Clarion Review

Science Fiction

Semmant
Vadim Babenko
Ergo Sum Publishing
978-99957-4200-3
Four Stars (out of Five)

An insane narrator with a humorously self-aware voice accentuates the rich narrative of this intriguing sci-fi novel.

Semmant, Vadim Babenko's third novel, is a science-fiction story with a literary novel's attention to the details of language. It follows the unexpected friendship between man and machine, delves into madness, and explores what it means to be human—all with a well-voiced main character.

The book's opening drips sexuality and lust as a yet-unnamed narrator describes the physical qualities and attitudes of women who tend to him during some sort of mysterious confinement. Readers soon learn that the narrator is Bogdan Bogdanov, who expresses his hubris and humor in his introduction of himself: "a genius in cybernetics, an expert in everything expressed in digits." Bogdanov is confined to a mental institution—which he describes with characteristic casualness as a "nut house" and "hospital for VIPs."

Bogdanov scrawls his story from his cell and calls out to an enigmatic friend, Semmant, who happens to be a robot. Bogdanov makes this revelation rather coyly: "And yes, I'll tell you, finally, what he is. He's a robot, nothing more—a program installed in an iron heart." This revelation, while fitting to Bogdanov's voice, might irritate some readers since it feels like the author and narrator are playing games to craft suspense.

From there, the book details Bogdanov's creation of Semmant and the tangled path of financial gain and emotional loss—and vice versa—that leads Semmant to his untimely end and Bogdanov to his new home in the insane asylum. Babenko's narrative pace is slow and methodical, but intense—we are in the mind of a madman, after all.

Babenko's devotion to writing is clear; he left high-power jobs in technology and finance

to pursue the craft. He aptly uses his career experience and eye for detail here. He initially wrote the book in Russian, his native tongue, then translated it into English—which is the only language it's published in. This second pass through the novel surely added to its richness.

An insane narrator gives the author a broad alibi for misogyny, violence, and racist language. Racial and gender insensitivity mingle with similes and action in Bogdanov's voice: "People were there too: many people—some *mulatos*, a short Asian girl with mouth agape. I scanned around like a police robot. The neurons in my brain were firing in a mad dance."

Bogdanov evokes both love and hate. On one hand he's violent, crude, and insane; on the other, he seems like a victim of his own mistakes who's just trying to be a nice-enough guy: "The nurses like me—I cause them no trouble. I'm compliant and not capricious." His most winning quality is his clever, self-aware narration: "I dressed in black, which was fitting for an assassin."

To Bogdanov, Semmant is larger than life, and so the novel is named for the robot. It is readily apparent, however, that this is Bogdanov's story—he's speaking, and it's his mind and actions that ultimately captivate.

Melissa Wuske