



Things in the Night

Mati Unt

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Things in the Night explores a world on the edge of disaster--plagued by mysterious power-outages and threatened by ominous conspiracies--juxtaposed against images and stories of unsurpassed beauty and tenderness. Beginning with the simple but moving words, "My Dear, I feel I owe you an explanation," and ending with the passionate, lyrical, and immensely sad, "Those were beautiful years, beautiful autumn days," this astounding novel, set in Estonia near the end of the millennium, is a hymn to the very best in the human imagination and a eulogy for what humans, at their worst, may destroy.

Things in the Night Details

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Author : Mati Unt

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From Reader Review Things in the Night for online ebook

Cooper Renner says

I read about a third of this, and I'm abandoning it (for the time being?) It's nimbly written and sometimes funny, but it seems rather aimless and plotless and it's trying my patience.

John Brookes says

“Things in the Night” by Estonian writer Mati Unt, takes place on the cusp of this Estonia's transition from Soviet rule to independence.

What immediately became clear to me upon reading this novel, was that Unt was a writer very much in the postmodernist vein. The first few chapters concern an unknown activist, with unknown motives, making his way towards a small power generator with a view to blowing it up. The narrative takes place in the form of an interview with an unknown interviewer.

However, it is soon made apparent that this section is actually an unfinished novel by a famous Estonian author who then proceeds to form the main narrative of this novel. Thus Unt makes his intentions clear from the start – this is to be no clear cut, plot-driven linear novel – rather it increasingly becomes a post-modern metafiction. To clarify: metafiction is a type of fiction that self-consciously addresses the devices of fiction, exposing the fictional illusion. It self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artifact in posing questions about the relationship between fiction and reality, usually using irony and self-reflection.

If this sounds a little overly “art-for-art’s sake” and disengaging; well sadly that’s how the novel is in my opinion. And I am not a Luddite in terms of literary convention; I am a big fan of postmodern writers ranging from Kurt Vonnegut to Salman Rushdie to Thomas Pynchon. Indeed, one of my favourite books recently has been the highly experimental “Natural Novel” by Georgi Gospodinov of Bulgaria. Despite its unusual structure and non-linear plot; Gospodinov’s novel managed to be both engaging and genuinely interesting in terms of giving an insight into an unfamiliar culture and society.

Sadly “Things in the Night” is neither engaging nor enlightening. The fact that this review so far has dealt (necessarily) with form and structure rather than any content is telling. I would have liked to come away from this novel with a greater sense of content, of the experience of Estonian people, and of how the crucial events of Estonian independence in the early 1990s actually played out.

That said, there ARE some worthwhile nuggets to be found in this work, and it would be churlish to suggest that there is no definable plot here at all. So I also include an attempt at a straight plot review here also:

“Things in the Night” begins with a Prologue, the first sentence reaching out: “My Dear, I feel I owe you an explanation.” The explanation is, mainly, for a novel-project the narrator has long planned - “a book on electricity”, he explains, one of his long-time ambitions. Appropriately enough, the next chapter is: The First Chapter of the Novel - but that doesn’t get too far: first reality intrudes, and then the whole project peters out, the writer hitting a dead-end very early on.

The planned novel was one of protest and about taking action: the central character wants to blow up a power plant. It's less about changing the world - the act is a gesture, and one of futility at that - than a demonstration of the character's dissatisfaction. As is, he can't even go through with it. But "Things in the Night" continues in this vein of protest, a lashing out in all directions, with no specific targets.

As I have mentioned, this book was written in a then still Soviet Estonia, and in the book life there is explored using a variety of approaches. At one point the narrator explains why he doesn't just describe the situation as it is:

"Because at an everyday level, life in this country is simply appalling, and if you start trying to describe the horror of it, you really have to devote yourself to the task, stack up thousands of pages of all kinds of absurdities [...] but I don't want to write about it all, and nobody would want to read it anyway. One should rather push this frustration down into the subconscious and write as Proust suggested: one of the characters doesn't close a window, doesn't wash his hands, doesn't put on a coat, doesn't say a word to introduce himself. That is a more honest and pure feeling".

Personally, I would have preferred the detail!

Still, some of the horrors are described, culminating in a nightmarish scenario of a power outage in sub-zero weather, a blacked-out city frozen solid. This is the nearest the novel comes to a plot (coming in the second third of the book) and contains some genuinely eerie descriptions of the abandoned winter nightlandscape of the city that the writer ventures out into.

As I say – there is no clear linear narrative, although the story does progress - albeit fitfully and with a variety of digressions. There's a significant woman in his life (never elaborated upon): Susie; and an antagonist of sorts, Tissen. There is also a large collection of Cacti that the narrator keeps in his high rise apartment flat and whom he engages with to a much greater degree than any of his neighbours, and which he describes at great length.

lianne says

someone left this at the airport...

... i'm so not interested in this book and i'm 100 pages in... is that a bad sign?

... i've decided to stop with this one. it just sucks. halfway through and no go. ah well, i gave it a shot.

Valerie says

Listen, my friend, only the individual can have personal sense of responsibility, only the thoughts of an individual can be genuine, if you really are seeking something genuine. Stay on your own as much as you can. The more you can decide for yourself, the more perfect you will become. Because in the case there will be no absolute authority over you, neither friends nor public opinion will exist for you, and you will not have to be friendly in bars. K. says that being alone is an art, which can cost the artist his life. Because the individual is not only passive, just the opposite, he announces his loneliness quite actively.

Psychologists have drawn attention to the act that we turn Others into stereotypes and characters. Others are this or that. For instance weirdos, cunning people, or fanatics. We ourselves are simply Me. We are varied. We suit our partners. We are very open. We are everything. We are different than others, are unique and special.

KristenR says

This is a very strange, disjointed book. Parts of it were very beautifully written, but it was hard to follow and there wasn't really a plot.

I'd probably actually rate this 2.5 stars, but rounded up since, even though it was odd, it was interesting.

Jeff Bursey says

For a joint review of Mati Unt's *Things in the Night* and Zoran Zivkovic's *Hidden Camera*, go to:

<http://www.jeffbursey.com/downloads/B...>

Ruth Soz says

There is no question that the author is talented, but I did not enjoy this at all.

MJ Nicholls says

This novel let me down. It began with a whoosh of interest—a postmodern cocktail of writing angst, electricity and Estonian political schism. Then, somewhere around p150, reading another rambling monologue in the one voice Unt can write, I began to itch my bum. Think about my bills. Want a drink. Go for a walk. Picture Lisa Marr in her bikini.

This novel IS great. What it needs is someone to kill the last one hundred pages. So if we imagine those pages don't exist, this is a poetic, melancholy and affecting little book, rich in beautiful descriptions of Estonian nature, mini-tales of Soviet oppression and amusing poetic interludes. It has a bouncy and free structure. It's playful. I love these things. The design is beautiful.

But then. Those extra one hundred pages. More rambling first-person speeches. No real sense of what is going on. An anti-structure. The narrator addressing us as an absent second-person wife, who never turns up. Irritating use of exclamation marks. More Latin phrases for cacti. Oh God! Is that the time? I'm afraid I have some business to attend to, Mr. Unt. Goodbye.

Lee Thompson says

A writer after my own heart. We have electricity and some vague disaster, shifty characters, shifty scenes, a shifty narrator, shifty tense, myth and fact intertwining, digressions, cannibals, cacti, and a savoir!... A brilliant, playful, unclassifiable work.
