

Day of the Oprichnik

Vladimir Sorokin , Jamey Gambrell (Translator)

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One of *The Telegraph's* Best Fiction Books 2011

Moscow, 2028. A cold, snowy morning.

Andrei Danilovich Komiaga is fast asleep. A scream, a moan, and a death rattle slowly pull him out of his drunken stupor—but wait, that's just his ring tone. And so begins another day in the life of an oprichnik, one of the czar's most trusted courtiers—and one of the country's most feared men.

Welcome to the new New Russia, where futuristic technology and the draconian codes of Ivan the Terrible are in perfect synergy. Corporal punishment is back, as is a divine monarch, but these days everyone gets information from high-tech news bubbles, and the elite get high on hallucinogenic, genetically modified fish.

Over the course of one day, Andrei Komiaga will bear witness to—and participate in—brutal executions; extravagant parties; meetings with ballerinas, soothsayers, and even the czarina. He will rape and pillage, and he will be moved to tears by the sweetly sung songs of his homeland. He will consume an arsenal of drugs and denounce threats to his great nation's morals. And he will fall in love—perhaps even with a number of his colleagues.

Vladimir Sorokin, the man described by Keith Gessen (in *The New York Review of Books*) as “[the] only real prose writer, and resident genius” of late-Soviet fiction, has imagined a near future both too disturbing to contemplate and too realistic to dismiss. But like all of his best work, Sorokin's new novel explodes with invention and dark humor. A startling, relentless portrait of a troubled and troubling empire, *Day of the Oprichnik* is at once a richly imagined vision of the future and a razor-sharp diagnosis of a country in crisis.

Day of the Oprichnik Details


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From Reader Review Day of the Oprichnik for online ebook

David says

"Somos la jauría del Amo. Hemos de mantener la mente fría y el corazón limpio".

La literatura rusa moderna (desde el S. XIX hasta la actualidad) floreció como oposición al régimen (fuese cual fuese el que tocase) y es por eso que la sátira abunda entre sus obras. Vladímir Sorokin es uno de los herederos de esta corriente.

Para hablar de esta novela debería comenzar por explicar que es un Oprichnik: pues ni más ni menos que era el nombre con el que se denominaba a los hombres de la Opríchnina (la "Guardia Pretoriana" de Ivan el Terrible). Una organización que sólo respondía al soberano de sus actos, con total impunidad, fanática fidelidad y sin más razón de ser que mantener al mandatario en el poder y satisfacer sus caprichos. Pero no, no es una novela histórica. Es una distopía de una Rusia aislada y fortalecida aunque dependiente de China económicamente y como fuente de abastecimiento. Una Rusia orgullosa bajo el Ala de un único líder, cimentada en la tradición y apoyada por la Iglesia Ortodoxa dónde conviven brutalidades y ceremonias propias del S. XVI, con sofisticadas armas y gadgets.

"Qué dulce es dejar tu simiente en el seno de la mujer del enemigo del Estado. Más dulce aún que colgar por el cuello a los traidores."

El protagonista es Andréy Danílovich que en primera persona nos narra su día, sus pensamientos, devociones y acciones para mayor gloria de Rusia. Un personaje fanático al servicio de un soberano caprichoso y voluble. A través de Danílovich, Sorokin nos muestra un sistema en el que el soborno está institucionalizado y a unos hombres entregados al desenfreno y la depravación que lo defienden con guante de hierro. Son deleznable en el plano moral pero excelentemente pagados; por su duro trabajo, los Oprichnik gozan del derecho de quedarse con propiedades y disfrutar de las mujeres de "los enemigos del estado ruso" Con hombres así, el régimen siempre tendrá un puño con el que golpear.

¿Demasiado increíble?

Yo diría que no: En cualquier estado el poder se reserva el derecho al uso de la fuerza y la violencia de una forma "legal". Es un hecho, nos guste o no.

Sorokin en esta obra lo lleva todo al extremo para ridiculizar tanto a mandatarios como a sus siervos. El humor es el vehículo que te mantiene pegado a la historia, pero no es un humor memorable. Se trata de una sátira contenida; la ironía involuntaria del protagonista dibuja una sonrisa durante la mayoría del relato y hace soportable una narración por otro lado no muy compleja y con momentos de ritmo desigual. Tras un arranque violento que tal vez intenta escandalizar o fidelizar al lector, el ritmo decrece para mostrarnos las ya sabidas estupideces de la censura y descubrimos a los personajes del mundo de la cultura como azote del soberano y por tanto del sistema.

Sorokin ridiculiza sin contemplaciones a la hermandad de los Oprichniks y al soberano totalitario y su entorno, intuyo que tratando de levantar ampollas en aquellos que se vean identificados en la Rusia actual. Pero si bien las últimas páginas mejoran el regustillo de la novela por lo desengrasante de lo absurdo, no me ha parecido una obra contundente. Tal vez porque hubiese preferido una narración más seria, con menos chiste y en la que se desarrollasen más ideas como la tensión con China por una relación de dependencia mal

asumida o el uso legalizado de algunas drogas para "estimular o relajar" al trabajador (esto último imagino que como guiño a otras obras de la literatura más que como tema a denunciar).

En definitiva, recomendable como lectura ligera sin esperar demasiada contundencia.

Chad Post says

This book grew on me. It's not as satirically funny as I expected, but it's pretty intriguing in a sort of sci-fi-define-a-corrupt-world way. Especially like the bits about Russian literature. Writing a real review for Three Percent and starting The Ice Trilogy as soon as I can. (I just saw a performance of Ice--the second book in the trilogy--in NY and was reminded how creepy/intriguing that book really is. I think it was underrated when it came out . . . or it might take the whole trilogy to provide the right context.)

OK, here's the review I wrote for Three Percent (<http://www.rochester.edu/College/tran...>)

Set in a futuristic Moscow (2028 according to the jacket copy), *Day of the Oprichnik* is exactly that: a day in the life of Andrei Danilovich Komiaga. The oprichniki were essentially a cultish "death squad" that was set up by Tsar Ivan the Terrible back in the mid 1500s to protect his ass and slay his enemies, and in Sorokin's latest novel, they do exactly that--and in graphic detail--all in service of His Majesty, the new ruler of Russia.

As a reader jumping in blind to this book, it doesn't take long to realize that this isn't exactly the Russia we're familiar with . . . In the second paragraph, Komiaga is awoken by screams, moans, and "the death rattle" emanating from his "mobilov" and recorded by "the Secret Department, when they were torturing the Far Eastern general." Then there's reference to a "news bubble," the Far Eastern Pipeline which "will remain closed until petition from the Japanese," and his Mercedov with its "transparent roof."

It's in the last paragraph of this opening chapter that we see what direction Komiaga's day is heading:

In the rearview mirror I see my homestead receding. A good house, with a heart and soul. I've been living in it for only seven months, yet it feels as though I was born and grew up there. The property used to belong to a comrade moneychanger at the Treasury: Gorokhov, Stepan Ignatievich. When he fell into disgrace during the Great Treasury Purge and exposed himself, we took him in hand. During that hot summer a good number of Treasury heads rolled. Bobrov and five of his henchmen were paraded through Moscow in an iron cage, then flogged with the rod and beheaded on Lobnoe Mesto in Red Square. Half of the Treasury was exiled from Moscow beyond the Urals. There was a lot of work . . .

Over the rest of the book--the rest of Komiaga's day--he helps destroy the home of a fallen nobleman (and rapes his wife in some surreal prose), goes to church (New Rus is ardently religious), investigates a pasquinade defaming His Majesty's son-in-law, helps pass judgement on an obscene new performance, takes a bribe, does some super-hallucinogenic mindmelding drug of Philip K. Dick proportions, tries to help repress a subversive storyteller, consults a psychic for His Majesty's wife, and participates in a oprichniki orgy, among other sordid, frequently disturbing tasks.

Since the novel's main engine, so to speak, is the attempt to describe (and satirize) an invented world, these

set-pieces work exceedingly well. It's through Komiaga's experiences that we learn about the "Western Wall" that cuts New Rus off from the stinking filth of Europe, about the political issues related to taxing all the Chinese inhabitants of Siberia, about the importance of religion, the ban on hard drugs (weed and coke are totally cool), and the restrictions on swearing and obscenity. This novel operates within one of the common trappings of science-fiction novels, in which the author ends up building a plot simply in order to show you the various aspects of the world he invented.

In this case, there's no really overarching plot to speak of aside from simply seeing what happens in a typical day in the life of a member of this special group. What they're allowed to do, how their oppression works, etc. In contrast to the sci-fi book that relies on the creativeness of its inventions (social, scientific, and whatnot), the reason Sorokin's book is mostly successful is due to its satirical charms and frightening truth that, no matter what changes, there's always a secret group of oprichniki with special privileges.

It's probably my own shortcoming, but I get the sense that some of Sorokin's targets slipped by me . . . Or, to put that more positively, that Russian readers (or readers more well versed in the contemporary Russian scene), will get even more out of this. One bit that I particularly liked (which brought to mind an essay of Dubravka Ugresic's from *Thank You for Not Reading* and plays to my obsessions) was this bit about literature in New Rus:

Bookstands are also standardized, approved by His Majesty and approved by the Literary Chamber. Our people respect books. On the left side there's Orthodox Church literature; on the right the Russian classics; and in the middle, the latest works by contemporary writers. First I look over the prose of our country's contemporary writers: Ivan Korobov's *White Birch*; Nikolai Voropaevsky's *Our Fathers*; Isaak Epshtein's *The Taming of the Tundra*; Rashid Zametdinov's *Russia--My Motherland*; Pavel Olegov's *The Nizhny Novgorod Tithe*; Savvaty Sharkunov's *Daily Life of the Western Wall*; Irodiada Deniuzhkina's *My Heart's Friend*; Oksana Podrobskaya's *The Mores of New Chinese Children*. I know all these authors well. They're famous, distinguished. Caressed by the love of the people and His Majesty.

One of the main problems I had with this book is that it's not as humorous or biting or disturbing as I expected. Sorokin has been the figurehead for contemporary Russian literature for years now. He's been featured in major publications on several occasions (like the *New York Review of Books* where he was referred to as "the only real prose writer, and resident genius" of late-Soviet fiction), with the general view being that his works are the most subversive, controversial, brilliant things being written in Russia today.

For example, almost every single piece about him that I've read (or written), makes mention of the fact that the Putin Youth symbolically flushed his books down a paper-mache toilet. Or that the untranslated novel "Blue Lard" has a graphic sex scene starring Khrushchev and Stalin. All of which ended up constructing a sort of image of a punk trouble-maker, a shocking sort of explosive writer. That may be true in some contexts, but *Day of the Oprichnik*, for all its political concerns, isn't the fireball of controversy that I was expecting . . .

Getting that reputation out of the way allows for his work to be appreciated for other reasons though, which will benefit his reputation (in this country at least) in the future. *Day of the Oprichnik* isn't a bad book, in fact, it's enjoyable to read--something that sounds odd to say when it's a book featuring a sizable helping of destruction and violence. But Komiaga's voice is compelling, and he serves the reader well in leading us through this new, perplexing world.

An interesting aspect of Komiaga's voice, that happens also to be a translation question, is the use of italicized words throughout the text. Sometimes these italics imply a special new code of sorts, like when he refers to "an order to *squash the innards*" during "a *raid*," or the order to perform a "*red rooster*." Other times, the italics are particular phrasings emphasized to provoke a certain feeling (usually creepy), like in this bit related to the nobleman's wife:

This work is--passionate, and absolutely necessary. It gives us more strength to overcome the enemies of the Russian state. Even this *succulent* work requires a certain seriousness. You have to start and *finish* by seniority.

There are so, so many of these italicized words and phrases in the book, many of which just seem odd or distracting or emphasizing the wrong word. ("I've seen many book and manuscript bonfires--in our *courtyard*, and in the Secret Department.") I have every confidence in the world in Jamey Gambrell's translation (she also did Sorokin's *The Queue* and *The Ice Trilogy*, so she definitely *knows* his work and style), but I am curious as to how these worked in the original Russian. Sometimes punctuation and other forms of emphasis don't always translate exactly . . .

Overall, *Day of the Oprichnik* is an intriguing book (a 7.1 out of 10), and hopefully in combination with the recent publication of *The Ice Trilogy*, will help English readers have a much better understanding of Sorokin's art, and not just his reputation.

Olga says

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So this is a 'day in the life' story of a secret policeman ('oprichnik') in some future authoritarian dystopic Russia, which combines all of the features of the past authoritarian dystopias of Russia. A little bit of the Soviet secret police apparatus, a little bit of Ivan the Terrible's religious ritual and sanctioned brutality, and a lot of Vladimir Putin's autocratic dystopia which praises God, Mammon, and the Tsar.

Sorokin is upfront about the grotesque things he writes. There is no getting around them. Some bits you can laugh at, like the secret police having a gay sex ritual with glow-in-the-dark penises. Others less so, like the gang rape of a nobleman's wife.

I suppose the worst thing about it is that all of this has some basis, however tenuous, with Russia today. It's one thing to compartmentalize the bad things you read about as 'only fictional', but this is a book which explicitly references reality, and so it unsettles you.

Vderevlean says

Mda, nu e de mine romanul ?sta. Are multe calit??i, mai ales în imaginea de co?mar a Rusiei din viitor. O Rusie SF, îns? nu improbabil?. E scris bine, îns? nu e ptr mine. Nu-mi plac personajele ?i, uneori, nici traducerea. Nu ?tiu ?i nu pot verifica dac? vocabularul seam?n? cu cel rusesc, tind s? cred c? nu. R?mâne îns? un roman important pentru imaginea ru?ilor despre ru?i, o caricatur? grotesc? a ceea ce ar putea deveni cândva imperiul rusesc.

Joseph says

Day of the Oprichnik by Vladimir Sorokin is a futuristic Russian novel tied to the past. Sorokin is probably better known for his novel *The Queue*. Sorokin has experienced Soviet Russia and the rise and fall of democracy. The *Day of the Oprichnik* is a single day in the life of Oprichnik Andrei Danilovich Komiaga in post-Putin Russia -- 2028.

The Oprichnik were originally part of Ivan IV's Russia. Ivan IV (The Terrible*, in the West, but Great or Powerful in Russian -- Grozny or thunderstorm) had difficulty with his nobles (boyars) and went about to correct this. His plan involved using commoners to police the nobility. In that society the common people believed the Czar, Ivan IV, to be divinely appointed to rule and his word was God's word. Using this control he was able to turn the peasant population against the nobility. The large part of this was done by a special police force called the Oprichnina. They were feared by all. Their coat of arms contained a broom and a dog's head. The broom to sweep away the traces of the criminals and the dog's head -- vicious and loyal. Executions and property confiscations were the norm. Many other nobles were exiled to the East unintentionally, but effectively spreading Russia East into Siberia. The problem this created was that the Oprichnina were only accountable to the Czar. Their new found power lead massive corruption as there were no effective checks on the Oprichnina.

Sorokin takes a reader on a trip to a Russia that returns to the past. Rule by an autocratic Czar and a renewed religious fervor in the country sets the scene. The reader will experience a day in the life of Andrei Danilovich Komiaga a rising member of the small Oprichnik unit. In addition to enforcing the royal decrees, there are also the operations of the unit as what seems to be an organized crime family. Extortion, drugs, and luxury are the way of life. The reader will also witness the variable morals where cursing is disallowed but

rape is accepted. *Day of the Oprichnik* is a novel of what happens when a society falls blindly to a ruler or religion. Although a bit hyperbolic at times its message is clear.

* Terrible although a bad translation could be used as how Ivan IV was seen by Russia's many enemies, but it was meant as a term favor. Many rulers were also described as awful. This was meant, at the time, as being awe-inspiring. Many words take on their own meaning with time like "awful" and even Machiavelli(an). Being known as Ivan the Terrible was actually a compliment to the ruler given by the people. Ivan IV was a progressive as rulers came in that time period. Yes, there were atrocities but his in comparison to peers he was not all that "terrible."

Jim says

To understand this book, one needs a little background. The *oprichniks* were a semi-monastic brotherhood that acted as enforcers for Tsar Ivan the Terrible. What Vladimir Sorokin does in *Day of the Oprichnik* is to move the institution into the near future in a post-Putin society in which the West has been walled off and the Chinese are moving into Russian society.

Sorokin is an excellent writer, though I recommend you read this Wikipedia entry before reading the novel.

The oprichniks of the future ride through the Moscow traffic in their red Mercedovs in special lanes, their cars emitting a loud snarl to make traffic move over for them. Each car is fitted with a dead dog's head as the hood ornament and a broom behind to show that they sweep Russia clean of the Tsar's enemies.

We follow one Andrei Danilovich Komiaga, one of the senior oprichniks, as he participates in the destruction of a wayward noble's estate. This consists of hanging the noble from the gate of his estate, gang-raping his wife and delivering her naked and wrapped in a fleece to her relatives, and sending the children to a state-run orphanage. There are several other tasks, including visiting a famous clairvoyant in Orenburg on behalf of the Tsarina and participating with his fellow oprichniki in a combined steam bath and homosexual drug orgy.

The author shows us aspects of the Russian character that are not usually known to outsiders, which makes this book endlessly fascinating. This is far more than an alternative history fantasy: It approaches the cross-over line into literature.

Bjorn says

It's 2027, and Mother Russia is finally great again. The Soviet years and the messy capitalist confusion that followed are long over, the decadent junkie cyberpunks in the West have been shut out with a huge wall, the Czar is back in the Kremlin, the sacred Russian church is in charge of moral, and the not-so-secret secret police keep everyone in check. Finally, everyone can sit back and be Russian - that is work hard, pray, eat black bread, and try not to notice that the Chinese are making a fortune off them.

Like the title suggests, *A Day In The Life Of An Oprichnik* borrows the structure from Solzhenitsyn's *Day In The Life Of Ivan Denisovich*, but instead of a political prisoner, this time we get to follow one of the jailers. (Well, supposedly.) Komyaga is one of the top enforcers in the secret police, and during one day he gets to see a lot of action; he roots out and hangs unwanted elements, he oversees the day's state-approved dissident poetry and makes sure it's not too subversive, he flies to Siberia to consult with soothsayers and make deals with the Chinese, he does very expensive drugs, he philosophizes on the importance of Russianness... Especially the bits about the serfs and the czar and the church and blind obedience for the greater good. Praise the classics and make sure nobody reads them wrong or writes anything new that might upset the ruling order.

Each kiosk has to have two of each product so the people can choose. It's wise and profound. Our people - God's people - should choose between two products, not three and not thirty-three. When the people choose between two they feel calm, safe for tomorrow, they have no worries and are content. And with a people like that, a content people, great things can be achieved.

It's a gleefully vicious satire Sorokin serves up, both of nationalism and Orwellian controlled pseudo-democracy in general, but also of the Putinist conservative to-thyself-be-enough vision. It's deliberately over the top, ending in an outright pornographical gangbang of the supposedly powerful, but it's hard to miss the point: going forward by going backward and demanding that everyone respect the Good Old Ways will only lead to a snake eating its own tail, losing itself in a dream of what a country should be but never was.

And meanwhile the Chinese buy everyone.

H R Koelling says

Ummmm, well... I just finished this book, but I'm not really sure what the heck I read. It's supposed to be funny, but I don't possess the erudition nor am I privy to the esoterica of Russian life to fully appreciate the humor. That said, this book contained several passages of magical realism that reminds me of Gogol, but I just didn't understand what was going on for most of the book. Still, I thought it was an OK novel, but I can't pinpoint why, other than it seems like it had a decent plot and the translation seemed pretty good. There's also some very offensive material in this book that I think many Western readers will find unpleasant: detailed descriptions of rape, group homosexual sex and blatant racism. And for some reason, which I never figured out, there are random words in italics throughout the novel. Normally, I understand why words are italicized, but in this book, I have no idea why certain words were randomly italicized. I'm sure there's just something lost in the translation. I wouldn't recommend this book to anyone, even though I thought it was a passable read.

Ksenia Anske says

This book...it's scary. It's the future of Russia re-imagined, with all the nostalgia for the absolutism gone wrong and turned inside out, where bigotry and puritanism and patriarchy and righteous violence mix with reverence and tears spilled over touching songs and hallucinogenic drugs enjoyed in the technologically outfitted dens for high-elite police whose job is to kill and to rape and to pillage and to burn, a la Ivan the Terrible, hence, oprichniks.

Brrr...this is not a book, it's a prophecy, to what happens in Russia now. Read it to glimpse the horror.
Beautifully written.

Caro the Helmet Lady says

This was a very specific mix, this book, this creepy neo-patriarchal grotesque somewhat scifi-ish dystopia. Satirical much, sometimes very funny, sometimes scary and violent, and too true to be funny, especially considering modern tendencies of Russian politics... If you know Russian, you should read it in original, the language of this book is incredible and, hm, beautiful? yeah, surprisingly, it is. And this little book will surprise you, in many ways.

Jonfaith says

Swiftian satire at its finest, I suspect Sorokin was settling some literary scores as well. The House of Ruric has been restored in 2028, The Orthodox Church is now sleeping with the FSB and the result is a compelling dynamo through One Day In The Life (pun intended.) Europe, overwrought with Muslims, is walled of and Mother Rus and ally China engage on the highest levels, altering each other's language and customs to satisfy the bottom line and the approval of the Church Patriarch.

Brian says

Very good disturbing book depicting a dystopian Russian society in the not too distant future. Characters are rich, the settings are well described and the writing is crisp and poignant.

Michael says

Welcome to new Russia, where the Russian Empire has been restored back to the draconian codes of Ivan the Terrible. Corporal punishment is back and the monarchy is divided once again, but this is the future, the not so distant future for the Russian empire, or is it? Day of the Oprichnik follows a government henchman, an Oprichnik, through a day of grotesque event.

Day of the Oprichnik is a thought provoking Science Fiction novel of the worst possible Russia imagined. But while the book is dark, it also is hilarious and then it has this wonderfully satirical nature about it. Komiaga is the narrator of this gem, an anti-hero and one of the Tsar's most devoted henchmen. While the humour and satire throughout this book is grotesque, this book is a perfect example of great contemporary Russian literature as well as a political critique.

I will admit I like these types of modern Russian Science Fiction novels, like Super Sad True Love Story, you have this wonderful dystopian backdrop as well as the high tech gadgets like the "mobilov" and then you use this to create delightfully thought provoking plot riddled with satirical elements. These witty and intelligently written books are what I live for.

Komiaga is one of the elites, enforcing the laws of the land, helping the Czar's to rule with an iron fist for the sake of the motherland and the Russian Orthodox Church. This is my first Vladimir Sorokin novel and I would like to compare this novel to one of Philip K. Dick's (Man in the High Castle to be exact); there is this wonderfully crafted story and you have these philosophical and political ideas that stick with you well after you have finished the book.

The Telegraph named this book one of the best for 2011 and the New York Review called Sorokin "[the] only real prose writer, and resident genius" of late-Soviet fiction", just to give you an idea of what to expect. Day of the Oprichnik is deliciously complex, full of garish science fiction and hallucinogenic fish. Komiaga's day might not be a typical one but it's full of executions, parties, meetings, oracles, and even the Czarina.

I loved every moment of Day of the Oprichnik, even the moments that made me think "WTF" and for all of the people that have read this book, I want to say one word that will mean something to you but not the others, the word that the person who recommended this book to me said when I finished. That word is "caterpillar". For everyone else; read the book, enjoy the satire, black humour and Science Fiction elements of this book and also find out what I mean.

TheSkepticalReader says

I feel like this book was my punishment for staying up and reading when I should've been sleeping.
