The Last Wolf / Herman

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The Last Wolf features a classic, obsessed Krasznahorkai narrator, a man hired to write (by mistake, by a glitch of fate) the true tale of the last wolf of Extremadura, a barren stretch of Spain. This miserable experience (being mistaken for another, dragged about a cold foreign place, appalled by a species' end) is narrated— all in a single sentence—as a sad looping tale, a howl more or less, in a dreary wintry Berlin bar to a patently bored bartender.

The Last Wolf is Krasznahorkai in a maddening nutshell—with the narrator trapped in his own experience (having internalized the extermination of the last creature of its kind and " locked Extremadura in the depths of his own cold, empty, hollow heart ")—enfolding the reader in the exact same sort of entrapment to and beyond the end, with its first full-stop period of the book.

Herman, "a peerless virtuoso of trapping who guards the splendid mysteries of an ancient craft gradually sinking into permanent oblivion," is asked to clear a forest's last "noxious beasts." In *Herman I: The Game Warden*, he begins with great zeal, although in time he "suspects that maybe he was 'on the wrong scent.'" Herman switches sides, deciding to track entirely new game...

In *Herman II: The Death of a Craft*, the same situation is viewed by strange visitors to the region. Hyper-sexualized aristocratic officers on a very extended leave are enjoying a saturnalia with a bevy of beauties in the town nearest the forest. With a sense of effete irony, they interrupt their orgies to pitch in with the manhunt of poor Herman, and in the end, "only we are left to relish the magic bouquet of this escapade..."

The Last Wolf / Herman Details

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From Reader Review The Last Wolf / Herman for online ebook

Joni says

man reaches in the dark for god, finds an animal instead

Lemar says

Laszlo Krasznahotkai is an artist. The book provoked me, made me uncomfortable at times, made me laugh at others, but most rewardingly, added ways of thinking. He accomplishes this through unusual characters and, in The Last Wolf, his technique.
The book in English is a cool presentation in that the first two stories, Herman, and The Death of a Craft, conclude and then you flip the book over and read The Wolf. The first two stories feature a game warden eradicating "noxious beasts" from a small overgrown forest. He uses traps but at a certain point is overtaken with a change of heart that simply arises, not from conscious thought but from the gut. Reading about a guy who sets traps for animals is, to put it mildly, not my thing. What happens next is a trip, a trip into a Grimm's fairy tale world of contemporary a Hungarian forest.
The Wolf is, stunningly, a 72 page story of one sentence. Had I known that I would probably have thought, "that sounds like a bullshit grandstanding gimmick". I would have been wrong again! This technique barely registers because the train of thought is so compelling. The reader feels as if he is sitting in a bar hearing and unlikely story from an unlikely fascinating man. Here is an excerpt in which our man finds himself in a beautiful part of rural Spain,

"...that was what was so wonderful about both the land and the people, and that nobody was really aware of the danger presented by the proximity of the world, that they, the Extramadrans, lived in terrible danger because, he explained to the barman, they had no idea what they were letting themselves in for, what spiritual changes would be set in motion once the autopistas and shopping centers had laid havoc to the fields, fields where the poverty had been terrible, because he had seen photographs of what it used to be like and it was dreadful, really dreadful, and one really did half to put a stop to that, and they had put a stop to it, and would continue putting a stop to it, the only dreadful thing being that they had only one way of doing that, and that was by letting the world in, thereby admitting the curse, because everything would be cursed, everything in Extramadura, the land, the people, all, though they had no inkling of it because they lacked the knowledge and had no sense of what they were doing, what they were in for, but he, he did feel it, he pointed to himself, was keenly aware of it and couldn't sleep because of it but lay tossing and turning in the elegant hotel room..."
The Wolf was translated from the Hungarian by George Szirtes and The Game Warden and the Death of a Craft were translated by John Batki. Both translations were of the highest quality.

Paul Fulcher says

The Last Wolf & Herman combines into one English book two linked stories, Herman, A vador, and A mesterségnek vége (Herman - The Game Warden and The Death of a Craft), taken from the 1986 story collection Kegyelmi viszonyok (Relations of Grace) and translated by John Batki, and the story "Az utolsó farkas" (The Last Wolf) from 2009 and translated by George Szirtes. [The dust jacket describes them as

novellas, but that is generous when the whole book amounts to only 120 well spaced out pages]

The Herman stories and Last Wolf were originally published 23 years apart, not originally intended to be read together, and they show strong stylistic differences, but actually they link wonderfully well together as tales of modern development and man encroaching on tradition and nature. Indeed, The Last Wolf is actually available at the Words Without Borders website, (there is now just an excerpt https://www.wordswithoutborders.org/a...), but reading it in the context of Herman (as well as on the written page rather than a screen) strongly enhanced my enjoyment.

Overall the book makes an excellent, if not particularly good value for money (120 pages for a 12.99 cover price) introduction to Krasznahorkai, although it is very much a case of start here then read everything he has written.

The Last Wolf

"it was south of the River Duero in 1984 that the last wolf had perished"

The Last Wolf is written in Krasznahorkai's trademark style, comprising one long flowing sentence which drags the reader into the current of the story before dumping them drained but stimulated at the story's end.

It concerns a failed German philosophy professor and unsuccessful author. It is difficult not to see some (undeserved) self-satire from Krasznahorkai in the characters own self description:

...who had written a few unreadable books full of ponderously negative sentences and depressing logic in claustrophobic prose, a series of books in fact, when it had long became obvious, almost immediately obvious, that no one read them of course, and, that being the case, he must long have been washed up as a philosopher, no one was making any serious attempt to understand him or what his sentences, his logic, his diction or prose might be about [...] with his hopeless complex, labyrinthine thoughts and sentences ... the language at his disposal was no longer capable of giving form to subjects that could not be fixed because it had gone full circle, had articulated all it could articulate and had reached the point from which it had started, and was completely exhausted by the circular journey.

Out of the blue, he receives an invitation and generous monetary offer from a Foundation in the undeveloped Spanish region of Extremadura to visit the area, the only request being that he writes something, anything, about his impressions.

The story is told in a rather circular fashion, via a 2nd person account of him telling his tale back in Berlin to a Hungarian barman in the Sparschwein. So we have sentences like the following, which take some parsing:

***a warden** the interpreter bellowed, bellowed at him that is, he said pointing to himself in the Sparschwein, because he didn't know what the interpreter was taking about, **him**, she replied a little impatiently*

And this is Krasznahorkai at his most Thomas Bernhardian. When his eagerly generous hosts wonder, on his first night, why he is looking depressed over dinner, rather than suggest he may be tired from the journey, he thinks:

how could he explain how long ago he had given up the idea of thought, the point at which he first understood the way things were and knew that any sense we had of existence was merely a reminder of the incomprehensible futility of existence, a futility that would repeat itself ad infiniti, to the end of time and that,

no, it wasn't a matter of chance and its extraordinary, inexhaustible, triumphant, unconquerable power working to bring matters to birth or annihilation, but rather the matter of a shadowy demonic purpose, something embedded deep in the heart of things, in the texture of relationship between things, the stench of whose purpose filled every atom, that it was a curse, a form of damnation, that the world was he product of scorn, and God help the sanity of those who called themselves thinkers, which was why he no longer thought, had learned to think no more, not that this led anywhere of course, because wherever he looked there was that all pervasive stench, that stench that was there because the last word, the word that comprehended the knowledge that futility and acorn, replete with purpose, was coextensive with the world, was the world, was something of which he had to be conscious, an eternity of futility and scorn that obtained in each and every second of life for those who had set out as thinkers, futility because as soon as you abandoned thought and tried simply to look at things, thought cropped up again in a new form, a form from which, on other words, there was no escape whatever man thought or did not think, because he remained the prisoner of thought either way

He is at a loss what to write, particularly since the Foundation seem to want to use his writing to promote the development of the region, whereas he sees they overlook the threat this poses (*he was all too aware of how the world would break in on Extremadura too ... nobody was really aware of the danger presented by the proximity of the world*) and personally identifies with the remoteness of the area: *the "dehesa", with holly oak trees "lightly sprinkled around the fields, the various trunks and branches of individual trees maintaining a decent distance from each other on account of the aridity ... he did understand, and felt inwardly, since the dehesa was much like his own soul*

A loss, that is, until he recalls an odd remark from the research he did before his visit about the shooting of the *last wolf*, and aided by his overenthusiastic (at least until his depression wears her down) guide and translator, he sets out to track down the story eventually finding Jose Miguel, the game warden who witnessed the end of the wolf population, and who suggests he has a secret of his own to tell our German professor (which also ends our story):

I told him not to tell me, we simply embraced, and that was how I left him, and this brought on the sense of anxiety that I still suffer from to this very day - oh right, anxiety, grinned the barman, yawning and stretching his back still sitting down, muttering to himself in Hungarian, go on then, go tell your story, you last of the wolves, go on, I'm listening - and yes, he replied, turning to face the window, but did not continue, saying nothing more for how could he explain that although he had returned to the place that he had left in order to make a brief trip to Extremadura, what remained for him was a life without thought, in other words the deadly wasteland of the Sparschwein, this cold, empty, hollow square and the fact that he had not earned this or that amount of euros for doing as asked but had instead locked Extremadura in the depths of his old, cold, empty, hollow heart, and that ever since then, day after day, he had been rewriting the end of Jose Miguel's story in his head, and that's exactly where he was now, at the end.

<u>Herman</u>

The two Herman stories tell accounts of the same story but from very different perspectives.

The Game Warden, subtitled (first version)
Herman is an expert game-warden, a *"peerless virtuoso of trapping"*, perhaps the last such master, and he is hired for a job he sees as the culmination of his career: to tame the neglected Remete woods:

This inexcusable neglect (in Herman's words "the alarming laxity of the authorities") had turned the Remete by the time of the assignment into an unmanageable and impenetrable jungle, a veritable "sore on the well-

groomed body of the region""

Here we don't have one single Bernhardian sentence, although the prose is still delightfully complex. But the first version does have the notable stylistic tic of the various phrases in "quotes", giving this the feeling of quotes drawn from a primary source into a secondary re-telling of a local legend, some time after the events.

Herman initially sets out with enthusiastic gusto and notable success to trap all the *noxious predators* in the forest. But he has a road-to-Damascus moment when he first takes some leave, oppressed by the slaughter he himself has wrought, and then returning to the forest:

He was aware of an invincible, stifling power already busily attacking his manicured paths and trails from all sides, crushing feeders, mouldering the box- and pole- traps and settling over the entire forest like some enormous infernal serpentine vine in mockery of the spasmodic human will that endeavours to tone everything , all that is complex and unknowable, down to its own heroic simplicity

Yet far from depressing him this liberates him as he realises that his distinction between *noxious predators* and *beneficial game* was false and that the true issue lies with the human world of which he is part. And he starts to take his revenge by trapping not animals, but the local townspeople.

Death of a Craft (second version) gives a very different account of the same events. A group of hedonistic young male officers and women come to a *godforsaken small town* to visit one of their mothers, a temporary introduction to their quest for *paraphilaic fulfilment, unbridled pursuit of pleasure, the ceaseless apocatastasis of an Eden missing from primal imagination.*

While there, and indulging in their drug-taking and bed-swapping, they get caught up in the rumours about "Herman", a rogue game warden now terrorising the local populace, who they sees as the antithesis of their own agenda, and so decide to join in the hunt:

we realised with astonishment that whereas our group - or to use Gusztav's favourite expression: our detachment - as monsters of forward progress was playing the role of pioneers in a world only hesitantly liberating itself from the controlling machinery of goodness, "Herman" had all this while been acting as a fanatic obsessed with the centripetal forces of restraint.

We realised that even as we (again only Gusztav managed to find the right words) brutalised things, violating their frail integrity precisely because of their perfection, "Herman", driven by the pressures of ancient ingrained compulsions, managed to monumentalise destructiveness.

The details of the two stories differ - in the second the authorities identify Herman sooner, he leaves trapped animals outside people's houses rather than traps for the people, and the ends are very different, again giving the story an air of legend. Indeed in the retrospective account by one of the young officers about*"Herman", this in his unique way rather scary fellow, regarding whom to this day it is not entirely certain whether he had in fact really existed or had merely arisen as an embodiment of craven, inferior fears.* And the style is extremely different, almost Marquis de Sade, and rather unserious - indeed it is comes with the subtitle contra Yukio Mishima, known for his rather overwrought approach to life.

But the two combined and set alongside Last Wolf create a powerful exploration of Krasznahorkai's themes.

Edward Rathke says

I love long sentences so part of me was primed to love this kind of thing. Both novellas are pretty different, offering very different experiences, but also working together in an interesting way.

But, yeah, really more for those interested in style. The Last Wolf is a 70 page sentence, which is full of self-loathing and digressions, and an interesting story about a man who hunted wolves. Herman is a bit stranger and darker, about a man inflicting random violence upon a small town.

Good stuff. Interested in checking out a novel by him, finally. I've owned Satantango for years.

Justin Evans says

Excellent stuff: Herman is a memorable narrative, The Last Wolf is a memorable sentence. Can't ask for much more, especially with the cute design.

Jim says

László Krasznahorkai's The Last Wolf / Herman is a collection of stories around the relationship of humans with a disappearing nature. In "The Last Wolf," we have a 78-page story consisting of a single sentence of a man who travels to Estremadura, Spain, to write on a local topic of his own choosing. He chooses to write about the shooting of the last wolf in the province, but finds it is by no means easy to get to the bottom of the story.

"Herman" consists of two substories around the main theme of a game warden who is asked to clear a forest that has run wild of all the predators that have sought it as a refuge. In the first version, "The Game Warden," the warden becomes disgusted with his success and takes it out on the townspeople, who come for him with guns. "The Death of a Craft" is the same story up to a point, though as seen from a group of libertines, male and female, who have come because the mother of one of them is dying. The warden has started setting non-fatal (but harmful) mantraps around the village, but comes to see the error of his ways.

Krasznahorkai is always worth reading, even when he is doing weird postmodern experiments. That's because he's one of the few who can do it and retain the intelligent reader's interest.

Hadrian says

Hunting, being hunted, the collapse of human customs, and a sentence that's 70 pages long. That's Krasznahorkai.

Kobe Bryant says

Nice writing exercise

Richard Newton says

From the two books I have read of his, Krasznahorkai is a rather frustrating writer. At his best he is very good - an original and unusual voice, original writing style, unusual topics and great insights. At his worst I have found it rather poor ramblings. This book exhibits both.

The book is made up of three novellas, although the last two are closely related as they recount the same story from different perspectives - very different perspectives. The first novella, The Last Wolf, is rather good and would have gained 4 stars on its on. The second Herman, is not bad. The final, Death of a Craft is at best 2 stars - and reads like the ramblings of a clever child excited by using obscure words and random images and who is not worried about the overall effect.

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jeremy says

> *"the love of animals is the one true love in which one is never disappointed"*

imagine if lászló krasznahorkai wrote a single novella-length sentence about a failed, depressed philosophy professor who spends one morning in a german bar recounting the story, to one demonstrably uninterested barkeep, of his trip to spain, the result of an invitation to write a "new chapter" about the extremadura region, which, instead, turns into a compulsion to track down and discover the facts behind the death of the area's last remaining wolf (or wolves), a fated loss internalized by the professor and conveyed in all its dark, existential beauty; but you need not imagine too hard, as *the last wolf (el último lobo)* is just that, the slim, potent new work by the great hungarian master himself.

> *for how could he describe what so weighed him down, how could he explain how long ago he had given up the idea of thought, the point at which he first understood the way things were and knew that any sense we had of existence was merely a reminder of the incomprehensible futility of existence, a futility that would repeat itself* ad infinitum*, to the end of time and that, no, it wasn't a matter of chance and its extraordinary, inexhaustible, triumphant, unconquerable power working to bring matters to birth or annihilation, but rather the matter of a shadowy demonic purpose, something embedded deep in the heart of things, in the texture of the relationship between things, the stench of whose purpose filled every atom, that it was a curse, a form of damnation, that the world was the product of scorn, and god help the sanity of those who called themselves thinkers*

*rendered from the hungarian by george szirtes (poet, and translator of márai, kosztolányi, et al.)
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though released as separate uncorrected proofs, *herman* and *the last wolf* will be published as a single hardcover. *herman*, written in two parts ("herman, the game warden" and "the death of a craft"), are similar in scope to *the last wolf*, but stand alone as perhaps variations on a theme. "the game warden" is the story of a trapper gone rogue, whose new targets lead the townspeople to take on a terrifying ordeal. "the death of a craft" concerns the very same incidents, but is told from the perspective of the town's visitors. together, these two pieces work to great effect, further revealing krasznahorkai's commitment to intensity and foreboding.

> *and whereas our techniques—having realized in the wake of our sorry experiences that we were not questing heroes but merely dumb victims of the thinking mind—were based on paraphiliac fulfillment, unbridled pursuit of pleasure, the ceaseless apocatastasis of an eden missing from primal imagination, and took refuge in transgression, herman's deliberately paltry means were called into being by hubris, a hubris that believed in the invincibility of weakness.*

*translated from the hungarian by john bakti (author, translator, and kilimologist[!])

Leopoldo says

Me pone tan feliz haber leído a Laszlo. Es como descubrir una joya escondida: mientras se lee, uno tiene la impresión de haber encontrado a un nuevo clásico de la literatura universal.

"Herman" (un cuento contado desde dos diferentes perspectivas) y "El último lobo" (una novela corta) son dos historias muy distintas pero que se complementan a la perfección. En cualquier orden que se les lea (ya que, dada su forma de impresión, el libro te permite escoger qué relato vas a leer primero) ambas historias parecen ocurrir en el mismo universo: el de la feralidad sagrada, en una naturaleza tan hostil como bella, misma en la que ya no cabemos como seres humanos. Ambas historias tratan de lo mismo: gente que se encuentra de sopetón con la muerte, con esa parte inconsciente de su ser a la que sólo puede llegarse a través de la epifanía.

Lamentablemente, este libro no ha sido traducido al español (o al menos yo no he podido encontrar ningún rastro de una edición así), pero es relativamente barato si se compra por internet. Definitivamente voy a lanzarme en un futuro a leer más de este extraño autor.

Lee says

A small beautiful hardback stocking-stuffer received for Xmas per a not very long list of international literature in translation I sent to Santa Claus c/o my Mom. A great description of a pit filled with carrion. Creepy, atmospheric, flowing, makes me want to re-read The Hound of the Baskervilles for the first time in ~30 years -- these three stories interlink, or I should say that 'The Last Wolf" seems to inexplicitly interlink with the two "Herman" stories that explicitly interlink. Trapping, when the hunter gets captured by the game, or more so when the game warden turns his attention from animals to townsfolk. Loved the parallel between the fox caught in the trap and Herman's end. Generally, I have walking pneumonia and read a lot of this in the doctor's office. Couldn't hope for better companionship in such a state. Two crosses on the cover for either infected lung.

Jim Elkins says

A Story Diminished by Lack of Ambition, Energy, or Commitment

"The Last Wolf" is a novella, 76 pages in translation, written in what is usually described as one of Krasznahorkai's characteristic long sentences. Technically, that isn't right, because the novella is actually a

string of run-on sentences, with ordinary sentences embedded in them. Grammatically correct long sentences are rare in fiction. (See the remarks on Enard's "The Zone.") This form is looser and, I think, less interesting than a single long sentence (as in Raymond Roussel's "New Impressions of Africa") or a genuine analocuthon (as in late Thomas Bernhard).

In the novella, a philosopher sits at a bar and recounts a trip he made to Extremadura, Spain, and to Alburquerque, the near-namesake of the city in New Mexico. The philosopher was invited to Spain in order to write about anything he might choose, and he ends up investigating the shootings of the last eight wolves in the region, in the 1980s and 1990s. He is given an unlimited budget and a translator, and he's driven around so he can interview people. All along he keeps saying, to the bartender, that he has said everything he can, that his thinking life is over, that even accepting the invitation was a sham, that he cannot write anything. In the end the killings of the last two wolves coincide with the end of his story, and -- as a reader will have surmised from the first couple of pages -- he ends up back in the bar, without having written anything.

It's all a common literary conceit: the unwritten text, the unspoken account, actually told, but not to an attentive hearer, or one who will retell the story, or write it down. (The bartender is represented, implausibly, as sometimes falling asleep.) The last of the wolves is the last of his thoughts; his wandering in Extremadura is his meandering mind made real, and so forth.

The story is simply not ambitious enough. If Krasznahorkai had more energy or commitment, he would have explained why it isn't a paradox that the philosopher actually has told a story, and in fact it's the story we're reading. The philosopher didn't write it down, but the author did. How, in the logic of the novella, does a person supposedly at the end of this thinking life manage to write -- really, to toss off -- a seventy-page novella? Of course there are thoughts in his head: we know, because we read them page after page. To make this more ambitious, more consistent, and more challenging, Krasznahorkai could have written out the philosopher's incapacity on the page, showing us what it was like for the to be unable to think.

The philosopher chooses to investigate the killing of the wolves because he remembers reading something about it, and in fact he made a note of it. That is interesting, but it isn't explained: but in a deeper version of this story, we could be told that he is perplexed by his choice of that article, and curious about his own interests and motives in finding it. That could be a sign of his ongoing inability to sort out his own motivations and thoughts. And while he is on the pursuit, he could do more than simply record what he sees and hears: he could wonder if he is being coherent in his intentions, or faithful to whatever remnants of intentions he may have.

By his own account, after all he can no longer think philosophically: but we're never told what that means, exactly, and what could it mean other than an incapacity for rational thought? And how could such an incapacity not vex or even torture the person who thinks he suffers from it? And how could he not wonder, at every moment, what he is understanding and what he isn't?

"The Last Wolf" is unambitious because it makes a very big claim about its narrator's incapacity: a claim that should not just exhaust him, as it does, but either perplex him -- given his apparent ability to continue to think and reason -- or paralyze him with doubt and fear -- given the apparently irrational nature of his investigation. A better model is Beckett's "Ill Seen Ill Said," where there's a claim about the narrator's incapacity, and it corrodes and infects the entire fabric of representation. Here it's just a claim, and the narrator goes on reasonably happily with his life, "incapacitated" only by an unaccountable inability to notice that by telling the bartender everything he has, in fact, written the story he claims he couldn't write.

Ronald Morton says

A small book, containing three excellent short stories. Its brevity - and that it feels more like a sampler for ND's upcoming translation of *Relations of Grace* (which contains at least one of these stories: Herman) - is the main reason I only gave it four stars. This is top-notch Krasznahorkai, in a handsome little (it's quite undersized) hardcover. I just wish there was more is all; it's pricey for the little you get.

Jeff Jackson says

Two excellent novellas about hunting, vanishing crafts, shifting ethics, and species extinction linked by haunting thematic echoes. "The Last Wolf," a single sentence account of a trip to the Spanish hinterlands that's surprisingly addictive, is especially impressive. I'd wager this slim volume is a good introduction to Krasznahorkai. Beautifully designed, too.
4.5 stars
