

Kill Fee

An experimental review by Matthew Jakubowski

Even weeks after the critic had filed her review, she could still pick up the book, flip to a random page and like what she saw, feel its voice resound inside her as the days went by one after the other. It was such a damn good book, had been so hard to write about, but she thought she had managed it pretty well. So why had her editor—someone she had pitched ideas to for three years before getting a yes to this one—spiked her review?

She was at the bar looking at the twenty-five-per cent kill-fee cheque the magazine had sent her according to the contract. There it was, the result of years of effort, sticking out like a tongue from the middle of her review copy of Albena Stambolova's *Everything Happens As It Does*¹. It was a short, dagger-like book brought over from Bulgarian into silken, brutally good English translation by Olga Nikolova. The title alone had made it worth checking out when she first heard of it online, because on days when banality seems supremely charming, a sort of philosophy in itself, most everything does just seem to happen as it does. Not as it should. Not for the best or worst, just as it does. The critic tried in the present moment to recover that initial sense of awe at the book, let it overwhelm the bitter irony she felt creeping in, and tears arose for a second out of anger and embarrassment as she glanced again at the cheque, then recovered and asked for her tab so she could leave.

1 *Everything Happens As It Does*, Albena Stambolova, translated from the Bulgarian by Olga Nikolova (Open Letter Books 2013)

There had been moments while working on the review when the title of the book had annoyed her. She had been particularly angry with her mother lately, all the sniping voicemails followed days later by apologetic texts, and the anniversary of her father's death that month had led to the requisite gravesite standing-around for a little while with her younger sister, whose daughter was eighteen months old.

'What's the book about?' her sister had asked when they were back in the car leaving the veterans' cemetery.

'A weird family with a bunch of problems. Nothing works out well for them, they don't seem to love each other. Then someone important to them dies and they all seem to wind up okay almost as if by accident.'

'So you picked it because it's like our family?'

'No,' the critic laughed. 'I didn't learn what it was about until I read it.'

'Where's it from again?'

'Bulgaria.'

'How do you know it's right?'

'I just pick books based on a feeling, I guess.'

'No, how do you know it's right in English if it was written in what, Bulgarian?'

The critic nodded and as she looked at her sister she thought of something a male character in Stambolova's book had said: 'Half of her face was identical to his ... It was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.'

'The translators know what they're doing,' the critic said. 'A lot of them are geniuses in their own right. And the publishers don't want to be made a laughing stock. They'd be crucified online if it was just Google-translated

or something.’

The baby squealed for attention in her car-seat behind them. ‘Seems a bit weird just hoping it’s really the book the author wrote,’ her sister said.

‘Even if it’s not, it’s still a good book. Kind of incredible actually.’

The critic almost added, ‘You should read it,’ but her sister couldn’t read very well. It was one of the things they didn’t talk about much, a part of the past trouble that had left Dad dead at fifty-eight, Mom bereft and addled by wine on good days, the two sisters out on different limbs: the critic unmarried with a marketing job and freelancing on the side; her sister married with one kid, babysitting when her husband was between jobs.

So it was very polite of her to ask about the book reviews. Lately she’d asked the critic to visit more and read to the baby and would hang out nearby trying to follow along. The critic felt lucky knowing that her sister would never ask again about the review being published so she could read it. Their mother never would. The rejection would remain secret. Some book expert she was turning out to be. More lines from the book rose up to sort of mock and support her. ‘She could not remember ever feeling so paralyzed and having to sit there and think. And that was precisely what she believed she was doing. Thinking.’ Was it a warning, her remembering this? A reassurance that it was okay to doubt, okay not to have to think all the time? Reading to infants was about all she felt good for on bad days months after the rejection, days that felt as bad as some of the breakups she’d been through.

Everything Happens As It Does. Shit happens. Romance happens. Nothing happens. I think, therefore fuck you. I am, therefore I love you. Nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so. Oh, to fucking die, to sleep, and in that sleep to know that it's romantic bullshit to conceive of death as some time-beyond-time where we can rest, get nostalgic, and have celestial dreams about what we lived through.

If the book was meant to get under her skin, it had succeeded. At its center was Maria, the mother of several children by two different men. And she's this enigma to them all. A fairy tale creature with long dark hair and a way of captivating people with her creepiness. Luckily, she turns out to be mortal. Afterwards everyone gets to see, that is, we get to see everyone achieve some kind of peace in their lives and then we get to close the book.

That irked the critic. She wanted more about those ugly parts. Stambolova didn't deny that her characters suffered, but she sure didn't show it in detail. She left that to the reader's mind, freeing them to sense the plot and characters' negative image. In the front of her copy of the book, on one of those bad days, the critic had written in red ink, 'But what do you do when the pain is all you can focus on and you're suffering at the centre of so much estrangement and hopelessness? How do you not just commit suicide as a gesture of truth? How do you kill off the urge to do such a thing to yourself, when the logic of those moments of despair has this attractive fleeting grace to it?'

This of course wasn't the sort of thing that belonged in a traditional book review. It was the last kind of writing any editor would tolerate, and also might get people worried

needlessly about her mental state, wondering where the persona of being a critic began and ended between the lines of what she wrote.

Stambolova's language was not poetic. But even in Nikolova's translation it had a phenomenally light touch. It felt mathematical and complex in what it evoked. The critic dreaded writing about such books; they felt beyond her. Short books were always harder to review. They contained infinitely more than the larger, baggier books did. No paycheck was ever really worth it. Shorter books like this evoked and evoked and became something else entirely in her mind, so that by the time she'd sat down to describe and contain the nature of that evocative spirit in a thousand words, the practice of literary criticism felt crude. Telling herself that she was doing some sort of good for the body of literature—this had somehow turned into a chestnut in the past few months. And not only that, she was crushing herself with hard thoughts about her role as a critic, that its imperfections as an art form were greater than any good its influence could achieve. Was this line of thinking worthwhile? Was this self-recrimination a disciplined habit that aided her work, or a senseless goading, some tic of conscience or bad breeding that did her and the species harm?

She wished she could be more like the character named Margarita from the book, who in one scene, 'was peering at the people and things around her, gripped by a new feeling she was aware she could never put into words. After all, she and words travelled their journeys separately.' How nice it'd be to go back and enjoy words again on one level, and life

on another, never feeling tempted to do the dangerous thing of bringing those together in a review, putting it out for the world to see, perhaps to judge, or worse to mock. Or get shot down before it even gets published.

The critic wondered what it had felt like for Nikolova the translator to work on passages where Stambolova addressed that sense of living on either side of the meaning of something, the border created by two languages. 'For a while she felt imprisoned in some sort of relationship, some connective tissues, like a fly in a spider's web. That was where her confusion was coming from. She was somehow present in both places at once; she was seeing the same thing separately with each eye. If she blinked, the two images would blend.'

How good that was! It could refer to so many different things in the experience of reading and imagining how the book had come into being from one part of the world to another.

At the bar, scribbling her signature to put the beers on her credit card, the critic found a short quote underlined in red on one of the pages she had marked by placing the kill-fee cheque there at random, like an act of bibliomancy: 'She was suspended between two points in time. How long it would last, she would never know. Suddenly it was over.'

The critic looked at those words and the red lines she had added, suspended between so many points in time, her life and her family's lives, those who were still there with her and those now gone, like beads still dangling on a twine of vitality and mortality together: as if they had been made so

by the book, or her thoughts on the book were affecting what might become of the living and the dead. That's what reading is, she saw: feeling alive, yet isolated, yet connected; it was about minor, hidden risk, taking time away from her life with other people to relax and learn something that might make life with other people better after she was done reading.

Then what purpose did reviewing books serve? As a way to talk about this other part of life, this reading habit that she shared? Was the shared part of it what she liked most, or the isolated personal part of it, engaging with art on her own time, in her own mind, the realm of it hidden away?

How had something so personal become a field of academic study, and a way for critics to make a living? Had that academic intrusion, this world of men in robes and hats like their religious predecessors, been the entry point where the precise yet often meaningless formal language about books crept in? What's more there was now the business of books and international conglomerates slathered over all the literary theory.

She was no longer just a reader, and far from being an academic. She occupied a middle ground closer to the publicists, who supported the publishers, who in turn were supposedly supporting the work of the artists they had banked on. And the book bore evidence of the sort of reader she had turned into, belying the new role she had in this environment.

She flipped further through the pages, continuing the bibliomancy, which yielded more of her words, not just Stambolova's or Nikolova's. There were her marginalia in red

ink and long wavy lines beneath the text on every other page. The red ink formed another work on top of the translator's, a record of the critic's reading performance, with herself in mind as the audience to leave a trail of what might be most important later on when the time came to write her review. She had also improved in her ability to perform this over time. How worthwhile was this skill? Only inasmuch as it had become part of her job, or addiction to working her way up in the field. Addiction? Or ambition? Maybe both, she thought, and realising this felt somewhat strange in hindsight.

At her sister's house not long ago she had seen something on the kitchen counter in a pile of papers, a pamphlet she guessed her sister had brought home from the library or some bookstore. It said in bubbly red cartoon letters, *'Books are fun!'* and the innocence of those words for the critic when she saw them, the hope and encouragement it wanted to carry into little kids to get them to read anything at all, made the critic's angst about her work and her role in the whole business seem funny, not like art, a bit beside the point when so many people like her sister could hardly read.

Nevertheless, books and her life in them had become important. Knowing herself and the world through them would never change. Her theories along these lines had been affected by Stambolova's book. The trouble knowing people was the same trouble knowing a book. You only know so much. You only spend so much time with the person. Then they change and so do you. With books you are who you are when you read them. Your mind is attuned to the text

in a certain way. You have read what you've read to that point in your life. A person is the person as you see them at that point; the book is the person you are at that point. A person then becomes the person as you see them at that point, not as they necessarily may be, and the book becomes the person you are at that point, as the author may have been at that point, and as the translator may have been at that point. The book a grain of sand in a sedimentary layer discovered eons later by archivist-archeologists beneath the rot of an urban landscape, several human skeletons ranged like spokes of a corolla around this vital point of focus, where they had perhaps hoped to disappear, or had perhaps entered the world.

Was that right at all? It was choppy, but yes, it felt somewhat right. But all this thinking, thinking, as Stambolova had her characters lament. It didn't have to be all that complicated, did it?

At the bar, with just a few sips of beer left, she picked up her phone to look around at Twitter and things, a switch to electronic bibliomancy.

She came across a blog post by a publisher in Prague and sighed when she saw her editor's name, followed by high praise, 'one of America's most important critics,' and so forth, a public intellectual on the rise.

Further down, she learned that her editor was a judge for a fiction award. She clicked on the link for the award and saw that the person who'd written the blog post was also on the award committee. Then the critic realised that she knew the blogger's name from somewhere else. She googled her and learned the blogger was also co-chair of

a foundation that promoted translated literature via their small press. Scrolling down through the other search results the critic found an interview in which the blogger and co-chair lamented the lack of praise and media coverage for her small press' books from Bulgaria. Clicking back to the list of finalists for the fiction award, the critic saw that one of the blogger's books was on the list and clicking back to the longlist, she saw that Stambolova's book had made the longlist, but not the final cut.

Was that it then? Had her editor declined to publish a good review of this book to please this other important person instead? Perhaps the kill-fee he'd paid her was just a small expense in the sum of things. She knew that no one would ever confirm or deny it. But as this sunk in, the critic knew that in her effort to impress the people she called influencers—in order, she had to admit, to become one herself over time—there were often many masters to serve. There was self-interest, too, always another higher rung, another step toward what might be the best level of all: freedom to trade on one's name alone, to be able to stop chasing, sit back, and have the work come to you, be it a book introduction, a speaking engagement, a column in a paper, profiles in glossy magazines, a place on a big literary prize judging panel, then a bigger one, then maybe indulge in a little breakdown and recovery: the trope of being redeemed after collapsing under the burden of all that success.

She knew that these conjectures based on a few loose facts were a bit dangerous. It could lead to jadedness, which could poison her work down the line and if she wasn't careful one of her future pieces could easily turn into creative

non-fiction with thinly veiled passages of axe-grinding and autobiography. So she tried instead to see simply that things had shifted in the time between his accepting her pitch and her sending in the review. He probably wouldn't have minded her praising the book, at first, but then things had happened, as they do. His allegiances had switched just slightly. Nothing personal. How the critic had come to know the book was still part of what she had gained. True, her work wouldn't be published and the book wouldn't get its deserved publicity. There was no real loss, was there? The whole business of literature would go on, with things happening as they do. Anything else was in the mind. It was all thinking. She could worry or feel guilty, but it might be wiser and healthier in the long run if, rather than getting angry or seeking revenge, she tried to maintain her balance and let Stambolova's mockery of 'thinking' sink in.

As she left the bar, she decided to take a break for a bit from all the hustling required to be a critic. Books are fun after all, as it'd said on that pamphlet at her sister's house. She tucked the book in her coat pocket and saw the cheque sticking out of it, like some ugly bookmark, a flag stuck into what had been a natural place of beauty for her. She plucked out the cheque, tore it up, and let the pieces fall as she walked to her bus stop.