

It turns out I've been living among monsters

by Toby Litt

Who knows, perhaps you might even leave the theatre a vegetarian? (That is, if you aren't one already.) Because, whether you like it or not, you're about to get into a massive argument – with yourself. There's a lot of anger awaiting you, supplied by you, aimed at you; opposing energies that you didn't even realise were building over the course of your lifetime. Especially since you stopped being a child who learned to read with

stories of loveable animals and became an adult who accepted that some of these animals are, in strict legal terms, fair game. But this anger you're going to feel is a different anger to the usual everyday dammit-level annoyance at clumsiness or stupidity. This will be an active, tragic anger – the kind of anger described by Janina Duszejko, the protagonist of the novel-version of *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*, as 'genuine, not to

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say Divine Anger.' Divine Anger is empowering. 'It flooded me from inside in a burning hot wave. This energy made me feel great, as if it were lifting me off the ground, a mini Big Bang with the universe of my body.'

It may be that you'll come out of this argument with yourself feeling you've somehow won. That you

this one's young; feed this one to this one. Am I really capable of this level of hypocrisy?

Yes, you are – but it's not just you. I'm as hypocritical, and as angry about it, as you are. And so are the people around you in the seats, and – shortly – in front of you on the stage. It's not just you, it's all of us,

follow Jainism and would never swat the mosquito (possibly malarial) that's sucking blood from our arm, or unless we're a merciless hunter who kills indiscriminately and makes no distinction between game and domestic animals, then we are in some way living with values that just don't fit coherently together. We're in profound disagreement with ourselves.

Olga Tokarczuk, through Janina, wants to provoke Divine Anger in us, to call it forth. She does this by forcing the acceptable everyday world to appear as it is, appalling. In her weird and thrilling tale of murder and loneliness, she comes close to William Burroughs who said of his most famous novel, 'The

'How great and full of life the world is.'

were right all along. That you don't need to change what you eat, how you think, who you are. But even if that happens, in another sense you'll have lost. Lost to yourself. Because there's another part of you, perhaps almost half, that's going to feel shock, rage, shame, and perhaps a decadent kind of awe. Am I really this mixed up? Love this animal; kill this one; eat

all humans. Unless we absolutely obey 'Thou Shalt Not Kill,' unless we



title means exactly what the words say: naked lunch, a frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork.' Janina asks –

When you walk past a shop window where large red chunks of butchered bodies are hanging on display, do you stop to wonder what it really is? You never think twice about it, do you? Or when you

order a kebab or a chop – what are you actually getting? There's nothing shocking about it. Crime has come to be regarded as a normal, everyday activity. Everyone commits it.

And throughout Tokarczuk's impassioned novel, the voices of this 'Everyone' speak back at Janina, as you yourself might. She is, after all, 'just an old woman, gone off her rocker in this wilderness'. She's really triggering, isn't she? She's the kind of person who believes in astrological speculation rather than deductive reasoning. She writes batty letters to the Police, advising them where they've gone wrong in their murder investigations – and they rightly ignore her. And when she insists on not being ignored, not being silenced or made invisible, they, they and the other voices, say to her – “Don't upset

yourself, madam. We're within the law.” “Christ, what are you on about?” “You have more compassion for animals than for people.” “What do you expect us to do?” “You must be joking...” “Don't get

so upset about things. Don't take the whole world on your shoulders. It'll all be fine.” “You must be joking...” “Nowadays, fortunately the concept of hunting has changed. We are no longer seen as people who

just want to shoot everything that moves, but as people who care about the beauty of nature: about order and harmony.”

Olga Tokarczuk's novel first came out in Poland in 2009 and was translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones for publication in 2018, yet it feels entirely contemporary. Veganism has become one of the most commonly proposed ways of addressing the climate and ecological emergency. This is explicitly brought up by one of the most cogent voices who speaks to, and against, Janina. He's a young forester, so he should know what he's talking about –

There's nothing natural about nature any more... It's too late. The natural processes have gone wrong, and now we must keep it all in control to make sure there's no catastrophe... We have to shoot the foxes, or else their population will grow so large that they'll be a threat to other species.

But Janina rages against this. And as time passes around her, as the seasons of a year go by, Janina hears in all these



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placating voices a screeching crescendo of human hypocrisy. And whether we agree with her or not, we feel her justification. Our inconsistency is intolerable. Finally, Janina is forced to cry out in compassion. 'How great and full of life the world is.' But it's another character, peripheral but also central, a summertime neighbour of Janina's, the writer, the Grey Lady – it's Olga Tokarczuk's wry self-portrait who half-says the truth. 'It turns out,' she says, 'I've been living among monsters. 'And yet there's more to say, and we complete the other half of her truth ourselves: 'It turns out I've been living among monsters. And it turns out the reason they haven't eaten me is that I'm a monster, too.' ■

Toby Litt is a writer, academic and environmental activist based in London. He has published novels, short story collections, comics and poems. His most recent book is *A Writer's Diary* (Galley Beggar, 2023). His novel *Patience* was shortlisted for the Republic of Consciousness Prize. Toby is a member of Writers Rebel, part of Extinction Rebellion. In November 2022, he and the writer Natasha Walter took part in Cut the Ties, thirteen coordinated XR actions against institutions that reinforce our dependence on fossil fuels. Both Toby and Natasha were arrested for their non-violent (but slightly messy) direct action outside the Institute for Economic Affairs.