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Y.T.

Alexey Nikitin

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“I did remember: Whenever we moved our troops, advanced or retreated, we had written ‘your turn,’ usually just ‘Y.T.,’ to confirm that we’d made our final decision . . . Looking at the letters now, I felt something in the world change forever.”

Ukraine, 1984. The Soviet Union is creaking toward collapse, and a group of bored radiophysics students devise a strategy game to keep themselves entertained. But war games are no joke, and no sooner does their game get underway than the KGB pulls the students in for questioning. Eventually they’re released, but they remain marked men.

Twenty years later, capitalism is in full swing when one member of the group, Davidov, receives an e-mail with a familiar ultimatum attached, signed, eerily, “Y.T.” Someone has revived the game, but it’s not any of his friends from the university . . . and the consequences now feel more real than ever.

The first English-language publication of a major Russian novelist, *Y.T.* follows an innocent-seeming game to its darkest places, and the result is a disturbing vision of war and tyranny. *Y.T.* is a wildly inventive novel that explores the banality deep in the heart of a paranoid totalitarian state.

Y.T. Details

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Author : Alexey Nikitin

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From Reader Review Y.T. for online ebook

Downward says

born of soviet era paranoiac thinking, y.t. has a borgesian focus on the influence of the construction of false realities on the real world, sometimes in a macro way. y.t., which stands for "your turn" is about a group of friends, twenty years after they'd been imprisoned and questioned by the kgb for playing an immensely complicated risk-esque game of portmanteau nations duking it out for economic and military dominance. the novel's inciting incident is a reissue of the ultimatum that was sent at the very end of the game, from a mystery source, with "y.t." written at the end, the implication being that the game is starting again, from where it left off. it shapes their lives in interesting ways.

though it engages in the sort of atmospheric paranoia that essentially funds thomas pynchon's narratives, this one drifts into being a bit of a bore at times. it's at its best when engaging directly with the game and its phasing into the real lives of our characters, mostly because that hits the sweetest conceptual spots about the distinction between the complexities of political reality (in 1984 and 2004) and the gamefying of that reality.

Carol says

I'm confused, I'm not entirely sure what I just read and if I got it right, for some reason I feel like I'm missing something (context maybe).

It's a book on strategy games played by bored radio physicist students and the implications the game had on their lives 20

years later. There's some good intrigue, but the end was rather... abrupt.

My brain can't make up its mind whether I liked the book or not.

Kat says

Fantastic book

Artemisia says

“*Istemi fu l'ultimo signore assoluto del Khanato turco di Zaporoz'ye*” e al contempo non è mai esistito. Aleksej Nikitin, nel suo primo romanzo pubblicato in Italia da Voland, lo fornisce tuttavia di una ricca biografia, e un accurato sfondo storico: la vividezza e i dettagli con cui ogni atto di Istemi è raccontato fa sì che sembri più vero della realtà stessa, e sin dalle prime pagine verità e finzione scivolano l'una nell'altra. Istemi, tuttavia, è la storia malinconica di un gioco interrotto bruscamente dopo poche partite, così come bloccate e rovinate sono state le vite di tutti i suoi partecipanti.

Nel 1984 una conversazione colta e annoiata tra cinque studenti confinati in un kolchoz ucraino avvia una competizione fantapolitica e astorica: come in un Risiko slavo, i cinque ragazzi riscrivono la storia dell'Europa, ridisegnandone i confini e spartendosene i territori. Vengono ristabiliti monarchie e califfati e il Sacro Romano Impero non è mai caduto, ma al contrario è fiorente sotto la guida di Carlo XX. Le trattative

tra i cinque potenti e le manovre politiche e geografiche durano poco, ma le conseguenze sono enormi; lo stesso KGB non resterà sordo all'innocente gioco, e i cinque studenti verranno arrestati e detenuti per un periodo lungo, reso infinito e insostenibile dagli interrogatori estenuanti.

Alla loro liberazione si accorgono di aver perso tutto, pur non avendo consegnato altro che le regole del loro gioco bizzarro, e le loro vite si dividono in maniera inesorabile. Solo vent'anni dopo si ritroveranno, chiamati a una possibile guerra da un ultimatum che lascia loro poco tempo per agire, ma abbastanza da ripercorrere la strada che si erano lasciati alle spalle.

Con un'alternanza temporale lucida e mai fuorviante, la storia inizia quando già tutto è andato perso e ricomincia proprio dove si era fermata anni prima. Lo stile di Nikitin è eccezionalmente avvincente, dotato di una suspense malinconica e mai banale e il modo in cui tratteggia Istem, avatar del protagonista Aleksandr Davydov, è fermo ed epico. Attraverso i pensieri e le osservazioni, spesso sfuggenti, di Davydov, Istem, forte e orgoglioso, ci appare come il depositario di una dignità che la sua controparte non riesce a possedere. Signore di un impero infinito e potente, la storia di Khan Istem è piena di "spazi bianchi simili a buchi neri" e nessuno li riempirà mai più. Ed è sempre lui che parla attraverso Davydov durante gli interrogatori: lui a non cedere alla pressione di un potere ottuso e prepotente, e sempre lui a difendere le regole che governano il suo impero inesistente, e al contempo il regno invisibile dell'immaginazione del suo creatore.

Attraverso Istem Nikitin ha così intrattenuto un dialogo personale e originale con la storia della Russia: la tristezza e la nostalgia slava parlano attraverso i protagonisti, e Istem incarna l'idea di un paese ancorato a un passato leggendario e a un'idea di grandezza e dignità, proprio attraverso la figura di un personaggio che in nome di una mediocrità stabile e sicura ha lasciato andare via qualcosa di più profondo e prezioso della sua personalità.

Jennifer says

Seduced by this book from the new fiction section at the library. Melville House books are never a hard sell.

At times, bewildering, but I loved it from the outset. What is real in a totalitarian state, when everything is politics and games of power? And how could even a game ever be simply a game, when it could be a conspiracy and backstabbing and cynical political moves.

And what to do when the intrigues of your past suddenly pop up to haunt you?

Fresno Bob says

not really sure what I just read, was expecting more discussion of the game itself

Portal in the Pages says

I'm so sorry guys. I have no idea what I just read. I can't rate this properly for you and I really don't think I can review it either. :S

Harlen says

Excellent fast paced novel that touches on the paranoia and uncertainty caused by a innocent game between students. How it peeked the interests of the KGB and its consequences 20 years later.

Stephen says

Interesting premise but I think the dustjacket copy is a bit misleading about the stakes involved for the central cast of characters.

Jason says

His first work translated into English, Alexei Niktin's *Y.T.* bears more than a passing similarity to Milan Kundera's debut *THE JOKE* in its elaboration of how seemingly innocent conduct (nonetheless precipitated by the doldrums and a general sense of mischief) can become, in the humorless Soviet world (from the core out to the satellites), enough to get you in pretty serious trouble, completely altering the course of your life, productive of malignant reverberations many years down the road. *Y.T.* also combines a cold modernism w/ the kind of intrigue that will not be completely alien to readers of certain popular paperbacks, and in its anarchic self-conscious engagement w/ these sorts of precedent, pushes (very appropriately, as it happens) a modernist aesthetic into a postmodern arena. The first section of the book hops between 2004 and 1984; from the realm of reverberations back to the scene of the crime. Though I suspect it hews very close to reality (can't really say, I have never lived in anything resembling the USSR), the stuff that depicts life under Soviet rule is somewhat comic, almost satirical. There is the absurdity of the situation in which our completely harmless not-exactly-subversives find themselves and invent the game that will get them into trouble, followed by the absurdity of the KGB's prolonged detainment and interrogation of these hapless radiophysics students (experienced firsthand by our narrator Alexander, by whose side we stay for the book's entirety). We are presented a vision of very circumscribed life in the eighties, the expression of State power ridiculous, but simple, uncomplicated. Almost a joke. That the realm of 'reverberations' is situated in 2004 after the implosion of the Soviet Union, and involves the Ukraine, Crimea in general, at least one displaced Chechen, and the shady mechanics of international geopolitics, means that the post-Soviet order is the more fraught, complex, dehumanized, and fundamentally decentered (this is not a book w/ a sunny disposition re: liberal capitalism). It is through his engagement w/ the 21st century experience of power and (especially) impotence that Nikitin really delivers something substantial. *Y.T.* does not ultimately have an excess of chess pieces in play. This allows Nikitin to plot very elegantly and expeditiously. We are left w/ the bare minimum of loose strands, though much is smartly left unsaid. The novel feels finely crafted. It gradually began to almost make me think of *THE CRYING OF LOT 49*, the paper crane of Thomas Pynchon's oeuvre. I feel like I was sorely in need of this particular novel, speaking as it does to very vital sociopolitical themes (the Ukraine is indeed at the heart of much) and to a particular embodied on-the-ground experience of millennial metamorphosis. If we think of most stories about the return of the repressed as horror stories, then *Y.T.* is in some sense a horror story. History is the monster. We are, of course, standing right in the middle of history. Also: I would hardly be doing my due diligence if I didn't recommend it to all students of game theory.

Dylan says

Alexei Nikitin's *Y.T.* is a confounding little book.

When I first saw it, it was sitting on a shelf in Bakka Phoenix Books (a smaller bookshop specializing in genre fiction, with a bent towards science fiction and fantasy and everything on that spectrum) - a face-out - calling the eyes of customers to its cover, and it caught my eye and I gravitated to it. The cover is provocative: bold, strong lines; stark use of colour; a title that is quiet and subtle, yet mysterious and alluring...

I picked it up and saw the author's name - Alexei Nikitin - and felt that it was quite slim. I thought to myself, "A Russian author - I've never read a Russian science fiction or fantasy novel...and, it's slim! What a rare quality to be found in Russian literature!" [Clearly thinking of the works of Dostoevsky and Tolstoy here.] I flipped the book over and quickly learned that Nikitin was born in Ukraine (close enough to Russia for my mind) and that the book was not distinctly on the spectrum of science fiction or fantasy.

The blurb on the back sounded intriguing and I decided to pick it up. It seemed like a perfect fit for me! Naturally, it sat on my shelf aging for a while - but, in my attempt to read more translated literature this year, I finally decided to give it a shot. I was sorely disappointed.

Y.T. - clocking in under 150 pages - doesn't waste any time in getting underway. Its directness makes for a beginning that is challenging and confusing, not because it is poorly written, but quite the opposite - it's simply sharply concise, so much so that I found it detracting. Despite my effort to make sense of the early pages of the story - during which time Nikitin jumps back and forth from 1984 to 2004 - I found myself struggling to stay afloat. On occasion I found my feet and thought I had gained my balance again only to have my feet knocked out from underneath me again, floundering to make sense of what exactly was going on.

I found this to be the case all throughout the novel and yet, now that I have finished, it seems there really wasn't much to the novel at all. Everything you need to know is there on its back cover...and yet the way Nikitin's tale unravels obfuscates things so much so as to make a poorer experience.

I feel *Y.T.* was a challenge for me in part because I was overthinking it and believing that there was more to it than what appears on its surface - and I am certain there is because the novel is precise and strategically structured - but what I gathered was only the surface-level of the story. Surely I am missing something on a contextual level, given my remove from the worldly context in which the novel is situated.

All this aside, I feel that I would gain a much stronger interpretation were I willing to reread this little book...but I can't help but admit that I have no desire to do so. The drive isn't really there for me because it just wasn't all that good...

Despite my lukewarm reception of this novel I feel it's only fair to point out that the novel is darkly funny and a great satire at times. These moments are when I feel the novel was most focused and sharp - the moments that take place while Davidov is speaking with his boss and when he is speaking with Sinevusov. There is quite a lot of humour...but just not enough to make up for the book's detriments.

One reviewer made mention that this book reminded them of Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* and, after finishing this book and giving it some thought, I can agree with this perspective. My first reading of *The Crying of Lot 49* left me confused and disappointed. A slower, more thorough reading a few years later left me reeling in amazement at how much I had missed my first time through. I feel I would have a similar experience with *Y.T.* if I were ever to read it through a second time.

I'd give this a 1.5 leaning towards a 2 with the potential to be so much higher.

Robert Stewart says

This is the book about strategy games I've been waiting to read since the utter travesty of Roberto Bolano's posthumously published *The Third Reich*. The strategy game in *Y.T.* is created by a group of radiophysics students while they are on a state-sponsored apple-picking weekend in the Ukraine during the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1980s. The game lands them in the bowels of a KGB interrogation centre. They are released under the promise that they can never play the game again, and with the sneaking suspicion that their captors were actually aware it was a game, and merely wanted to play along. Twenty years later, a mysterious email arrives and it becomes clear someone never stopped playing the game. I found myself going back and rereading parts of the book as I went along. Usually, I hate this. But it wasn't because Nikitin (nor translator Anne Marie Jackson) were being unclear: It was because *Y.T.*, at 133 pgs., is unusually dense and subtle and I wanted to be sure I was seeing everything clearly, making all the right connections. This is pretty slick fiction-in-translation from Melville House.

Charles Neff says

Y.T. (for “Your Turn”) begins in Kiev, Ukraine in 1984 with a geopolitical student fantasy game, moves to an interrogation by the secret police, and evolves into an examination of the effects of both of those actions on the lives of the participants twenty years later. All this is packed into a brief book, replete with ruminations that have broad philosophical, political and individual implications. Behind the action is an unsolved mystery: who was responsible for initiating such a cascade of events? The Ukrainian fantasy game might best be understood by an American by imagining a powerful Indian tribe invading the thirteen colonies, losing the battle, yet reorganizing later and demanding reparations. Would such a demand be taken seriously, and, if so, how seriously? *Y.T.* answers the Ukrainian version of that question in the changes wrought in the lives of its four main protagonists. In the end, what matters most is how accurately each person guessed the weight of what was happening, in the moment and for the future. And yes, the mystery is solved. Time spent with *Y.T.* is rewarding on many levels.

CharlieNeff+-150words

Clio says

The flow of the plot felt very Russian but to me this was missing emotional depth.

J. Whitley says

I like Nikitin's style of writing. At times, reminded me of some stories I've read by Chekov.
