

literary fiction

Intervals

Novel. Eksmo. AST 2019. 351 pages

In a near-future dystopian version of Russia, which it describes with documentary realism, the state has outlawed poets and poetry in favour of prose, now the only legal form of literature. A special powder is used to destroy poetry books in libraries, poets are killed (and even ritually eaten), and a Nobel Prize-winning poet is secretly kidnapped by government agents. The state declares him officially dead while trying to force him to ghost-write for a certain very powerful person, who dreams of being a famous poet... but lacks the talent.

What neither the president nor the prosaic people suspect, but poetry has always known: In this universe, not only humans are soulful beings gifted with consciousness. Consequently the novel has a multiplicity of narrative perspectives which makes the storytelling truly innovative: pigeons, dogs, trees, platelets in a character's blood-stream, moss, the bricks in a prison wall, a set of blinds, a crust of bread and even a station platform – animals and objects narrate the poet's story from their point of view, often intervening or empathizing with the joys and disasters of humans. As the tension between state and poetry builds to a bloody climax, the poet and his followers discover that nothing truly dies...

A cruel anti-utopia, convincingly naturalistic, and hauntingly surreal transforming into a utopia.



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Inside Out

"The author's mastery of the details is worthy of mention. The language elegant. Infinite irony, exquisite metaphors, filigree woven pictures..."
DIANA BAKIROVA

"...how beautiful the text is in style, what metaphors are used. Just like an artist paints a picture that reflects his inner world, Inga uses her language to reveal something that has been hidden from us until now, but has always been present."
LIVELIB

Inga Kuznetsova was born 1974 in the Krasnodar region and spent her childhood in a closed city for academics (Akademgorodok). She studied journalism, then philosophy, at Moscow State University. She has worked as an editor for Russia's premier literary reviews, Voprosy literatury and October, and also for Radio Russia. She has published several collections of poetry and critics have hailed Kuznetsova as a leading poet of her generation. Kuznetsova is living in Moscow.

Inga Kuznetsova

Intervals

PREMISE

In this novel, animals and even inanimate objects are sentient and able to speak in their own languages. The plot is told by shifting perspective between human and non-human characters: the latter include birds (especially urban pigeons), bricks, prison bars, moss on a wall, a crust of bread and even a railway platform.

SUMMARY

The totalitarian State has invented a war between Poetry and Prose and taken sides in the battle: Poetry, which in Interval represents truth and freedom of conscience, is outlawed and defeated, while Prose (representing falsity and oppression) is announced victorious. Poetry books are dissolved with special powder; poetry groups go underground, but their members are chased down and killed. A maddened crowd tears a teenager to pieces and ritually devours his body, because he dared to defend poetry in public (cannibalism has been legalized). Ironically, the murdered poet's father is the parliamentary deputy who has just proposed an administration bill to liquidate all poetic activity. Paralleling the actions of the State police, warrior T-cells inside the teenager's bloodstream rigidly control the behavior of red and white blood cells, but they can't stop a single platelet who wants to discover the world outside the body, even at the cost of all their lives. Meanwhile the young man's mother loses her mind, wandering the city in pyjamas in search of her son.

The State, despite systematically killing poets, decides to leave one alive. They announce the funeral of Vetlugin, the State's most celebrated poet (nicknamed the Metaphysician); in reality Vetlugin has been kidnapped by government flunkies who hope to turn him into a ghostwriter for the country's vainglorious President. A pigeon, who admires the Metaphysician, witnesses his arrest and acts as a messenger between the prisoner and his surviving followers, who refuse to believe in their teacher's death. They include Inga, the Metaphysician's lover, and Dart, who loves Inga. The pigeon and the young poets escape the police on a sentient vehicle powered by human emotion. They hide out in a village where they develop a plan to rescue Vetlugin from prison. The latter, after refusing to work for the government, is gradually transforming into a tree. Leaving Inga in the village, Dart and a friend use a crane to pull Vetlugin (now almost wholly a Tree) out of his cell; in the process, they have to cover the prison wall with a poster of the President's face. The poster watches them, but it is powerless to interfere. The police find and kill Inga at the edge of the forest. After a shot, her consciousness is split between her dead, now robot-like and a living finch. Ultimately all the dead characters (even the teenager, whose body is miraculously reconstituted from its pieces) meet both their friends and their persecutors in a sacred forest, where the mysterious Man-Deer awaits them (the Finch, who was Inga, sits on the Tree that was a Man). They discover that death does not exist: only love is real. It's a happy ending for everyone, except the Deputy and the prison governor, who are unable to bear the new truth and who choose instead to return to the everyday, terrible world.

Inga Kuznetsova