

SEIOBO THERE



BELOW

Seiobo There Below

László Krasznahorkai , Otilie Mulzet (Translator)

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Beauty, in László Krasznahorkai's new novel, reflects, however fleeting, the sacred — even if we are mostly unable to bear it.

In *Seiobo There Below* we see the goddess Seiobo returning to mortal realms in search of perfection. An ancient Buddha being restored; Perugino managing his workshop; a Japanese Noh actor rehearsing; a fanatic of Baroque music lecturing to a handful of old villagers; tourists intruding into the rituals of Japan's most sacred shrine; a heron hunting... Seiobo hovers over it all, watching closely.

Melancholic and brilliant, *Seiobo There Below* urges us to treasure the concentration that goes into the perception of great art, leading us to re-examine our connection to immanence.

Seiobo There Below Details

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Author : László Krasznahorkai , Otilie Mulzet (Translator)

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From Reader Review Seiobo There Below for online ebook

RK-isme says

"Even the grey clouds are black in Krasznahorkai's world and don't let the silver linings fool you. That is black." Me

I approached the reading of László Krashnahorkai's 'Seiobo There Below' with some excitement because, I must admit, I am smitten with his writing. It was a hot, sunny day so I wandered down to a bench by the riverside and read about a view of a river (the Kamo River in Japan), much like the one I saw spread out in front of me (the Rideau River),

"... and all the individual glittering of light flashing on the surface of this fleeting element, this surface suddenly emerging and just as quickly collapsing, with its drops of light dying down, scintillating and then reeling in all directions, inexpressible in words; ..."

"... inexpressible in words; ..." Krashnahorkai, the author who led me in a dance with the Devil in the dark, rainy Hell of 'Satantango' seemed to be taking me into another world in a kinder, gentler nature in Japan.

I looked at the scene before me, like Krashnahorkai's, framed by traffic noise and was delighted to watch a great blue heron land between the scattered grass islands in the shallow river, find his footing in the gravel below his feet and stand motionless, watching the water before his eyes.

"... only it, the Ooshirosagi, does not move at all, this enormous snow-white bird, open to attack by all, not concealing its defencelessness; this hunter, it leans forward, its neck folded in an S-form, and it now extends its head and its long hard beak out from this S-form, and strains the whole, but at the same time it is strained forward, its wings pressed tightly against its body, its thin legs searching for a firm point beneath the water's surface; the surface, yes, while it sees, crystal-clear, what lies beneath this surface, down below in the refractions of light,"

In the juxtaposition between the reality in front of me and the somewhat transcendent world of the sublime being woven in words in the book, I allowed myself to be lured into Krashnahorkai's trap. Japan, nature, the motionless bird in its Zen-trance among the swirling waters and the man-made chaos around him. I entered into it all willingly. And then the end of the story (chapter) and the trap closed.

"....it would be better for you to go away this very evening when twilight begins to fall, it would be better for you to retreat with the others, if night begins to descend, and you should not come back if tomorrow or after tomorrow, dawn breaks, because for you it will be much better for there to be no tomorrow and no day after tomorrow; so hide away now in the grass, sink down, fall onto your side, let your eyes slowly close, and die, for there is no point in the sublimity that you bear, die at midnight in the grass, sink down and fall, and let it be like that—breathe your last."

Krashnahorkai asserted his vision, "sink down, fall onto your side, let your eyes slowly close, and die, for there is no point in the sublimity that you bear...." The trap closed on me as I sat there watching the heron. All my Zen, Daoism, and romanticism melted away. Thus ended the first of the seventeen theme-linked stories of 'Seibu There Below'. Krashnahorkai, the apparent architect of Hell, had created an ordered world of Asian transcendence and smashed it to pieces. In the sixteen stories to follow, he managed to do it again and again.

In 'The Queen Exiled' we are reminded of the Biblical story of Esther in which Queen Vashti, acclaimed for her beauty, is raised up to the throne by the love of the King who seems to be risking all, caught up as he is in his love for her. Then, in a moment, as she seems to disobey him, his male ego wounded, he exiles her, and worse, has her murdered, her sublime beauty gone from the world forever. Within the same story, we follow the Italian Renaissance artist as he tries to recreate scenes from her life and the efforts of art specialists in later times as the struggle to discern who the artist was who created these unsigned works. The sublimity of art becomes besmirched by those who see themselves closest to the sublime.

For me, the most beguiling story is 'The Life and Work of Master Inoue Kazuyuki' in which we finally encounter the Japanese goddess of the book's title, Seiobo, as she descends to our world:

"I put down my crown, and in earthly form – yet not concealing the contours of my face – I descend among them, to seek out the prince of Chu, King Mu, for I was constrained to leave the infinite planes of Heaven, the Empire of Radiant Light; compelled to leave that realm, where form shines, abundant and emanating, and thus all is replenished with nothingness, I had to make my descent below yet and yet again, for I had to flee the purity of Heaven, I must step across into a moment, for nothing ever lasts longer"

And thus, Seiobo has come to Earth to transmit a vision of the perfection of Heaven to human kind. She dances for King Mu, the human who most exemplifies the characteristics of the ancient sages who achieved their own perfection. And then she must return to Heaven leaving behind the earthly pleasures of "lilac and scarlet silken shot through with gold, and I must at once set off, go back to that place from whence I came.... for that is the place where I exist, although I am not, for this is the place where I can may place my crown upon my head, and I can think to myself that Seiobo was there below."

And here the ascent (descent) hits us as Seiobo is transformed back into the Noh Master, Inoue Kazuyuki, actor extraordinaire. A man for whom reality is, perhaps, more real on stage, or at least more sublime. He has perfected the role of Seiobo, that is his glory and his life. But here again, humanity is caught up in pain and frustration, the glory of the great Noh Master with all of its earthly honours and petty jealousies and worries. He seeks peace in prayer but even that is difficult to find as his fans, his family, his supporters and, maybe, his superior await him:

"... he begins to pray, from the Great Spirit all the way to I Give Over My Fate Entirely, he kneels on the cold stone floor of the toilet in the smell of disinfectant, he is alone, there is peace, tranquility and silence in the toilet of the Kanze, then he presses the flush button, as if he had finished his business, and he calmly sets off to the common dressing room, so that he may be dressed in the first layers of the garb of Seiobo."

In the Western world, we often seek out the culture of the East. China, Japan and India hold for many the possibility of transcendence, of an escape from the pressures, the suffering, the anxiety of this world. We seek something beyond. Since the days of the German Romantics, we have sought transcendence in art: painting, sculpture, music, poetry and even, in prose. It is curious that Krashnahorkai is able to create such alluring prose that makes the reader believe that that moment of ecstasy is upon us, and then he drops it - reality is there - in the toilet.

I suppose that I am the perfect reader of this book - the cynic who hopes constantly to be proven wrong. I recognize Krashnahorkai's transcendent imagery because it is ingrained. I appreciate his honesty because it returns me to my reality, and, in the final analysis, tickles my sense of humour. He made me laugh out loud as he pulled the rug out from under me. I rarely laugh.

This book takes us through Japanese monasteries, Renaissance ateliers, cathedrals, village cultural centres, museums, train stations, an island of exile and more. We learn about Renaissance art, Baroque music, Noh theatre and Japanese religious practices. (Take the time to look up the historical references. You lose a great deal without it.) The book is fascinating.

Finally, there are 17 chapters: numbered 1 - 2584. Krashnahorkai has chosen to use the Fibonacci sequence to numbering system for the chapters. (Look that up too. Fun.) My take on it is that we are caught in an eternal spiral in life for Krashnahorkai. Perhaps like Dante's vision, except that there is no heaven and we never know if we're going up or down.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book. A fun vision of Hell. Dante would be proud.

Marc says

Art is your only chance at touching the transcendent. Pray that it doesn't blind or kill you, or blind you and then kill you.

And that concludes our one-time exercise in two-sentence book summaries.

Elyse says

I didn't finish - so my rating is only based on my personal frustration. I wanted to try this - but it lost me. What drove me crazy - is that sentences went on for pages!! There were comas - lots of them- but it was rare to find a sentence end.

There were some interesting & lovely descriptions... but I couldn't understand half of what I read and I couldn't 'feel' anything without understanding. Just lost! My failure.

Antonomasia says

A tad overhyped, this (in some quarters). It's an interesting and unusual book, of interlocking short stories about art, beauty and the sacred. I'm not saying emperor's new clothes - but some of the superlatives...

- *Unique, like nothing else.* [Collective gist.]

A non-exhaustive list of things I was reminded of whilst reading *Seiobo There Below*: documentaries about art & building restoration; documentaries about and visits to buddhist monasteries; meditation and writing and talks on; *How to Be Both* by Ali Smith; *Revenge* by Yoko Ogawa; history lessons; the puzzles in Georges Perec books; the number/chapter games in *The Luminaries*; experiences of arriving somewhere ill-prepared, or feeling irritable whilst in queues; other long-sentence writers, especially in the German tradition. (All those 'as it were's were very familiar.)

- *an impossibly wide range of knowledge*

Seiobo is undoubtedly a knowledge and terminology-heavy book. However, nearly all of that knowledge is from two domains.

a) Mainstream European [art] history of the medieval & early modern period: a repetitive surfeit of Ital Ren; the Alhambra; Andrei Rublev. (Also, a reasonable knowledge of the bible is necessary for studying that period. Anyway, I wonder if this stuff seems more exotic to Americans, for whom it isn't so standard in curricula and holiday destinations.)

b) Traditional Japanese culture. Not a few enthusiasts of that around, and not an unusual overlapping interest with art history.

This is depth more than breadth: it's possible to see one person checking all this from a handful textbooks if

he didn't know it already off the top of his head - it's not the vastly disparate facts that Pynchon employs researchers to verify; different from the scale of Perec who mentions stuff from many domains, giving a sense of how much general knowledge there is in a whole other culture; having been the sort of kid who read encyclopaedias for fun *in Britain* did little more than scratch the surface.

Part of the point is, of course, comparison with the likes of Perec - not with most other literary fiction published in 2014.

For a book I'd heard spoken of for the fascinating, intoxicating properties hidden beneath this plain cover*, it got a touch monotonous at times. Did we really need that many C15th-C16th artists' workshops? And such a lot of obvious destinations in the European sections, Italy, Spain, Greece: bloody Cook's Tour. (The Romanian lake and the land sculpture of the horse, though, was exactly the kind of strange and wonder I'd come here for.) Most main characters are men who are in late middle age and/or Hungarian. Surely the fabled Krasznahorkai does better than writing self-inserts? Among the most memorable lead characters were those who differed noticeably from the template, especially the Dostoevskyan working class Hungarian (still a Hungarian) stranded in Barcelona by an employment scam, and the embarrassed young Japanese chap trying to cope with his Euro friend's frequent faux pas at 'The Rebuilding of the Ise Shrine'.

Seiobo There Below had become a barometer or test to me since I first looked at it in March. I had a specific block on, or a very high threshold for, processing the run-on sentences of the first chapter. A couple of pages and my mind felt like a failing printer with 30 items backing up in the queue; soon jammed, it ground to a halt completely. And this wasn't just at the worst times when I might expect that: even whilst I was up to enjoying *Blinding: The Left Wing* by Mircea Cărtărescu or *The Wake* by Paul Kingsnorth – books of comparable difficulty in the eyes of many - I couldn't properly process this. But I kept looking at the sample (I must have read chapter 1 about ten times by now). On a couple of occasions, the text started to flow and so I got a copy, having become determined to conquer this thing at some hoped-for suitable time.

I'd now say that the first chapter, along with the first page each of chapters 377 (13) and 2584 (17 - they have Fibonacci numbers), is considerably more dense structurally than the rest of the book. (My head finds abstract sentences more challenging to deal with than specialist terminology.) Through the early chapters, I was aware of a slight physical tension produced by the multi-page sentences. Sometimes it suited the content very well (e.g. the harried, overheated tourist 'Up on the Acropolis'). At others, whilst I understood their use as creating a sense of long-term unity for scenes that develop slowly, such as during 'The Preservation of a Buddha', this tension didn't always seem appropriate to the subject, and I thought Krasznahorkai could perhaps have written some scenes in shorter sentences and others long to fit rhythm and mood of actions taking place**. Throughout the book, sentences, though extremely long, almost never had the sort of complexity I'd been apprehensive about. They don't go back to an earlier point after a three page anecdote, rarely even a three-line one. It all flows along like a stream. (And sometimes the camera pans to a scene of another stream that's a tributary of the same river.) Simply there are, for page after page, commas and conjunctions where full stop, space, capital letter would normally be found. A portion of the tension came from chopping up these sentences and editing in the conventional punctuation in my head – making a conscious decision about the 'pause to take breath' that Gertrude Stein acknowledged was part of the purpose of the punctuation she rejected on paper. Regardless, it was always hypnotic: more than with most books, it was easy to fall into it for pages and pages and not look up - I even remained engrossed at times when I had to use a book stand, not something I like. At some point, into the second day of reading, I stopped noticing: it wasn't a problem any more, I wasn't tense and I didn't need to repunctuate consciously. I was just reading. It's not *Finnegan's Wake*.

A lot of this post so far has been about blowing raspberries at Krasznahorkai, or rather his reputation - but there are many, many wonderful things in *Seiobo There Below*. This is a work which, unusually, understands deeply meditative and reverent states, *and* great darkness and black comedy. Several chapters end with a sudden sting in the tail - most of these made me laugh; and I loved the way that they could turn a scene on its

head without diminishing its earlier meaning. And whilst he does deal with some hackneyed subjects (who needs another postcard from the Alhambra or Florence for instance?... Especially at this distance, in a book, not in the place, I was sometimes like Brancoveanu, the sceptical colleague of the Venus de Milo worshipping Louvre security guard character, the one who feels the sculpture is trite) Krasznahorkai does bring a sprinkling of extra magic to these locations, conjured from detailed information that's less often heard, and from the meditation-like state of the prose which is intended to mirror both the transcendent experience of viewing great art on one hand, and the taut rope of sustained concentration, and the near-impossible perfectionism (which would be denigrated in many other scenarios) needed to produce it.

I wrote detailed summaries of all chapters(in the status updates below). But personal favourite pieces were:

- 'Kamo-Hunter' - a heron hunting, a beautiful creature yet predatory, nature and its cycles living alongside the bustle and buses of Kyoto, a city where the book returns several times. (*Seiobo* appears to follow the same classical Japanese tradition as Ogawa's *Revenge*, stories which are in some respects separate but which contain motifs and themes shared, though not according to a mechanical sequence.)
- 'Up On the Acropolis' - Just simple identification, this kind of journey, the eager adventure, the draining effort, having forgotten something vital. How often have I had this? (Though not, of course, the last few lines.)
- 'Something is Burning Outside' - at an artists' workshop in the Romanian countryside, no-one seems very productive. An impoverished-looking old man arrives, who turns out to be nationally famous artist Ion Grigorescu. Early one morning two other artists go out for a walk and find him and his project. [Grigorescu is real and I found this page for a Tate exhibition that included him. Watching its video led me to another artist's photographs of Armenia juxtaposing beautiful snow scenes and decaying concrete tower blocks of stunning yet brutal design.]
- 'Private Passion'. A scene which would have been quite different, laughable probably, in the medium of film or radio. An old architect, of repulsive appearance and grating voice, delivers an adult education lecture to a few bored, numbed Swiss villagers. He is, at best, a buffoon - worse, experienced by his audience as a Job-like test. His crazy passion for the music of the Baroque has a Byronic intensity which comes through on the page, making it possible to hear how differently it might have been received from a person who was attractive and charismatic, and to consider the idea of a personality trapped inside an exterior shell that doesn't match. (Or did Krasznahorkai just write this text too well for this character?)
- 'Screaming Beneath the Earth' - I don't really agree with the extent of darkness which things, life and death are viewed in this final chapter (c.f. some people find looking at the stars and thinking how insignificant we are to be depressing, I find it comforting). But the archaeological vision in this piece was exhilarating, of all these past creatures under the ground.
- In general, I've become more interested in Shinto, and the unique way in which an ancient animist / pagan religion remains part of every day life in a highly developed country. (Amazing to imagine if we still had continuous traditions like this.) It's thanks, I'm guessing, to Japan's long isolation from monotheisms, and the economic strength and stability that allowed it to forge ahead for itself without subjection to significant outside influences.

There is great stuff in *Seiobo There Below*, but it doesn't have the magic for me that it does for many other readers; it wasn't a transcendent experience, though it was meditative. I daresay a few others in time will find the characters a little samey. Nonetheless, there's be an ineffable something I just don't get, as with my similar underwhelmed-but-not-disliking reaction to another of the Best Translated Book Longlist, Stig Sæterbakken's *Through the Night*. I'd still rate a few of those longlisted books higher than this one, and, contrary to almost every opinion I've read, think the *C?rt?rescu* better for its unusual fusion of biological science and surrealism and narrative - art in literature has been done often enough (and there's been a lot of it about in 2014 publications). I wasn't quite in the mood for these topics and places right now - the Mediterranean, Japan - they feel more summery: I wanted the dark and brooding of central European traditon, which likely would have been better served by *Satantango* rather than Krasznahorkai's sunlight-dappled, meditation-infused, voyage away from home.

* The chest on the cover, as well as being an obvious metaphor for looking into, opening up etc, refers to a trousseau-chest from the school of Botticelli that features in chapter 2. Its outline and the title lettering are made of a rainbow-shimmery stuff most familiar from kids' stationery. So up close, not entirely as plain as it looks.

** There's a pretty good discussion about Krasznahorkai's sentences in this interview and the comments. Shame that, despite the mention of his 'broken English', that people sharp enough to know better then take his phrase 'loss of a culture of poverty' at face value rather than considering consumerism and folk culture.

Declan says

You reach through bars. Your arm is stretched to the furthest possible extent; tense and aching from the effort. You wriggle your fingers attempting to come into contact with an object that has enormous significance for you. You are convinced that just to touch it once would resolve so much that has become disfigured in your life. With one final strain you manage it. A finger has lightly pressed against this sacred talisman. What do you feel? Relieved? Renewed? Transformed? How fleeting will this feeling be? Or will it last for the rest of your life? Was it a moment that will, like the memory of its occurrence, remain indelible? Or will you, even as your finger is against this object, feel an absence of all feeling. A failure of transformation that is, despite your immense effort, beyond reach?

'Seiobo There Below' is, in many ways, utterly unlike the three other Krasznahorkai novels that have been translated. Where previously we were mired in random acts of brutality or understandable despair, we are here presented with immensely patient considerations of the ways in which art or the sacred can be deeply transcendent. This willingness to confront beauty in an open, whole-hearted way is certainly unexpected, and makes for deeply engaged writing, and deeply absorbing reading. Whether that beauty is illustrated through a detailed examination of the composure of a heron, the carving of a noh-theatre mask or an amusingly opinionated lecture about baroque music, Krasznahorkai, seems to be genuinely in awe of the power of these, and other elements of our lives, to give meaning and purpose to our existence.

But while all of this is new and unexpected, an essential element of the previous novels is present here too, because there has always been a sense in each of the novels that a moment, an action, a prophet will, given time and a favorable alignment of circumstances, transform the lives of those who are seeking solace. That yearning is an essence of all of his writing, but here it becomes - in its many manifestations - almost his sole subject matter. But, it never brought about the hoped for transformation in the other books. Can we believe that it is possible in these remarkable episodes? I want to believe it. I need to believe it...

Boy Blue says

In the process of searching for beauty and perfection, this book becomes the very thing it was looking for. It won translated book of the year for a reason, Krasznahorkai's vision and Mulzet's incredible translation make this one of the most beautiful reads you'll ever come across. Seiobo There Below is as close as you can get to meditating while reading, Krasznahorkai has the ability to pull you into his reveries and make them feel like your own. It's hard to think of a book that is like this but if you like philosophy, literature, and art and sometimes get frustrated with academic fustiness and drab prose then you will fall in love with this book.

Hadrian says

A heron stands perched above a stream, waiting in perfect tension to catch its prey. Monks pray to a statue of the Buddha, knowing every detail of its tarnished face but yearning to recognize and be enveloped by the Buddha's infinite compassion. A cynical tourist wanders in a museum in Venice, but sees a half-remembered painting of the dead Christ and is overwhelmed by pathos and emotion. A Japanese goddess descends to earth, bearing a fruit of immortality, searching for perfection.

Seiobo There Below is a book about the beautiful and the sacred. It is about how emotions and experiences build upon each other, and how distant the idea of 'sacredness' is to our society at all. What is beautiful, of course, is not always good, nor does beauty inspire goodness. This spiraling novel goes from museum guards who obsess over statues to the buried armies of Qin Shi Huang, lying in wait for some eternal demon.

Now Krasznahorkai is an author of despair. His most famous novel, the one with the film adaptation, is an exercise in intricate grimness. How does this same author talk about the topics of the divine? First start with the supposition that creating something beautiful or sublime is a way to find some sort of immortality. But also add that immortality is infinite, and thus incomprehensible to our mere human perceptions. Whole lifetimes can be spent on a fraction of a part of a single work or event, and indeed this is often the case. Krasznahorkai's writing style is a barrage of details, spiraling outward into a broader whole, beyond any universal ideal or conception. One hint of this is in the chapter numbers - instead of the usual order, they are Fibonacci numbers.

Seiobo there below is a deeply challenging and, of course I will say it, beautiful book. There are few others like it. Maybe soon this book will be like those cathedrals and statues it describes, something so far out of reach that it cannot ever be grasped.

It would be better for you to turn around and go into the thick grasses, there where one of those strange grassy islets in the riverbed will completely cover you, it would be better if you do this for once and for all, because if you come back tomorrow, or after tomorrow, there will be no one at all to understand, no one to look, not even a single one among all your natural enemies that will be able to see who you really are; it would be better for you to go away this very evening when twilight begins to fall, it would be better for you to retreat with the others, if night begins to descend, and you should not come back if tomorrow, or after tomorrow, dawn breaks, because for you it will be much better for there to be no tomorrow and no day after tomorrow; so hide away now in the grass, sink down, fall onto your side, let your eyes slowly close, and die, for there is no point in the sublimity that you bear, die at midnight in the grass, sink down and fall, and let it be like that — breathe your last.

Andrew says

I hadn't realized who/what Seiobo was before I picked this up, and I knew Krasznahorkai as a chronicler of Hungarian misery, not of the intricacies of ancient Japanese craft. This is about as rich in detail, and obscure detail at that, as anything I've ever read, on subjects ranging from the flight of a heron to the crafting of Noh masks. Really, the thing I would most compare it to is the mathematical precision of Robbe-Grillet's novels (exactly how many centimeters wide that window is). It's dense and frustrating at times, and Krasznahorkai's structural style (he also went to the Thomas Bernhard School of the Endless Paragraph) is doubtless going to alienate a lot of readers, but as a work of and about craftsmanship, it's impeccable.

Robert Wechsler says

This collection of thematically related stories has some of the most incredible writing about the making and appreciation of art that I've ever read (a far shorter, but also wonderfully imaginative collection on the same topic is Saul Yurkievich's *In the Image and Likeness*, which I published back in 2003). It also has sections where the author's extremely detailed approach didn't work for me, where I found myself skimming over dully-presented TMI. But the great writing is more than worth it. Don't worry about the first section of the novel; it gets much more readable.

Jonathan says

1. First Thread

Margarita Terekhova in Tarkovsky's *Mirror*

Munch's portrait of his sister

Ingrid Thulin in the films of Bergman

2. Second Thread

Derek Jarman

Ikiru

Théodore Géricault's last Self Portrait before his death

3. Third Thread

Brassai's Night Photos of Paris

Hasegawa Tohaku's Pine Trees

4. Fourth Thread

Sally Mann's photos of her kids

Schiele - Mother and Child

5. Fifth Thread

Rublev's Trinity

Three Ebensee survivors, too weak to eat solid food, suck on sugar cubes to give them strength. (May 8, 1945)

6. Conclusions

Alfred Schnittke - Collected Songs Where Every Verse Is Filled with Grief (1984–85) (from Concerto for Mixed Choir, arr. Kronos Quartet)

<http://youtu.be/wMcTQPdxttA>

Paul Fulcher says

A truly stunning work.

Through a series of beautiful stories Krasznahorkai explores the immanence of the divine in human artistic creation.

As just one small detail - the chapters are not numbered sequentially but rather in the Fibonacci sequence, with each chapter number the sum of the preceding chapters. This mirrors the way that the book's themes build up between the seemingly unconnected stories. And, of course, the ratio between successive chapter numbers then converges on the Golden Ratio - a mathematical fraction that occurs often in works of art (e.g. the dimensions of the Parthenon, featured in one chapter), often referred to as the Divine Proportion.

Algernon says

I voted last year for “Seiobo” as the most unique book I have read in 2015. I could have gone also with the most challenging or the most annoying. The review turns out to be the most difficult to write in this beginning of 2016. I can’t seem to run out of superlatives when considering the novel, but they cover both the high end and the low end of the spectrum: amazing and annoying, marvelous and mean spirited, erudite and exhausting, soul searching and smug.

Most of my problems issue from the style of presentation. Mr. Krasznahorkay sets up to redefine the term “wall-of-text” by deliberately and smirkingly avoiding to put a stop to his phrases for several pages at a time. I know that other great writers have used this device successfully before (Faulkner, Proust) and I see no discord in adding Krasznahorkay to the list, but in his case I question the necessity of going overboard in his stream-of-consciousness flow, given that the main tonality of the novel is the relationship between existence and Art rather than character study. I got the feeling that in Mr. K’s opinion Art should be placed as far as possible from the common ground and the common people (up there as opposed to here below), a mystical, transcendental experience reserved for the elites that can only be expressed obliquely and indirectly :

... circumambulated with words, like a beggar with his palm extended, for this darkness and this screaming, these mouths and these eyes cannot be compared to anything, for they have nothing in common with anything that can be put into words ...

As you will notice in all my quotes here, they are only snippets of those chapter long phrases, of necessity cut out of context and presented to you as pieces of a puzzle that is admittedly elegantly and exhaustively put together with words by the author in this large canvas that roams over both geography and history, that unites cultures and ages into a coherent vision that, for want of a better analogy, we will call Seiobo’s plane of existence :

... I put down my crown, and in earthly form but not concealing my face, I descended among them, to seek out the Prince of Chu, the King of Mu, I had to leave the boundless plains of the Sky, the Radiant Empire of Light, I had to come from that world where form itself is resplendent; streaming forth it swells, and thus everything is filled by nothingness, I had to descend once more, and again, for I had to break away from the purity of the Heavens, and step into a moment; for nothing ever lasts longer, or even lasts as long as that, and thus so is my submerging below, not lasting longer than a single moment, if, yet, so much of everything can fit into a single moment ...

The book is structured around these moments of revelation of the divine and eternal in the drudgery of the daily toil. In the beginning the common thread that links the novellas together is not clear, with the point of view jumping from Japan or China to Venice or Andalusia, from modern times to Renaissance workshops, each tale a snippet out of the continuum of life, like my quotes are snippets of the never-ending paragraphs. An early pointer can be found in the numbering of the chapters, modernist and gimmicky but not as gratuitous as it sounds. The Fibonacci mathematical series is constructed by each iteration being the sum of its previous two numbers, and so each story stands on the shoulders on the previous ones, each puzzle piece connects to the ones already placed on the board. As an added bonus, the pre-Renaissance Fibonacci is quoting more ancient texts passed westward by the Arabs from the wisdom of Indian mystics, reflecting the author’s effort at reconciling the action oriented European heritage with the contemplative Far East.

The polarization is introduced in the very first novella, as a tourist in Kyoto stops for a moment on a bridge over the river Kamo and gazes at a hunting crane:

... everything is at play or alive, so that things happen, move on, dash along, proceed forward, sink down, rise up, disappear, emerge again, run and flow and rush somewhere, only it, the Ooshiragi, does not move at all, this enormous snow-white bird, open to attack by all, not concealing its defenselessness ...

Layer upon layer of meaning is added to this moment of eternal beauty in a transient world. The white crane becomes a painted wooden panel of a Biblical scene. A Buddha statue becomes an Orthodox icon by Andrei Rublyov. The arabesques of Alhambra are mirrored in the arpeggios of the Baroque concertoes. A Noh mask is holding conversations with a portrait of Christ by an unknown Venetian master.

... a dark obscurity lay in these eyes, and it seemed unbearable that this dark obscurity was emanating such an endless sadness, and not the sadness of one who suffers but of one who has suffered – but not even that; he got up, and then leaned back in the chair, it is not a question here of suffering but only of sorrow, a sorrow impossible to grasp in its entirety, and entirely incomprehensible to him, an immeasurable sorrow, he looked into Christ's eyes and he saw nothing else there, just this pure sorrow, as if it were a sorrow without a cause, he froze at the thought of it, SORROW JUST LIKE THAT, FOR EVERYTHING, for creation, for existence, for beings, for time, for suffering and for passion, for birth and destruction ...

In sorting the puzzle pieces I looked for common features, lines of continuity and colour transitions. One of these is a recurring reference to restoration or restaurateurs. I am choosing to interpret this as an invitation to the modern man to reconsider the past and to recover the Sacred from the onslaught of the Profane. A dig at the *direct cretinization of our ignorant present age* is balanced by the dedication of a few elite souls, like the abbot of the Zengen-ji monastery in Kyoto: **all that is unclean and foul and decayed and impure is now being made pure here.** to the chant of mysterious and ancient sutras.

From the same episode at the monastery, the author points at the role of the artist / artisan / craftsman / novelist, whose higher sensibility allows him or her to atune his soul to the magical / mystical message of past masterpieces. A renowned Amida Buddha statue needs to be repaired, but will it lose its original mystical power in the process of restoration?

... and so where is that renowned gaze? – that is the sensitive question; to which of course Fujimori-san has an answer, namely that it is nowhere else, and nowhere else during the entire course of the restoration, but within the souls of the restorers ...

This is also an example of the less salutary elitist position taken by Krasznahorkai, that only a few special persons are allowed to glimpse at these mysteries.

... it was he who surmounted everything with the greatest of sensitivity, because he alone had a heart, and with this heart he looked at the landscape, and he looks at it now too, and it is with this heart that he sees now that everything is woven into one: the earth with the water, the water with the sky, and into the earth and the water and the sky, into this indescribable Cosmos is woven our fragile existence as well, but merely for just one moment that cannot be traced, then, already, it is no more, it disappears for all eternity, irrevocably ...

Getting off my, probably erroneus, high horse, I am moved to insert a personal note in the proceedings : Mr. K. is my kind of tourist. After long decades of living behind the Iron Curtain where the only traveling available was through the pages of books and art albums, he finally has the means and disposition to travel the world and see the wonders of the past with his own eyes. But the previous imaginary journeys are already

colouring and enriching the experience far beyond the snapshot shallow quality of the moronic camera touting tourist stereotype. The key points of interest of Mr. K. travels are not to push back the tower of Pisa with your hands raised in fake perspective, but to recapture the transcendental experience of the artists of the yesterday, to grasp the spirit not the substance of the place. Such experience takes a heavy toll on Mr. K. alter egos, sometimes driving them crazy, isolating them from the crowd in a unique metaphysical sphere where Seiobo walks in grace and indifference to mortal concerns.

The episodes that resonated the most with me are thus the ones that occur in the places I have myself visited. Alhambra in particular is an occasion where the crowds of other tourists could not in the end overshadow the magic of the labyrinth of halls and fountains.

... this glittering, delicately-lived pattern points to the unity of the nature of various experiences, the unity holding all as one in a net, because the geometrical composition used by that Arab spirit, across the Greek and Hindu and Chinese and Persian cultures, actualizes a concept, namely that in place of the evil chaos of a world falling apart, let us select a higher one in which everything holds together, a gigantic unity, it is that we may select, and the Alhambra represents this unity equally in its tiniest as well as its most monumental elements ...

Like the Fibonacci mathematical formulas, the Arab artisans with their interlocking geometries and flowing scripts are agents of a higher understanding of the world, uniting the fleeting lives of individuals with universal truths : *... to say that something infinite can exist in a finite, demarcated space...*

Mr. K. pays a visit even to Romania, talking in episode 144 of a commune for artists set up near a volcanic lake high up in the Carpathians, where they were supposed to gather together to create masterpieces on demand for the regime. I'm not sure he got his names right, after all Ion Grigorescu was a painter not a sculptor, but the nonconformist, modernist message is spot on, an invitation to return to an earthy source of inspiration and abandon the mannerisms and the pride of the established schools.

The insistence on personal experience and mystical revelation is present in most of the novellas, but once again, the ones describing places I am familiar with are the ones that remain stronger in my recollection. A modest janitor in Le Louvre becomes a specialist on the famous statue of Venus of Milo, and he defends his passion in a conversation with another improbably named Romanian character, Mr. Brancoveanu:

... in his opinion this was not a competition, here, not even one stands above the other, but yet and yet, what could he do, for him personally, this, the beauty of the Venus de Milo meant the most ...

From Paris, I often go in my holidays to visit friends in Switzerland, and Morges is one of my favorite locations by the Lake Lemman. Like the Swiss painter in the novel, I have often been struck with wonder and pointed my camera at the majestic vista of water, mountain and sky that makes ants of the humans strolling by the lake and reconciles me for a mystical moment with the irrevocable passage of time.

... at the end it was not his more lucid self but instead the other that was triumphant...

I hope one day I will also walk the streets of Kyoto, the most powerful and laden with meaning of the foreign travels of Mr. K. If I do, I plan to take his novel with me for a re-read and as a guide to the wonders of secret worlds hidden behind monastery walls or behind ancient theatre masks:

Noh is the lifting up of the soul, which, if it doesn't occur through Noh, that means that the Noh is not occurring, but if it does occur, then anyone can comprehend that above us and below us, outside of ourselves and deep within ourselves, there is a universe, the one and only, which is not identical with the sky looming above us overhead, because that universe is not made of stars and planets and suns and galaxies, because that universe is not a picture, it cannot be seen, it doesn't even have a name, for it is so much more precious than anything that could have a name, and that is why it is such a joy to me that I can practice Seiobo; Seiobo is the emissary who arrives and says I am not the desire for peace, I am peace itself; Seiobo arrives and says do not be afraid, for the universe of peace is not the rainbow of yearning; the universe, the real universe – already exists.

I hope some of the tranquility of the crane in the middle of flowing waters will find its way into my heart and that future generations will look kindly and try to preserve the efforts of past and present artists to capture in stone, paint, word or sound the miracle of life and conscience:

... and every person will understand that something cannot be separated from something else, there is no god in some faraway dominion, there is no earth far from him here below, and there is no transcendental realm somewhere else apart from where you are now, all that you call transcendental or earthly is one and the same, together with you in one single time and one single space, and the most important of all is that there is no room here for either hope or for miracles, since hope has no basis and there are no miracles, namely that everything happens as it must happen ...

Laszlo Krasznahorkai drowned me in a sea of words in this first book of his that I read, making me work like a miner sifting through dense slurry to get at the speckles of gold. Sometimes he took pity on my stressed brain and offered the gems / keys to the kingdom in short references to old poems:

“A bird flies home across the sky. It appears to be tired, it had a difficult day. It returns from the hunt, it was hunted.”

- Al-Zahad ibn Shahib

or,

“Music is the sorrow of one who has lost his Heavenly home”

- Ibn al-Faradh

The toil and struggle may result sometime in a high sense of achievement, in pride at getting to the end of a long journey and in admiration for the master craftsman who was my guide. I am not sure I want to start very soon on another of Mr. K's novels, at least not while I still have to worry about earning my daily bread in the factory, but I will keep this book in my library as a bulwark against a rainy, lonely day. The last quote is appropriately from the last piece of the puzzle, with an alter-ego of the author saying goodbye to it all:

... the ceremonial swan-song of a soul sunk into silence, of a being who has overcome inconstant fate, capable of contemplating worldly existence only alongside heavenly existence...

[from Ze'ami is leaving]

jeremy says

...but if it does occur, then anyone can comprehend that above us and below us, outside of ourselves and deep within ourselves, there is a universe, the one and only, which is not

identical with the sky looming above us overhead, because that universe is not made of stars and planets and suns and galaxies, because that universe is not a picture, it cannot be seen, it doesn't even have a name, for it is so much more precious than anything that could have a name, and that is why it is such a joy to me that i can practice seiobo; seiobo is the emissary who arrives and says i am not the desire for peace, i am peace itself; seiobo arrives and says do not be afraid, for the universe of peace is not the rainbow of yearning; the universe, the real universe - already exists.

perhaps not since the 2008 translation of roberto bolaño's superlative 2666 have i read a novel that was at once so heartbreaking, so beautifully composed, so frustrating, so imperfectly epic, so singular, so striking and effortlessly alluring, so sprawlily reflective, so... comprising the gradations of earthly reality and its many hues of horror and hopefulness. lászló krasznahorkai's *seiobo there below* (*seiobo járt odalent*) - if such an achievement could even be distilled without imperiling its potency - is a work of art and beauty *about* art and beauty. with the sacred, solemn, and sublime swirling ever nearby, *seiobo's* stories stake their claim in opposition to a world that increasingly cherishes the disposable and frivolous while overlooking and discarding the sacramental or magnificent.

...i, he added, am speaking of something else, that is to say that there lies before us, after the hazy bestial zero, a long continuum arising from all the noises and rhythms having to do with music, which then reaches - as it did indeed reach a perfection no longer perfectible - the roof of a seemingly infinite celestial vault, a particular border of heaven close to the godly spheres, so that something - in this case music - comes into being, is born, unfolds but then it's all over, no more, what must come has come; the realm dies away, and yet lives on in this divine form, and for all eternity echo remains, for we may evoke it, as we do evoke it to this very day and shall evoke it for as long as we can, even if as an ever more faint reflection of the original, a tired and ever more uncertain echo, a misunderstanding ever more despairing from year to year, from decade to decade, in a disintegrating memory that no longer has a world, no longer shatters people's hearts; no longer elevates them to that place of such achingly sweet perfection, because this is what happened, he said, and he straightened his suspenders, such a music came into being that shattered people's hearts, if i listen to it, i still feel, at some given point, after an unexpected beat, i feel, if not that my heart is being shattered, that at least it is falling apart, as i collapse from this sweet pain, because this music gives me everything in such a way that it also annihilates me, because how could anyone think that they could get away without paying the price for all of this, well, how could we even imagine that it is even possible to traverse that distance where this music exists and not be annihilated one hundred, one thousand times - if i listen to them, i am in a thousand tiny pieces, because you can't just roam around in the company of the geniuses of inexplicable musical fulfillment and at the same time, say be able to fill out a personal income tax form or prepare the technical blueprint for a building while this music is sinking to the depths of your heart, well, it doesn't work, either this person filling out tax forms or completing technical blueprints is annihilated, or will never understand where he has arrived...

with meticulous, melodious sentences of a length that would have given the estimable saramago cause for blushing, krasznahorkai's prose enchants with a rhythm and movement that, alone, make *seiobo there below* beatific and bewitching. *seiobo there below's* chapters are arranged to follow the fibonacci sequence - which can perhaps be understood as a commentary on the oft-overlooked beauty inherent around us (whether in mathematics or the natural world that adheres to its laws). whereas the hungarian novelist's works are often identified with darkness and dystopia, *seiobo there below* instead offers a glimpse into the fleeting nature of temporal exquisiteness - aesthetics and qualities that offer easy admiration were they not so frequently neglected.

...the world had changed over the past two thousand years; that part of humanity, thanks to which it had not been in vain for the venus de milo to stand anywhere and to signify that there

was a higher realm, had vanished; because this realm had dissipated, vanished without a trace, it was not possible to understand what the one or two remaining fragments or pieces dug up could even mean today, chaivagne sighed - and he moved his toes in the cold water - there was nothing higher and nothing lower, there was just one world here in the middle, where we live, where the number one and the four and the seven run, and where the louvre stands, and inside it is venus, as she looks at an inexpressible, mysterious, distant point, she just stands there, they put her here or they put here there, and she just stands there, holding up her head proudly in that mysterious direction, and her beauty emanates, it emanates into nothingness, and no one understands, and no one feels what grievous sight this is, a god that has lost its world, so enormous, immeasurably enormous - and yet she has nothing at all.

a novel as ambitious as *seiobo there below* could not possibly reveal itself (much like its subjects) in one mere reading. like the great, vast works before it, only subsequent immersions could reveal the multi-layered brilliances shimmering within. krasznahorkai is clearly a writer of great consequence and *seiobo* is easily one of the finest books of the aging decade (to say nothing of it being an exemplar of the myriad powers of translated fiction). after *seiobo's* final pages, one is left with both tranquility and the fluid sense of having just witnessed something breathtaking and beyond description - or even comprehension.

the allure of sirens without the inevitable shipwreck to follow. beauty exists - why must we forever recoil from its delights?

...he stands in not-knowing, and despite all of this dazzledness there is something of disillusionment within him, it is as if a mild, unwished-for gentle breeze of recognition strikes him as he departs, it is as if he already suspects that the alhambra does not offer the knowledge that we know nothing of the alhambra, that it itself knows nothing of this not-knowing, because not-knowing does not even exist. because not to know something is a complicated process, the story of which takes place beneath the shadow of the truth. for there is truth. there is the alhambra. that is the truth.

~translated from the hungarian by ottilie mulzet (krasznahorkai's *animalinside*)

`Ashlula` Ayse says

This is my first time reading Krasznahorkai. Surely he is a deeply intellectual, knowledgable, 'been around - seen around' wise person. The translator's role is monumental in bringing us this book in English. Krasznahorkai writes in long sentences, mostly using the fullstop only at the end of the chapters. He writes in a meditative way. Its sort of like listening to progressive jazz, where one theme hangs in the air but constantly new ones are being born of it.

In *Seiobo there Below*, there are 17 chapters numbered according with the Fibonacci sequence, sort of spiraling out to heaven. Each story is almost independent however some themes like Noh, or an artist working on his art seems to appear repeatedly. The stories take place in different times some going back 1500 years. We visit many places in Europe and Japan; in all the stories we watch an art or an artist, developing into its perfection, maturing into something divine and transcending this material world; as if peeping through a small hole in time and space.

Architectural and artistic perfection through mathematics and through faith is the main theme. In fact there is a very moving prayer of Inoue Kazuyuki at page 241 which ends 'O God the Creator, may your strenght be in performance, I give over my fate entirely'.

Although this was not an easy book to read (partly because I had to read it in hardcopy and missed luxuries of Kindle), this was a very meditative and deeply moving experience.

Zach says

Did I miss the part where the goddess Seiobo comes down to visit? Rereading the description on the dust jacket, I'd swear I just read a different book.

Okay, goddesses aside, what is going on in this book? It's a Difficult Art Book about art and about death and about the difficulties of making meaning throughout time, in every place, and through anything/everything. I'd say it's a bitter book, populated by obsessive middle-aged men who you never really get to know. I picked it up after reading the first beautiful chapter, a ukiyo-e scene in Kyoto regarding a heron and meaninglessness. I'd reread that first chapter hundreds of times; it's beautiful. Krasznahorkai's writing is really unlike anything you've probably ever read -- it cascades and ebbs and flows; it sinks into meditative mists; on the rare and blessed occasions, too, it rings like an epiphany, sings like a revelation.

But oh boy are there some slogs in between. I wish I could say "plow through the boring parts and you'll be rewarded" but eh, I'm not sure if that's true.

It's a really uneven book, to be honest. Not inconsistent, though! Every chapter (numbered in some silly Fibonacci sequence) deals with very similar themes even though they take place across time and place, the tone of the writing is remarkably on key (there are no stylistic breaks I mean -- every single chapter does that endless sentence thing), the structure of each chapter remains the same, with a little inversion at the end that arrives like a ray of sun -- not because it's warm and pleasant (hardly), but because it finally reveals what Krasznahorkai has been blathering about for the last 40 pages. The ends of the chapters are legitimate culminations, and they are tightly written; when you finish them, you feel a little sense of accomplishment and dare-I-say closure for what you just read.

However, as mentioned, there are some just flat out boring parts. And really, I try to use that word sparingly; it's harsh word to leverage at an artist. Chapter "55" (as it were), "Il Ritorno in Perugia" was the worst culprit -- masters and apprentices in a studio in 1500s Italy, clause after clause about the paint and long-past art politics. I put the book down twice reading the chapter, and it's smack in the center of the book, so it gives you fear for what's to come. And you have a right to be afraid, for this *mise en scene* reappears again, and again! So many masters and apprentices in studios. Sigh.

Krasznahorkai doesn't give you much to be hopeful for -- not in his big themes (can't fault him for that necessarily; the world is a depressing place and hey, the nihilists might be right), but not even in his characters. I'd say contrary to Virginia Woolf's stream of consciousness, where you often do "get into the head" of the character and at least feel the movements of their own soul from time to time, each and every one of the characters peppered throughout *Seiobo* remain mostly at a distance. This does have benefits -- the author is good at using "wandering perspective" or shifting narration. You'll be in the middle of a sentence -- well, you're pretty much always in the middle of a sentence in this book -- and realize that the perspective has shifted to another character, and you're seeing the person who was the 1st person narrator a moment ago in the 3rd person. Krasznahorkai writes about obsession well too, as most of his characters exhibit some marked obsessive qualities.

If you are not an art historian, or don't particularly enjoy art from antiquity $_ (?) _ /$, have Wikipedia on hand or expect to be utterly confused. Many of the chapters deal with some mysterious or otherwise shrouded genesis story of a particular piece of art (or temple, in the "Rebuilding of the Ise Shrine" chapter, for

example), but this mystery at the heart of the chapter is never explained to you outright. If you didn't study this stuff, you'll learn something from this book at the very least. Most of the book oscillates between the worlds of Western art from classical times to, I don't know, Renaissance (I think?) and the worlds of classical Japanese architecture and Noh theater. (With a scary chapter on hell and the inevitability of Chinese dynastic cycles at the very end.)

There is clearly something ineffable about his writing. His ability to balk at any conventional sense of meaning (in life, etc.) is interesting and mighty depressing; his knowledge of art is truly staggering; his willingness to take on an "experimental form" of writing for an entire book, well, you've got to give him points for that. But I'm not sure what it all adds up to. His unwillingness in this book, with the exception of the very first chapter with the heron, to engage with non-capital-A art ended up being very frustrating. Sure, art from antiquity is amazing, temples are beautiful and have incredible stories, but humanity's enduring struggle to make meaning is not so severely limited to art.

That's why I'll mention just one more time how much I liked the first chapter. To simply bear witness to the world, to look and listen and experience whatever synesthetic epiphany (or not) is possible -- now that's a compelling vision for making it through life.

Lee says

"Immanence" is what you get when the spiritual world permeates the mundane. The word appears on the inside flap and nicely sums up this one's primary theme (secondary theme = inevitability of death and being forgotten forever under the force of time). Most of this seemed benevolently mundane to me, read at a slow fluid pace that so often accelerated as it reached the highest peaks. The first 50+ pages I read nearly blind, as though through a scrim of not quite comprehending between words and mind, not quite engaging, eyes covering the long sentences en route down paragraphless pages, anticipating some iridescent fleeting beauty below my steady gaze to spear and then hype on a certain book-related social media site, like the Ooshirosagi, that enormous snow-white bird in the first section/chapter/story. The prose achieves at times a sort of motionlessness, replete with unfamiliar (to me) names and terms from Japan, Italy, Greece, elsewhere, often from the art of antiquity, the eye passes over them as the mind in part thinks OK it seems like the author is really integrating research or specialized knowledge about Noh mask building etc, how do I feel about that, is he doing a good job, does ignorance of all this enhance the text's authority and does it jibe with the primary and secondary themes noted above? Yes I'd say, plus it opens little doors one might walk through one day via Google. In general, throughout I trusted that sweet fish to spear would appear at some point, and they do in nearly every chapter/story/section, usually achieving for stretches the highest level prose I've read in contemporary fiction in a long time. It's almost formulaic, maybe even absolutely formulaic, but it seems like his own formula and the prose and insight and unexpected turns cannot be faked. Toward the end, the last 100-150 pages, there's a self-referential level I appreciated, about the Alhambra's intricate, ecstatic patterns that appear behind not particularly elaborate or enticing entrances, for example, the landscape painter's parallel lines, the rant about baroque music, probably in each part actually but I only really began to register it as I read enough to recognize the lines that seemed like self-referential explanatory explorations. The Acropolis story (view spoiler) seemed like the best standalone piece, the one I'd scan and distribute to creative writing students if I still taught. The blinding light atop the Acropolis, so bright the traveler can't really even see the place he's traveled to -- reminded me of traveling to Machu Picchu and not being able to see much thanks to fog and rain, which maybe in the end is more memorable and beautiful in a way than seeing it the way it appears on the postcards. All sections are similar, all definitely cast in the same prose style/narrative voice, but I appreciate the variation in geography, time period, and type of male protagonist, either a monk-like solitary expert deeply engaged in his craft or a novice/normal guy experiencing that sense of immanence in an ancient work of art, the Venus de Milo, a copy of a painting by

Andrei Rublev (a favorite movie), etc. Loved that all the beauty and specialized craftwork of the past is buried like blind screaming dragons and only occasionally is grasped these days on earth. 4.5 stars, rounded down since the first fifty pages and the last fifty pages sort of sandwiched this one's accessible greatness and nearly straightforward sections between dense blocks of prose I'll need to reread (and then maybe knock the rating up to five stars). I'll try to add some quotations later maybe. My first Krasznahorkai but I'll get to the others in 2017, assuming the world doesn't end. Read this thanks to Michael Silverblatt's interview here: <http://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/show....> There was something about the paperback, its glossy white covers and iridescent illuminated lettering and French flaps, that made reading this a real pleasure, too.

Justin Evans says

I dissent.

Look, I think Krasznahorkai is one of the most interesting writers working today (that I know of). I wish more of his books had been translated; I think 'Melancholy' is one of the greatest novels of the last century, and I wish all the people writing in English today would read his books and try to get closer to his baroque style than they are to the dishwater-dull post-minimalism that everyone seems determined to practice. Now, all that said, this is the worst of his books to have been translated so far (leaving aside *Animalinside*), and it isn't even close.

The wonderful style of the earlier novels was already leaning toward mannerism in 'War & War,' and here it tips over completely. Perhaps it's just the translator (I'm not qualified to judge) but these 'long sentences' aren't long sentences, they're run-on sentences. They're not the product of complex syntactical maneuvers, they are the product of simple addition *and* that process of addition never seems to stop *and* there is no reason for the sentences to be strung together like this *and* they could easily have been divided up (etc...)

The bleakness of the earlier novels is supposed to be alleviated a bit here, which might be good? Or not? I guess it's a question of taste. But regardless of your opinion there, I find it hard to believe that people really find this 'life is made worthwhile by the approach to beauty' stuff convincing--not because that idea is inherently unconvincing (though, well...), but because it isn't convincing *in this book.* A large part of this failure is probably due to the unnecessary length of the thing.

You, devotee, are going to say there's some master plan here involving fibonacci sequences, or, as the front flap suggests, Seiobo overseeing human attempts to reach beauty and so on. If there is, I demand that you explain it to me! I'm not so thick that I can't get it if someone tells me what I'm meant to be getting. Is it all the variations on a theme? This is not the *Diabellis*; this is a minimalist hammering one tone 233 times, then shifting one semi-tone and hammering that one 377 times. There is variation, yes. But variation to what end? It isn't clear.

The worst thing about the book, though, is that too many of the pieces could be replaced by a good color plate of the art-work with which they start, and we would lose very little.

Perhaps if you read one story a week for a few months, this would be less of an issue, and I encourage potential readers to do so, because there are rewards here. The first piece, in particular, is wonderful--and avoids the dull clichés about reticent Japanese artists, or money-grubbing Renaissance European artists that fill the rest of the book. Also well worth it: 'The Exiled Queen,' which actually develops, rather than over-doing one point; 'Distant Mandate,' in which the long sentence serves some function; 'Private Passion,' a funny rant about music, an actual variation in a very visual-art-heavy collection; 'Ise Shrine'; and 'Screaming Beneath the Earth.'

Chuck LoPresti says

His most difficult and complex work yet. These stories operate like mandalas in that they use rhythm, tone and position to deliver meaning. Each segment progresses in Fibonacci's sequence, and draws readers towards an understanding of art and artists primarily. How things are made, or compiled rather and then taken back apart and ingested is a constant theme throughout. Krasznahorkai makes literary music that has nothing to do with improvisation but rather a masterful interpretation of traditional expression. As seen in Ensor's masterful drafts like the Skaters and The Cathedral - it's rhythm and tone that shows the skill of a unique and highly articulate voice. Transcendence is also a constant point of focus and there's no place for the shambling drunkards of Satantango or the circus shaman of Melancholy of Resistance. The tone is heightened and elevated here as mastery of art and the experiencing of that mastery is a repeated focus.

There are moments where the prose is delightful and articulate, intense and horrifying, innovative and intellectual and also - extremely dull. The section concerning the origin and meaning of the Alhambra was simply numbing. I didn't care and I took no joy in the repetitive pattern of the string-along-sentences that echo the pattern of Muslim architecture. Just not interested.

I like Krasznahorkai when he bears his fangs or shows his love of beauty because in both terms his prowess is almost unmatched. His overtly structural patterning that at times remind me of Bernhard's Correction in all the wrong ways interests me less.

There is a Leskov-like skill in story telling that kept me engaged generally as the masterful development of K.'s skill is always apparent. It's not at all surprising that the icon painting of Rublev, something that has compelled fellow artists such as Tarkovsy and Leskov himself, gets K.'s attention to the readers delight. There is much the reader will learn about the preparation and execution of art throughout.

Towards the end of the work the examples of structure and concordance coil away from example and towards methodology - here K. does the analysis for us as he explains such structural concerns in clear terms. There's nothing symbolist here that requires reading into. This is more a display of how-to. And yet, despite these predominant formalist elements - it's ultimately the overall tone of his writing that is most engaging. My understanding of Schoenberg's Transfigured Night as not simply a last foray into romanticism but rather a mastery, an exhaustion of a method that necessitated the subsequent abandonment of a desiccated source of expression is similar to my impression of this latest from Krasznahorkai. It is clear that he is moving way from narratives about what people are doing and it seems logical that coming works might no longer need any other humanity that that of the reader when taking the words offered

There's much more to write about this...more soon. Pardon my lack of editing...

Madeleine says

My review of this stupefyingly good book appears at The Coffin Factory:
<http://thecoffinfactory.com/seiobo-th...>

Muldvarper says

I'd feel very naughty reviewing this book. I'm just a simple, filthy reader.
