



A Horse Walks into a Bar

David Grossman , Jessica Cohen (Translator)

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The setting is a comedy club in a small Israeli town. An audience that has come expecting an evening of amusement instead sees a comedian coming apart on stage, an act of disintegration, a man crumbling, as a matter of choice, before their eyes. They could get up and leave, or boo and whistle and drive him from the stage, if they were not so drawn to glimpse his personal hell. Dovale Gee, a veteran stand-up comic – charming, erratic, repellent – exposes a wound he has been living with for years – a fateful and gruesome choice he had to make between the two people who were dearest to him.

A Horse Walks into a Bar is a shocking and breathtaking read. Betrayals between lovers, the treachery of friends, guilt demanding redress. On stage the comic is torn between his commitment to his audience and the debt he owes to himself. Flaying alive both himself and the people watching him, Dovale Gee provokes both revulsion and empathy from an audience that doesn't know whether to laugh or cry – and all this in the presence of a former childhood friend who is trying to understand why he's been summoned to this performance.

David Grossman has reached yet another literary peak that is emotionally equal to his previous books and stunning, even outrageous, in its inventions and complexity.

A Horse Walks into a Bar Details

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From Reader Review *A Horse Walks into a Bar* for online ebook

Dannii Elle says

I received a copy of this book in exchange for an honest review. Thank you to the author, David Grossman, and the publisher, Vintage Digital, for this opportunity.

This was my second read from the Man Booker International prize shortlist and, whilst I did not exactly 'get' this book, I can wholeheartedly see why it has garnered this acclaim.

This book was... bizarre! The novel's concept is of a stand-up comedian delivering more than just the expected one-liners and, instead, giving his audience a harsh and stark insight into culture and society. Just like the audience, as the jokes gave way to something darker, I was often left confused with what I was being served.

There was certainly power in this book and both the audience and the reader are privy to witnessing a man coming undone before their very eyes, but managing to deliver a dark and irrepressible something in the midst of his personal chaos.

The book focuses on the themes of societies horribly malfunctioning and it was an important and thought-provoking read because of that. Yet there was just something about this... Something I couldn't wholly grasp or sink my teeth into. Perhaps that is due to the immensity of the topics discoursed, or perhaps because of the abstract form of their delivery. Whatever it was, it has me at a loss to discern how I truly feel about this book. But, perhaps that is the very nature of what makes it so powerful? Because true art is never straightforward and easy to interpret.

Trish says

Everyone knows that successful stand up routines are laughs at the expense of grief, or embarrassment, or pain of some kind. The laughing picks a sore and in many cases, starts the healing. The novel-length comedy routine given by Dovaleh Greenstein one night in a worn-down beach town is unique. The night of the performance is his birthday. He will be fifty-seven. He will give a one-of-a-kind, career-ending show that looks at his life, his heritage, and one particular loss that shaped him as a youth. He wants to connect the dots. He invites a witness.

David Grossman manages an extraordinary breakthrough in the consciousness of readers. Dov is not an appealing man. He is old and his jokes are not funny. He often berates his audience and embarrasses them. He is not politically correct. Most of his audience walks out. But somewhere in there is a sense of history itself, the whole boring humiliating sordid joyous beautiful and yes funny ball of wax...the thing that forms us...the things that make us human.

"He darts across the stage like a windup toy, cackling: 'Being! Being! Being!' He stops and slowly turns to the room with the gleaming face of a crook, a thief, a pickpocket who got away with it. 'Do you even grasp what a stunning idea it is to just *be*? How subversive it is?'"

Somehow, in playing the scales of history up and down for several hours, Dov makes us sense the depth of

humanity again behind the historical markers. The witness he invites to his show is a former judge, a man who knew him as a child, right before some mysterious personality-shaping event of his childhood. Dov asks this former judge to watch his show and tell him if he sees

“That thing, he said softly, “That comes out of person without his control? That thing that maybe only this one person in the world has?”

The radiance of personality, I thought. The inner glow. Or the inner darkness. The secret, the tremble of singularity. Everything that lies beyond the words that describe a person, beyond the things that happened to him and the things that went wrong and became warped in him. The same thing that years ago, when I was just starting out as a judge, I naively swore to look for in every person who stood before me, whether defendant or witness. The thing I swore I would never be indifferent to, which would be the point of departure for my judgment.”

Dovaleh sees another person in the audience he recognizes, though he pretends he doesn't. He makes her explain why she feels she knows him, and whenever she expresses tendency towards kindness in her memory of him, he humiliates her a little, challenging her and memory. The audience becomes restless, angry. One man leans over to the woman and suggests she leave:

““This guy's not right, he's taking us all for a ride. He's even making fun of you.”

Her lips tremble. ‘That's not true,’ she whispers. ‘I know him, he's just doing make-believe.’”

That defense, the surety of her knowledge of Dov's goodness is as much about the woman herself as it is about Dov. Dov is the ultimate recreation of the tortured soul so familiar to us from other works of Jewish literature. There is nothing so tempting and hard to resist as the chance to look into another man's hell, Grossman tells us. But the woman looks only for his humanity, his kindness.

Dov was pulling in and wrapping up that night, making sense of the whole long parade of his life. Being itself is subversive, comedic even. But Grossman's tale is just as much about the judge who was witnessing that night, who'd been shown early retirement because he'd been too caustic and furious in his decisions. This judge, who'd had to crawl through his own prejudices while watching Dov's show, who got back to that place where he could recognize the spark of humanity Dov was searching for. He'd wanted to remember so that he could be remembered. And it worked.

This novel has been long-listed for the 2017 Man Booker International Prize. It was translated from the original Hebrew by Jessica Cohen. An interview about the translation can be found [here](#). A Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio interview interview with the David Grossman is [here](#).

Elyse says

Update: Congrats to David Grossman!!! This book just won the Man Booker International Award!!!

I was shaking at times reading David Grossman's new book -- my thoughts and emotions spinning. "A Horse Walks Into A Bar""isn't just a book about Israel: it's a book about people and societies horribly malfunctioning".

As I press the keyboard looking for what to write....I honestly just tremble inside. I can't seem to be able to

separate reading David Grossman's book's any longer without feeling deep sorrow for 'David'. David's 20 year old son, Uri, was killed in action just two days after joining the Israeli army.

As to be expected -- as readers are witnessing- David Grossman who has always been a serious-compassionate - sensitive writer - isn't giving us regular size novels any longer -- so far we are getting smaller serious books.

His last book -- "Falling Out of Time" -- was a small and deeply personal book about the loss of a son. Many of his fans were torn about that book. It was abstract - personal to David - certainly not a novel... and many of his fans have been 'waiting' for David to get back ON the HORSE! I'm not so sure his galloping days are in his future any longer.

What we're getting from David Grossman now is a different type of genre -- but comic? Not even!

So... then how the hell does a SERIOUS writer - a highly respected literary author pull off writing a book about a stand up comic all in a 2 hour evening?

Brilliantly-- that's how!!

Dovaleh Greenstein, an Israeli, is performing a 'stand-up' routine in a bar... in the town Netanya---but weather or not Dov G. planned his 'act' for the night ---or maybe things just got out of control --- the people in the audience who came to laugh are in for a rude awakening.

Dov called an old friend -- almost begging him to come to his show. Stand up is not his friends thing... but after much persuasion with "I want you to look at me, he spurted. "I want you to see me, really see me, and then afterward tell me".

"Tell You what?"

"What you saw". His friend came. His old friend, is Avishai Lazar, a retired judge and widower. Dov is 57 years old - in fact it's his birthday - but he hasn't seen this old friend since they were 9 years old. When's the last time you phone an old childhood friend from when you were 9 years old---and asked them for a favor?

The book is narrated by Avishai.... in first person. We get the impression he is sitting towards the back - but not too far back - because clearly there is eye contact and non verbal communication between Avishai and Dov on stage during the two hours.

Avishai gives us insight into a few different ways to look at what's happening on stage and with the audience. I always felt a little calmer when Avishai was speaking. It was often so chaotic on stage and in the room that my stomach was in knots. We are glad Avishai is in the room - and soon it's clear why he was invited.

When Dovaleh G first walks onto the empty stage. He warms the room up with animated energy. "Ladies and gentleman.....put your hands together for Dovaleh G.!"

There are sounds of laughter for the short, slight, bespectacled man, with cowboy boots decorated with silver sheriff stars. People have clearly come to be entertained.

Dov tells some jokes - involves the audience - most of the audience claps supportively in the beginning.

At some point the audience becomes 'pissed off'.. Dov seems to come undone more and more as the night goes on- but speaks some gut wrenching truths.

One man in the audience yells out to Dov: "Listen, buddy, bottom line--are we gonna get any comedy here tonight or not?"

"Seriously, people, we came for some laughs and this guys giving us a Holocaust Memorial day. And he's making 'jokes' about the Holocaust!"

"You are absolutely right, my friend, and I do apologize. I'm gonna make it right for you. Now I was thinking... Oh yeah, I have to tell you just one! A guy visits his grandma's grave on the anniversary of her

death. A few rows away he sees a man sitting next to a grave crying, shouting, 'Why? Why?' Why did you have to die? Why were you taken from me? What is my life worth now that you're gone? O cursed death! Well, after a few minutes the grandson can't resist and goes over to the guy: 'Excuse me for disturbing you, sir, but I'm really touched by your expression of sorrow. I've never seen such profound grief. Could I ask whom you are mourning? Was that your son? Your brother? The guy looks at him and goes, 'Of course not-- it's my first wife's first husband.'

There's a few exaggerated forced laughs. It's heart-wrenching to see how eager people are to help him salvage the evening.

Not everyone in the room has compassion--people are throwing money down on their tables for the drinks they had - grabbing their wives and walking out - Some people try to stop others from leaving - others just 'hiss'.

As one man leaves he says...."people come here to have a good time, it's the weekend, and you want to clear your head, and this guy gives us Yom Kippur"

Doveleh covers so many 'serious' topics - grief - regret - loss - relationship with both parents - cancer - the military - anti-Semitism - NEW anti-Semitism - even a few jokes ...

He examines the way an audience looks at 'art' (if we call stand up art). Why do we tell jokes? Why 'not' stand up and tell 'truth' ... or are they the same in disguise?

It's hard not to keep reading - and thinking about this book - but it wasn't comfortable.....

Yet....an interesting observation for myself: (is this why we write reviews?).... I feel better than when I started typing on the keyboard. The process of thinking deeper about this book allowed me to let air flow through my body a little better again.

I'm going to end with.....life issues ARE serious - but people want 'vacations' from hearing about it. It's a choice when to engage - when to pull away - each taking care of our well being.

For me, this book was hard to pull away from yet uncomfortable to read.

Would I have walked out of this evening if it was a real evening stand-up? I'd like to think I'd stay.

My husband said he would have walked out.

As for the creation of this BOOK.... HIGHLY ORIGINAL!!! -- a very sad undertone!

Kamil says

A carousel of emotions and layers. Deep, as personal as political, seductive while often uneasy. Very emotional life story wrapped in 2 hours performance of Israeli standup comedian... Video review: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d627e...>

Mattia Ravasi says

Video review: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EdFCn...>
Featured in my Top 20 Books I Read in 2017

Exploits beautifully the way stand-up comedy, when stripped of a comedian's showmanship and turned into pure text, fully uncovers its destructive potential. Which does not mean the novel isn't hilarious. (Which doesn't mean it isn't one punch-in-the-face of a book).

Roger Brunyate says

The Last Stand-Up

So this comedian walks into a club. It's Netanya, Israel, not the audience he would have chosen, but hey, a gig's a gig. So he insults them a little, flatters them a little, tells a few one-liners, and soon they are eating out of his hand. Doveleh G's been doing this for 40 years; he knows his job. So does veteran Israeli author David Grossman who, aided by his splendid translator Jessica Cohen, captures the scene perfectly. Not just the jokes and routines, but the roller-coaster trajectory of the comic's relationship with the crowd, almost losing them one moment, winning them back the next. And the slow, sad attrition as people get up to go, leaving the club to an audience of those who have become interested in the performer, not as a comedian, but as the storyteller of his life. They will hear him out to the end. And among them is the reader; this is truly a book you can not put down.

"I don't know how to say this without offending the new anti-Semites, God forbid, but for fuck's sake, people, don't you think your attitude is just a little bit grating? 'Cause sometimes I get the impression that if, let's say, an Israeli scientist came up with a cure for cancer, right? A medicine that would finish off that cancer once and for all? Well, then I guarantee you the next day people all over the world would start speaking out and there'd be protests and demonstrations and UN votes and editorials in all the European papers, and they'd all be saying, 'Now wait a minute, why must we harm cancer? And if we must, do we really need to completely annihilate it right off the bat? Can't we try and reach a compromise first? Why go in with force straightaway? Why not put ourselves in its shoes and try to understand how cancer itself experiences the disease from its own perspective? And let's not forget that cancer does have some positives. Fact is, a lot of patients will tell you that coping with cancer made them better people. And you have to remember that cancer research led to the development of medications for other diseases—are we just going to put an end to all that, in such a destructive manner? Has history taught us nothing? Have we forgotten the darker eras? And besides' "—he adopts a contemplative expression—*" 'is there really anything about man that makes him superior to cancer and therefore entitled to destroy it?' "*

This comes from near the beginning, when Dov is riding high. The theme of Jewish self-deprecation, which he calls the new anti-Semitism, is a familiar one from writers like Philip Roth or Howard Jacobson, but Grossman's Dov has a particularly sharp way of addressing it. He is even more vitriolic against his own people in a routine about kicking Palestinians around, but on the whole he stays clear of politics. All the same, this is a very Israeli book, because both Dov and his audience have grown up there, been to similar schools and camps, done the same military service. I am sure there are many references that I haven't picked up, but that did not lessen my involvement.

Fairly near the start, we get a shock. The word "I" enters the picture; the anonymous narrator isn't anonymous anymore. We realize that Dov is being observed by someone sitting alone in the shadows near the back. I will let Grossman reveal at his own pace who this observer is—he will be quite touchingly

realized in his own right—except to say that it is a figure from the comedian's childhood, whom he has invited to attend. Gradually, the routine will turn into the story of Dov's younger life, and this witness is essential to what he is trying to do. It turns out that there is another person in the audience who knew Dov back then, an older woman who has come to surprise him. But he insults her mercilessly, to stop her calling up the good side of him that he would prefer to deny in his self-lacerating humor and at times the physical blows he rains upon his face and body.

When I quoted the passage above about the new anti-Semitism, I was just looking for an entertaining and representative sample. But it occurs to me now that the theme of self-deprecation, even self-hatred, is central to the novel. More than a comedian's *shtick*, it is part of Dov's personal tragedy. However, I suspect that Dov also represents a whole generation of postwar Israelis. His driven, authoritative father is a pioneer who emigrated in the 1930s; his reticent and devoted mother is a Holocaust survivor; do they perhaps represent opposing attitudes in Israeli society? Not that it really matters, for in the last quarter of the novel, as we are drawn into a nail-biting scenario in which Dov is in effect forced to choose between them, it is not as a symbol that he moves us, still less as a stage performer, but simply as a human being.

P.S. The horse who walked into the bar? That is just about the only joke in the book that is cut off before reaching the punchline. The others are intact, and—whether corny, cutting, or ribald—they are often very funny.

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My Top Ten list this year is selected from a smaller than usual pool. I really only started reading again in May, and even then deliberately kept new books to under 50% of my total. In compiling the list, I also did not exactly follow my original star ratings, but rather the takeaway value after time has passed. In particular, there are two books, *Lincoln in the Bardo* and *Go, Went, Gone*) to which I gave only 4 stars, but which I recognize as important books, with more staying power than many that I enjoyed more at the time, but have since forgotten.

For some reason, three of the ten books (*Forest Dark*, *A Horse Walks into a Bar*, and *Three Floors Up*) are by Jewish authors, set in Israel. To those, I would add a fourth: *Judas* by Amos Oz, read at the same time and of similar quality, but actually published at the end of 2016.

The ten titles below are in descending order (i.e. with *The Essex Serpent* being my favorite). The links are to my reviews:

1. *The Essex Serpent* by Sarah Perry
2. *Autumn* by Ali Smith
3. *Forest Dark* by Nicole Krauss
4. *The Heart's Invisible Furies* by John Boyne
5. *Reservoir 13* by Jon McGregor
6. *A Horse Walks into a Bar* by David Grossman
7. *Exit West* by Moshin Hamid
8. *Three Floors Up* by Eshkol Nevo
9. *Lincoln in the Bardo* by George Saunders
10. *Go, Went, Gone* by Jenny Erpenbeck

And half that number again that didn't quite make it, in alphabetical order by authors:

11. *Souvenirs dormants* by Patrick Modiano
 12. *All We Shall Know* by Donal Ryan
 13. *Improvement* by Joan Silber
 14. *Anything Is Possible* by Elizabeth Strout
 15. *Rose & Poe* by Jack Todd
-

Amanda says

3.5 stars

I approached this one with some trepidation. I don't like stand up comedy. My husband says I have no sense of humor, that's not really it, I don't find things funny that are at other people's expense which is generally the basis for comedy routines/jokes. I chose to read this because it is short-listed for the Man-Booker International prize and also because I really enjoyed Grossman's *To the End of the Land*.

The entire book takes place over the course of a couple of hours at a rundown bar hosting Dovaleh, our comic. We get a play by play of the night from one of the audience members who was a childhood friend of Dovaleh. Dovaleh is not a likeable character and he's not a good stand up comic but somehow by the end of the story I was almost in tears for him.

This is completely different from my usual choice of books but I'm glad that I read it. It's good to read outside of the comfort zone from time to time.

Adina says

Winner of the Man Booker International Prize

Update: I listened to an interesting conversation with David Grossman about his inspiration for the book, the translation, stories and Israel. To be listened after you read the novel because it contains spoilers. The link: <https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/in...>

I left it for today to write my review for *A Horse Walks into a Bar* because I was sure it will be the winner although it was my least favorite of the 4 shortlisted novels that I read. Moreover, it was the choice of The Mookse and the Gripes Group Forum, an opinion that I trust. Why I thought it will win, you might ask? The reasons might be the following: the originality of the plot and setting and the way the writer manipulates the reader's feelings towards the main character. Unfortunately, I cannot say anything about the English translation as I read this novel in Romanian.

As you might guess from the well-chosen title, the novel revolves around a stand-up comedy routine performed by Dovaleh G. in the Israeli town of Netanya. What starts as a normal routine involving unconformable, offensive bad jokes soon transforms in a dramatic recount of a traumatic experience from the comedian's past. The jokes become more and more intermingled with the recollections of his past until the

later takes center stage, so to say. The way the actor falls apart on the stage is, at first, disgusting but then it becomes harrowing and pitiful. The audience feels the first expectant and uncomfortable, then puzzlement replaced later with rage for some and pity for others. However, they were all attracted by the performance in front of them, like under a trance, even if the act became something very different than what they paid for. During reading, I felt a part of the audience, like I was there. For the first half of the novel I could not stand Dovaleh and his jokes, I even considered abandoning the battle, like many of his spectators did. Still I pressed on, drawn by some invisible thread, and then I began to read more and more fervently until felt the tension increasing and my feelings for the main characters metamorphosing from disgust to understanding and pity. Actually, as I am typing this review, I truly realize how masterfully this little novel was crafted.

I do not want to say much more. *A Horse Walks into a Bar* is a novel one has to experience, to live, not only to read. It is not for everybody and I recommend patience until the end. It is small so it won't take too much of your time. Give it a go and see where it takes you.

Chrissie says

Winner of The 2017 Man Booker International Prize

This is a very difficult book to read. It is emotionally draining. It also has great emotional depth.

A fifty-seven-year-old standup comedian gives a two-hour performance. On stage, he falls apart before our very eyes. Readers should be warned; this is not a book of laughs. We readers can of course simply close the book. The spectators could leave the show; it was just to walk out that door. Spectators entered the club looking for laughs, but you, you have been warned. My advice? Follow the book through to the end; then make a judgment.

What begins with a show of chaotic frenzy becomes instead a man laying all bare. How many people want to or have the capacity to share with another deep sorrow, loss, grief and the incomprehensible confusion of life? For me, this is what the book is about.

Not only hurt and pain, but also dear memories are revealed.

The man on stage is Dovaleh Greenstein. The performance is to be held in the Israeli town Netanya. Contemporary times. He has telephoned Avishai Lazar, now a retired district court judge and widower, before a childhood friend, and asked him to come to the show. He has not met Avishai for over forty years! C'mon, he says, come:

"I want you to look at me," he spurted. "I want you to see me, really see me, and then afterward tell me".

"Tell You what?"

"What you saw."

His friend came, and he sat, first in the back and then he moved forward. As the room emptied, as angry, disappointed spectators first booed, yelled obscenities, jeered and then left, he and a few others remained. It is Avishai who speaks to us. It is he that is telling the story, but both Avishai and Dov, there, up on the stage, talk to us. Two first person narratives, but not confusing in the least. One must give Grossman credit for pulling this off so well.

The audiobook is magnificently narrated by Joe Barrett. The raucous jumble on stage, the yelled obscenities, the crude language are voiced with authenticity. This is neither an easy book to read nor to listen to. As the book proceeds Barrett captures equally well Ayishai's measured words, a woman's voice from the audience and Dov as the show nears its end. I cannot imagine a better narration.

Reading this book does not replicate the phenomenon of people staring, glued to a car crash. There, observers have no connection to those hurt. Here, in this book, we feel a connection. We have been told so much. The book is not about observing at a distance; it is about letting people in close. Not many dare to do this.

I detested this book at the start, by the end I was totally absorbed. Grossman's writing is not pretty, but it always pulls me in. I can also recommend *To the End of the Land*, which I gave five stars.

Ravi Gangwani says

Edit on 15/6/2017 - Why there is so much torture in the world. This book has won Booker International 2017 ... Seriously ? Now I have some serious doubts on Booker.

----- My Review -----

A story of 10 inch, stretched till the length of 10 kilometers. The bush has beaten at such level that even the pulp has been reduced to invisible.

"Man plans, god fucks him."

Similarly I would say 'expectation plans and reality fucks it.'

A lot of blending thoughts, this time, didn't work for me.

And a very big WWHHHHHYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY is pounding inside me again ... As why some people are loving it and why I am deprived of such emotion that people usually are squeezing from it.

I didn't like this book for following reason ...

- (1) I am incapable of living with jokes.
- (2) May be due to my location, I am ignorant of political base lying underneath.
- (3) Author was just pushing the story ... A man on dais, doing stand-up, and suddenly something changes inside him and he started narrating his childhood story when he was in some camp and a order summoned to take him at his home because someone at his home died. I will not say who was that due to spoiler alert ... But that was all this story contained.
- (4) And the most frustrating part ... when he was taken home, the driver was muttering stupid jokes and this whole thing was taken till very irritating level that I was almost compelled to throw the book away.
- (5) A horse walks into the bar, the joke was incomplete, I did not understand the utility of it.
- (6) A lot of incomplete references ... (Or may I was unable to comprehend the links)
- (7) And the blurb was such a deception that when I read it after completing the whole book I couldn't satisfy to tally it with similar intensity running in the book.

I mean I still don't understand why it garnered such a huge response and even shortlisted for Man Booker

International.
But from my side, A big thumbs down.

Jill says

David Grossman is surely a magician because during the entire time I was reading this novel, I felt under a spell—one from which I haven't emerged from yet.

Dovelah Greenstein is a stand-up comedian facing an existential crisis and he chooses a one-night engagement for a kind of self-immolation. Reaching out into his distant past, he chooses a childhood neighbor named Avishai Lazar – a district court justice and a grieving widower --to provide feedback about what he sees.

The power of this novel is that the reader—like the audience—is placed in the position of witness, unable to turn away yet increasingly unsettled about the lengths to which Dov is inflicting pain upon himself.

This is a confident author, unafraid to take risks with his character, and these risks reap ample rewards. As the audience clamors for easy laughs, and as more and more make their way to the exit (Dov actually tallies the disgruntled guests on a stage chalkboard), the stakes keep raising for the audience members who remain. Dov, a one-time scrawny kid who learned to use humor as a shield against his abusive father and neighborhood bullies—is a man who is in genuine pain and is seeking a type of self-forgiveness.

As an added reward, David Grossman knows the complex rhythm of stand-up comedy—reading the audience, giving it what it wants, and yet consistently forcing the audience from its collective comfort zone. There is an urgency to this story and the reader begins to feel complicit—wanting to reach out and provide comfort while, at the same time, furtively looking behind for a way out.

I thought this book was mesmerizing and extraordinarily powerful. It certainly deserves the Man Booker prize it earned and it will certainly be in my Top Ten this year. Bravo, Mr. Grossman!

Jennifer Blankfein says

For book reviews and recommendations go to
<https://booknationbyjen.wordpress.com>

A Horse Walks Into a Bar, the 2017 Man Booker International Prize Winner, is a stunning account of a middle aged, washed up comedian's stand up show, but there is so much more. Taking place in the Israeli city of Netanya, Dovaleh Greenstein has invited a high school friend from military camp, Avishai Lavar, to watch the performance and then let him know what he sees...the person he really sees. In the audience, in addition to Lavar, now a retired judge, there is an unusual woman from Dov's old neighborhood in attendance, a little person who endured bullying all her life, and throughout the show interjects comments and contributes her recollections from childhood.

Dov starts out marginally funny, a bit mean with injected political commentary on the state of Israel and her relationship with surrounding countries. As he feeds off the energy of the audience he gains confidence and

becomes focused on telling stories of his youth. He reveals in a joking kind of way the pain he felt as a young boy, small in stature, walking on his hands to avoid getting beat up but enduring hurtful slaps kicks and punches anyway. The small odd woman from his past doesn't approve of his self deprecating act and refuses eye contact. Meanwhile, as he sits silently during the performance, the judge recalls his brief time with Dov when they were young and how he just observed the bullying and abuse Dov painfully endured without standing up for his friend.

Dov tells stories of how he tried to protect his Holocaust surviving mother, how his father beat him, how he felt like an embarrassment. The little woman reminded him of his kindness and strength as he goes down this depressing, yet life affirming path on stage and only a few of the diminishing crowd lingers. The comedy show turns into an autobiographical one man show and the audience, not getting what they came for continually thins out, but there are some who cannot resist the "temptation to look into another man's hell". This cathartic sharing of his background and past experiences allowed Dov to relive the pain and suffering he has endured over the years in front of an audience.

At times painful to read, Doveleh's stories bring to light questions about being an active participant in advocacy or an ineffective observer. From Middle East relations to the Holocaust to bullying vs. kindness; what is our responsibility as an audience, a friend, a citizen? While some of the comedy club crowd questions the heavy performance that night, "People come here to have a good time, it's the weekend, you wanna clear your head, and this guy gives us Yom Kippur.", I believe Dov wants to be recognized for his suffering.

Author David Grossman does an exceptional job with his characters, giving the reader just enough to grasp who they are, flaws and all. His insights about society, Israel and life choices provide food for thought; I could not put this book down and highly recommend it for book clubs.

Vanessa says

3.5 stars.

This was the last book that I had planned on getting to on the Man Booker International Prize 2017 shortlist, and it was definitely a memorable read and an interesting one to round off my reading with. Grossman depicts one night in a comedy club, and the fall of a comedian who commits to bare all his insecurities and pain in an incredibly intense, awkward, and tragic show. The audience are bewildered, especially the childhood friend that the comedian has previously begged to attend the show. He doesn't know why he's there, but much like many of the people in the room, he can't quite tear himself away from the car crash on stage before him.

The book is free of chapters, with only the occasional break in the text for the reader to have some breathing space, so it is a book best read in as few sittings as possible. However, I didn't find it necessarily an easy read. The text itself wasn't dense at all, and it was quite quick to read in terms of its pacing, but the content felt heavy at times and I was transported to that comedy club, feeling trapped by the comedian on stage and wanting to leave at times but not wanting to draw attention to myself. Grossman's presentation of a dying on stage comedian was incredibly on point, but personally I hate comedy clubs for the awkwardness that they represent, and so at times I felt like I was imprisoned in this book.

I really enjoyed the fly on the wall aspect of the book, and the moments where the focus was turned on the

behaviours of the other audience members, through the inner thoughts of the childhood friend watching the show. I found myself relating to a lot of the awkward people in the audience. It was also oddly fascinating to see this comedian at work - going from manic to the lowest of the low in the space of a few sentences, his banter with the audience, and his increasing lack of interest in keeping his audience with him as he delves deeper and deeper into the story of his past. However, a lot of the time while reading I was wondering to myself what the point of his story was, much like the audience members, and by the time I had got to the end of the book/show, I felt that not much had been delivered and that the ending was a bit of a let-down.

I think Grossman definitely portrayed some real writing skill here, by managing to hold me like an audience member through a pretty non-stop book, and I thought that Jessica Cohen's translation was flawless, with the dialogue flowing thick and fast in a way that was so natural I could forget it was translated at all. But it's not a book I would pick up again, and although I think it's definitely worth checking out, it's not been my favourite on the shortlist.

Paul Fulcher says

Update: a very worthy winner of the 2017 MBIP

What sort of obligation do I have towards someone who I went to private tutoring sessions with forty-something years ago? I'm giving him five more minutes, on the dot, and if there isn't any kind of plot twist, I'm leaving.

Book 12 from 13 of the Man Booker International longlist and I certainly saved one of the best till last.

Israeli author David Grossman is perhaps best known in English for his *To the End of the Land*, translated by Jessica Cohen (a 3 star review from me), a long and emotionally resonant account of a mother who takes refuge in a long walk across the Galilean countryside when her son is called up to military service: this ensures the army officials can't find her to notify her if anything happens to her son, and her effective belief is that this ensures his safety – if they can't tell her then it can't happen. The novel was given added poignancy by Grossman's own son's death in military service in Lebanon while he was completing the novel.

A Horse Walks Into a Bar, which has been longlisted for the 2017 Man Booker International is very different in tone, although there are some similarities in the underlying literary conceit and the comedy on the surface of this novel conceals tragedy and emotional depth underneath, as Grossman explained in a CBC radio interview.

It takes some time after a trauma to start to be able to make fun of it...and yet it has a kind of a healing aspect to it, the fact that people are able to laugh again.

Dovaleh G (G for Greenstein) is a 57-year stand-up comedian, and the novel consists of an account of a routine he performs one night in the city of Netanya.

'I should be explaining how I'm just so into being here with you on a Thursday evening in your charming industrial zone, and not just that but in a basement, practically touching the magnificent radon deposits while I pull a string of jokes out of my pass for your listening pleasure - correct?' 'Correct' the audience yells back. 'Incorrect,' the man asserts and rubs his hands together gleefully. 'It's all a crook, except the pass bit, because I gotta be honest with you, I can't stand your city. I get creeped out by this Netanya dump. Every

other person on the street looks like he's in the witness protection programme, and every other other person has the first person rolled up in a plastic plastic bag inside the trunk of his car. And believe me if I didn't have to pay alimony to three lovely women and child support for one-two-three-four-five kids.....'

The story is narrated by Avishai Lazar a senior judge: *'District, not Supreme. And anyway I'm retired.'* he retorts when Dovaleh G singles him out in the audience. He knew Dovaleh over 40 years ago, when they spend a summer in the same private maths tutorial class, but had not spoken to him since, until he receives a call out of the blue asking him to attend the gig:

'I want you to see me, really see my and then afterwards tell me.'

'Tell you what?

'What you saw'

As Dovaleh's act unfolds, we are party to Avishai's observations on the audience's reaction, his own thoughts, his emerging recollections of his friend from 40+ years ago, and his own personal issues.

From the outset Dovaleh's act sways uneasily between traditional stand-up – improvised abuse of the audience and their city interspersed with hackneyed gags – and personal confession. When he drops into the latter, he tells the audience: *'Just pretend you know what I'm talking about, okay? Nice city, Netanyahu, nice city'* so often, it becomes a catchphrase that they join in with. He walks a tightrope between the two, trying to keep the audience with him while airing the personal confession he wants to make: *The crowd laughs heartily and relaxes a little, sensing that somewhere out there a dangerous wrong turn has been righted.*

Over the next 2 hours of the show and 200 pages of the novel, Dovaleh G's unspools his life in front of Avishai, the audience and the reader. The audience waver between being repulsed, bored, amused and intrigued, but it is the latter emotion that dominates for the reader.

Comedy is typically regarded as being more difficult to translate than poetry and that this novel works so well in English is testimony to the wonderful translation from the Hebrew by Jessica Cohen. She explains some of the issues she faced - including the very first line of the novel - in an in-depth interview in the literary journal Asymptote.

In conclusion, I cannot resist quoting a wonderful line from Neil's review:

Last year's Man Booker winner was criticised by some because they felt it was a stand-up comedy show masquerading as a novel. This book is a novel masquerading as a stand-up comedy show.

I was one of those who said this of last year's Man Booker winner, and Grossman's novel is a far superior work of literature.

Definitely one for my shortlist, indeed I would be happy to see it win.

Paromjit says

Despite the title of this book, it is not going to make you laugh. It is a compulsive and harrowing read. It is about Jewish history, the dysfunctional nation of Israel and its people, where the political is heartbreakingly personal. The narrative covers two hours of a middle aged stand up comic's routine, albeit an unusual one

where Dovaleh Greenstein spews forth the horrors that have comprised his life. It is set in a club in Netanya, with a broad section of Israeli society watching him as he begins by telling terrible jokes. He comes across as repulsive, haranguing his audience, virtually inviting their hostility.

The narrative is delivered through an invited guest to the show, retired judge Avishai Lazar, a childhood friend. At military camp where Dov was mercilessly bullied, the judge wonders why he is there, then he thinks he knows why he is there, but like the rest of the audience and the reader, he knows nothing. As Dov's rants and insults grow, a large part of the audience begins to leave and by the end there are but a handful of individuals left. We hear of Dov's parents, his violent father, his vulnerable and broken mother, and the litany of the slings and arrows that life has thrown at him. His unravelling has him metaphorically beating his chest, with tears running down his face, screaming this is who I am, this is the world that I have lived in. This is a story of bone deep pain, grief, loss, a country that has lost its way, lies, betrayal, treachery, survival and guilt. It is about recognising the value of a human life and soul that has undergone such trauma.

Grossman achieves a remarkable turnaround as we come to both understand and empathise with Dov. More to the point, we see ourselves and the world in Dovaleh and the life he has lived. For me, there is no doubt this has been a excruciating and claustrophobic read at times, It is a short book which encapsulates major themes in what it is to be human, the nature of relationships, politics and trauma. I highly recommend this book in the spirit of it is what you need to read although it may not be what you want to read. Thanks to Random House Vintage for an ARC.

Blair says

I've never really been drawn to stand-up comedy, so it's unlikely this book would have appeared on my radar if not for its Man Booker International longlisting. It's essentially one long scene in which an obnoxious comedian takes the stage in the Israeli city of Netanya. Dovaleh G, as he styles himself, is a short, malnourished figure, a diminutive man whose humour is crude and erratic, veering from slapstick to tragedy. As his routine progresses, it takes an increasingly confessional direction. Punctuating his monologue with the occasional terrible joke, Dovaleh tells a story about a traumatic incident from his childhood. ('Can you believe how he's using us to work out his hang-ups?' asks one heckler – but don't all stand-up comics do that?) The whole thing is narrated from among the audience by former Supreme Court Justice Avishai Lazar, who was briefly friends with the comedian in his youth. Beyond that, the retired judge has no idea why he's been invited, let alone how to interpret what Dovaleh has asked of him: 'I want you to see me, really see me, and then afterwards tell me... what you saw.'

A Horse Walks Into a Bar is thoroughly tied to its setting, a book about Israel as much as it is a book about these specific characters, and I did have to google quite a few things to understand all the political references. (That, in case it isn't clear, is a good thing.) At its heart it is about loss. The emotional core is composed of grief: Lazar's for his late wife Tamara, Dovaleh's for his mother. It is definitely a book about a comedian rather than a comic book – it's not that funny: Dovaleh's jokes are either broad and offensive or specific and dark; we wince alongside Lazar as audience member after audience member walks out. As well as that, there was something I found seriously, memorably disturbing about the young Dovaleh's trick of walking on his hands, and his habit of reverting to this act at times of emotional distress.

You know when you're not really enjoying something that much, but can't tear yourself away from it? That was my experience of this book. 'Compulsive' is the perfect word for it, in that it encourages swift reading but not necessarily because it's irresistibly entertaining. I needed to see it through to the final pages, which

are at once crushing and anticlimactic.

I received an advance review copy of A Horse Walks Into a Bar from the publisher through NetGalley.

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Neil says

Dovaleh is the kind of comedian I would never go to see: he is vulgar and offensive and his jokes are often bad. But, by the end of this book I was almost in tears alongside him. It's that kind of book. It takes you on a journey where you learn to care about a person you would not normally have anything to do with. And it is a mark of the power of the writing here that I found myself coming to care about a fictional, unpleasant person!

Last year's Man Booker winner was criticised by some because they felt it was a stand-up comedy show masquerading as a novel. This book is a novel masquerading as a stand-up comedy show. In the course of what is supposed to be about two hours of jokes and comedic insults of the audience, Dovaleh G instead unravels in front of his ever diminishing audience. It is raw. It is uncomfortable. At what point would you have left? At what point would you turn away from that much honesty when it wasn't what you expected?

Writing in The Guardian, Ian Sansom says: *...Grossman's true interests lie elsewhere: A Horse Walks into a Bar is not a book about standup comedy. It is a book about art, and the relationship of suffering to art. "I'm a bottom-feeder, am I not?" says Dovaleh. "It's a pretty pathetic form of entertainment, let's be honest." Through the character of Avishai, the judge, it's also a book about our role as spectators and participants, about what it means to be part of an audience. "How did he do that? I wonder. How, in such a short time, did he manage to turn the audience, even me to some extent, into household members of his soul? And into his hostages?"*

There aren't that many books where I have to stop and sit still for a while after finishing them. This is one of them.

Comfortably 4.5 stars. I am thinking about going all the way to 5.

UPDATE (15 April) - I've decided to go all the way to 5 stars.

Emily May says

Here it is now – a shared flicker that no one but the two of us, I hope, can detect. You came, his look says. Look what time has done to us, here I am before you, show me no mercy.

I'm not 100% sure how I feel about this book, to be honest. Like most Booker Prize winners, it is undoubtedly very clever, but can I say I actually enjoyed reading it? Not really.

There have been a number of reviews and comments saying "I don't really like stand-up comedy, but..." or "I

do like stand-up comedy so..." but I really think liking or not liking stand-up comedy has nothing to do with whether you will like this book. A stand-up routine in a comedy club in Israel works as a framing device for this story to be unveiled, but it is not funny, nor does it seem like it's supposed to be.

A comedian called Dovaleh G begins his routine to laughter and applause, but it very soon begins to fall apart as his jokes become ever less funny, ever more personal. Many themes are covered in this short book about a man falling apart on stage - friendship, betrayal, revenge, Israel, the Holocaust, to name a few.

The rambling style of narrative, punctuated by unfunny jokes, made for a difficult and tiring read. Dovaleh was sometimes too annoying to be interesting, though I will say that perseverance pays off when we finally discover the truth behind his personal angst. I think the most interesting aspect throughout - and what probably enabled me to read to the end - was the inclusion of the first person narrator in the audience. We know almost immediately that Dovaleh knows this person and that there is going to be some story behind their shared glances.

I finished the book feeling satisfied at having read it. Some books don't feel worth the effort put in to make it to the end, but I appreciated this one more when I looked back over it. It just seems wrong to give a book more than three stars when it was so difficult to push through.

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Hugh says

This book won this year's Man Booker International Prize, which in itself created very high expectations, and for me it never came close to fulfilling them.

The central portrait of a stand-up comedian Doveleh Greenstein, giving a final performance in which he abandons jokes for a cathartic bout of self-analysis in which he gives a detailed account of a traumatic and pivotal day in his childhood, is undoubtedly a powerful one, though the idea of a tortured comedian is nothing new.

Where I struggled was the relentless nature of the story, and although it succeeds on its own terms it failed to hold my interest and in the end I was glad it was only 200 pages long, and sympathised with the audience members who kept walking out of the performance.

Perhaps I picked a bad time to read it, as the last six books I have read have all been much better.

Nandakishore Varma says

I am not a big fan of stand-up comedy. Even though there are many funny moments in such performances, I find most of the jokes crass and overtly sexual - and the comedian is in such a tizzy most of the time to get the audience to laugh, he seems to work at being funny; which, IMO, makes it even more unfunny. The only thing missing is the laugh track.

But consider for a moment the comedian, the guy behind the clown's mask. He is taxed with an unenviable

task - he must laugh, no matter what. As the doyen of Malayalam humour, Sanjayan, (who had an abysmally tragic life) says: whether one's heart is burning or brain is fuming, one must laugh - for that is the duty of the *vidushaka* (jester). Think of how he/ she must feel.

In this Booker-winning novel, David Grossman treats us to the tortured performance of such a soul - Dovaleh Greenstein, the bullied boy who grew up to become a self-deprecating clown. In this final (?) appearance, Dovaleh virtually goes to pieces onstage; instead of jokes, what comes out is his distressing life story and its one defining moment. Watching the performance is his childhood friend Avishai Lazar, now a retired judge, who is there at Dovaleh's request and also is the narrator of the tale: unbeknownst to Dovaleh, the story is about Avishai's shame too, about how he let his friend down at a crucial moment in his life. There is also a midget woman, another social misfit from the comedian's childhood who is now a medium. As the evening descends into its predictably disastrous climax, the trio of the performer and these two members of his audience and the chemistry between them stretch the evening in space and time, going beyond the confines of the small club in Netanya into Israel, her geography, and the tumultuous history of her people.

This novel, though extremely short, is very difficult to read. There were a lot of moments in the middle when I felt like putting it down and saying 'enough is enough'. But the story kept pulling me in, like Dovaleh's distressing yet magnetic performance holding the audience hostage (is the similarity of the names of the protagonist and author just a coincidence?). For most of the story here is on the unwritten pages - what is left unsaid is as important as, sometimes more important than, what is said. Dovaleh's jokes, spanning domesticity, politics, the Jewish identity and his own crisis of personality will speak to the perceptive reader; ask him or her to look inside.

Come to think of it, isn't it the *vidushaka* - *dharma*, the duty of the jester?
