



The Zoo

Christopher Wilson

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There are certain things that Yuri Zipit knows:

That being official food-taster for the leader of the Soviet Union requires him to drink too much vodka for a 12-year-old. That you do not have to be an Elephantologist to see that the great leader is dying. That Marshal Bruhah has been known to eat his own children, while Comrade Krushka is only fit to run a slaughterhouse, and that one of them has Yuri's father somewhere here in the Dacha. That it's a crime to love your family more than you love Socialism, the Party or the Motherland. That, because of his damaged mind, everyone thinks Yuri is a fool.

But Yuri isn't. He sits quietly through another excessive state dinner and witnesses it all - betrayals, body doubles, buffoonery. He's starting to get the hang of this politics thing, but there's so much to learn. Who knew that a man could be in five places at once? That someone could break your nose as a sign of friendship? That people could be *disinvented*?

The Zoo is a cutting satire, told through the refreshing voice of one gutsy boy who will not give up on hope.

The Zoo Details

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From Reader Review The Zoo for online ebook

Monerl says

Handlung 4

interessant, leicht übertrieben, mit Tiefgang, enthält Gewalt

Sprache 5

satirisch, bissig, Thema entsprechend

Charaktere 5

vielseitig, skurril, fiktive und historische

Ende 5

passend, rund, überraschend

Hörbuch 5

toller Sprecher, empfehlenswert

Gesamtwertung

4,8 / 5

Fazit:

Ein sehr interessantes Buch, das auf eine ganz eigene und spezielle Art und Weise mit dem Thema Kommunismus umgeht. Der Autor bedient sich eines lädierten und sehr naiven 12jährigen Jungen namens Juri, der als Vorkoster Stalins ins Zentrum der Macht gerät und somit unsere Brille auf die letzten Tage Stalins wird. Durch ihn erfahren wir von den Machenschaften der Politiker und des Scheiters des Kommunismus. Juri sieht aber versteht nicht alles. Was wiederum sein großes Glück ist, denn der Autor schreckt auch nicht vor Kindesmisshandlungen zurück. Der Kunstgriff durch die kühle und distanzierte Sprache, der Anwendung des satirischen Stilmittels, lässt für diese Misshandlungen kaum Emotionen zu. Dafür bin ich dem Autor sehr dankbar.

Als Satire ist dieses Buch sehr gelungen! Ich konnte lachen und doch ist mir das Lachen zum Ende hin auch im Halse stecken geblieben. Je mehr Juri erlebt und uns berichtet, desto mehr Tiefgang bekommt das Buch. Denn im Gegensatz zu Juri verstehen wir alles sehr wohl sehr gut.

Man kann die Eloquenz und Klugheit Juris kritisieren oder man sieht sie, so wie ich, als das überzogene Element, das es möglich macht, die Geschichte und ihren Inhalt auf diese spezielle Art und Weise erzählen zu können.

Ein überaus gelungenes Hörbuch mit einem tollen und passendem Sprecher! Ein Buch, das mich durch und durch überraschen und unterhalten konnte! Eine gelungene Geschichte, die Fiktion und historische Fakten wundervoll verbindet. Wo jedoch die Historie endet und die Fiktion beginnt, ist ohne Hintergrundwissen kaum auseinanderzuhalten und animiert den Leser deshalb zur weitere Recherche.

Luca says

In the zoo Christopher Wilson lets you read about the Soviet Union through the eyes of a 12-year-old boy. The boy, Yuri Zipit, lives at the Kapital Zoo where his father is a professor of Veterinary Science. Somehow Yuri suddenly finds himself at Comrade Iron-man's (Stalin) quarters as food-taster technician first class.

Yuri's head is damaged as the result of a truck accident when he was younger. Some people mistake him for a fool. What is more is that Yuri has a kind face. This combination makes that people easily trust him.

The book is funny, brutal at times, and definitely satirical. I loved how reading through Yuri's eyes made everything so unbelievably logical and light. The book itself was light too because it has only 230 pages. This makes it a quick read which can either be a good or a bad thing depending on the type of reader you are. Personally, I think compact size makes historical fiction more approachable to readers who are not so familiar with this genre. However, I do think that the Zoo had some elements that I would have loved to see further explored.

There was a single element in this book that stood out to me in a not so positive way. On page 6 Wilson writes: "her breasts smelled of turpentine". Well, that was confusing... What on earth does this sentence have to do with the rest of the book? Not sure... It sure feels a little out of context. What I do know is that I have never encountered some one whose breasts smell of anything, let alone turpentine. Actually, I am pretty sure neither has the author. It is just tiresome to hear male authors talk about female characters this way. Therefore, I am politely going to ask Mr. Wilson to refrain from using randomly placed sexualized sentences ever again.

My little rant aside, this book was fun. It is the kind of thing you should read when you like history, but consider most books about history (either historical fiction or non-fiction) to be long-winded. The Zoo is not, it is a quirky and quick read. Perhaps even the kind of thing that you are looking for to take with you on vacation this summer!

Taken together I rated this book with 3,5 stars out of 5 (rounded up in this case).

I received a review copy of this book from Faber & Faber in exchange for an honest review. All opinions are entirely my own. My review is susceptible to changes in the final copy of this work.

Sid Nuncius says

I thought The Zoo was very good. It's a sharp and original observation of the brutality, self-delusion, self-centredness and self-regard of dictators and their entourage which is intelligent, at times rather funny and at others utterly horrifying.

Set in Moscow in 1953, a 12-year-old Yuri finds himself in the dying Stalin's inner circle as a food-taster. Yuri had a serious accident as a child which damaged his brain. This has left him still highly intelligent but with a naïve directness and inquisitiveness, and a face which leads people, even strangers, to confide in him. People often also believe him to be an "idiot boy" and forget his presence, so he hears a great deal which is not intended for other ears.

The story is narrated by Yuri and we see Stalin, Beria, Khrushchev and others through his eyes. It is a clever device, showing their monstrous behaviour in a new but no less horrifying light. We also get comments like this from the innocent Yuri, when a friend tells him that his uncle "got twelve years for doing precisely absolutely nothing at all. Zilch, Zero.

But that's Life. You don't know what to believe for the best. Because, everyone knows, for *nothing* you only get nine."

I found Yuri's voice very convincing (although once or twice he does use slightly more poetic and advanced

language than seems appropriate for his character) and the whole thing extremely engaging and readable. It's a fine satire which more than one current world leader would do well to take note of, as well as being a rather touching story as I became more and more engaged with Yuri and his understanding deepens of what is really happening. It's a very good read which will stay with me and which left me with plenty to think about. Warmly recommended.

(I received an ARC via NetGalley.)

Magdelanye says

what a ride!

Imagine 1984, only narrated by an enfant sauvage whose naivety hits the mark every time.

Christopher Farrell says

While this look at the inner workings of Russian politics through the eyes of a young boy is interesting, I think it could have done with some finer tuning and maybe a bit more fleshing out. It feels like a bit of a skeleton where the author could have done a lot more with it. Great jokes though.

Carolyn says

In this cleverly written satire about the last days of Stalin's regime in 1954, Yuri Romanovich Ziput is the twelve year old son of a vet at a Moscow Zoo. He is mentally damaged as the result of a childhood accident but has a simple, engaging personality and an open face that people trust. One night his father is called in to treat Stalin after a stroke (because all the doctors have been gaoled or put to death), taking Yuri with him to assist. After his father gives Stalin advice he doesn't want to hear about drinking and smoking, he disappears leaving Yuri with Stalin who takes a shine to him and appoints him as his official food taster. Stalin's inner circle treat Yuri as a simple idiot but he hears much of what is going on in the dying days of Stalin's rule, the paranoia, sadism, drunkenness and other excesses while his people live in fear of disappearing after saying or doing the wrong thing. Yuri is the perfect witness to the events unfolding around him with his naive but intelligent view of the world. Humorous and edgy, this satirical novel would be almost farcical if it were not for the fact that that it is based on real events.

With thanks to Netgalley and the publisher Faber and Faber for a copy of the book to read and review

Gabriel Ducate says

Extremely interesting to view Stalin through the eyes of Yuri, a 12-year-old with brain damage. Through his eyes, we see the horror, madness and brutality of the last days of Stalin's rule. I wouldn't have thought this book would be funny but it was very enjoyably funny. I also really liked Yuri.

SueKich says

The exploits – and exploitations – of a smiley kid.

I'm very much in two minds about this book. On the one hand, I find it a beguiling rendering of how a boy of 12 gets caught up in the Soviet Union's inner circle of power because of his smiley-faced innocence and innate likeability. On the other, it strikes me as a very manipulative piece of work, using a brain damaged child to throw a beam onto the mad machinations of Stalin in his dying days.

Yuri was injured in a terrible accident when he was six. Although he has a fierce intelligence, the brain damage has left him excessively naïve in some respects and subject to fits. Meanwhile, Stalin's distrust of doctors has led to their banishment. When he falls ill, he must seek help from another quarter and Yuri's father, the state zoo's leading veterinary scientist, is called to examine the ailing leader. Yuri accompanies him but his father disappears and he is left alone with 'Comrade Iron-Man' for several hours. Unlikely though it may seem, the boy ends up as Stalin's official food taster at the dacha. Here he witnesses Stalin's gang of ministers in action. It is not a pretty sight.

Where I have a problem with books like this that use, for want of a better word, idiot-savants for their main protagonists, is that the author shuffles in and out of their character's intelligence to suit the exigencies of the plot or even just to amuse. Admittedly, this novel is very, very funny – but it's also quite unbearably sad. Parts of it - the torture scenes - are also decidedly harrowing. One of the obligatory famous author quotes on the front cover says: "Disgracefully entertaining" which just about sums up the problem for me. It felt jolly uncomfortable to be quite so diverted. 3.5*

•° gabs •° says

i'm torn between 3 and 4 stars. i'm not used to historical fiction but i'm trying to branch out and this was a good start.

Latkins says

This is a short, entertaining novel set in the 1950s in Soviet Russia, as Josef Stalin approaches the end of his life. Narrated by Yuri, an unusual boy who finds himself at the heart of the power struggle between those at the top of the Soviet government, who are all vying to take over once Stalin dies, it has an humorous, absurdist edge to it, and exposes the brutal and farcical elements of the regime. After his father (a vet at the zoo) is taken away for giving Stalin the advice that he should perhaps stop drinking and smoking after his stroke, Yuri is left to be Stalin's new food taster and confidante. But there are others who want to use him for their own ends. In the 'post-truth' world we know live in, it's easy to forget that propaganda and 'fake news' has actually been around forever, and was particularly prevalent in the Soviet Union. Funny and incisive, this novel would be rather ridiculous if it wasn't based on reality.

BuboBubo says

In den 1950er Jahren lebt der zwölfjährige Juri Zipit in der Sowjetunion in einem Moskauer Zoo. Sein Vater ist der dort arbeitende Veterinärmediziner und hat sich auf die Neurologie von großen Säugetieren spezialisiert.

Eines Tages wird Juris Vater in das Umfeld des „Stählernen“ gerufen um ihn zu untersuchen.

Der naive und als Idiot betitelte Juri begleitet seinen Vater.

Juris besticht dadurch, dass ihm jeder sofort ungefragt seine Geheimnisse erzählt und durch einen Unfall Probleme mit seinem Gehirn hat.

Er scheint auf sein Umfeld sehr einfältig.

Juri wird zum Vorkoster des alten und kranken Diktators Stalins. In den wenigen Wochen, die er bei dem Stählernen verbringt lernt er einige Mitarbeiter und Berater des Diktators, kennen die hinter den Rücken der anderen Intrigen spinnen. Juri wird zum Spielball und bekommt Dinge mit, von denen er hätte nie wissen dürfen.

Das Buch wird aus der Sicht des zwölfjährigen und sehr naiven Juris geschildert. Zu Beginn der Geschichte bringt Juri den Leser immer wieder zum Lachen, auch im Laufe der Geschichte zum Schmunzeln. Allerdings bekommen wir dennoch ganz deutlich Menschenverachtung und Brutalität mit, die Juri am eigenen Leib erfährt, aber dennoch nicht als schlimm erachtet. Eine heitere und bedrückende Stimmung wird so bei dem Leser ausgelöst – einerseits durch die Sprache des Jungen – wir wissen nie ob er es wirklich so meint – auf der anderen Seite durch die unglaublichen Situationen, die er erlebt.

Der naive Optimismus den Juri an den Tag legt ist an einigen Stellen kaum zu ertragen – seine Hoffnung unerträglich.

Die Kombination aus absurd, humorvoll, brutal und herzerreißend ist ein wahres Meisterwerk des Autors. Trotz schlimmer, trauriger und brutaler Momente kommt durch die Erzählperspektive nie das Gefühl von Melancholie auf.

„Ich bin ein Künstler, doch wohingegen ein Maler mit Farben malt, ein Töpfer mit Ton töpfer, arbeite ich mit Schmerz und Furcht. Denn ich bin ein Terrorist.“

„Sind Sie das?“

„Ich terrorisiere Menschen. Ich verhafte sie, bestrafe sie, zerbreche sie, zertrümmere Ihre Knochen. ich reiße ihnen die Augen aus, zerfetze ihre Seele...“

„Autsch“, sage ich.

[S.79]

Anne says

Spannend, witzig, aber auch ehrlich

"Guten Morgen, Genosse Elefant" von Christopher Wilson ist schon ein spezielles Buch. Der Titel, das Cover und auch der Klappentext, haben mich neugierig werden lassen, und ich muss sagen, das Buch ist wirklich ein gelungenes Werk. Der Protagonist, der zwölfjährige Juri, aus dessen Sicht dem Leser sein Abenteuer als Stalins Vorkoster und auch sein "Kummerkasten" erzählt wird, ist einfach vom Fleck weg liebenswert. Mit seiner niedrigen Hemmschwelle, die ihre Ursache in einem Unfall mit einem Milchwagen und einer Straßenbahn und dem damit verbundenen schweren Hirntrauma findet und einhergeht, scheut Juri sich vor nichts, und spricht einfach aus, was er denkt. Was im streng sozialistischen Russland natürlich auch sehr gefährlich sein kann. Als dann auch noch sein Vater, ein Tierarzt, mitten in der Nacht zu einem wichtigen Patienten gerufen wird, begleitet Juri ihn natürlich und macht prompt Bekanntschaft mit der

politischen Führungsriege und Stalin höchstselbst. Nach der Untersuchung wird sein Vater "fort gebeten" und Juri bleibt in der Datscha des Stählermen allein zurück. Allein mit seinem weltoffenen Gesicht, das jedem seine Geheimnisse zu entlocken scheint und den bedrohlichen und gefährlichen Politikern und Offizieren unter Stalins Herrschaft.

Es ist sehr interessant und fesselnd erzählt, wie Juri sich nach und nach in das politische Leben einfädelt und sich zurecht findet. Er lernt schnell, wann er doch lieber die Klappe halten sollte und wann es sich lohnt, auch einmal seinen Senf dazuzugeben. Manchmal scheint er die Gefahr, in der er schwebt, dennoch nicht zu sehen oder zu begreifen. In diesen Momenten möchte man ihn einfach an der Hand nehmen und aus diesem grausigen Palast hinausführen und retten. Wie er es aber trotzdem schafft, heile aus einigen Miseren herauszukommen, ist unglaublich, schön und immer wieder spannend. Als die Dinge dann eine üble Wendung nehmen, befürchtet man einfach nur das Schlimmste, Juri tat mir so leid...

Alles in allem ist "Guten Morgen, Genosse Elefant" (der Titel erklärt sich schnell aus der Handlung heraus) nicht unbedingt ein Buch, dass ich mir auf den ersten Blick sofort gekauft hätte, vielleicht auf den zweiten Blick oder sogar den dritten. Deshalb bin ich mehr als froh, dass ich dem Buch sofort ein Chance gegeben habe. Ich kann Juris lustige, traurige, spannende und manchmal auch herzerreißende Geschichte nur empfehlen.

Calzean says

A quirky way to bring to life the weird social world of Stalin and his inner circle in the last few weeks of Stalin's life. The hero of the story is just a quirky, a 12 year old boy with a presence that attracts people who then feel obligated to reveal all of their problems. Yuri finds himself the official taster for Stalin and witnesses the nightly chaos of Stalin's court - movies, feasting, drinking, dancing, joking - all dominated by Stalin.

Some good jokes relating to the times too.

MisterHobgoblin says

The Zoo is a farcical romp through the last days of Stalin's reign of terror in the Soviet Union.

Yuri is a twelve year old boy who claims to have suffered some form of brain damage as a child, leaving him a functional idiot. He can see everything that goes on around him, he can learn facts, but he hasn't the guile to understand people. Yuri takes everyone at face value, all the time. By a quirk of fate, he ends up meeting Stalin who likes having a confidant he can trust completely. So he immediately appoints Yuri to be his food taster, thereby necessitating Yuri's witnessing of the last days of the Great Leader's life.

And this is not a glamorous end to a glorious life. Basically, Stalin is holed up in his dacha with this inner circle (Beria, Khrushchev, Bulganin and Malenkov), all of whom want to usurp the crown. These five do not like each other, they do not trust each other, but they end up spending all their time together watching films and playing drinking games. The plotting, aside from the crazy drunken antics, the stunt doubles follows Harrison E. Salisbury's 1983 account of Stalin's last days faithfully. It is a surprise – indeed a frustration – then that Christopher Wilson insists on using near approximations of the protagonists real names. Stalin (man of steel) becomes Iron-Man; Beria becomes Bruhah; Molotov especially irritatingly becomes Motolov, etc. It feels like it is cheapening what could otherwise have felt like a satire to take seriously.

Because, underneath all the drunken japes, this is a pretty good study of the paranoia of a brutal regime waiting for its leader to die. As a kitchen cabinet, the regime has the power of life and death over anyone

unfortunate enough to cross its path, but yet remains powerless to bring about any meaningful social or economic change. Stalin himself is portrayed as a tired, sick and unsatisfied man, troubled about the legacy he would leave. He was lonely and desperate for unguarded, non-judgemental company, yet he had created a world in which only an idiot boy could fulfil that function. If anything, Yuri's role was that of the mediaeval court fool, speaking truth to a king by dressing it up as wit.

In a neat story arc, we see Yuri come from ordinary society to mix with the elite; and then we see him return to ordinary society. It feels like completing a circle, albeit a rather sad circle because, as Khrushchev says to Yuri: "Poor child... You see it all. Yet you understand nothing". But in a way Yuri inhabits a fool's paradise. Right up to the end, as his world disintegrates around him, Yuri still remains optimistic.

This really is a great read. Short, lively, humorous but thoughtful. Yuri's narrative voice is fabulous and his perpetual innocence is captivating. Stalin's inner circle is well drawn and Beria, in particular, is a standout character – vain, foppish, ambitious and sadistic. He is a well-rounded psychopath. Given the way history played out, it might have been interesting to dwell just a little more on the character of Khrushchev whom history has treated with affection – it would have been nice to explore his role in the purges, his role in the Ukraine and his personal relationship with Stalin a little more closely. But this is a minor complaint in a tight and entertaining novel.

Stacey says

Funny, and yet not, all at once. Told through a 12 year old boy perspective, Yuri, who I absolutely loved!! Very well written, super fast and easy to read, I highly recommend it to everyone!
