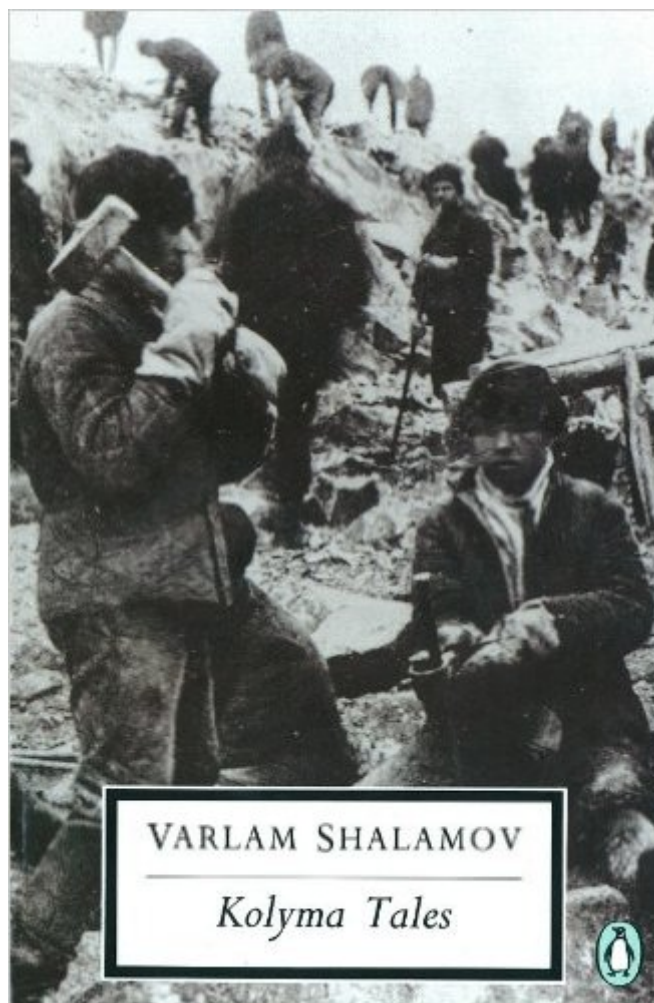


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Kolyma Tales (Penguin Modern Classics)



Synopsis

It is estimated that some three million people died in the Soviet forced-labour camps of Kolyma, in the northeastern area of Siberia. Shalamov himself spent seventeen years there, and in these stories he vividly captures the lives of ordinary people caught up in terrible circumstances, whose hopes and plans extended to further than a few hours. This new enlarged edition combines two collections previously published in the United States as *Kolyma Tales* and *Graphite*.

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Customer Reviews

Survivor of that time, that place." Anna Akhmatova, *Requiem*. Varlam Shalamov was a survivor of 17 years in the work camps of that time and that place known as Kolyma. Upon his return to Moscow Shalamov crafted a series of short stories that memorialized his time in Stalin's labor camps. Those 54 stories were not published in the USSR but were circulated widely in samizdat form. They were published in the west as *The Kolyma Tales*. They are exquisitely well crafted, powerful, and moving. Shalamov's prose style is sparse and to the point. The dry recounting of horror after horror has quite an impact on the reader. In fact, the level of passion in Shalamov's writing seems

inversely proportional to the nature of the scenes he paints; the more horrific the tale the less emotional the writing. This is certainly an effective style. Some facts do not need embellishment. The stories speak for themselves. Shalamov also does not tell the reader how to interpret a story. He simply tells a tale. Unlike Tolstoy and Solzhenitsyn, who had a tendency to tell a story and then advise the reader what lessons should be drawn from it, Shalamov simply tells a story. In that sense his stories can be compared to Anton Chekhov and Isaac Babel. It would be impossible to summarize each individual story in a short review. However, each was compelling in its own way. I was particularly struck by a few of them. The story "In the Night" concerns two men who sneak out of their barracks at night to dig up the grave of a newly deceased fellow prisoner. Why? Because they wanted to steal his relatively new underwear so they could trade it in for bread and tobacco and perhaps live an extra day longer.

Varlam Shalamov's style is minimal, brutal, and straight-forward. He does not preach to his reader about terror, torture, death, and injustice. Rather, he describes the horrible experiences he endured in short stories that are far more like eye witness narratives than the typical short story. He does not need to tell you that cutting off a man's hands is a terrible crime, he just describes the actions and allows the reader to absorb the impact as they read the cold, hard narrative. Life in Kolyma had no frills and lace, and neither does Shalamov's narrative style. I think this book would make excellent classroom reading and discussion for high school seniors. I say this primarily because of the exposure to the Soviet system of social control, especially between 1936-1956. Understanding totalitarianism and social control should be part of our education of our youth. I also think that Shalamov counters the concept that suffering is redemptive. Rather, Shalamov indicates that extreme hunger, torture, work, beatings, exhaustion, cold, and experience of arbitrary death and injustice gradually destroys any human being, depriving them of uplifting emotions, imagination, creativity, and finally empathy and a sense of self survival. Shalamov carefully demonstrates this loss of our humanity under conditions of extreme torture, exhaustion, hunger and cold by showing character after character disintegrating in unique but common ways. In general, empathy and sympathy are gradually dissolved in the horror of their experiences and are replaced by a depressed apathy. Rarely does he show the downward spiral to go from nobility to criminal cruelty. Rather, his characters become devoid of emotions, both positive and eventually even negative, before they give up.

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