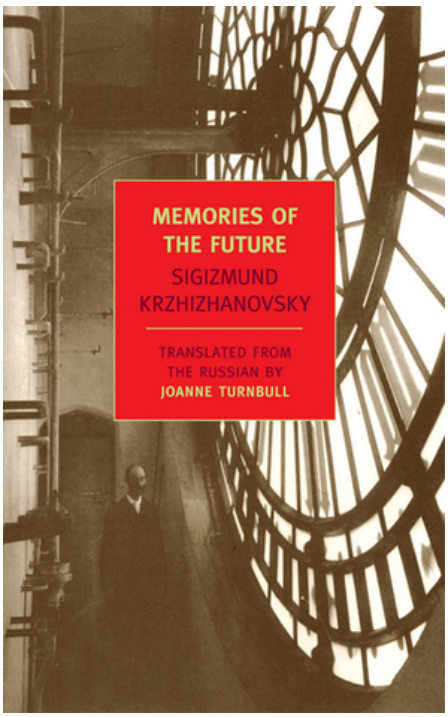

Memories of the Future

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Written in Soviet Moscow in the 1920s—but considered too subversive even to show to a publisher—the seven tales included here attest to Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky's boundless imagination, black humor, and breathtaking irony: a man loses his way in the vast black waste of his own small room; the Eiffel Tower runs amok; a kind soul dreams of selling "everything you need for suicide"; an absentminded passenger boards the wrong train, winding up in a place where night is day, nightmares are the reality, and the backs of all facts have been broken; a man out looking for work comes across a line for logic but doesn't join it as there's no guarantee the logic will last; a sociable corpse misses his own funeral; an inventor gets a glimpse of the far-from-radiant communist future.

Memories of the Future Details

Date	:	Published October 6th 2009 by NYRB Classics (first published 1929)
ISBN	:	9781590173190
Author	:	Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky , Joanne Turnbull (Translator)
Format	:	Paperback 228 pages
Genre	:	Short Stories, Fiction, Cultural, Russia, Literature, Russian Literature, Science Fiction

From Reader Review Memories of the Future for online ebook

Tony says

You're sitting in a bar, of sorts, and a rather shabby fellow comes in, dirty scarf trailing, and he does not stop at the table of students, or to the officers in their greatcoats. No. He pauses, and heads for you. A polite slight bow. And then he says, "I wonder, citizen, if you wouldn't like to acquire a philosophical system?"

You are looking through old books. And you find an old bookmark: *a flat body of faded silk and needlepoint designs trailing a swallowtail train.* It was left in a book you didn't finish and, that, a long time ago. *Thus do long sea voyages part sailors from their wives.*

You visit, more and more often, a cemetery. *You walk in--first past a chaos of crosses, then past the inner wall--to the new crossless cemetery...* You meet the old gravedigger there. You offer him a smoke. He smokes and points out Actors' Row, Speakers' Corner, Writers' Impasse. Then he tells you about the buried man who visits him.

A sampling, and a tease, what's there above, about the 'fantastical' stories in this volume. It's my second foray into Krzhizhanovsky. And, yes, it's pronounced exactly as it looks. I read Autobiography of a Corpse and reviewed that. It's mind-bending without, you know, violating any of the applicable controlled substances statutes. Krzhizhanovsky worked as a lawyer but he wrote, a lot. You could read Krzhizhanovsky as science fiction. Or you could read him as political satire. The Soviets read him as the latter. So these stories, written in the 1920s, sat in a desk drawer, published finally in 1989.

I interrupted my reading of Victor Serge's Midnight in the Century to read this. Serge's book was very well-written, about the travails of Soviet counter-revolution. But that's a story I know. So I turned here, knowing from previous experience that I'd be turned upside down.

The title piece - 'Memories of the Future' - in its abstract nugget is about a man who builds a time machine. And that's silly, yes. Although there's enough algebra here to appeal to sci-fi fans; and enough wry to satisfy those looking for political skewering. I liked it instead for the wordplay. I liked how, in the telling, Krzhizhanovsky would channel characteristics of his characters. An examining doctor became 'the palm'; an interested party, with shabby attire, became 'the faded piping'; the General wasn't the General, he was 'the General's collar'.

Our inventor is his first subject. He travels. And eventually, he meets a group of potential investors who want to hear about his 'travel'. They are described thusly:

Among Moscow's "Izvestians" scattered about on straight-legged benches and stools one might spot: a fashionable poet with a lyrical incandescence in his cold-blooded breast; a learned linguist who never opened his mouth--people called him "a mute in twenty-six languages"; a famous film director whose ever-gesticulating thoughts made him look like a six-armed Vishnu; a long-faced novelist with legs squeezed into gaiters, cheeks that twitched, and a habit of saying "as I was saying"; the fleshy, gray-fringed brow of a venerable critic; the abstractionist's deep décolleté; the round, carefully combed-over bald spot--like an eye on the back of of his head--of a publisher; the crook of a nervous hand sticking out of a cartoonist's cuff.

What they (you) hear is vague, obscured. It is 1929. I'd be careful in the late 1930s, he says.

When he went poof, there was a new tenant. But our inventor was still there:

There's a very peaceable little worm that bores into walls and cabinets and desks and taps: rat-tat-tat. A meticulous timber worm, only I don't remember the Latin name. In France they call it "fate": destin*, or something like that. Well, this little worm, this* destin*, has given you a fright. Plain as day.*

Am I wrong to hum: *da-da-da-dum*?

J.M. Hushour says

I so, so badly wanted to like this book after reading an article a few years back about the rediscovery of Krzhizhanovsky's work. Heralded as a great surrealist, Kafkaean master in that piece and elsewhere, I was taken aback to find K.'s short stories pretty mundane and, well, not very good. The longest work, "Memories of the Future" is probably the best, the story of a young guy obsessed with time building a machine he calls the "timecutter" and then maneuvering through the nascent Soviet state trying to get sponsorship for it. But even this falls pretty flat. The opening story about a paste that makes a man's very small room expand exponentially was good, too, but the rest was shrecky. Also, some of the over-described stories from the back cover all occur in one particular story, a little misleading. For instance, as awesome as it sounds there is no story about the "Eiffel Tower" running amok: that's part of another story and is of dubious worth.

Bbrown says

Krzhizhanovsky’s The Bookmark is the best short story I've read in years. It brings to mind The Approach to Al-Mu'tasim by Borges, who reviews the work of a fictional author and summarizes some of the author's works, except that in The Bookmark you actually get to hear the complete (or nearly complete) stories of the fictional creator, which are every bit as engrossing as they are depicted as being. Walking the streets of Moscow, the narrator chances to sit on a bench by a man spinning a tale of the Eiffel Tower run amok, and other fantastic stories follow. Fantastic in terms of quality, not genre: the storyteller sometimes delivers impossible tales, others are utterly realistic; all of them are good. This is a five star story, and it's worth reading the collection for it alone.

But it's not the only good story in Memories of the Future, there are several other strong tales in this Krzhizhanovsky compilation (though none to match The Bookmark). The first story, Quadraturin, might be a bit misleading because it's prone to making you think that Memories of the Future will consist of enjoyable but familiar surreal stories, setting up a topical problem (too small of a living space), and giving a careful-what-you-wish-for resolution. But it's good nonetheless, and even a collection consisting entirely of such stories would have been enjoyable. However, it's actually by far the most standard of the tales contained here.

Next comes The Bookmark, already discussed, then Someone Else's Theme, a story also dealing with a run-in with a stranger that has a particular view of the world, this time a philosophical one that was intriguing but nevertheless a step down from its predecessor. Then comes The Branch Line and Red Snow, two stories where the strangeness of Krzhizhanovsky's stories is at its zenith, literally concerning dreams instead of

merely being dreamlike. The Thirteenth Category of Reason is a return to a more standard story, a gravedigger relaying an anecdote about a bothersome corpse and their travels together. Lastly comes the longest, titular story Memories of the Future, as much of a hard science fiction take on time travel that I've ever read, though it also discusses the psychological aspect of such a topic as well. It spends much of its length discussing the technical side of time travel, but the most interesting aspect of the story is how other people react to the main character Shterer's obsession: the people around Shterer see the possibility of a time machine as a way to escape their poverty, pending prosecution, or death itself. Others fear knowledge of the future, and its contradiction of the soviet party line.

Thus, there are a variety of stories here, told in a variety of styles (Memories of the Future, for instance, taking the form of a summarized biography of the main character, with frequent reference to another biography of that character written by another character in the story). Despite this, though, all of the stories are distinctly Russian, dealing with the post-Revolution world that Krzhizhanovsky inhabited. They are critical of the system, even suggesting the eventual demise of the Soviet Union, so it's easy to see why they weren't published in Krzhizhanovsky's lifetimes. I'm glad they were eventually, though.

After reading The Bookmark, I knew that this wouldn't be the last thing I read by Krzhizhanovsky, even if the rest of the stories were garbage. And they weren't garbage, this collection would have been solid even if it lacked The Bookmark, even if some tales were a bit underwhelming. As a whole, Memories of the Future averages out to four stars. One more thing to note is that Joanne Turnbull's translation was masterful, and I'm glad she is the one who has tackled Krzhizhanovsky's other works.

Postscript, February 18, 2018: It's been just shy of nine months since I read Memories of the Future, and the strength of The Bookmark has stuck with me in a way that few stories do. From the cat on the ledge to the couple reliving their days in poverty with their friends, it's a masterpiece (it's so great that I'm surprised to find I didn't go into more detail about it in this review). Oftentimes my approach is to average out my feeling towards the stories in a collection, which almost always results in a middling rating unless I'm reading something by Calvino or Borges. Here, I think the more appropriate move is to rate the collection based on its best story. So, for me Memories of the Future is a five star collection, the mediocre parts of it fading away and the best imprinting themselves upon your memory in the best possible way.

Kevin Tole says

Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky never managed to get a book published in the Soviet Union in his lifetime (1887 - 1950). It was not until 1989 that his work started to be published, now stretching to five volumes in Russian. So it was with delight that I discovered this translation of probably his best known short story and six other short works in 'Memories of the Future', published by the New York Review of Books and translated by Moscow-based Joanne Turnbull.

What a gem this book has turned out to be. After reading as much of Bulgakov, Kharms and Grossman as I have been able to get hold of, Krzhizhanovsky has to be included with them. Had more of his work been published during his lifetime with the encouragement this would have engendered then I personally think another Russian name would be added to the canon of European masters-who-changed-our-perceptions-of-literature. Too strong? Get the book and read for yourself.

Krzhizhanovsky's background appears to be very similar to another Polish Ukrainian Russian - the composer Karol Szymanowski. The composer turned to Poland whilst the writer turned to Moscow - one to become grumpier and fated to be hailed as the new Messiah for the rise of a post-Chopin Polish music, and the other to all but vanish into obscurity despite his incredibly well-read and intellectual background in both

Philosophy and all the Arts.

As I lived very close to where Krzhizhanovsky used to live on old Arbat I feel akin in a way and also appalled that I did not know this before leaving for Mayakovskaya. Every story within this book has at its kernel a gem of an idea, and every story has at least one section that you want to underscore, highlight and write down for reference. They tend to feel like they have a 'science-fiction'-like (hawk...spit) quality, but these are not science-fiction. Everyone asks, however, for engagement by the reader. This is not some cosy little volume of Chesterton or Huxley.

'Quadraturin', the first story, reads like a short Kafka exercise in which a room's inhabitant disappears in the suddenly expanding dimensions of his previously assigned cosy cubby-hole. The second story 'The Bookmark' removes the writer from the writing by several dimensions and we are off into Flann o'Brien / Third Policeman / At-Swim-Two-Birds territory with a particular Russian slant. This is a writer writing about a writer writing about a book in which a writer..... you get the picture. It contains what could very well be some pithy autobiographical stuff too

> "You say this is 'nonsense'. Not at all: we writers write our stories, but literary historians in whose power it is to admit us or not to admit us into history, to open or slam the door, also want, you see, *to tell stories about stories.* Otherwise, their stuck. And so the story that can be told in ten words or less, the one easily summarised, squeezes in the door, while writings, which cannot produce that *something*,remain..... nothing.

and....

> " ...the land's noblest and richest magnates raised *animals disputans*. There isn't anything to argue about in an isolated country where everything has been determined and predetermined *in saecula saeculorum* but these disputants were trained for the purpose, fed a special diet that itrritated the liver and sublingual nerve, then pitted against one another and forced to argue till they were hoarse and foaming at the mouth - to unanimous laughter and merry halloos of those that still remembered the old traditions.

The fun doesn't stop there. The next story is 'Someone Else's Theme', a wild adventure again about a wordsmith who encounters a Theme-Giver and looks to seek him out again. We're into the realm of meta-fiction again where characters talk about their lack of existence and writers fight their creations. Read this deeply and you begin to sense Krzhizhanovsky's suggestion that there is a character-like made-upness about the nature of existence. This most certainly is the existential short story with reflections by readers on characters in books and that inflexion that takes place at that point. A truly deep, psychological and meaningful story which just gets better the more you consider it. 'Someone Else's Theme' will give you hours of contemplation and pleasure as you unravel this multi-stranded tale.

'The Branch Line' is the slightest of the short strories being an evocation of dream to reality during a railway journey. But its a dream of dreaming itself and a fantasy on the 'heavy industry' of dreaming with Stakhanovites called up to the maintenance and vorsprung of Soviet dreaming.

'Red Snow' and 'The Thirteenth Category of reason' I will leave for you to discover, only to say that Krzhizhanovsky read Kant's 'Critique of Pure Reason' as an adolescent (or at least according to the

burgeoning copying from one internet site to another so beloved of yoof-innernet geekdom out there).

'Memories of the Future' itself is an absolute belter of a tale which I am not about to give away. But it is about Time Travel and has absolutely nothing to do with H G Wells. I keep looking for a picture of Krzhizhanovsky, and when I find it I think it will be the face of Shterer, the protagonist, that I see as I read the tale.

What else can I say?
get this book - its a belter and reveals an undiscovered genius who '..... coulda been a contender' errrrrrrr for something. A great writer.

Eldonfoil TH*E Whatever Champion says

Russian (actually Ukrainian of Polish parents) avant-garde with lots of originality, sweet aesthetics, and smooth ideas.....with several areas of seeming drag as well. Certainly see the connections to Kafka, Bulgakov, and Schultz that others have noted, and also agree that Mr. K's pieces here deserve high concentration and multiple reads. If I can commit to the latter at some point, perhaps I'll find this fine work at 5 stars instead of 4. In the meantime, I register this fellow under "originators" rather than "influenced by."

Jesse says

So I can’t decide what’s more shocking: that this guy is this good, or that these stories sat for decades in a Soviet basement. Sigizmund (I’ll call him by his first name as I don’t want to repeatedly type his Scrabble masters wet dream of a last name) is one of those writers whose life was in a way the finest distillation of his artistic themes. For Sigizmund this was alienation, victimization, and endless imagination in the face of institutionalized ignorance. He reminds me of Nabokov, Borges, Kafka: the metaphysical greats; he wields a perfect blend of philosophy and fiction with stories like “Red Snow” where ‘Kant’ is used as a swear word because he is a deity with the required sanctity needed to be profaned. This is a world where people stand in line for wisdom and logic not wheat bread and liquor. The state obliges, handing out syllogistic propositions which the citizens attempt to trade like baseball cards.
His motivation for writing these stories is known to be pure as Sigizmund was never properly published (read remunerated) in his lifetime (an essay on the art of titling works of fiction being the only subject innocuous enough to get by the censors). His stories were deemed to ‘radical’ (whatever that means) and to ‘experimental’ (meaning again murky). These of course were euphemistic ways of saying ‘your stories don’t glorify the communist party’ and this is the very reason why didactic soviet fiction is banausic and dead to posterity while Sigizmund’s stories are alive and offer a refreshing unique approach to Russian literature during the 1920’s.
The first story in the collection is the one with the most resemblance to Kafka. A hermetic Citizen X buys a wonder-product called Quadraturin which promises to enlarge his living space - a sorta Freudian exegesis just waiting to happen. Thus his cramped 86 square feet slowly begin to expand, with a horripilative outcome: if House of Leaves is a good Portland microbrew, then “Quadraturin” is a shot of top shelf Russian vodka (and not the imported Smirnoff that you can buy for 19.99 at Walgreens, that’s more like Tolstoy,

Sigizmund has not been commoditized). All alcoholic metaphors aside, Sigizmund really excels in surface level innovation. He's a master of synecdoche, with characters called by a single trait ("a pair of eyeglasses that popped out suddenly from behind a newspaper"), or dialogue divorcing from characters ("then suddenly he nearly knocked into these words emanating from the fog: 'Oh, dear sir, from your apartment you say…But I've been evicted from my own head'"). He also marries static objects with action verbs "the carriage steps tumble his feet to the ground". He then spins these innovations into larger more penetrating themes - shining a light on the grotesque hilarity of Group Think, or revealing the practiced art of subjugation.
His story structures are easy to label postmodern, until you remember he wrote these stories in the 1920's, thirty years before the Godfather of postmodernism wrote his first bestseller ("Lolita"). From a leveled frame tale reminiscent of David Foster Wallace's Oblivion stories (which is sort of a 'memory of the future', if you'll allow me, as Wallace wrote 70 years after Sigizmund), to a character overhearing conversational detritus, which just happens to be parts of the text of the story your reading (a Cortazar contagion), Sigizmund is constantly a decade or two ahead of his contemporaries. While modernism was hitting its stride, Sigizmund was running meta-marathons. The reason is probably his isolation added with extreme genius and lyrical legerdemain. Yet ultimately he had to sacrifice acclaim, sustenance, and artistic community in order to achieve the singular spectacular texts he was able to conjure from his insularity. But it was this sacrifice that carved out his niche: first in the basement of a Soviet archive (like a Borges story), then into the pale post breakup Russian light, and finally into the international literature canon, where his stories stand as complex as his name.

Arhondi says

This is a small hidden gem of a book. Mesmerizing writing, bordering on the surreal and fantasy, a cross between Kafka and Poe, sometimes. Acute insight into the human condition and the historical circumstances of his time. Dense in meaning, it asks for a devoted reader and rewards you greatly with beautiful writing.

Nate D says

Deft, precise words and an ever-so-dry humor charting the contours of a fantastic embedded in the quotidian, equal parts Gogol and Borges but with a philosophical, even metaphysical density that may exceed either. So so great, and highly original, especially for its time and place (Stalinist Russia). So much so that Krzhizhanovsky didn't even attempt to publish these very-non-socialist-realist stories, and they languished in a vault until the 70s. Thankfully they survived and are starting to come into translation. Excitingly, these are only seven of his hundred or so stories and novellas (and there're apparently a handful of novels out there as well).

Jesse has written much more on this already, so I'll defer further description to his review.

MJ Nicholls says

Coming up, Knig-o-lass will teach us how to pronounce this writer's cumbersome surname. In the meantime, here's seven fantastical stories. 'Quadraturin' is a slice of Russian absurdism qua Gogol. 'The Bookmark' is an early, essentially metafictional story about storytellers losing control of their characters and other opaque

meanderings. ‘Someone Else’s Theme’ continues the literary satire, spliced with a fantastical layer that makes the story impossible to pin to one thing . . . halfway into certain pages it seems the story has morphed into another entirely. ‘The Branch Line’ and ‘Red Snow’ are entirely fantastical dream-narratives with shades of Bulgakovian magic, closer to surrealism in style. ‘The 13th Category of Reason’ is irresistible black comedy. ‘Memories of the Future’ transports the time-machine yarn to Stalinist Russia in an extremely detailed SF number that predates the *nouveau roman*’s contraptive exactitude. Joanne Turnbull (translator) preserves the wordplay and unusual snakiness of his sentences, making this septet an uneven but quiet delight.

Main feature: Here is Knig-o-lass pronouncing Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky.

Sorry Ticketholders: Knig-o-lass removed the recording without telling me when I expressly asked her to tell me if she wanted the link removed. People behave oddly.

Jacob says

June 2011

> "...As for the human brain's affinity for pillows, it's entirely natural: they're related, after all, the pillow and the brain. For what do you have under the crown of your head? A grayish white, porous-plumose pulp wrapped in three pillowcases. (Your scientists call them membranes.) Yes, and I maintain that in the head of any sleeper, there is always one pillow more than he thinks. No point pretending to have less. No, sirree. Off you go!"
> (From "The Branch Line", p. 96)

Well, I can't speak for anyone else, but *my* brain certainly feels like a pillow.

The seven stories in Memories of the Future, all written in Moscow in the 1920s, didn't quite get Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky (may I call you Siggy?) in trouble, but they were still too subversive--not Soviet-friendly enough, that is--to be published; they certainly didn't capture the mood the government wanted the times to have. Siggy's vision of the present situation was hardly ideal, or pleasant--never mind that his vision of the future, as told in the title story, was even worse.

In "Memories of the Future," a hapless inventor finds his work on a time machine delayed for years by revolution and war; when he finally finishes and tests the device, the future he finds is just as unsatisfying as the present. In "Quadraturin," (check out the short film here), a man tries to escape the allotted eighty-six square feet of his apartment by applying a "biggerizing agent" to the walls, and ends up lost in his own room. A corpse in "The Thirteenth Category of Reason" misses his own funeral and gets little sympathy from the living. In "Red Snow," a man with a very hard job--"being out of a job"--resigns himself to wandering the streets, and even ignores the line for logic. Elsewhere, wanderers, misfits, and the out-of-luck trade themes and swap stories-within-stories, because there seems to be nothing else to do.

I'll admit, I bought this book because I liked the cover, and because I couldn't pronounce the author's name, and because it was published by NYRB. As penance for being somewhat shallow, I'll also admit that a lot of what Siggy--sorry, *Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky*--wrote went *wayyy* over my head. Siggy K. was a fantastic, brilliant, clever, super-imaginative genius writer whose brain could run circles around my own poor pillow-brain, and each of these stories is testament to that. One read-through isn't going to be enough--I'll need

several, because Krzhizhanovsky deserves to be read by more and better readers, and to skim through it and hope to 'get' his work just won't cut it.

Hadrian says

First off, the author's name is pronounced Kurr-zheh-zhuh-*nov*-skee. Now you, too, can dazzle and impress your friends!

This is a set of unpublished short stories written in 1920s Soviet Russia, and were never shown to a publisher, out of fear of being too subversive and dangerous to show. These were also concurrent with the decline of the Soviet *avant garde*, and their gradual replacement with the institutional kitsch of Stalin's joyous peasant propaganda.

These stories are very much a grab bag. Some are like Kafka's parables, darkly humorous, (ex: Quadraturin), some are dreamy surreal narratives (the Eiffel tower galloping along the streets of Paris) and some are so boring as to be incomprehensible.

But even the 'worst' stories still have fun ideas to play with, the fragments of interesting ideas, and broken pieces of brain candy. One story (not a bad one, for example) is about a mad scientist who wants to make time go in a circle, and another is about a street peddler who sells philosophical systems and aphorisms.

These are the sort of stories that Stalin's dreary little world needed, and also the sort which our slightly less dreary world could use as well.

Chuck LoPresti says

Really an amazing read. It's getting harder these days to experience something that is really inventive but this author accomplishes that task, at the least, with ease and grace. If you're familiar with the sort of fantastic reality of writers like Schulz, the younger Karinthy (Metropole), Kosztolanyi (Kornel Esti), Bely's Silver Dove and Yuri Olesha (Envy) you will find it a bit easier to digest these oddities. If you say Krzhizhanovsky three times fast whilst looking in the mirror you would see a free coupon appear for his next NYRB release if Sigi controlled reality as well as he controlled his prose. I must confess at times I found his writing a bit exhaustive - but I'm not sure if it was my condition, the translation, or the sheer density of ideas presented in his writing. This is very dense reading apart from The Branch Line which shares Szerb's light touch. I understand the Sigi was once at work on a libretto for Prokofiev's Eugene Onegin but I think he would have better suited for Stockhausen's more ear-friendly moments. Like Schulz (Street of Crocodiles) and Szerb (Pendragon Legend) themselves - Krzh's Shterer spans the heights of intellectual contemplation and the bowels of the concentration camps. All three writers seem be be so acutely aware of the potential/threat of human cruelty that they were compelled to the fantastic. If you can watch Willy Wonka and perceive the Swift-like notions of social criticism as reflected by the carnival mirror rather than observed through a looking-glass you should enjoy Krzhizhanovsky. My biggest challenge is trying to decide who to share this book with next. It's almost too scientific for the surrealists, too playful for the symbolists and too pointed for the absurdists. My smallest challenge is loving it unconditionally - and seeking out more K-r-z-h-i-z-h-a-n-o-v-s-k-y.

Jonfaith says

A philosophy of life is more terrible than syphilis and people - you have to give them credit - take every precaution not to become infected. Especially by a philosophy of life.

Obscure authors are only exhumed with praise, not sober reflections on potential inclusion in the canon. No, hysterics and mashed analogies are required; its as if _____ had a baby who grew addicted to mescaline and rewrote _____. Rebirth also requires nudges and casual mention. I suppose that was Goodreads has become a nudging machine for the authors without bodies. Can you feel the tension between the molecular and molar now? I thought you could.

http://www.nybooks.com/books/authors/...

This collection is astounding. These are stories of the highest order. These pieces are in the ball park with Borges and Kis.: I mean that. That said, they remain unusually foreign and unique. This isn't as if anyone went drinking with anyone else as interpreted by Ozu or Bresson; such be Rhizomic. These are dreamy portraits which ponder the possible and deflate in the face of the horrific

Everyone needs to read these, quickly now.

Dirk says

Sometimes it takes a bit of work to read a work of genius, but Krzhizhanovsky is worth the effort. Writers and teachers of writing speak of narratives being either character driven or plot driven; the stories comprising Memories of the Future are driven by ideas, oftentimes breathtaking in their scope, intelligence, and force of imagination. Reminiscent of his contemporary, Andrey Platonov, Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky's forays into surreal landscapes provide both the author and reader a vantage point from which to view Soviet Russia--through a distorted lens into a funhouse mirror--as perhaps the safest alternative to a direct examination of an environment in which artistic and other individual freedoms were suppressed. The story "The Branch Line" is a case in point. There the protagonist finds himself exiting a train in a place where the residents are manufacturing nightmares with the intention of shipping them back to the realms of daylight consciousness. "!ALL HANDS TO THE HEAVY INDUSTRY OF HEAVY DREAMS!" a sign proclaims, at which the main character tells himself "I'd better turn back." Once he is off the rails, as it were, turning back is easier said than done. These are chilling, sobering, thoughtful tales, all the more remarkable for having survived the times in which they were written.

Sean says

Yes indeed, that is some fine, surreal Russian writing right there (and quite a job of translation). Stories much weirder than stories generally have a right to be, plus a long one about a time machine inspired by H.G. Wells.

John says

Pretty wonderful stories of ideas, strange and claustrophobic and surreal and biting. Devoid of socialist realism or prol art student experimentation, these tales are proto-science fiction or weird tales of mystery.

QUADRATURIN - a smear of a new solvent achieves the poor Moscovite's dream of unlimited living space. To much horror.

THE BOOKMARK - the story soars through the tight pages of other people's reading

SOMEONE ELSE'S THEME - examines the errant, moorless scholar, the critic, and a narrator intent upon retracing the magic of enlightened conversation.

THE BRANCH LINE - exists to illustrate the terror of commuting, the disruption of modern rail travel.

RED SNOW - art and death and the meaning of other peoples' grave sites.

THE THIRTEENTH CATEGORY OF REASON - a ghost tale of living too long.

MEMORIES OF THE FUTURE - HG Well's Time Machine update for the end of history. Stalin makes the protagonist disappear in the end.

Khzhizhanovsky is no poet, nor does he master the perfect turn of the phrase to imbue his stories with a universal charm. The cold, neither, creeps in between the floorboards nor frosts the souls of the passerby because he writes IDEAS, not stories. These tales bristle with profundity and struggle through systems, the chickenwire of the post-war Revolutionary Soviet society. These stories bring forth the "end of history" in each profound last paragraph and every last line an epitaph.

Fine addition to the ever growing wealth of literature dealing with the failure of the bourgeoisie intellectual pencil pusher, haunted by his own irrelevant mortality.

Brian Berrett says

I have to admit I was very excited to pick this book up and read it. I went into it knowing I may not enjoy the writing style. I both did and didn't. The book is a compilation of seven short stories. I thoroughly enjoyed three of the seven. The other four were, and you can quote me on this, "meh".

The three I enjoyed were:

Quadraturin, a story about a man in a tiny apartment who is given a salve that, when applied to the walls of the apartment, will make it grow. This was a fun story about being careful what you wish for. It is also a story about the harsh living conditions in Moscow at the time of the writing.

The Thirteenth Category of Reason. This one was my favorite. It is about a grave digger and a corpse that visits him. Again, it tells the story of the circumstances in Russia at the time the author is writing the book. The masses of people and that many of them are merely like walking corpses due to the oppression and depression. I actually have a son who lives in Russia and many of these depressions are in fact alive and

well.

Memories of the Future. I've always enjoyed stories about time and time travel. This one reminded me some of Wells's The Time Machine.

I really didn't care for the other four stories so I won't comment on them much. If you are reading this review you have likely read other reviews on them and I too found them a little difficult to follow. His writing style is to take you from one thing to the next and it can be done quickly and if you aren't following his train of thought, you will feel left behind.

It is because I only enjoyed three of the seven that I gave the book three stars. The ones I liked would be rated higher and the ones I disliked, lower. I'll simply average them out to a three.

I hope this doesn't discourage you from reading the compilation. Read my favorite first if you like. Then, if it is to your liking, keep going. There is a lot to learn about Russia during the early 20th century. Enjoy!

Brian Gramman says

In each of Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky's seven stories that are found in *Memories of the Future*, a character takes to the streets of Moscow to reflect on the central focus of the narrative. There's Sutulin, restlessly pacing back and forth, too afraid to enter his ever-expanding apartment. There's the "theme catcher" from *The Bookmark*, lamenting on the lack of artistry in contemporary Soviet Literature while making up incredible new stories just by observing his surroundings. There's the gravedigger from *The Thirteenth Category of Reason*, riding a tram with a dead man who was too late to go to his own funeral. And there's Max Shterer, sitting on a park bench with nowhere to stay now that he's back from the future. The characters' understanding of where they are and why they are there is central to the work of Krzhizhanovsky, a man who seems to have loved where he was without necessarily loving *when* he was.

The stories were very hit-or miss for me. I loved *Quadraturin* and *The Bookmark*, liked *Someone Else's Theme* and *The Thirteenth Category of Reason*, had mixed feelings about *Memories of the Future*, and couldn't get into the others at all.

Because of the limited amount of space an author has in a short story, creating a sense of place is crucial if the reader stands any chance of connecting with the narrative. If it takes too long for the reader to find his/her footing on whatever/wherever the literary terra firma of the piece may be, there just isn't enough time left to say anything interesting. Krzhizhanovsky deals with some lofty, abstract concepts, and I thought in *The Branch Line* and *Red Snow*, both of them heavy critiques of the Soviet Union, he didn't give himself room to flesh those out.

When Krzhizhanovky's on the ball, though, he's a funny and incisive critic of the world around him. *The Bookmark* in particular stuck out to me in this regard. Centered around a narrator who is interacting with a brilliant, unpublished writer (which parallels Krzhizhanovsky himself, as none of the stories in this book were published in his lifetime), we get a great feel for the limitations on artistic expression in Russia, even before Stalin's Great Purges.

While not one to be overly bitter about things, Krzhizhanovsky writes like a man who knows he was born at the wrong time to be successful. He was gracious enough, however, to not hold that against the city he inhabited. Moscow comes to life in these stories as a city filled with buildings that have given up and people who haven't. I'm far more familiar with literature based in Saint Petersburg, so I really enjoyed the

opportunity to explore a new city through a contemporary author's eyes.

In Joanne Turnbull's introduction to the book, she includes a quote from Krzhizhanovsky about why Shakespeare's work was so inundated with dreams:

> *"The answer is plain. A dream is the only instance when we apprehend our thoughts as external facts."*

Krzhizhanovsky wrote the way he dreamed, imagining new ways to evaluate life, death, time, and creativity while he wandered through a park in Moscow.

Alta says

Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, Memories of the Future (tr. from the Russian by Joanne Turnbull)

This book written in the 1920s in Russia by a man who couldn't publish because what he wrote couldn't satisfy the "realist" taste of the Communist authorities is not an easy read, but it has some extraordinary pages. Some American reviewers call him "surrealist" because the reality he describes doesn't correspond to their definition of reality. Bullshit! What would people do if the word "surrealist" didn't exist? This has nothing to do with surrealism. Maybe the Soviet reality of the time was surreal, but poor Sigizmund had no intention of being "surrealist"! Let's remember that the surrealists were either being playful or were trying to subvert the "rational" way of looking at things. But Russian and East European writers don't need to "subvert" this rational way of perceiving the real because they don't perceive it in this rational way to being with. They are naturally "irrational" (that is, according to the Western definition of "reason")—ie, they do not necessarily use a cause-effect logic.

SK was a kin soul to Felipe Alfau. His characters not only become independent of their creator, but turn into critics, denying their author's existence—"they are the book's atheists."

In one of the book's dialogues, one of the characters asks, "What distinguishes a creator of culture from its consumers?"

The answer is the best definition of the artist I have ever read:

"Honesty"—and this is why:

What distinguishes them is the fact that, unlike other people, the creator gives back what he receives on credit from nature. Every day the sun "lends its rays to every one of us." To give something back is a duty of anyone who "doesn't wish to be a thief of his own existence. Talent is just that, a basic honesty on the part of 'I' toward 'not I', a partial payment of the bill presented by the sun: the painter pays for the colors of things with the paints on his palette […:] the philosopher pays for the world with his worldview."

Gregsamsa says

If you read these stories while populating the shadows in the back of your mind with Kafka, Szerb, and Bulgakov, you will find yourself imagining a *literal* existence of the *zeitgeist*, expecting it at any minute to startle you with table-rapping or producing manifestations of luminous text-textured protoplasm. How is it

possible that Krzhizhanovsky and Kafka did not know each other unless the transmission was clairvoyant, the medium the ethereal *zeitgeist*? Look! There it is! Oh, wait, that's just the ghost of Gogol.

These stories have that cold yet seductive tone by which a deadpan delivery narrates the most dreary fabulism and chilly surrealism. The most haunting one is the opener, when a man stuffed like old letters into his shoebox of an apartment is approached by a pair of salesmen straight out of The Trial. (view spoiler) Gorgeous, just gorgeous.

Summaries of his work will highlight the oppression experienced by the writer, but do not be led to believe that these are neat political allegories; we are a long way from the cozy idyll of Animal Farm. *Dreamlike* is such an overused descriptor of fiction that I would resist it were there any other thing in this dimension to compare with Krzhizhanovsky's world. The most his work has in common with dreams is that nonplussed affect your floating-eyeball mind often takes on while cataloging the most bizarre events. This is fantastic literature that does not know it is fantastic, calling for no heightened description nor hyperbolic language. There is simply what happens, but the flatness of tone goes unnoticed, drowned by the dread-sensation it signals with the impression that under--or behind, or within--all the proceedings is something knowable only through these unreal approximations.