



Exodus

Lars Iyer

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A wickedly funny and satisfyingly highbrow black comedy about the collapse of Western academic institutions under the weight of neoliberal economics and crushing, widespread idiocy.

Lars and W., the two preposterous philosophical anti-heroes of *Spurious* and *Dogma*—called “Uproarious” by the New York Times Book Review—return and face a political, intellectual, and economic landscape in a state of total ruination.

With philosophy professors being moved to badminton departments and gin in short supply—although not short enough—the two hapless intellectuals embark on a relentless mission. Well, several relentless missions. For one, they must help gear a guerilla philosophy movement—conducted outside the academy, perhaps under bridges—that will save the study of philosophy after the long, miserable decades of intellectual desert known as the early 21st-century.

For another, they must save themselves, perhaps by learning to play badminton after all. Gin isn’t free, you know.

Exodus Details

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From Reader Review Exodus for online ebook

Caleb Wilson says

A great end to a trilogy that blends pitch-dark philosophy humor (!) and a technically fascinating first person narration in which the ostensible narrator ("Lars") allows his friend W. to appear to be the narrator, for unknown reasons seeming to let W. viciously insult him for the entire book.

Christy says

Could have used a good editor - because a blog does not a novel make without one. Still, the beginning and end were up there with the best of *Spurious*, and even if the shtick gets a little too repetitive, it's a great shtick. Absolutely worth the read.

Raises all sorts of questions of form, though. Maybe blog to novel isn't any more logical a transformation than novel to film. This could easily have been seven little super-short volumes. Or maybe a graphic novel with multiple "chapters" into which the different episodes were folded. Or several volumes broken up by fuzzy photos, like WG Sebald's work. What I'm glad it wasn't was one long book - even a trilogy doesn't quite work for something that is kind of a nihilist sit-com, in the end.

John says

I've enjoyed Lars Iyer's *Spurious* Trilogy (this is the third) as much as anything I've read in many years. Challenging, laugh-out-loud funny, and dark, dark, dark.

While all of the *Spurious* books are nearly plotless, *Exodus* comes closest to having a definite narrative. Our heroes Lars and W. set out on a tour of modern academia and find, as expected, that the life of the mind has been pretty much banished from the modern university, which is now a privatized trade school.

Lars and W. are in fact soulmates, despite the fact that all three books are framed as Lars' transcripts of W.'s relentless mockery of him. Though they're agreed that the apocalypse, or at least the collapse of the modern world, is imminent (unless it's already arrived), they manage to stir up enough hopefulness to try to organize a sort of Uprising of the Academic Philosophers. So as not to spoil what little story there is, I will only say that its trajectory has a lot in common with their effort to start a Philosophical Movement in *Dogma*, the second book of the series.

If you've ever spent time inside the modern-day academic world you'll especially appreciate this book's tone: it's probably the best send-up of the academy since *Lucky Jim*. But it's much broader than that. Anyone who likes to laugh, cry and think at the same time must read these books.

Paul Fulcher says

That's what our lecture tour is to e about, W.'s decided. Our great lecture tour of Great Britain, our last look at the ruins of the humanities. We are to investigate the conditions of his sacking!, W. says. The conditions of the destruction of philosophy at his university - of the destruction of philosophy in Britain - of the destruction

of philosophy in the whole world! The end days are upon us, and we must witness them at first hand, W. says. The Pharaoh is drowning the children of philosophy. - 'Drink up, fat boy!, there's not much time.'

Exodus is the third and final book of the adventures of two philosophers Lars and W., following (links are to my reviews) Spurious and Dogma.

Much of the comment made on those books applies here – indeed really this felt like one combined book rather than three, which immediately highlights one issue I had. Reading the three books back-to-back, as I did, creates continuity but it does turn what were otherwise relatively light reads into one rather lengthy 700 page novel. Even as stand-alone works, each was deliberately somewhat repetitive, so by page 600 of the combined novel some of the jokes were wearing a tad thin.

It also felt the authors and editor's attention span may have wavered: towards the novel's end in a section on Mount Sinai we are told in successive pages that the rainbow appeared as a "sign of God's promise at Sinai", and also that according to certain Rabbis "there was a total of 36,427,260 covenants - 603,550 multiplied by 603,550, each person pledging himself in service to the others". The latter point is valid as a sentiment but wrong by an a factor of 10,000 in its arithmetic and that in a novel that often focuses on the intersection between mathematics and philosophy.

That said, there is a progression through the novels. In Spurious Lars and W.'s role as academic philosophers seemed to serve mainly as the sit- for the –com, whereas in Exodus the philosophy itself, Kierkegaard in particular, assumes a more prominent role, indeed to the extent that I felt a little out of my depth at times. The book also takes a more polemical air in its, not always entirely convincing, laments against global capitalism and its impact on academia.

And whereas Lars seemed to largely serve as a vehicle for W's insults, his own voice becomes a little more to the fore. Reflecting on the three novels, the technique Iyer uses where we largely hear W's views but filtered through his speech as reported by Lars is an intriguing one. In an illuminating interview in the Quarterly Conversation Iyer himself comments on this:

If Jane Austen pioneered the indirect free style in fiction, then my novels, as an interlocutor of mine recently remarked, are written in a *direct constrained* style: it is not simply our view of Lars that is constrained, filtered as it is through W.'s reported speech; for our view of W. is likewise constrained by the third person pronoun with which he is mostly referred to even when talking directly about himself. It is Lars, the narrator, who speaks more directly after all. But having said this, perhaps it is the force and vivacity of what W. says that remains with the reader after the novel is put aside. Perhaps W. is able to burst through the narrative filtering to which Lars subjects him.

That's not to say that the insults don't still flow and reach new heights. One chapter, inspired by the Wikipedia page on Howard Gardner's Theory of Multiple Intelligences, catalogues corresponding categories of stupidity with each illustrated by yet another of Lars's many failings:

Linguistic stupidity
Logical-mathematical
Bodily-kinaesthetic
Interpersonal
Intrapersonal
Naturalistic
Moral

*Existential
Sartorial
Religious
Painting-and-decorating
Romantic
Culinary
and
Stupidity stupidity*

In another W. decides to widen the scope of his criticisms:

My past failings, my present ones: yes we know all about those, W. says. But my future failings ... that's what W. wants to talk about tonight.

'Where will you have gone wrong?', he says. 'What will you have done? What crimes have you yet to commit? How will you have managed to fail anew?'

It's quite a tense isn't it, the future perfect?. W. says.

And:

W. reads me a passage from one of Guy Debord's films:

It must be admitted that none of this is very clear. It is a completely typical drunken monologue, with its incomprehensible allusions and tiresome delivery. With its vain phrases that do not await response and its overbearing explanations. And its silences.

'That's how you should preface everything you write', W. says.

But at the same time the signature references are all there – particularly Plymouth Gin, Bela Tarss' movies and, my favourite, the dancing chicken from Herzog's Stroszek.

Overall taking all three novels, a worthwhile work but one where I felt the underlying philosophic depth was rather lost in the comedy and indeed on this reader. In the Spectator Iyer comments that "the reception of the trilogy has been unbelievably intelligent, and in a sense I was disappointed" – I suspect he may be less "disappointed" with my review.

Vincent says

And... done. Okay, maybe reading all three of these in a row made the last in the series seem less fantastic, and of course the impact will have worn off after Spurious and Dogma, but this is still some of funniest reading I've encountered in quite a while. W. and Lars, the Laurel and Hardy of British philosophy, continue their path of ruin, touring the doomed universities and consuming that good Plymouth gin. Quite ride, indeed.

Dustin Kurtz says

I have a personal policy about not reviewing the Melville House books I read. (I work there.) These books by Lars Iyer are so funny and smart, I'm breaking that here. Or, no, the books *are* funny. I laughed, loudly, obnoxiously even, in public places around town while reading them. And they *are* smart, damned smart. Iyer somehow bookends all the ribaldry with real insight into melancholy, into the academy, and into how we think. Usually that insight is at the expense of the characters, but occasionally, generously, it is through them, through their mouths.

No, I feel driven to talk about this book, about all three of these books, because they are incredibly written. Lars has sidelined plot. What he gives us, instead, is a master course in pacing, in the nuances of rant. It's wonderful and what's more, it's subtle. The "jokes" in this book are not always easy to excerpt, for all of the scatology and drunken buffoonery, because so much of the humor—so much of the despair, for that matter—is wrapped up in nothing less delicate than the time it takes to turn a page from one chapter to the next.

I've been trying out various colorful analogies to the book when I write about it elsewhere. It's like listening to a Krasznahorkai charlatan for six hundred pages, say, or like watching Beckett wrestle in the mud with John Williams and John Kennedy Toole, all three drunk out of their minds and dressed as their favorite enlightenment thinker. It's as if Joseph Heller were writing about academic wars rather than WW2. But nothing really does these books justice. So, simply, go read them.

Jim says

I've now finished all the books by Lars Iyer featuring the wanderings and mental meanderings of his two pet philosophers, W. and his protégé, Lars. Comparisons with Beckettian tramps, most obviously Vladimir and Estragon, are easy leaps to make although the dynamic is different; in many respects they're closer to Hamm and Clov although I see a good bit of Withnail and Marwood in them and even a glimmer of Don Quixote and his squire; hell, there's even some George and Lenny in there.

Having already read *Spurious* and *Dogma* I knew exactly what I was getting into with *Exodus* so much so that I'd saved it as a treat; I would not recommend reading these three one after another and best to give each time to settle. In many respects they're hard work and most readers won't have a clue about the people they constantly namecheck, cite, reference or allude to and yet oddly none of that's especially important. If they suddenly transformed into two astrophysicists or a pair of archaeologists we'd have the same problem. They're academics and that's what makes them so damned entertaining; they're so far removed from us they could be a pair of quarrelsome baboons and we'd be almost as entertained.

I've always thought of myself as a bit of a philosopher, a thinker, but the idea of thinking for a living has always seemed a tad pretentious. I've tried to read some of the thinkers W. and Lars admire so much and never got more than a few pages in (if that) before they'd lose me; even the various introductions to philosophy the pair often disparage were often too much but I never lost my love of the *idea* of philosophy because we all do it, we just don't give it a fancy name.

As with the two other books there's not a lot of action. W. has narrowly escaped redundancy (reduced to teaching sports science students) and decrees the two of them should go on one last lecture tour of the UK, one "last tour of the ruins of the humanities." The book mostly consists of conversations—I use the term loosely—between the pair as they travel to and around the various university cities on their list. As before W. does most of the pontificating. Although Lars is technically the book's narrator he gets almost obliterated

from the narrative by his mentor's overbearing personality. The big question—the unanswerable question which many friends would struggle to answer—is: Why on earth are they friends? All W. does is malign Lars:

And there's *my* flat, the centre of the catastrophe, W. says. *My* flat, a swamp in the shape of a flat, a flat-plague, interred in its pit. *My* flat that the sun doesn't reach, deep underground like a mausoleum to the world's greatest idiot. *My* flat, like a barrow for the greatest of imbeciles...

[...]

W. wants to see how it all ends, he says. He wants to see how it will all turn out. But this is how it ends: him on a train, travelling with an idiot. This is how it will all turn out...

[...]

Hasn't he always blamed me for his despair?, W. says. Hasn't he always assumed that it's *all my fault*? *If only I could be rid of Lars, that idiot*, he's said to himself. *If only I could ditch Lars somewhere...*

If Lars is an idiot what does that make W.? To be fair not much better:

'After tragedy, farce', W. says, remembering Marx. And after farce? This. Us. Christchurch Meadows.

Who are we amusing? Who laughs at our slapstick? — 'Something in us doesn't know that we've died', W. says. 'Something in us doesn't grasp our destruction'.

Who's going to finish us off? Why haven't they done it already? For whom are we the insects that race around when a rock is lifted? Someone needs amusing, so they're letting us live, W. says. Some idiot god, with drool running down his chin.

[...]

There are some thoughts that will be forever beyond us, W. says. The thought of our own stupidity, for example; the thought of what we might have been had we not been stupid. The thought of what he might have been, W., had he not been dragged down by the concrete block of my stupidity ... The thought of what I might have been, had my stupidity simply been allowed to run its course ... W. shudders. Oh, he has some sense of what we lack, W. says. More than I have, but then he's more intelligent than I am. He has some sense that there's another kind of thinking, another order of idea, into which one might break as a flying fish breaks the surface of the water. He knows it's there, the sun-touched surface, far above him. He knows there are thinkers whose wings flash with light in the open air, who leap from wave-crest to wave-crest, and that he will never fly with them.

In fact in his more lucid and honest moments it's clear W. is under no great delusions as to his worth to the world (of philosophy at least):

[H]e'll never get away, will he?, W. says. There's Canada, of course, his Canadian dream. But the Canadian universities don't even reply to his job applications. They don't even send him rejection letters...

He's been *left behind*, W. says.

“Nothing is funnier than unhappiness,” says Nell in Beckett’s *Endgame* and these really are a miserable pair, more to be pitied than scolded, but they’re also undeniably funny as are most people who live in wee worlds of their own devising. The problem with philosophy is that it’s *not* a wee world; it’s an enormous one and once that fact dawns on you you begin to realise how insignificant you really are. As W. puts it: “[W]e [are] the insects that race around when a rock is lifted.” Ever wondered what the ants are thinking though? Probably not. They’re just ants after all. Ah, but if they could speak. As Ian Samson put it in his review for *The Guardian* back in 2013:

Exodus is a novel which depends almost entirely on the quality of its scorn. And on any scorn-rating it scores pretty highly: the book basically consists of a series of prods, pokes, gags, winks, in-jokes, rages and philosophical wind-ups.

True. Basically they—but mainly W.—doesn’t have a good word to say for anything and if he accidentally does you can be pretty sure he’ll take it back in a few pages; he’s nothing if not contrary.

There are many interviews online—Iyer has certainly worked hard to promote his writing—and in one in *The White Review* he’s asked about the relationship between the two philosophers. Very briefly:

[I]t may be that the friendship of W. and Lars involves an unusual degree of toughness and cruelty. Perhaps their ‘rollicking kindness’ is a particular characteristic of male friendships, and something different can be found in female friendships; I’m not sure. ‘True friends stab you in the front,’ says Wilde.

Or maybe they stab you in the buttocks as the Italians still do. Why they have remained friends may be a difficult question to answer but not how they *became* friends:

Is there such a thing as *friendship at first sight*? , W. wonders. Well, that’s what happened in Poland, in Wroc?aw, when he saw my *Adam Ant dancing*: friendship at first sight.

Ah, he still remembers it, W. says: in the middle of the meal held in honour of the British delegation in Wroc?aw, I pushed back my chair to demonstrate *Adam Ant dancing*. He remembers when I took to the dancefloor, recreating *Adam Ant dancing* from the *Prince Charming* video. And he remembers how the Polish postgraduates followed me; how they, too, pushed back their chairs and took to the dancefloor, likewise recreating *Adam Ant dancing* from the *Prince Charming* video.

‘*Here is a man who does not know shame*’, W. thought to himself. ‘*Not only this, he seems to encourage others to forget their shame*’. And soon W., too, pushed back his chair and took to *Adam Ant dancing*.

As with the others this book won’t be to everyone’s tastes and you’ll know within a few pages whether that’s going to be the case. Being a *huge* Beckett fan it was right down my street. It also reminded me a lot of Padgett Powell’s *You & Me* which also (it’s unavoidable really) makes you think of Beckett.

James says

The final book of a trilogy about two philosophy professors. This book finds them on a tour of Europe, drinking gin and continuing to contemplate the end of the world, as their philosophy departments are folded into badminton departments. Full of wry, black humor, this book is a fitting conclusion to a series rife with insults, romanticism, and snobbery. While not for everyone, I highly recommend these books.

Will says

I loved this book. I liked it even more than the first two books in the series. I love the characters of Lars and W. more than any literary characters in recent memory. I love that Lars is constantly referencing and quoting philosophers and, more importantly to me, my favorite film directors and writers. These books are fantastic and *Exodus* is a sad but fitting end. It is the end times, after all. In the end, I'm left asking myself the questions that go unanswered, too, and coming up with crazy solutions and theories I hope would make Lars and W. proud, like what if the great triumph of capitalism has created the myth that all the world seems to believe in, and that Capital (money, money, money) is the Messiah W. has been waiting for all this time and we are all, truly, proper fucked?!

Zac Smith says

hell yes.

better than book 2. he finds that beautiful niche of despair-cum-comedy again. Lars has some great moments (surprisingly!) and i appreciated the discussion of graduate students.
wonderful books.

Neil says

Lars and W. continue their gin-sodden adventures and philosophical discussions in what is for me, confusingly, simultaneously the best and the worst of the three Spurious novels. Best because it is more grounded in story and place making it simpler to read and to engage with. Worst because it relies heavily on a level of knowledge of philosophy and philosophers that I simply do not have.

It also helps very much to be British when reading this episode because our two protagonists undertake a university tour of Britain and a lot of the humour relies on a knowledge of different parts of the British mainland. For example, there's quite a long discussion about Manchester which is funny if you know Manchester, but quite possibly meaningless if you don't.

Even though a lot of the philosophy references passed me by, I did enjoy reading this and there's a lot of laugh out loud moments. But, overall, it is a frustrating read unless, I imagine, you are a British philosopher, in which case you will probably love every word. Or, possibly, hate every word. I'm not sure.

Heather says

I mostly read *Exodus* because I'm a completist—it was bugging me that I'd read the first two books of this trilogy about, as the back cover puts it, "the two preposterous philosophical anti-heroes," Lars and W., but hadn't read the third. This third book is more of the same, which is mostly a good thing, because these books are funny: Lars and W. are philosophy professors who drink a lot of gin and bemoan the state of the world in general and academia in particular. In this volume, W. is on the verge of losing his job but then doesn't,

because of some technicality, but now he "only teaches sports science" students (14). In the last book, Lars and W. attempted a US lecture tour; in this one, it's their "great lecture tour of Great Britain," their "last look at the ruins of the humanities," their investigation of the "destruction of philosophy at [W.'s] university — of the destruction of philosophy in Britain — of the destruction of philosophy in the whole world" (3). But we don't really see much of the lecturing: it's more the touring, the in-between places, the train rides and the coffees and beers before or after lecturing. And as with the previous two books, a lot of this one consists of Lars recounting his conversations with W., full of funny insults. There's this:

I was a scholarly *Kasper Hauser*, W. says, who knew nothing of reading, or note-taking. I could read, that much is true. But only just, only approximately, and with a great deal of pathos, with wild underlinings and illegitimate identifications. — 'You thought every book you read was about you, didn't you?' That's me!, I would say, pointing to a passage in Hegel. It's about me!, I would say, pointing to the *Science of Logic*. (8)

And this: "He can see my lips moving as I read, W. says. It's not a good sign in a scholar" (29). And this: "I rely on secondary commentaries, on idiot's guides, W. says. In the end, I am only a *ransacker* of books, a kind of reader-marauder. My reading is a great pillaging, as if by a Viking raiding party" (*ibid.*)

W and Lars's wanderings intertwine with the themes of exile that keep recurring in this book (at least one lecture they give is about "exilic themes in the work of Marx"), and one of the pair's central concerns is the place of thought in the modern world/in a capitalistic society/in capitalistic Great Britain in particular. I'm sure I missed a bunch of philosophical jokes and references—I suspect someone who majored in philosophy would find this book even funnier than I did—but still, this was a satisfying read.

Victoria says

The good news is: there *is* a reward for those who make it to the end of Lars Iyer's trilogy, and *Exodus* being the last volume, one must look back over all three when talking about it. The reward is not quite at the end; in fact the very end might be a little anticlimactic, but what happens just before is the fictional equivalent of the Big Opera Moment, when music, words, and singing come together with great emotional impact. It might not work for everyone; it did for me.

The further good news is that there is no bad news: to the end the lengthy and, in several ways, repetitive account of the adventures of L & W in their own particular Wonderland remained engaging enough to keep one reading. Occasionally it came close to demonstrating the folly of authors reading Thomas Bernhard, but didn't reach that point in part because of the fundamentally endearing nature of the pair's clownish progress.

(That is, if it is about a pair: from *Spurious* on through *Dogma* and to the end, the idea wouldn't go away that W. might exist only in Lars' self-excoriating imagination, with a wife to match. But perhaps that's too fanciful...)

In lieu of bad news is a question: why three volumes? it was all quite of a piece to me, though I may have missed what distinguished the content of each volume with its terse, erudite title. That it was of a piece is A Good Thing, to be sure. One couldn't help but think that, had it been issued as a single volume, some editing and a great deal of white-space removal would have been obviously advisable, and performed. Publishing, it seems, is to blame -- perhaps.

But to paraphrase Orwell in a letter describing at enthusiastic length his discovery of *Ulysses*, I could always have stopped reading, and I didn't.

April says

I received a copy of this book free through Goodreads first Reads.

I work at a Senior/Youth center and donate all print books I win in giveaways to the library.

I hope I get a chance to check this one out in the near future!!!

I can say it must be a really good read because it has been checked out since I added it to the library shelves!!

Anna says

I read 'Exodus' on a series of Sunday trains that took me home by a circuitous and extended route, as a result of Engineering Works. This seemed like the ideal milieu for a rambling and circuitous commentary on academia, philosophy, armageddon, capitalism, and ineptitude. Much of the novel takes place on trains, in any case. As previously noted, I've enjoyed each installment of this trilogy more than the previous one (Spurious then Dogma) as the passage of time has made me more bitter, cynical, and resentful, about academia in general and being a postgraduate student in particular. There is much more talk of postgraduates in this installment, which I appreciated. I cannot resist quoting this commentary at length, because it is magnificent:

Postgraduates are the *angels* of the academic world, we agree. They're between worlds - mediators between the heaven of full-time lecturers and the netherworld of the undergraduate. They teach - they often take seminars - but they are not a real part of the teaching staff. They study, it is true, but they're not entirely students either.

They have a sense of what they want to achieve: an academic job, an academic career, but they know that there are very few such jobs, and very little chance of a career. They've fled from the world into academia, but they know they will most likely find themselves back where they came from, as though they'd dreamt up the entirety of their postgraduate lives...

There is no laughter like postgraduate laughter, W. says. There's nothing as dark. Nothing as knowing. It's death-row laughter, we agree. It's the laughter of those condemned to death.

Because they are condemned to death, the postgraduates around us. Shown the greatest of vistas, the whole landscape of Old Europe at their feet, and then thrown out into the world, they're condemned to a life without meaning, a life without succour, a life of shit in a world of shit...

They're martyrs, the British postgraduates, we agree. They're anchorites, like St Anthony in the desert. They're exiles from the world. They're *proletariats*, as Marx would say. They're *individuals*, Kierkegaard would say. They're waiting for the *revolution*, Marx would say.

They're waiting for *grace*, Kierkegaard would say.

'Exodus' fitted my current state of mind perfectly, so I cannot help but give it five stars. It is a wonderful satire. I particularly liked the mockery of Oxford, the Slavoj Žižek cameo, and the typology of stupidity.
