

I highly recommend it.

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## Fede says

Meh.

According to most reviewers this book is bound to trigger suicidal tendencies in the reader, bleak and depressing as it is. Well, Krasznahorkai's works are not exactly cheerful and living behind the Iron Curtain certainly did not help. But I really can't see all the devastating sadness some (enthusiastic!) readers talk about.

I mean, has anybody noticed the satirical undertones of this novel? Because they are quite evident, as the author himself stated on several occasions since its release.

The protagonists reminded me of Bulgakov's Woland and Azazel ("The Master and Margarita"), devilish creatures who put up a shambles in Moscow by unraveling the corruption and madness of Soviet Russian society. In "Satantango" two grotesque government agents - the evil Iriás and Petrina - become the messianic saviours of a desperate, neglected rural community they once visited, now doomed by economical paralysis. The villagers, exalted by Iriás' return and coaxed by his promises of a wealthy life, set off toward an indefinite destination, only to be deceived and abandoned to their destiny (oops, I spoiled it. Who would have thought there would be a sad ending?).

The book is divided in two parts: before and after Iriás' arrival. The first part is basically a long analysis of the characters, stream of consciousness-like indirect monologues that make the reader delve into any sort of weird psychosis and frustration. As the autumn rain relentlessly pours down, men and women gather in the seedy bar waiting for the charismatic Iriás to reappear, killing the time with alcohol, drunken arguments and music (the 'tango' Krasznahorkai refers to in the title). Time expands indefinitely in a stifling dimension of morbid withdrawal, like in Kieslowski's or Borowczyk's films of the same period.

Let aside all Chapter Two, which is a satire of the communist beaurocracy reminding once again of Bulgakov's masterpiece, in the first half of the book we witness the characters turn into parodies of themselves, horrible masks of greed, lust and envy - the nasty crowds that haunted the visionary fantasies of Goya and Ensor. Iriás will cunningly exploit their moral corruption and desperation for his mysterious purpose.

Now (second part) the action begins: at least it was meant to. Actually, the plot gets so weak and the dialogues so poorly written that we start to regret the endless rambling of the first part. It seems the author himself loses interest in the novel precisely when it is supposed to come to a turning point: the story is now little more than a pretext for the writer's display of introspective skills.

As for the writing: not so good, not too bad.

There are no paragraphs: each chapter is an uninterrupted cluster of long, convoluted sentences, one after the other. The author does make use of 'traditional' punctuation, therefore the text is not hard to follow; but the 'visual' effect is unpleasant at the very least: in these monolithic paragraphs the reader's attention is seldom awakened and tends to wane.

All in all, I found this book little more than mediocre. The psychological analysis of the characters is often

shallow and the dialogues are terrible (at least in translation). It is more 'Commedia dell'Arte' than existentialism. Krasznahorkai also goes too far in depicting the ridiculous ugliness of the villagers, so that they become puppets, caricatures of characters. More evidence of the satirical intent of the novel...

Quite overrated. I preferred "The Melancholy of Resistance" by the same author, with a similar subject but a better development.

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### **Steven Godin says**

First published in Hungary in 1985 this cleverly constructed, often exhilarating, but relentlessly bleak novel is now something of a cult classic. Krasznahorkai's vision is of the likes you just don't come across that often. This book stands out from the crowd, along with everything else he has written. The story centres on the arrival of a man who may or may not be a prophet, or the devil, or just a violent being, out to cause unrest in a rotting, perishing, rain-sodden Hungarian hamlet where all hope has been lost. The buildings are crumbling down, the inhabitants, a cast of semi-crazed desperate peasants who cack-handedly are trying to rip each other off while ogling each other's wives are not the kind of folk to share a joke with. A doctor obsessively watching his neighbours, young women trying to sell themselves in a depleted mill, a disabled girl ineptly attempting to kill her cat to shake off boredom. Now if this sounds like the stuff of misery, that's precisely what it is, with the exception of a few moments of strange humour. The man whom they credit with extraordinary powers, and who was supposed to have already died, is on the road to the estate, with his sidekick Petrina. The locals excitedly assemble in the spider-infested bar to await him, where they argue, drink and dance grotesquely to the accordion into the small hours.

László Krasznahorkai's scenes are designed to de-familiarise with the world around us. The chapters tend to begin with some under-explained event, a strangely vehement argument about whether to turn on an oil heater, or the inhabitants trashing their homes and setting out on the open road clutching a few possessions. He writes in a high modernist style, that's vague in places and fairly abstract, and even though the writing seems out of place with the setting, it doesn't really feel like it. He cleverly weaves themes like communism and alienation into his narrative that helps the story feel that bit more realistic. But the book still carries a old folk tale sentiment, or that of somebody's nightmare. Anyone looking to feel like a summer's day whilst reading this can forget it. It's like being stuck in a world set against the darkest tones of black and white, with out of tune violins crying away slowing ready for the last day on earth.

This is no doubt a remarkable achievement, but structurally, I still preferred 'The Melancholy of Resistance' to this. Hence the four stars instead of five.

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### **M. Sarki says**

<http://msarki.tumblr.com/post/5203382...>

The sickly overweight doctor near the end of the book discontinues his severe watering down of his *pálenka*, mixing now a mere fifty-fifty blend of brandy and water as he collects in his files his records by journaling what is in his mind and the way he wants to see it now instead of his normal operating procedure of reporting on what he actually sees. In other words, the good doctor is rewriting history and there is nothing the ex-residents of the Hungarian estate can do about it. Little does he know that the cooperatives he spies on have

already left the estate to pursue other dreams that are just as fraught with despair as what remains as leftovers for the old man of medicine to write about.

After finishing the novel this morning I am not sure what I have to say about it. The Béla Tarr film *Sátántangó* was unsettling in itself, even with not understanding exactly what was going on in the underlying plot and the meaning of what was being portrayed on the screen. But the book was very much of the same artery. It leaves more questions than answers. But this I do know:

- There are writers, and the written upon.
- There are masters, and their slaves.
- Life can be delusional if your given lot and circumstance is to be believed as reality.
- There are leaders and there are followers.
- An entire life can be led in completely the wrong direction, and finding out one's grave mistake, realizing it much too late to do anything about it, is sometimes liberating in its defeating devastation.
- It is easy to be lulled to sleep by security, however false and fleeting it may ultimately be.
- Superstitions are born of a false environment and believed at great peril, that is, if a single life matters at all.

Some would argue that all the work of László Krasznahorkai is unfair and demand their money returned in good stead, and hastily. I am not sure what I would think of this novel had I not seen the Béla Tarr film *Sátántangó* first. But there are many similarities. The pacing and dreariness is the same. The constant dread and impending doom of the present on every page is almost always disconcerting. The scene in which the young girl kills the cat and then herself was beyond creepy in the film and handled much more gingerly in the original novel. Having Hungarian rock star Mihály Vig in the lead role of Irimiás in the film version helped make the character more compelling and desirable than the book's version of the same man.

But I do think László Krasznahorkai has made a fine artifact worthy of at least one reading. If I need more *Sátántangó* I will definitely watch the film again. It is generally true that the book is always better than the film, but not in this case.

*In Sátántangó, it feels like the real thing: a horrified reaction to a world without meaning.* \_\_\_\_Theo Tait, The Guardian

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## David says

Laszlo Krasznahorkai's first novel *Satantango* certainly plays hard-to-get. This cagey, fractal narrative—divided upon itself and reassembled, almost like a cubist painting—delights in disorienting the reader and forcing him to roll up his intellectual sleeves and get down to business. Published originally in 1985, during the decline of European communism, and finally appearing in English translation this month, *Satantango* offers the story of a Hungarian collective which, despite its formal dissolution, fails to disband. Its inhabitants—decrepit, despairing, and utterly purposeless—wait around for some sign or impetus, enduring yet another oppressive rainy season without hope or certainty.

Krasznakorkai visits a number of their stories glancingly: a reclusive, alcoholic doctor who documents the goings-on in the village from the scrupulous vantage of his window; a couple of swindlers who attempt to steal the community's profits from the sale of its livestock; an earthy, sensual wife who either beds or

frustrates every man in town (if only perhaps because of her lack of any formidable competition); an abused and disturbed little girl who tortures and kills a cat in a desperate attempt to feel some mitigated sense of power; and a religious fanatic who decries the decadence of this strange, withering community.

Everything changes with the return of Irimiás and Petrina, two members of the collective who were reported dead eighteen months before. Their reappearance, by virtue of its mystery, signals an almost religious awakening for the villagers, who are fortified with a renewed hope for (what feels like) one last push to achieve freedom from their dismal inertia. But is Irimiás a savior or charlatan?

*Satantango* is a challenging but rewarding book. Krasznahorkai likes nothing better than obscuring certain details of the plot to reinforce the otherworldliness of the narrative. Several questions remain unanswered—ultimately to the benefit of the novel, I think—but they will frustrate readers expecting a more forthcoming plot. The style—long, unbroken paragraphs, without a lot of introductory exposition—tends to keep the reader off-balance and will discourage the less committed reader, but those who are in it for the long haul will find this oblique, haunting novel well worth their attention.

A gospel of despair, *Satantango*, I think, qualifies as a minor masterpiece. Hypnotic, bewildering, and unsettling, it nagged at me even when I was away from it. Sometimes I would wonder, Why do I feel bothered—on edge? And then I would recall a feeling or image that Krasznahorkai left me with. That's the strange power of the truly accomplished writer—not just to tell stories, but to imprint experiences, sensations upon his readers, so that even when we forget the particulars, we remember the *effect*—vast and overpowering.

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### Seemita says

For a rainbow-chaser and flower-collector, satan-tango is not exactly the kind of event to spend ~~an~~ many evenings on. The brightness is pleasing odour and the not-so-brightness is forever under verdict. But there I stayed; lurking under the disturbing, frequently tingling, always jagging edges of this strange melody oozing from the tango being played in a far land in Hungary.

In an unknown, abandoned terrain, the devil strikes my world with a soft morning hoot, a touch so ethereal, so cajoling that I should have upped my antennae at that very instant. But instead, I treaded idly on his tune; I had nothing to worry, my strong mind for support. Extending my hand and touching a dilapidated dream, trudging on the solidified ground of incurable despair and casting a long glance on overstretched alliances, I jingled along the bewitching tune wherever it took me. Like a seasoned Pied Piper, the all-powerful Irimiás suspended the bleak kaleidoscope of life with the vigor of a rising sun and I stood, peeping into the rustic juxtaposition of synthetic hopes, unaware of the shaking soil beneath my hoisted feet. The satan-tango was leaving rapidly changing colors on the bodies of all under its hypnotic vibration, a few villagers with unusually twinkling eyes to be precise.

But I was definitely not getting swayed in the virulent air engulfing the invisible specks of remnant desires. The villagers fought and prayed condemnation, they drank and hoped redemption, they cheated and bargained life, they suspected and ordained clarity, they voyaged and visualized tomorrow. And all this while, I walked safely on a parallel track, overseeing their devious twitches enraptured by the tango's strings, smirking at their unbelievable gullibility rupturing their faint blue veins. I knew the tango was going to recede after spraying a noxious plume of immobilizing staccato, sucking all the music from their souls and then, perhaps, I might serve as a timely messenger in curtailing Irimiás' similar tango sessions in the fertile

vicinity of other vulnerable simpletons.

But that tango... something about it was anomalous. The dark rhythm, the haunting splendor, everything decomposing yet rising in penultimate glory. The unknown, like a blithe promise, was finding its pieces in the grey outlines of life; a life weeping to shed pungent rashes from its skin, both self-inflicted and gifted on the occasions of experiment and discovery. Why is that tune equal to being strung on a guitar and played at the resurrection? Why is it that he shrill voice is like a suppressed melody wrapped deep within me; one that is an outcome of a being unbiasedly erected, letting go and settling like sand and water in a mortal container? When I refuse to let go of something uncomfortable in my heart simply because I have gotten used to the deviation and the ludicrous music carries the weight of the tangoreinforcement of the ose aberrations like they were as specific as conformities? We have reached a junction and I cannot see the villagers anymore. But I run into a path which throws me back since it is a mirror. Nothing is visible in its womb except for a reflection. And that does look like some thing I know - a mesh of fine white lines, criss-crossing a bare black background, drawing various sub-limes and great esque images with its slivering brush, filling them in rapidly as fast as one can imagine, constructing a multi-dimensional picture that I am about to enter into before the web.....

(view spoiler)

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### **Héctor Genta says**

Una scrittura densa, materica, con frasi lunghe e ricche di subordinate che cercano di riprodurre su carta la lingua parlata, rinunciando così a semplificare i concetti ma esponendoli per come vengono fuori, anche in maniera farraginosa. Una lettura a tratti faticosa, con la quale si fatica ad entrare in sintonia, ma che ripaga dell'attenzione che richiede perché a forza di farsi strada nei meandri della narrazione di Krasznahorkai si finisce per ritrovarsi nel bel mezzo della storia. Una storia che è attraente e al tempo stesso straniante, che racconta ma non spiega e complica quando finge di chiarire. Una storia raccontata per immagini, per tessere che poste una accanto all'altra vanno a costituire il mosaico di Satantango, un mosaico che sembra privo di un centro, nel senso che non c'è un protagonista assoluto ma una serie di personaggi (tutti molto ben tratteggiati e sviluppati nei loro caratteri) ognuno dei quali è protagonista della "sua" storia, della storia che vive e racconta dal suo punto di vista. Cambiamenti di prospettiva (lo stesso avvenimento visto attraverso occhi diversi) e alternanza dei piani temporali (per tacere dei simboli e delle fughe in avanti, in un mondo onirico tra fantasia e realtà), caratterizzano un romanzo dominato da un'atmosfera cupa, fatta di pioggia, oscurità e fango. Fango come metafora che tutto sommerge e rende uguale, fango che rallenta i movimenti e che costringe all'immobilità. Quell'immobilità nella quale si trovano tanto bene i protagonisti della storia, un gruppo di disperati che attende l'attesa di Ieremiás, il deus ex machina che promette di portarli fuori dalle secche nelle quali la loro vita è precipitata. Futaki, Halics, Kerkes la signora e il signor Schmidt e gli altri sono morti che camminano, ciechi che vagano nel buio come i protagonisti del romanzo saramaghiano, uomini e donne che si sono auto-condannati all'attesa: aspettano per indolenza, per incapacità, perché ci hanno provato ed hanno fallito, perché non hanno mai trovato la forza per provarci... Aspettano perché non sanno far altro e intanto che aspettano cercano di dimenticare la realtà con l'alcool e con la danza, quel tango satanico che è l'ultimo sberleffo, l'unico sistema che conoscono per dimostrare a se stessi di essere vivi, almeno fino a quando non sarà passata la sbornia e tutto tornerà come prima. Ieremiás è il Godot tanto atteso, che a differenza dell'eroe beckettiano però ad un certo punto si materializza, anche se con le sorprendenti fattezze del Don Chisciotte cervantiano con tanto di Sancho Panza al seguito (il fidato Petrino). Solo le fattezze però, perché Satantango non è un romanzo di eroi o di lieto fine e Ieremiás si rivelerà essere un truffatore di basso cabotaggio, un piccolo uomo che vive di espedienti come tutti gli altri. Non è più tempo di messia, sembra dirci Krasznahorkai, eppure quando il cielo è grigio e i tempi sono confusi gli uomini non

possono fare a meno di cercarli, e di mettere nelle mani di qualcuno le loro vite. Poco importa chi sia quel qualcuno, l'importante è che sappia accendere ancora una speranza, che è l'unica (l'ultima) cosa a tenere in vita persone che da tempo hanno smesso di credere in qualcosa, e pazienza se poi speranza fa rima con illusione. Satantango è un gran romanzo, ricco di spunti e con tanti piani di lettura, simboli (le campane, ad esempio), sprazzi di fantastico (la bambina morta – una delle figure più riuscite e sorprendenti del libro - che fluttua in aria come un personaggio chagalliano), zone oscure, pugni nello stomaco (la sadica fascinazione dei bambini per la violenza) e poi un finale che sembra tornare all'inizio, quasi a suggerire che è il personaggio del dottore il vero autore della storia che sta raccontando.

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