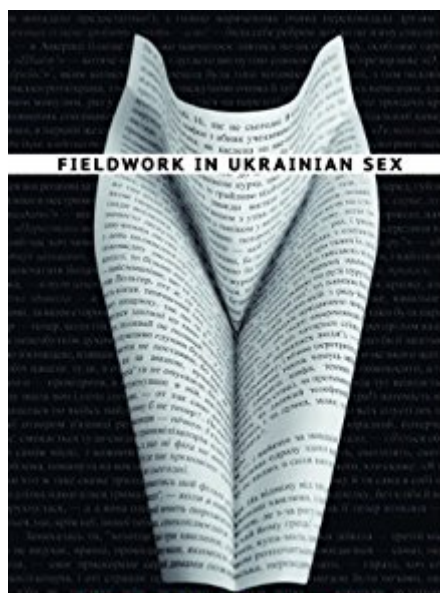


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Fieldwork In Ukrainian Sex



OKSANA ZABUZHKO
TRANSLATED BY Halyna Hryn



Synopsis

Called "the most influential Ukrainian book for the 15 years of independence," *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* by Oksana Zabuzhko is the tale of one woman's personal revolt provoked by a top literary scandal of the decade. The author, a noted Ukrainian poet and novelist, explains: "When you turn 30, you inevitably start reconsidering what you have been taught in your formative years—that is, if you really seek for your own voice as a writer. In my case, my personal identity crisis had coincided with the one experienced by my country after the advent of independence. The result turned explosive: *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex*."

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Customer Reviews

The first sentence in this novel is six words long: "Not today, she says to herself." The rest of the page, 265 words more, is the second. It takes a total of only thirty-three sentences to carry the reader through the first ten pages. That tells you something about the book. It's highly unconventional in its structure and syntax, it's written by a poet, and it reads something close to 'stream of consciousness.' Does it work here? Yes, it does, for Zabuzhko has an original voice and she writes of experiences common to more women than we men would like to admit exist. As much

as anything, this book is a long letting loose of emotion following a sexually intense but ultimately abusive relationship with a painter named Mykhola. She knew Mykhola was trouble the first time she met him. As he talked to her, setting up his later seduction of her, he casually twisted her fingers back almost to the breaking point, establishing his dominance of her while inflicting gratuitous pain. Later he progressed to verbal abuse and threats and he burned her with cigarettes. Hyper-charged fragments of Zabuzhko's poetry are interspersed throughout the book, providing counterpoint to the story of sexual enthrallment and abuse she is telling: Something has shifted in the world: someone was crying Out my name at night as though from a torture chamber And someone rustled leaves on the porch, Tossed and turned, and could not fall asleep: I was learning the lessons of parting....Zabuzhko flings out one metaphor after another, writing prose like a poet writes poetry. Some of them work, some don't, but the effect builds up, creating a dense, allusive, emotionally intent portrait of a woman and what has befallen her in a doomed relationship.

This is an angry and confused book. Some may interpret the passion of the narrative as revealing profound thoughts, but what I found in this book was mundane thoughts expressed at high volume. A seriously flawed woman in a seriously flawed love affair with a seriously flawed man is the foreground story. That they come from a seriously flawed society, Ukraine formed by Soviet rule, is the background story. The (single chapter) narrative is primarily the stream of consciousness eruptions by the author's alter ego (the seriously flawed woman). They form vignettes, and need to be accumulated and reassembled for the temporal progression of the story. There are periodic interruptions by the author who provides a third person, retrospective, commentary on the alter ego. The conceit of commentary is that it is a lecture to assembled academics; the author repeatedly acknowledges to them that they are probably not interested in the topic. Early in the book I was reminded of Kundera, but that proved ultimately to be a poor analogy.* Kundera wrote of the central emptiness of the Czech experience under communism. He wrote of the ennui of an educated Czech, and his characters responded with hedonism. There is an element of fantasy in his work. Zabuzhko, on the other hand, views Ukraine as a place of once great culture rendered banal by Soviet rule. The response of her alter ego is self-destructive behavior and incoherent rage. Such incoherent rage may have been novel in Ukraine fifteen years ago. (And it may have expressed a rage many of its readers also felt.) I think it has been long overdone in English, and that alone takes away from experience of this book.

the modern circuitous literary novel with a tradition all its own, at least since Ford Madox Ford's

Good Soldier, a sufficient length of time to have become a genre, should cause wonder why a novel this well written, entertaining, and evocative of so many literary luminaries, published in the Ukraine in 1994, written in Pittsburgh with the speed of light in less than four months, took so long to find a way to readers of English. Experimentalism and a depressed character are not the answers. Had there been a translator of the Ukrainian language ready to take on the task, we would not be getting the news so late. The telling of a love story on the sids. She's a poet and professor and he's a painter. They knew each other in Kyiv, Ukraine. She arrived in Cambridge, Mass first, a year later he followed. The relationship did not work out. There's life in the USA to blame, there's Ukraine, there's her childhood, there's her father's past of a slave's existence under Soviet rule. Clotted words, a slow onrush of run-on sentences. Paragraphs open to close pages later. The narrator, switches voice when speaking about herself from first person to third person, scarcely signaling, running her novella length monologue without chapter break willy nilly present to past, scenes spoken as remembered, as they make sense, as they fit her depression, Cambridge, Kyiv, Jerusalem. Picking up speed, her tone keens and screams like Lina Wertmüller films, like jazz novels by Black writers in the 60s and 70s, hushed from literary memory (find Clarence Major's All-Night Visitors and Carlene Hatcher Polite's The Flagellants, for examples).

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