Serhiy Zhadan

Voroshilovgrad

Ворошиловград (Voroshylovhrad)

Presented by: Sarah Colvin

Serhiy Zhadan is a political activist as well as an internationally successful novelist, poet, and musician. His multi-prizewinning novel *Voroshilovgrad* is set in Ukraine in the early 2000s, a country struggling with political corruption, greed, and exploitative business practices in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Zhadan has described *Voroshilovgrad* as a novel about memory (Schroder, 178). The main character, Herman, is a historian – but in a society where history and memory are devalued. As the novel progresses, ghosts of the past haunt Herman and raise questions about how forgetting is functionalized by those who want to exploit the country for profit without having to address historic questions of rights and belonging. The novel has picaresque qualities and the journey of its protagonist could be described as an *unheroic quest* to redeem his past ('the value of acting freely lies in our ability to redeem our past', writes the philosopher Roman Altshuler, 391).

As the novel opens, the 33-year-old Herman Korolyov gets news that his brother has disappeared, leaving behind a petrol station that now belongs to Herman. He leaves the city of Kharkiv, where his job has been to launder money for a government organisation, and travels to the border region where he grew up. It is a journey into his own past; but that past exists in tension with a post-communist present, and Herman quickly finds himself in conflict with the henchmen of an oligarch called Mr Slick, who wants to acquire the petrol station. After a series of violent scuffles and curious encounters that include a football match played with a team of ghosts, a night ride on a mysterious train (where Herman meets Mr Slick himself), and an interlude with a harmonious matriarchal community of travellers who seem to model a different kind of society, Herman manages to defend and retain the petrol station and to re-establish himself in the region and community of his childhood.

Despite the seriousness of the political context, and the almost casual violence that marks everyday life in Zhadan's Ukraine, there is plenty of satirical and ironic humour in the novel. Herman stumbles into picaresque adventures and emerges unscathed by good luck rather than by plan or skill. His Germanic name connotes masculinity, but in fact Zhadan's 'returning hero' flounders in the violent hypermasculine world of late capitalism; Herman dreams of 'brothers in arms' but ends up helping his friend Katya bury her dog after it is hanged by Mr Slick's men.

The novel won the BBC Ukrainian Book of the Year Prize in 2010, the BBC Ukrainian Book of the Decade award in 2014, and the Jan Michalski Prize for Literature in 2014. It has been translated into a range of languages.

References:

Altshuler, Roman, ‘Agency, Narrative, and Mortality’, in Luca Ferrero (ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Agency*. New York: Routledge 2022. 385-393

Schroder, Hannah, ‘Music, Media, and Memories in Serhiy Zhadan’s Voroshilovgrad’. *Popular Music and the Poetics of Self in Fiction*, ed. Norbert Bachleitner and Juliane Werner. Leiden: Brill 2022, 177-90

Further reading:

Pleines, Heiko ‘Oligarchs and Politics in Ukraine’. *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 24 (2016), 105-27

Schroder, Hannah ‘Music, Media, and Memories in Serhiy Zhadan’s Voroshilovgrad’. *Popular Music and the Poetics of Self in Fiction*, ed. Norbert Bachleitner and Juliane Werner. Leiden: Brill 2022, 177-90

Shopin, Pavlo ‘Voroshylovhrad Lost: Memory and Identity in a Novel by Serhiy Zhadan’. *The Slavic and East European Journal* (2013), 372-87

Zaharchenko. Tanya ‘While the Ox Is Still Alive: Memory and Emptiness in Serhiy Zhadan’s Voroshylovhrad’. *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue canadienne des slavistes* 55 (2013), 45-69

Zhurzhenko, Tatiana ‘A Divided Nation? Reconsidering the Role of Identity Politics in the Ukraine Crisis’. *Die Friedens-Warte* 89 (2014), 249-67

LANGUAGE: Ukrainian / Українська

CENSORSHIP STATUS:

Storytelling

The Political Novel: A Palimpsest

By: Ivana Perica

Politics of literature • Political novel • Fiction • book club

Resources for Reading Groups

A key focus of the CAPONEU project has been to produce materials on political novels for community reading groups and to organize book clubs across Europe. This collection brings together resources and reports on those activities which will be useful for anyone who runs or attends a reading group.

Audience:

Reading Groups