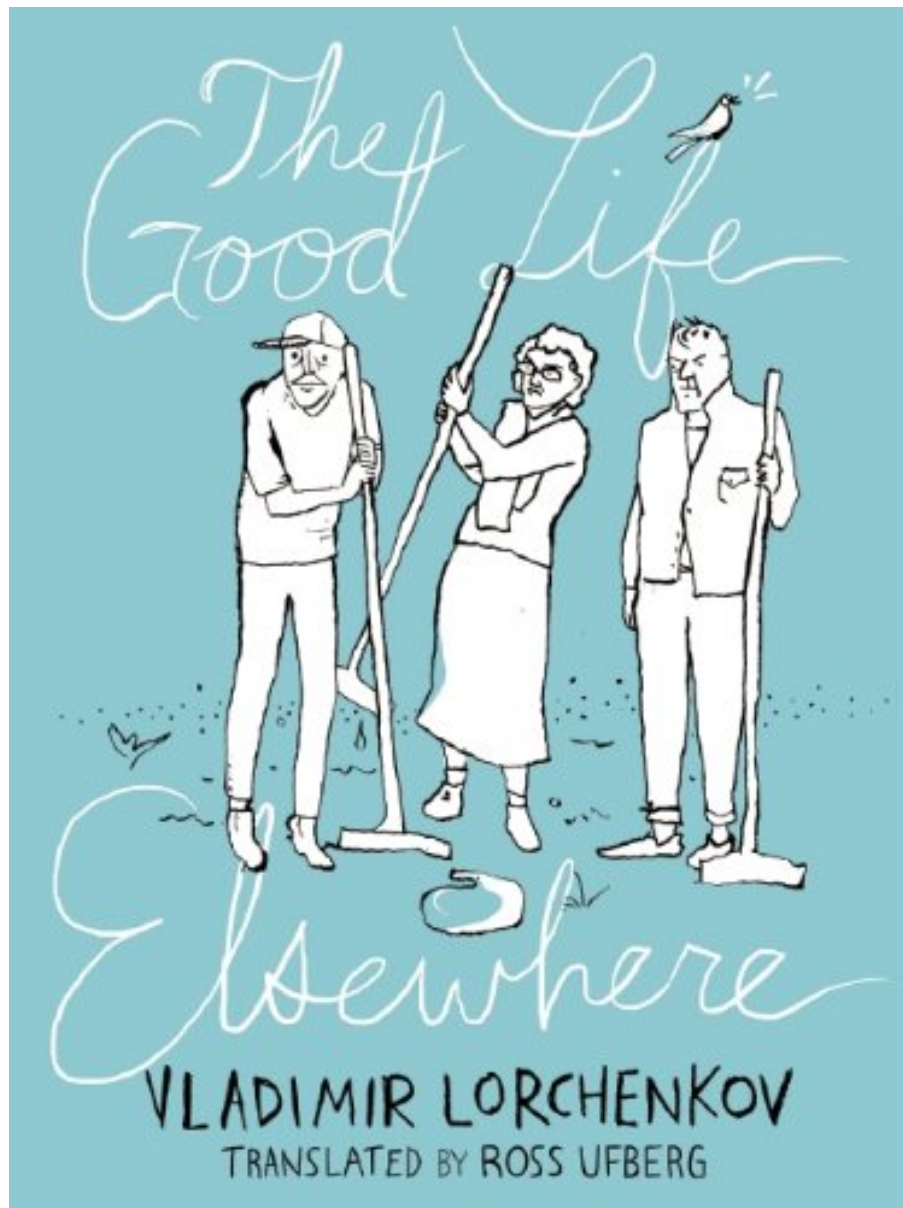


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Vladimir Lorchenkov tells the story of a group of villagers and their tragicomic efforts, against all odds and at any cost, to emigrate from Moldova, Europe's most impoverished nation, to Italy for work. In this uproarious tale, an Orthodox priest is deserted by his wife for an art-dealing atheist; a mechanic redesigns his tractor for travel by air and sea; thousands of villagers take to the road on a modern-day religious crusade to make it to the promised land of Italy; meanwhile, politicians remain politicians.

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Magic (un)realism

By Dan Harlow

Having spent years reading novels from Russia and Eastern Europe I've learned there is an odd, almost bipolar lens people from this part of the world look at their own cultures through. In Miklós Bánffy's novel 'They Were Counted' we get a picture of Hungarians who, though fiercely proud of their heritage, are so caught up in pettiness, corruption, and tearing each other down that it's a wonder anything ever got done - and, in fact, nothing ever did get done. Jerzy Kosiński's 'The Painted Bird' (a book I detested) portrays all the Eastern European's as brutes and animals. In Béla Tarr's film 'Sátántangó' (another Hungarian) we get a portrait of a people continually drunk, living in the mud, poor, stupid, and easily taken advantage of by even the flimsiest pretexts. And in nearly all Russian novels, both classic and contemporary, there is always the underlying psychology of a people who are uncomfortable with themselves.

Alexander Herzen in 'My Past and Thoughts' explains this unease in comparing Russian insecurity to the rest of Europe: "They talk in Western Europe of our duplicity and wily cunning; they mistake the desire to show off and swagger a bit for the desire to deceive", about how the Russians feel insecure and inferior about their own peculiar culture vs Western Europe's supposed refinement."

In the book club which I took part in to read this book a comment was made about how someone felt the book was offensive, that people from that part of the world had too long been the butt of jokes. And while I agree continuing these stereotypes can only do harm, it is quite often the people from this part of the world who perpetuate it. Yet since I am not from Hungary or Moldova or Poland I can't ever hope to know what this strange neurosis is people have about themselves and their fellow countrymen (and women) that would continue to make them look at themselves as 'stupid' or 'lazy' or in general insecure about their place in the world.

Perhaps geography plays a role. Perhaps being crushed between prosperous Western Europe on one side and massive Russia on the other is a determining factor in one's cultural self-esteem. This is a part of the world that has always been used as a "buffer zone" between the West and Russia - the term "buffer zone", to me, seems far more offensive than any stereotype. And now that communism has fallen and this "buffer" region is responsible for its own fate, the people living here are perhaps more anxious than ever. This entire region seems to have always been defined (to outsiders, anyway) by the powers that crowd around it and so being left to do what they want seems to lead to major problems. Much of the book actually deals with Moldovans wanting to attach themselves to another regime, the EU.

Since I knew nothing of Moldova before reading this book I looked up what I could online and while it's not as bleak as Lorchenkov makes Moldova out to be, I can see why people might want to get the hell away; there are no real opportunities in Moldova. Anything that might have once existed in Moldova was dug up and carted off by the Soviets years ago leaving behind a lot of poor people and a fractured government unable to bring the people together.

For a book so funny, it's really awfully sad. This book leaves you with the impression that the people of Moldova have given up and only look elsewhere for help (the EU). There does not seem to be a sense of history or culture or any hope to tie people to their country. We learn nothing of what makes Moldova unique or beautiful or important, we only get a series of funny but sad and ever increasing outrageous plots to escape the sinking ship that is Moldova.

But is Lorchenkov actually making fun of Moldova? Is he actually saying the people of Moldova are stupid, dirt eating, sad-sacks?

Lorchenkov explores a more subtle theme in this book; he is interested in the spin and propaganda nations use on each other and on their own people. When two of the main characters have their rusty homemade pedal powered submarine blasted out of the water by a foreign Coast Guard, the newspapers make it seem as if a massive plot of Islamic extremists was thwarted on the high seas. When a crusade is fired up by the local priest and hundreds of thousands of people attempt to march to Italy for freedom and jobs, the European newspapers claim the people of Moldova have risen up and are enacting reforms from within. When things in this fictional Moldova can't get any worse, the government declares war on its own people because it's too weak to go to war with anyone else yet to the outside press this might be seen as the government tamping down dangerous rebels (which, in a way, they are since all they want to do is leave).

I suppose a lot of the reason why this subtext exists in the book is due to how the Soviets were constantly putting forth their own propaganda to counter western ideals even though everyone knew the Soviet propaganda was nonsense or, at best, a fairy tale or mythology. And this fairy tale quality exists all through the book - not in that there's a princess (well actually there sort of is) or a happy ending, but in the strange magic unrealism of the novel. Skylarks roost in people's mouths, a dead wife hangs from a tree for months with garlic drying around her neck, an entire village exists where everyone sells their internal organs, tractors can fly, and the President fakes his death in a plane crash on northern Italy.

This magic realism (I call it unreal because it seems to exist as comic sadness and not as something deeper such as in *One Hundred Years of Solitude*) goes a long way to help explain the temptation the people of this fictional Moldova (and perhaps even the real Moldova, too) have with joining the EU or escaping to Italy where they think they can get rich cleaning bathrooms or flipping pizzas. They've bought into their own brand of propaganda and they've left reality behind, they've left Moldova behind to neglect. When we get a couple of characters who beg their fellow countrymen to try and better their own lives, to work hard and make Moldova a better place, these characters are, in the end, killed.

I do wish the book had been a bit more serious, however. I feel as if the author pushed the comedy too far at the expense of gaining some real insight into Moldova. I also never felt like the book was as cohesive as it could be, partly because it's a rather short book that never spends much time exploring the many deeper issues floating just between the lines. Granted my own lack of cultural context is preventing me from understanding a lot of this book, but the author could have done more to bring me in and help me understand.

Still, I did enjoy the book for what it is and I think it helps explain some of the unease people from this part of the world tend to look at their own culture with. These are people who do want to better their lives but are prevented from doing so by their neighbors and, in the end, by themselves.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

This book ought to be tragic - but it's not ...

By Matthew M. Howell

This book ought to be tragic - but it's not. It's not because you don't have time to feel the characters' pain. Whether they are sticking each other with pitchforks, being (possibly) mistaken for Islamic terrorists and bombed by the navy, getting shot in the back while escaping or being burned at the stake by their fellow citizens, the tragedies come so fast that you don't really have time to feel much pity for them. Besides, after every catastrophe they get drunk, dust themselves off, and try again - unless they are dead.

What's most remarkable about these characters is that none of them have time to live where they are. They can only devise more and more complicated ways to escape to Western Europe. In the end "Italy" becomes more of a metaphysical goal for them - a state of grace - a place of security, such that some characters even suggest they could make "Italy" in Moldova. But given all the tragedy in the book, you can probably guess how that turns out.

Casual drunken brutality, daily despair, and ever-recurring hope, mixed with an occasional occurrence of magic - that's Moldova in this book.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

really solid read

By Max

one of the funniest books i've read in years. wicked humor. like Joseph Heller and Kurt Vonnegut. definitely worth checking out.

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