



The Encyclopedia of the Dead

Danilo Kiš , Michael Henry Heim (Translator)

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In these stories Kiš depicts human relationships, encounters, landscapes - the multitude of details that make up a human life.

The Encyclopedia of the Dead Details

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Author : Danilo Kiš , Michael Henry Heim (Translator)

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From Reader Review The Encyclopedia of the Dead for online ebook

Amalia Gavea says

“When a lie repeats for a long time, people begin to believe.”

This collection is an ode to the values of Literature. An opportunity to contemplate, to feel, to reflect. A beautiful, haunting symphony composed of religion, philosophy, folklore, living History. A work that places the human being, naked and feeble as we are, at the heart of every story. Our fears, our fickleness, our virtues and vices, our ability to create only to destroy. Our desire to rebuild and then tear down everything and everyone. Our search for knowledge and love to an unknown end...These are some of the most beautiful, poignant stories you'll ever read....

“I offer you knowledge and the desert.”

Simon Magus: A story set after the Resurrection of Christ. Simon is a man who doesn't believe, fed up by the large number of disciples, irritated by the new belief. He wants to prove that there isn't only one truth in the world but a multitude of personal "truths". He encounters Peter and accepts a challenge. Well, he should have known better...Gnosticism is a major influence in this poignant tale whose conclusion is open to many interpretations.

“It was a beautiful gray November evening with streetlamps flickering in the mist.”

Last Respects: The death of a prostitute provides the ground for an act of rebellion as people whom society has pushed to the margins strip the graves off their flowers to cover the last residence of poor Mariette. Set in Hamburg during the early 20th century, full of images of a cruel and yet strangely romantic era...

“In that distant year of 1929, one approached Belgrade via the Sava Bridge, probably with the same joy of arrival as one feels today.”

The Encyclopedia of the Dead: A woman, who has recently lost her father, travels to Stockholm. In the Royal Library, she discovers the volumes of an encyclopedia whose entries are dedicated to every ordinary human being. As she starts reading about her father, we follow her thoughts and perhaps begin to contemplate on the significance of all of us. Most of us will remain unknown after our death. No entry in any encyclopedia will be dedicated to us. And yet, aren't ordinary people the ones who lead History to her eternal circle? What would the ones in power do if it weren't for their simple, common followers? What if we come to think of the story as a parable for a troubled past, a fragile present and an uncertain future?

“Was that, too, a dream?”

The Legend of the Sleepers: This story is based on the legend of the 7 Sleepers, the Roman noblemen who converted to Christianity while in the court of Decius, an emperor of pagan beliefs.

“This story does not begin abruptly, in medias res, but gradually, as when night falls in the woods.”

The Mirror of the Unknown: For me, this is the jewel of the collection. The youngest girl of a Jewish family in Hungary during the 19th century witnesses a tragic moment of the future through a looking glass bought from a gypsy. A heartbreaking story loaded with political, historical and social connotations.

“If I understood correctly, there is nothing left.”

The Story of the Master and the Disciple: A tale set in Prague with reference to Kabbalah and Mysticism and with the ingratitude of a mediocre disciple towards his gifted master.

“At that moment, as if by command, the drums began to beat, as sinister and monotonous as rain.”

Pro Patria Mori: Most of us are taught that we are obliged to die to defend our country. To what end? In our story, a young delusional aristocrat awaits his execution. His mother’s sole purpose is to save appearances. A tragic fable on the futility of politics, ambitions and the eternal shedding of innocent blood for some “higher” purpose that constantly changes...

“We hear terrified cries for help, then a few isolated shots finishing off one of the children. And then the heavy silence of the Siberian night.”

The Book of Kings and Fools: A harrowing story of religion, revolution, propaganda. Of atrocities, despair and the never ending idiocy of humans to believe everything they’re told to, to live according to their prejudice...

“But I do not matter, I do not matter in the least.”

Red Stamps with Lenin’s Head: An unnamed woman claims to be the lover of a famous deceased poet and condemns all critics of his work through a letter to his biographer.

A collection about deception, misconception, futility, violence and the darkness we sadistically created in ourselves and in the lives of those we love. A writer that was taken too soon....

“History is written by the victors. Traditions are woven by the people. Writers fantasize. Only death is certain.”

...and in these four sentences lies the whole essence of the blood-crazed world we’ve created through centuries....

My reviews can also be found on <https://theopinionatedreaderblog.wordpress.com>

Cinzia DuBois says

3.5

Vit Babenco says

“When a lie is repeated long enough, people start believing it. Because people need faith.”

The Encyclopedia of the Dead is an obvious attempt to follow in Jorge Luis Borges’ footsteps, and although the tales are good and mostly inventive they are rather short in charms and profundity of the original.

Simon Magus is a gnostic tale with an apparent sympathy for the advocates of Gnosticism. *Last Respects* is a flowery fable of a cocotte’s interment. *The Encyclopedia of the Dead* is an ironic variation on the library of Babel. *The Legend of the Sleepers* is a dreamlike parable of dream, life and death...

“Who can draw a sharp line between sleep and death?

Who, O Lord, can draw a sharp dividing line between present, past, and future?

Who, O Lord, can separate the joy of love from the sadness of memory?”

Red Stamps with Lenin’s Head, which **Danilo Kiš** called a pure fiction, I enjoyed most, it is a sarcastic story erasing the borderline between reality and myth.

All the stories are united with the subject of death.

Death is a final metaphysical act of life...

Bilal Y. says

Yorumdan ziyade kitaptan günün mana ve ehemmiyetine bir alıntıyla noktalıyorum bu güzel öyküleri:

"... her an, her zaman, her durumda yalan söylüyorlar ve öyle çok yalan söylüyorlar ki sonunda yalan söyleyip söylemediklerini tartamaz hale geliyorlar. Herkes yalan söyler olunca, yalan söylese de, kimse yalan söylememi oluyor. Her şeyin yalan oldu'u yerde hiçbir şey yalan değil..."

Edward says

Introduction

- Simon Magus
- Last Respects
- The Encyclopedia of the Dead
- The Legend of the Sleepers
- The Mirror of the Unknown
- The Story of the Master and the Disciple
- Pro Patria Mori
- The Book of Kings and Fools
- Red Stamps with Lenin's Head

Postscript

Jake says

I love Borges and after I exhausted his books, I went looking for other authors who were influenced by him. Danilo Kis came up near the top of the list, so I picked up "Encyclopedia of The Dead", his book of short stories. And indeed, Kis' subjects are Borgesian: gnostic heretics, infinite encyclopedias, men condemned by dictators, Koranic legends, reviews of imaginary books. In many ways, Kis is a better writer than Borges—the stories have the mournful lyricism of Milan Kundera at his best. But this book is no match for "Ficciones" or "Labyrinths" or any of Borges' collections. I think that's because what really animates Borges' stories are the ideas—the dizzying, utterly unique ideas that you can't find in the work of any other author. Kis just doesn't have those—and without them, all that's left are beautiful (but not mindbending) stories about love, loss, and death.

Brandon says

If for whatever reason you haven't read anything by Danilo Kis yet, I'm gonna go ahead and say "Do so as soon as possible." Jewish guy from what was Yugoslavia at the time, wrote in Serbo-Croatian, and as good as anybody you'd care to name. Really just top shelf. You can start anywhere because all the books are good. This is stories, loosely linked by the theme of death. Kis's three big topics are death, childhood, and the

Holocaust, and yeahyeah, heavy stuff, and generally pretty depressing but he is simply not going to make it easier on anyone by resorting to cliches and the man can just flat out write so well that he could get you with an essay about donuts if he wanted to. It isn't pretty but it sure is worth it.

Zayar says

History is written by the victors. Legends are woven by the people. Writers fantasize. Only death is certain."

Eadweard says

He reminds me so much of Borges, but with a south slavic twist.

Panagiotis says

Ο Νταν?λο Κ?ς, καρπ?ς εν?ς Εβρα?ου Ο?γγρου και μιας Μαυροβο?νιας, σε το?το εδ? το βιβλ?ο του, λ?νε, παραδ?νει ?να αμ?γαλμα ?λων ?σων των καθορ?ζουν ως συγγραφ?α. Ιστορ?ες ποτισμ?νες απ? την ιστορ?α της ανθρωπ?τητας, απ? μυστ?ρια που καθ?ρισαν και διαμ?ρφωσαν την συ?γχρονη ιστορ?α, απ? μ?θους βιβλικο?ς, Εβρα?κο?ς και Ισλαμικο?ς.

Ε?ναι παρ?ξενη αυτ? η μαγε?α και η φαντασ?α που βρ?σκει ο αναγν?στης, ?χοντας διαβ?σει τον πρ?λογο που τον θ?λει ?ναν συγγραφ?α που αποστρ?φεται την ατ?φια μυθοπλασ?α. ?σως αν κανε?ς αναλογιστε? τον αγαπημ?νο του μ?ντορα, Μπ?ρχες, τ?τε θα καταλ?βει πως ο Κις, ορμ?μενος απ? την πραγματικ?τητα, απ? ασαφε?ς μ?θους και θρ?λους, απ? την αχλ? γ?ρω απ? κ?ποια απ?κρυφα βιβλ?α, φτι?χνει ιστορ?ες αποδεικν?οντας πως η πραγματικ?τητα ξεπερν?ει την φαντασ?α. Ε?ναι η αγ?πη για το παρελθ?ν, για τα συγγρ?μματα, για την δ?ναμη του προφορικο? και γραπτο? λ?γου, που ?σο κι αν καταπι?ζεται κ?ποια στιγμή? αναδ?εται απ? παρ?ξενα λαγο?μια της ιστορ?ας, που δ?νει πνο? σε αυτ?ς τις ιστορ?ες.

Δεν ?χω διαβ?σει κ?τι ?λλο απ? τον Κις, μα το?το εδ? το βιβλ?ο μπορ? να πω πως, κ?ντρα στην παραπλανητικ? συγγραφικ? αποστρ?φ? του για το ολ?τελα επινοημ?νο, ε?ναι ?νας συγγραφ?ας που θα ικανοποι?σει τον αναγν?στη για λογοτεχν?α που ταξιδε?ει το νου. Σαν μια αλλ?κοτη, ποιητικ? εγκυκλοπα?δεια.

Απερι?ριστες οι δυνατ?τητες της λογοτεχν?ας. Ο Κις μου το θ?μισε με το?το του το βιβλ?ο και τον ευχαριστ? για αυτ?, ?που κι αν βρ?σκεται.

Begemoth says

This book, like Mahler's Symphony no. 9, has a central theme of the dead. And, also like Mahler's Symphony, raises many questions, but leave to the reader(listener) to find the answers for himself, since

there is no unique and unified approach on solving the problem of death and its overcoming. In this precious book we see nine ways of trying to overcome the death, which are told through nine stories. They raise many unpleasant questions, and the basic one is: Can a human being achieve the immortality? Sometimes, it seems that neither working of miracles, encyclopediasm, literature itself, defamation, nor plagiarism can help in achieving immortality. And the one approach that seems to be the most powerful, again like in Mahler's Symphony no. 9, is achieving the immortality through the power of love. But again, there is no general conclusion. The reader is leaved to think of it, maybe forever, armed with his knowledge and education. This book is for sure one of the diamonds of the Serbian literature, and the book that is read at least once in life.

MJ Nicholls says

A robust panoply of erudite stories, each plump with historical/ religious allusions told with a shading of mischief. A Borgesian bouillabaisse.

Paul says

I am a fan of Borges, and much of my MA dissertation focused on the disintegration of the Yugoslav state in the midst of conflicting nationalist rhetoric; imagine my delight when I discovered Kiš.

Sadly, great expectations are usually dashed, and I've just put this volume down feeling a little cold. It's hit and miss - my favourite stories were Simon Magus, the Encyclopedia of the Dead and the Mirror of the Unknown. At best though, these are sub-Borges, mostly lacking Jorge Luis' wit and charm that balanced out the high flying intellectualism. Kiš also seems to be uncomfortable with the out-and-out fantastical: for example, after setting up the wonderfully bibliographic hypothesis that forms the premise of the titular story, he can't help but reveal it all to be a dream at the end. A disappointing cliché.

As for the rest of the stories: forgettable, boring. Entries like the Legend of the Sleepers and the Book of Kings and Fools are bogged down by the stylistic constraints Kiš sets himself - biblical, journalistic, distracting him from the dullness of the overall execution. Other stories seem to reflect thinly veiled personal vendettas, such as Red Stamps with Lenin's Head and the Story of the Master and Disciple. I read that Kiš was in a bitter place during the writing of this collection, recovering from accusations of plagiarism in his previous novel and loving estranged from his wife. Some authors may have used this to artistic advantage, but in Kiš' case it just leaves a sour note.

The collection is not without merit. I enjoyed the recurring themes of death and mythology, and what seems to be Kiš' take on semiotics (stories within stories, unreliable narration, etc.). It has its own important place in the study of nationalisms and their mythologies - for example, Pro Patria Mori is a pithy fable that ruminates on the formation and role of political myth and folk tradition as opposed to 'official' documentation.

As a whole, the stories are interesting on an intellectual level only. The glimpses into fantastical worlds are too reluctant and half-formed to merit favourable comparison with Borges. I may delve more into Kiš, but for now I'll more likely look into other Yugoslav authors of the era.

K.D. Absolutely says

"Only death is certain" seems to be the dominant message of the nine short stories in this collection by Yugoslav writer, Danilo Kis. My first time to read a work by him and I am now craving for more.

Although the stories are about death and dying, the book is neither terrifying nor nightmarish. So, if you are looking to be scared like when you read a Stephen King or a Clive Barker, this book is not for you. This book borders on being philosophical about highly inventive scenes that only gifted authors could put up as milieus in short stories. Take for example my favorite story in the book, "To Die for One's Country is Glorious," I think that Kis was able to give a good tip on how to die: playacting. A young Esterhazy (that seems like a surname of a royal family in Hungary) is about to die by hanging and he is so composed because he is expecting that there is something that will save him because his beautiful mom is wearing a heirloom gown that she donned during a family wedding.

There were other stories that made this book unputdownable for me. The opening one, entitled "Simon Magus" about Jesus disciples, was a stunner and I went right into the next one somehow expecting that they would be great too. I was not really disappointed but I got bored at some point until the story "The Encyclopedia of the Dead" came and whoa, I said to myself, this is the storyline that I have not read anywhere despite me having read so many fiction books. It is a good way to tell a biography and having that twist in the end is brilliant.

Three fantastic stories out of 9. But that's my personal taste. I am sure that you would love the others too. Bottom line, I am just happy to have finished a book by a Yugoslav writers. Thank God for the 1001 Books You Must Read Before You Die. This book seems to be a good way to prepare oneself for dying and it is not even inspirational (imagine one of the Jesus disciples praying for his detractor to fall from the sky) but rather realist and I would say, self help (playacting is a good way to go).

Teresa Proença says

Religião e sonhos.

Resultado: adormeci, o livro caiu e ficou neste lindo estado:

Não leio mais.

Jennifer (JC-S) says

I've not previously read Mr Kis's work and I was not sure what to expect. I read this collection in translation (by Michael Henry Heim). This was the first book I could obtain, and I was totally swept up in the beauty of the prose from beginning to end. This collection of nine stories touches on a number of facets of life: relationships, encounters and experiences. Each is unique. Each illustrates a different aspect of existence, including questioning the notion of divine order.

‘Everything a living man can know of death.’

Because of these differences, I suspect that each story could be my favourite on a different day or read. Each provides food for thought and the language is exquisite. On this read, I particularly enjoyed 'Simon Magus' and his questioning of divine order, 'To Die for One's Country Is Glorious' describing the final hours of Esterhazy, and the reading journey of the bereaved daughter in the title story.

In fewer than 200 pages, Mr Kis has managed to evoke a set of experiences and reactions that linger on in the mind. Where does life end, and death begin? Are the boundaries mutable or immutable? We will each have (or form) our own private views on this question. For myself, I am delighted to have read this book and will be looking to read more of Mr Kis in translation.

'History is written by victors. Legends are woven by people. Writers fantasize. Only death is certain.'

And now, I need to read more.

Lee says

Garden, Ashes is a major favorite (one of the few novels I've re-read more than twice) but others I've tried (A Tomb For Boris Davidovich, Hourglass) haven't really done it for me. I had a similarly split reaction with this one. Loved the first few stories but midway through the one about the sleepers I found myself literally falling asleep and wasn't able to enter the last few. Tried a couple times but kept zoning out -- couldn't concentrate. I might return to the last three stories later on when able to read while walking (so often helps me get through things I can't read while supine/sedentary) but they're impossible at this point to read in bed.

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

November 1, 2012 All Saints' Day. Death looks very much like the ending of a book. It is inevitable, inescapable, final, often unpredictable yet necessary and common to all. Each human life that ends is like a book that has been read, and was loved, and is kept in at least one other person's memory. For a book, its author or its first reader; for a person, his/her mother or someone who had loved him/her most.

All Saints' Day is a celebration and commemoration of sequels, or the possibility thereof, based on the conviction or hope that a life story does not end after its last page. Stories are immortal. Books end and people, die but their stories go on. Heroes and martyrs were less potent when they were alive than after they had died. In life, they were just of ordinary flesh and blood; in death, they become legends which become stronger as the passing time makes them more dead.

Death is, in fact, itself a story which can be told in many ways. Danilo Kis did it here, in this collection of nine short death-themed stories. This triumph of the unkillable over the one who kills inspired me to create my own mini-tale: Death--the arrogant champion--was so angry at Danilo Kis for making It like just a mere prop for stories that when Kis was about to be awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature he died. What a pain in the ass! It is unlikely that Death reads, or listens to, stories. Out of disdain, perhaps, to the one It cannot conquer. Or maybe It is just a moron completely devoid of logic, morals, compassion or practicability. It blindly strikes anywhere, anytime. Thus sometimes it's horrific, dramatic, serene, brutal, senseless, sudden, silent, screaming, timely, heroic, holy, historic and even sometimes unknown. Spiteful, too, for there can be no other explanation why Kis--so deserving of the Nobel--was not given a bit more life to be justly honored.

Ironically, this collection is practically a paean to Death. My favorite is the one entitled "To Die for One's Country is Glorious", having just read the biography of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (his biographer briefly wonders if Bonhoeffer, on the eve of his execution, was able to sleep) and having Jose Rizal as my country's national hero (before his brief walk towards the place of his execution by firing squad a Spanish doctor examined his pulse and was amazed that it was normal). Here, we have a condemned man, a young count named Esterhazy (I'm sure he was one of the illustrious forebears Peter Esterhazy mentioned in his *Celestial Harmonies*, a 1001 book). On his last night, just before his execution, he couldn't sleep but pretends to sleep. In the morning, he steels himself and grits his teeth to show control and outward calmness. He makes sure his hands do not tremble and reins in "the cowardly behavior of his intestines and solar plexus." He wants to show a brave front because he belongs to a family with a glorious name and with a long line of heroes before him.

A few days before, his mother paid him a last visit. Secretly, she told him that she will beg the Emperor for a last-minute pardon. She will be there at his scheduled hanging. If she's wearing black, that means she had failed; but if she's in white, that would mean he will be saved at the last minute.

As Esterhazy marches along the boulevard with his guards, a hate-filled crowd jeers him and threw a couple of stones at him. Crushed, he was forced into the posture of the defeated. Seeing that his courage seems to be leaving him, the crowd cheers. But then, in a balcony, he sees his mother wearing a family heirloom, an all-white dress worn as a wedding dress of one of their ancestors in an Imperial wedding. Immediately, almost insolently, he straightens up and shows the crowd how brave an Esterhazy he is in the face of a certain death. Up to the last minute, as the hangman finally removes the stool from under his feet, he was still expecting a more dramatic reprieve (which never came). Danilo Kis summed everything up as follows:

"There are two possible conclusions. Either the young aristocrat died a brave and noble death, fully conscious of the certainty thereof, his head held high, or the whole thing was merely a clever bit of playacting directed by a proud mother. The first, heroic, version was upheld and promulgated--orally, and then in writing, in their chronicles--by the sans-culottes and Jacobins; the second, according to which the young man hoped to the very end for some magical sleight of hand, was recorded by the official historians of the powerful Habsburg dynasty to prevent the birth of a legend. History is written by the victors. Legends are woven by the people. Writers fantasize. Only death is certain."

Only death is certain. Bravery and heroism can be doubted. But not Death.

"Simon Magus," like Peter of the New Testament, was a preacher and the setting of the story bearing his name is seventeen years after Jesus Christ's death and resurrection. He performs his own miracles. But he preaches the exact opposite of Peter's gospel: that God is a tyrant and the author of all the world's ills. In a debate with Peter--again with two versions--it is once more demonstrated that even in matters of faith nothing is written in stone. Only Death is certain.

A beloved whore dies of pneumonia in "Last Respects." During her burial, in a cemetery for the poor, the reader feels the valiant effort of her Ukrainian sailor-lover to give her a final glowing tribute losing out to the inexorable annihilation that Death brings.

In "The Legend of the Sleepers" three Christian martyrs lay inside a dark cave: Dionysius, his friend Malchus and John with his dog Qitmir. After several centuries Dionysius awakens. The past, present and future assault his senses and all he could do is to ask repeatedly: are these just dreams? Towards the end of the story one sees Death triumphant, Dionysius still in the darkness of the cave--

"vainly straining his eyes, vainly calling to his friend Malchus, vainly calling to John, the saintly shepherd, vainly calling to the green-eyed dog Qitmir, vainly calling to the Lord his God: the darkness was as thick as tar, the silence--the silence of the tomb of eternity."

No person dies in "The Story of the Master and the Disciple" but one sees here the teachings and reputation of a master slain by his own disciple whom he had unwittingly misled by his own philosophies. Satire at its best, and the funniest of all the pieces here.

"The Book of Kings and Fools" would get one into thinking how so-called ancient books, with uncertain origins (most likely mundane), are given supernatural auras and become catalysts for wars, revolutions and similar self-righteous false crusades which feed Death with a rich harvest of souls, mostly innocent ones.

"Red Stamps with Lenin's Pictures" is a parody of literary critics and scholars especially those who like to pick on works left by dead writers. Death seems to be an impregnable wall here and anyone who attempts to pass through it suffers ridicule.

In "The Mirror of the Unknown" a young girl watches her father and two sisters murdered in the woods as it happens through a mirror bought from a Gypsy, another aspect of the mystery of Death, as it is roughly based on a true story like the other stories in this compilation (so the postscript says).

Lastly, the title story, "The Encyclopedia of the Dead." The massive Encyclopedia here is a record of everything about each person who had ever lived: "every action, every thought, every creative breath, every spot height in the survey, every shovelful of mud, every motion that cleared a brick from the ruins." But what for? Its mysterious compiler seems to have a central message: that each individual is unique and sacred, and that we are all novel, unrepeatable masterpieces of creation.

Yet Death will claim us all.

K says

Što je bilo bilo je. Prošlost živi u nama i ne možemo je izbrisati. Pošto su snovi slika onoga sveta, i dokaz njegovog postojanja, susrećemo se u snovima.

Hugh says

An intriguing short collection of stories and fables. This was a book I picked up just because of the title, though the Penguin Modern Classics series generally guarantees quality. The title story is reminiscent of and probably influenced by Borges, though the dream in question, of a sect that creates an encyclopedia documenting the lives of ordinary people in minute detail, was based on a real dream related by Kis's wife. Some of the other stories are re-tellings and fictionalisations of historical events and legends - once again these evoke Borges and his *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*. Finally the author has added his own fascinating postscript on the ideas and sources behind each of his stories.

