

Leonid Yuzefovich

title

Zhuravli i karliki

Cranes and Pygmies

Novel. AST. Moscow 2010. 474 pages

Big Book Award 2009

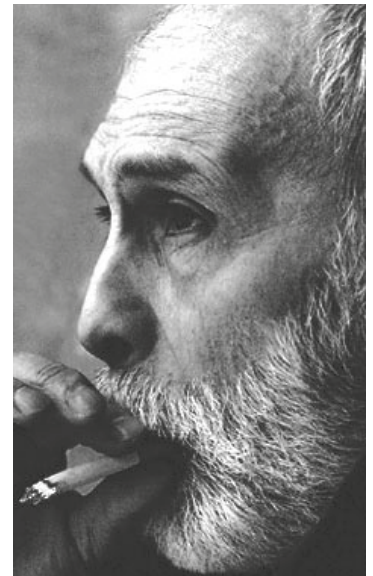
At the base of Yuzefovich's latest masterpiece, CRANES AND PYGMIES, lies the myth, known from Homer's Iliad, of the eternal war between cranes and pygmies, who "fight via human beings not for life but for death". In this adventure novel, reflecting one another as in a mirror, unfold the fates of four imposters – a young Mongolian living in the present; a forty-year-old geologist from Perestroika-era Moscow; an adventurer from the days of the seventeenth-century Ottoman empire; and the latest Tsarevich Alexis, who "miraculously survived" and turned up in the lands east of Lake Baikal during the Russian Civil War.

It is 1993 and the Soviet Union is no more. Zhokhov, once a geologist, has been forced by Russia's Wild West form of capitalism to reforge his identity. He has become a petty trader – not to say profiteer, a common figure in times like these. When a deal to sell sugar goes bad, he moves on to trading a rare strategic metal stolen from a military factory, and when that deal goes bad as well he has to face the consequences – not society and its laws, but the anti-social, sadistic criminal gang with which he's tried to do business. This soft but educated man has no choice but to toughen up. Society and the State have disintegrated. Zhokhov wanders around Moscow and finds himself in the middle of an excited crowd, hears shooting, sees men falling, and realizes that he is in the middle of a revolution. (This episode is based on the events of October 1993 in Moscow.) The government is gunning down a demonstration, as well as its own parliament.

Zhokhov's acquaintance, Shubin, a historian and a writer, is also trying to make some money and is lucky enough to hit upon a scheme that is both very timely and very Russian: he writes about impostors. Yuzefovich also offers his readers bits and pieces of obscure history in a fast-paced account of the life of Timofey Ankundinov, a petty Muscovite clerk who traveled throughout Europe claiming to be a son of Tsar Vasily IV Shuisky and thus the pretender to the Russian throne. Ankundinov's peregrinations yield a portrait of tumultuous early seventeenth-century Russia, allowing Yuzefovich to trace the hidden rhymes between events past and present. Zhokhov, too, becomes an impostor, bailing himself out of a dangerous spot by proclaiming himself to be the natural son of a famous Soviet architect. He ends up fleeing to Mongolia, where he is stabbed to death over a nonexistent treasure. His ultimate lot is the same as every impostor's: he is killed because he is taken for someone else.

The Mongolian episodes are of particular interest. For Russia, with its half-Asian identity, Mongolia is "fully Asian", a wild, uncivilized country. Each of the four protagonists ultimately turns up on the Mongolian stage, in the palace of the last Mongolian ruler in Ulan Bator.

As an extensive metaphor, this novel finds its place among the renowned classics of Russian fiction. Yuzefovich delves into the key problems and most critical features of modern Russian society, placing the Russian psyche and Russian lifestyle – lawless, ruthless, reckless, unpredictable, untrusting and untrustworthy – in a book so thrilling you won't be able to put it down until you turn the last page.

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biography

Leonid Yuzefovich, born 1947 in Moscow, spent his childhood and youth in the Urals. He has a Doctorate in History and is known to a wide audience of readers through his historical thrillers about Ivan Putilin. Yuzefovich is capable of interweaving detailed knowledge of historical fact with masterly literary style into the plot of a thriller. L. Yuzefovich lives in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

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