



★ **Grey Bees**

Andrey Kurkov

Boris Dralyuk, Translator

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Grey Bees is an affecting novel in which an apolitical, impassive beekeeper's life is upended by war, despite his best efforts to remain neutral.

Russia is hungry for Ukrainian lands, but the people of Little Starhorodivka, in the zone between nations, just want to be left alone. The town's homes nonetheless empty as military forces encroach. Three years later, only Sergey and Pashka remain. These childhood enemies turned reluctant neighbors dig in, though deprived of basic resources; they lean on each other for company (and occasional dabbles with honey vodka). But while Sergey imagines that they are mutually apathetic about the war, there are hints otherwise: Pashka is offhanded about his sympathy for the Russian forces; Sergey neglects to mention his visits from a Ukrainian soldier, or the weapon that the soldier left behind.

At night, Sergey dreams of his wife and daughter, who could not endure life in Little Starhorodivka, even before the war. He longs for creature comforts, reveals a sniper's location to the soldier, buries a man caught in the crossfire, and is delighted when mail arrives. But the shelling draws nearer, exposing the men's fragility further. Sergey begins to worry about his bees, who are certain to abandon him if he stays. He plans, at last, to leave.

The harsher realities of the war are at the book's periphery; whimsical Sergey is centered, as are his secret longings and desire for normalcy. But after he takes to the road, hoping to find his bees calmer skies, the war infiltrates nonetheless: there are soldiers with guns at checkpoints; there are landmines in the path ahead. Gentle Sergey is exposed to xenophobia anew; his generosity is threatened. And because wars make enemies even of friends, suspicions germinate within him—even toward his beloved bees.

Grey Bees is a poignant, quiet, and subversive Ukrainian novel that honors the ordinary souls who endure wartime travails.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (July / August 2023)

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