

horror

Vixen Hill

Novel. Moscow. 2022. 716 pages

The action of this horror thriller in the genre of mystic realism takes place in the Far East, on the border of the Soviet Union and Manchuria (China) in 1945, right after the end of World War II and the Japanese occupation of the region. The novel combines the history of the USSR, Chinese mythology, Japanese genetic engineering and Siberian shamanism.

After his adventurous escape from the GULAG, prisoner Max Kronin journeys to Vixen Hills: a village in the middle of a no man's land on the Manchurian border, in the hope of finding his long-lost wife. Vixen Hills is a place of strange miracles and supernatural phenomena – an appropriate hunting ground for Max who, before the war, was trained by mentalist extraordinaire and KGB officer Gleb Aristov to manipulate his own dreams, trance-walk, predict the future, and bring lost people back to reality. But just like all the others who once found themselves in this cursed place, Max does not find what he is looking for. And he does not realise that he is still being manipulated by his former trainer Aristov, whose ultimate goal is to find and deploy the mythical Terracotta Army. To conquer the world, Aristov wants to resurrect this Army with the Waters of Death and Life, a mighty biological weapon developed by Japanese scientists in Vixen Hills, where they conduct inhuman experiments in their laboratory for breeding the perfect soldier. But so does a German count, with his own links to Max Kronin. Here Soviet soldiers fall in love with Chinese were-foxes. Here KGB agents face a taoist master who knows the secret of immortality. Here those from fascist Ahnenerbe and those from the Soviet Secret Department represent one and the same ruthless totalitarian monster. Here the war never ends.

This is a spectacular and frightful trip to the heart of darkness, where the protagonists not only find themselves contending with shamans, Old Believers, the KGB and the Red Army, a hypnotists and a Tao Master, but everyone finds exactly what he or she has deserved. Some find love, others find death, but everyone finds the only appropriate fate predestined either by God or by the devil.

"Starobinets doesn't let the reader relax for a minute as she manages to keep up the hellish pace over seven hundred and something pages."
MEDUZA (Galina Yuzefovich)

Anna Starobinets was born in Moscow in 1978. She is a Russian and Israely citizen, writer and scriptwriter who works in various genres: sci-fi, dystopias and horrors for adults, fairy and detective stories for children. She is the widow of Alexander Garros, a critically acclaimed Latvian author. Her anti-government views have forced Starobinets to escape from Russia with her two children and dog in spring 2022.



THE AUTHOR

translations
over 20 languages

awards
2021 Spanish Celsius-232

2018 ESFS award
«Best European Sci-fi author»

2017 Winner Imaginales
festival in Epinal/ France

2016 Grand Prix of Utopiales
Sci-Fi book festival/ France

2014 National Bestseller Russia

2014 Prix Masterton

2014 Winner «The Portal»
Scifi Assembly Ukraine

sample translation available
full english

Anna Starobinets

horror

Long independent review

(<https://meduza.io/feature/2022/06/11/lisi-brody-roman-anny-starobinets-v-kotorom-tak-mno-go-attraktsionov-chto-zahvatyvaet-duh>)

Anna Starobinets' novel *Lisi Brody – Vixen Hills*, on which she has been working for more than five years, is like an exciting roller coaster ride with many deadly loops, free falls and dizzying curves - or rather, a visit to a huge park with such attractions.

Manchuria, autumn 1945. The mysterious mentalist and part-time KGB colonel Gleb Aristov is here searching for the invincible clay army of Emperor Qin Shihuan - not the soulless fake that archaeologists have unearthed in Xi'an, but the real army, not dead, just sleeping, with which the whole world could be conquered. Maxim Kronin, former circus performer, former front-line intelligence officer, former convict and someone else former (the memory of the pre-war past was erased from his mind by a powerful hand) is looking for his wife in this area - the blonde beauty Elena, only just remembering that he loved her and lost her. A fugitive convict named Flint wants to go to Australia - the magical land where everyone is a convict but there are no guards and where there's a beaver with a beak like a duck. The Ostseebaron Juenger, an Aryan occultist and mystic, is looking for his missing father and at the same time for the elixir of eternal life. The Baron's changeling servant, the tiger-man Lama, seeks the teacher who once rejected him - the wise immortal Taoist Zhao. Old Believer Yermil and paratrooper battalion commander Major Boyko search the local swamps for an enchanted ancient pot of gold. A family of kitsune – women who can turn into foxes - are looking for a way to get rid of the curse that prevents them from breeding. And the youngest of her clan, half-breed Lisa, is looking for a drug that can save the life of her daughter, seven-year-old Nastya.

All their paths converge and cross in the village of Lisi Brody, which lies on the shore of a cursed lake, surrounded by cursed forests, swamps and hills.

Starobinets combines these tales (and half a dozen others), any of which would make a full novel, with wonderful generosity into a tale that is as masterly constructed as it is delightfully wacky. Starobinets shifts the action from a uranium mine to a Taoist sanctuary, from an opium den to an enchanted dungeon, from an Old Believer hut to a torture chamber on the Lubyanka. And she doesn't let the reader relax for a minute as she manages to keep up the hellish pace over seven hundred and something pages.

Furthermore, the author eliminates any possibility of jumping off this speeding literary racer and shifts it up a notch in the final third by introducing a detective storyline: the heroes know that the almighty Taoist Zhao can take form into anyone, and now they must in their own circle find out the one in which he has incarnated this time.

In short, *Lisi Brody* is a rare example of masterfully crafted adventure prose, comparable among more or less recent books only to Arsen Revazov's "Loneliness-12" or Alexei Ivanov's "Tobol". However, this rarity, this unique feature of Starobinets' novel does not mean that it – excuse the deliberately naive formulation – is in fact simply fun to read. Once the initial fascination with the plot fades and the eye no longer dims, other details appear in *Lisi Brody*, no less rare and valuable, and this distinguishes this book from the texts by Revazov or Ivanov, which are undeniably masterful, but at the same time are one-dimensional and actually quite simply knitted.

Anna Starobinets

Long independent review

The first thing that strikes you is the novel's language, which is plastic and changes depending on which of the characters is in the focus of attention. The mentalist and black magician Aristov always appears throughout the novel's pages in a stuffy halo of metaphorical redundancy that nods to the literary aesthetics of the 1920s. If the seven-year-old daughter of a were-fox is in the focus, the language of the story becomes lovelessly childish, the were-tiger story channels orientalism, the old believer narration becomes ritualistic and fairytale-like. Starobinets does not skimp on shading, which her unique voice, recognizable even without intonation marks, gives not only to the main heroes, but also to the secondary characters.

The story told by Starobinets seems completely original at first sight, but on closer inspection it breaks down into numerous cultural references and mythologemes. The Enchanted Pot of Gold, which has the ability to enchant and then destroy human souls, reproduces the archetype of the Gold of the Nibelungs and by extension any enchanted treasure. Baron Juenger comes to Lisi Brody, of course, straight from Viktor Pelevin's novel Chapaev (the half-mad mystic of Starobinets' book has far more family ties to Pelevin's baron than to their common ancestor, the historical Baron Ungern-Sternberg). And the final unveiling of one of the key mysteries — who is the notorious Taoist Zhao, the secret puppeteer of the big-budget drama set in Lisi Brody — relates to all the images of the sage posing before the townsfolk under an unassuming mask hidden, ranging from Haroun al-Rashid and Jesus Christ to the Frog Prince.

In addition to external references, Starobinets' novel is densely interwoven with rhythms and internal references. The image that appears in one chapter reappears in another, but in a different context and in a different tone, giving the novel more coherence and harmony than the actual plot.

In the Russian tradition, the word „belles lettres“ has mostly pejorative connotations - pulp fiction, tomes, dime novels, trash. With her new novel, Starobinets sets a fundamentally new standard for Russian-language belles lettres: Lisi Brody shows that if you are really talented in this genre, you can work away from formulaic stiltedness without losing any of its fascination.

Ten years ago, when Starobinets was just getting into literature, critics called her the “Russian Stephen King”, alluding not only to her outstanding (and since then, by the way, not faded) ability to frighten the reader, but also to her ability to invent and implement high-profile stories into literature. And if at the time it looked as if this coat had been given to the author to grow into, today, according to Lisi Brody, we can confidently state: it fits like a glove.

Anna Starobinets