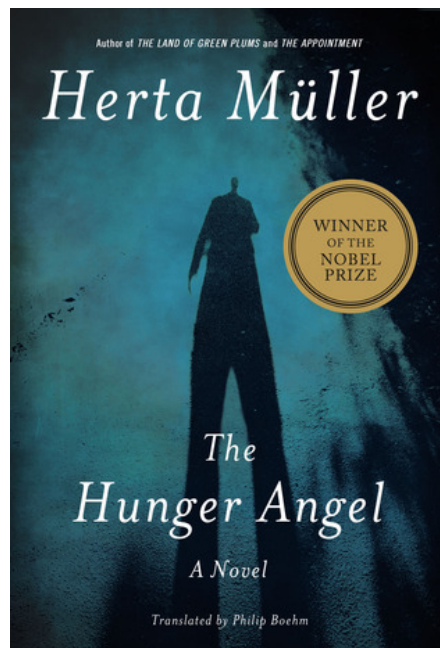




The Hunger Angel

Herta Müller , Philip Boehm (Translator)

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It was an icy morning in January 1945 when the patrol came for seventeen-year-old Leo Auberg to deport him to a camp in the Soviet Union. Leo would spend the next five years in a coke processing plant, shoveling coal, lugging bricks, mixing mortar, and battling the relentless calculus of hunger that governed the labor colony: one shovel load of coal is worth one gram of bread.

In her new novel, Nobel laureate Herta Müller calls upon her unique combination of poetic intensity and dispassionate precision to conjure the distorted world of the labor camp in all its physical and moral absurdity. She has given Leo the language to express the inexpressible, as hunger sharpens his senses into an acuity that is both hallucinatory and profound. In scene after disorienting scene, the most ordinary objects accrue tender poignancy as they acquire new purpose—a gramophone box serves as a suitcase, a handkerchief becomes a talisman, an enormous piece of casing pipe functions as a lovers' trysting place. The heart is reduced to a pump, the breath mechanized to the rhythm of a swinging shovel, and coal, sand, and snow have a will of their own. Hunger becomes an insatiable angel who haunts the camp, but also a bare-knuckled sparring partner, delivering blows that keep Leo feeling the rawest connection to life.

Müller has distilled Leo's struggle into words of breathtaking intensity that take us on a journey far beyond the Gulag and into the depths of one man's soul.

The Hunger Angel Details

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From Reader Review The Hunger Angel for online ebook

Wayne says

Beautiful, poetic writing. Muller's style and subject (WWII Romania and Russian deportation camps) are pretty unfamiliar territory to me, but themes are similar to those I've found in other stories about the soul-stealing power of dislocation and internment.

The personification of HUNGER reminded me of Elie Wiesel and Knute Hamson's writing. Strangely, I am also reading 'The Book Thief' which is narrated by DEATH, a character pivotal to that story and so many others, even if unintentional.

Muller's writing is amazing, lush, and colorful. Though the themes are heavy and the story can feel oppressive, her imagery paints pictures I won't soon forget. I look forward to reading more of her work.

Tony says

So, I started reading this book and it was just one of those *One Day in the Life of* kind of Russian Gulag books, and not much of one, really, as these things go, although it promised to be different because Leo Auberg is Transylvanian, a German transplant if you will. As if Stalin needs a reason. Leo is seventeen, and gay, but that's not why he's packed away. His bathhouse urges are just flecks of character. If they knew he was gay, he would have gone to a different camp, a shorter stay, and no return.

He wasn't much of a rabble-rouser; and too doughy to be a German soldier. His parents, who *believed in the black square of Hitler's mustache* got to stay. Somehow, only Leo was on the List. He packed and went, packed and went, carrying *silent baggage*.

So here he is, where his constant companion is The Hunger Angel.*

But then I took the book to breakfast. There, amid the bustle of morning souls, I read this:

*From all around the mess hall came the clatter of tin. Every spoonful is a tin kiss, I thought. And every one of us is ruled by our hunger, as though by an alien power. But no matter how well I knew that in the moment, I forgot it right away.***

Did the translator err? While it can be grammatically correct for every *one* of us to be ruled by *our* hunger, that's only so when it's a collective hunger. Leo's hunger is very personal, instead.

This is what they mean, I think, when they give Müller prizes, and say she speaks of identity and displacement, of the dispossessed.

This book talks about Hunger, yes, but not a whiny Hamsun hunger. Sometimes the hunger is Homesickness, but a more profound version - not just missing home, but not being allowed to *be* home. The impossibility of Home.

In the camp we had lice on our heads, in our eyebrows, on our necks, in our armpits, and in our pubic hair. We had bedbugs in our bunks. We were hungry. But we didn't say: I have lice or bedbugs or I'm hungry. We said: I'm homesick. Which was the last thing we needed.

Oh, you say, maybe the translator got it right, speaking to the universal.

It may be that I'm the old gap-toothed man in the upper-left corner of a wedding photo that doesn't exist, and simultaneously a skinny child in a schoolyard that also doesn't exist.

Leo gets out of camp, out of his arbitrary five-year sentence. He comes home, but is still homesick. He left his Hunger Angel in the camp, but is still hungry. He gets married, but he still goes to the park.

This book is about nothing less than the human soul. Some souls wind up face down in a mortar pit; some souls watch a cuckoo clock, even when the cuckoo is stolen; some souls get theirs, in a culvert, a mouth gagged with a tie, an axe, having done its work, left on the chest; some souls survive.

*The German title, *Atemschaukel*, is a compound word Müller made up - she does that - that is difficult to translate, meaning something like "breath-swing", according to our translator. I tried to imagine the book with "breath-swing" in place of "Hunger Angel" in each instance, but failed. Although, from a distance, the point of the book, as I understand it, makes more sense for me as "breath-swing".***

**I'll have the eggs over easy, black coffee, and a moment of clarity, please.

***Yes, I'm footnoting my footnotes. And not only to annoy those that are easily annoyed by annotations on the same page. This book was intended to be a collaboration by Müller and Oskar Pastior, a Romanian-born German poet who was deported to a Soviet camp, much like the protagonist of this novel. Pastior died in 2006 and Müller imagined and wrote the book on her own, although crediting Pastior for his reminiscences. I bring this up, as a public service, because Pastior was the only German member of *Oulipo*, a mostly French group of artists who believe in the seeking of new structures and patterns which may be used by writers in any way they enjoy. I know some Goodreaders who are having an *Oulipo* phase in their reading; and Müller, here, may be paying homage.

•Karen• says

The powerful futility of words

Words have a disconcerting power over Leo Auberg: the mere word **AQUARELL** (water colour) can make him stagger, as if kicked. That word seems to know how far he has already gone in his illicit bathhouse encounters. And yet, even more disconcertingly, a word like **LAGER** (camp), despite wartime, despite the penal camp near the canal from which those men arrested in the park or the bathhouse, brutally interrogated and incarcerated, from which they never return, or if they do then only as the walking dead, for that word **LAGER**, still, he is deaf. He is seventeen, he wants to get away from his family, and even the Russian police patrol, going round with a list, taking all those German speaking adults between the age of 17 and 45, even that seems to him almost like rite of passage, initiation into the adult world.

His grandmother's parting words to him are **ICH WEISS DU KOMMST WIEDER**.

I know you will come back. He didn't think much about those words. He didn't know they would follow him, work in him, become a confederate of his shovel, an adversary of the hunger angel. Those words would keep him alive.

Those words can transform into a handkerchief, the only person that took care of him in camp. Sometimes objects gain a tenderness, a monstrous tenderness.

Rain like knives of ice from October onwards: snow, sleet, howling gales: summer is a chance to warm the gnawing hunger. Gnawing lice, lice in the eyebrows, in the armpits, in the genital hair. Bed-bugs. Death. Death by crushing, by drowning, by being buried under cement, by the toxic effects of illicit schnaps. By slow starvation, because your own husband is taking your food. The fearful mathematics of death: 330 in March of the fourth year. The fearful mathematics of starvation: 1 lift of the shovel=1 gramme of bread.

Leo returns home to Hermannstadt in Siebenbürgen after five years in the labour camp, but he never leaves it behind him. The words on his treasures will never be DA WAR ICH, in the past. Nor will they be DA BIN ICH, in the present. On his treasures will stand the words DA KOMM ICH NICHT WEG. The gulag fills his head, colonises his thinking, from right to left, from day to night. It is with him always, there is no escape.

Man kann sich nicht schützen, weder durchs Schweigen noch durchs Erzählen.

There is no defence. Silence will not help, but neither will speaking. That fear of letting go, that fear of freedom, that fear of being close to another, no words can ever overcome that. No words ever will.

Alex says

A very lyrical novel, every chapter is almost like a poem. One can feel, that Herta Müller wanted to show her respect for all those innocent persons, whose only guilt was they had german names and german ancestors. Is is a hard and unsettling lecture, she is not making it easy for the reader.

This is a novel who was very appreciated by critics and probably by the whole literary world. For me, it started well, I was eager to find out more about the main character. It turned out to be a dull story, filled with lyrical and allegorical stuff intertwined with hard core reality. It is a proffesionally written novel, you cannot say anything wrong about it literally, it is so written that it should enter your heart, still it didnt enter mine. Sometimes suggesting things and letting the reader imagine the cruelty of the world has more impact than presenting the cruelty and dissecting it to its core. In this sense, I will never forget the suicide scene from Ljudmila Ulitskaia's "The green tent / Imago / das drüne Zelt" which still haunts my mind.

Still a very literary correctly written novel, I was glad to learn so much about the german community of Romania after the WWII. Knowing what happened is of paramount importance. Even if I give 3 stars only, I still recommend this book gladly.

Greg Brozeit says

One of my earliest, strongest childhood memories is when my family picked up my uncle, who had been a political prisoner in East Germany, from the hospital where he had been placed after his release, like many others in his position, after his freedom had been bought by the West German government. Although I never personally experienced such treatment, I was inculcated at an early age with a deep, repellant understanding of the fact that there were people like my uncle who had been wrongly incarcerated because of their political beliefs, ethnicity, geographic location, or for just being in the wrong historical place at the wrong historical time.

So I was aware of what was happening in countless places behind the Iron Curtain. And during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution in China. And in Cambodia under Pol Pot. And in Uganda, the Congo, Rhodesia, South Africa. And in Chile and Argentina and Central America as people disappeared. And American prisons like Parchman and Angola, for that matter. These were just facts of life in the decades after World War II. Actually, throughout history. But as I read *Atemschaukel*, it struck me that many young people today have no memory or understanding of these episodes in history and how different they were from the great socio-political fear of their age: terrorism.

For me, Herta Müller's book is as much a cultural historical statement as it is a work of literature. This being the third book of hers that I've read, I'm warming up to her sparing prose, episodic chapters that almost become short stories in their own right, and inferences about the past and future. The nebulous opening of a young Romanian ethnic German, who has been designated to be a prisoner at a Russian labor camp as a form of collective, representational penance is chillingly cruel. His grandmother's farewell, „ICH WEISS DU KOMMST WIEDER“ (“I know you will come back”) sets off into an ordeal that will take years, and even when it is over, it never loosens its grip on his subsequent life. The daily torments, tragedies, frustrations, interactions with the other characters, and the ever-present *Hungerengel* (Hunger Angel) are punctuated and revealed through Müller's writing.

The title *Atemschaukel* is more difficult to translate than most German words (especially since the word doesn't even exist in German). The translators changed it to *Hunger Angel*, which is a decision I completely understand and accept given the repeated references to it in the novel. But rather than the use the literal translation of “breath swing,” I think the sentiment behind *Atemschaukel* is closer to “on the edge.” In this case it is the central character being on the edge of so many things—his existence, his identity, his interactions with others, his ability to deal with every contemporary moment of his life. Müller's story is about more than an account of a Russian labor camp prisoner. *Atemschaukel* is a microcosm of what millions of people experienced in the latter half of the 20th century—and what countless anonymous persons still do. It is a link joining that era to today's fear of terrorism and the atrocities it can breed.

Stephanie Sun says

This book ends with a grown man dancing with a raisin. And then eating it.

The fact that I, someone whose life has been as far from Gulag survivor as they come, can, after reading this book, not see that image as weird and inconsequential, but layered with all of the pathos, dignity, gruesomeness, rightness, irony, and beauty that the author intended, says much about not only Muller's gifts as a writer and Philip Boehm's gifts as a translator, but also about what this medium of fiction is and can do.

After a month where the honor of “weirdest book I read that probably changed my life” is kind of a toss-up between *Invisible Cities*, *The Mezzanine*, and this book, *What can't fiction do?* seems like a more appropriate question.

It's easy to be cynical about serious literature and serious writers. But when you want to describe and expose the pretensions of pretentious literary types, where do you go? To *The Emperor's New Clothes*, right? To a piece of literature.

The Hunger Angel is no less than an *Emperor's New Clothes* for the experience of being imprisoned and enslaved by a corrupt and expedient power. It creates a common language among all who have read it about certain kinds of human desperation, craftiness, beastliness, memory, reserves of will, and dreaming.

In "hunger angel" (Boehm notes at the end that Muller's word, Atemschaukel, translates literally from German as "breath swing," but I am quite fond of his interpretation) Muller names for the first time the amoral collection of desires and drives created by a starving person's hunger. Although given top billing, it is one of many new names given to previously elusive phenomena here.

Indeed, many chapters read like psycho versions of entries in the Boy Scouts Handbook. Instead of BSAH staples like "STAY DOWNWIND: To see mammals like deer in the wild, be quiet and stay downwind of their likely position..." Muller's narrator gives "advice" on things like how to pace one's bread rations and how to apply a theory of special relativity to the distorted realities of life in a work camp:

"For instance, the hunger angel must have a Minkowski-wire of his own, only it's not clear from the book if the hunger angel's wire always stays attached to us, which is why he never really goes away when he says he's coming back."

Words don't really go away in this book. They come back from temporary exile, like Leo, changed. They dance. And sometimes get eaten.

In this book, they are never thrown away.

Jim Fonseca says

Through the story of one young man, this Nobel Prize winning author tells us the relatively unknown story of thousands of Romanians of German descent who, apparently in retaliation for WW II, were forced into Russian work camps. These people were not prisoners of war; they were men and women rounded up from their homes who lived for five years in borderline starvation eating only two meals of watery cabbage soup and a slice of bread every day. They were so hungry that they traded slices of bread with each other, often several times, because the other person's slice always looked bigger. Occasionally they begged for food in a neighboring village or cooked edible weeds gathered from the roadside. Hunger became so all-pervasive in their lives that "it was an object" and the Hunger Angel was surely the devil. No medical care was available and those who died were buried out back.

In blister-inducing wooden shoes (small or large, so none fit) they shoveled coal into a power plant and worked cement to make concrete blocks. Muller's descriptions of how you shovel coal or handle cement and its dust shows she had an informant who filled her in in great detail, or she tried it herself. During the last year they were suddenly paid some minimal wages and the hunger ended. Then they were freed. The young man feels forgotten and displaced at home by the birth of a baby brother. He feels lost in a strange world; clearly PTSD. A frightening book.

Mira Margitta says

Izgleda da sam ove godine pro?itala malo više ratnih knjiga,pa sam se zasitila.Knjiga nije loša,ali imam osje?aj da sam sve to ve? pro?itala.

Bogdan Ra? says

Amazing. Breathtaking.

„Când n-aveam nimic de g?tit, l?sam fumul s?-mi ?erpuiasc? prin gur?. Îmi tr?geam limba-nd?r?t ?i mestecam în gol. Mâncam saliv? cu fum de sear? ?i m? gândeam la cârna?i frip?i. Când n-aveam nimic de g?tit treceam prin apropierea oalelor pref?cându-m? c? înainte de culcare vreau s? m? sp?l pe din?i la fântân?. Dar înainte de a-mi vârî periu?a de din?i în gur?, mâncam de dou? ori. Cu foamea ochilor mâncam focul galben, iar cu foamea din cerul gurii, fumul.”

„Ra?iile gata cânt?rite ?i acoperite cu cear?afuri albe erau a?ezate pe poli?e. [...] Mu?tele erau nevoite s? se a?eze pe cear?afuri în loc de pâine. La pâine n-ajungeau decât atunci când o ?ineam în mân?. Iar dac? nu-?i luau zborul suficient de rapid de pe ea, mâncam laolalt? cu pâinea noastră ?i foamea lor.”

„Îmi umplea lingura numai pe jum?tate ?i sorbeam prelung. M? înv??asem s? m?nânc încet, ?i dup? fiecare lingur? de sup? s?-mi înghit saliva. Îngerul foamei m? pov??uia: saliva lunge?te supa ?i culcatul devreme scurteaz? foamea.”

„Apoi, m-am tocmit la sânge ?i-am primit pe cincizeci de pagini de Zarathustra - de r?sucit ?ig?ri - o litr? de sare, iar pe ?aptezeci chiar o litr? de zah?r. Pentru întregul Faust legat în pânz?, Peter Schiel mi-a fabricat penru uz personal un pieptene de p?duchi din tabl?. Antologia de poezie de opt secole am devorat-o sub form? de m?lai ?i untur? de porc, cât despre voluma?ul Weinheber, pe ?la l-am transformat în mei.”

„Diminea?a nu-i timp pentru asta, ?i nici n-ai ce schimba. Pâinea proasp?t t?iat? arat? toat? la fel. Pân? seara îns?, fiecare felie se usuc? diferit, dreapt? ?i col?uroas? sau strâmb-burtoas?. Optica usc?rii î?i d? sentimentul c? pâinea ta te-n?al?. Acest sentiment îl au to?i, chiar dac? nu-?i schimb? între ei pâinea. Iar când o schimbi, sentimentul se-nte?e?te. Schimbi o iluzie optic? pe-o alta.”

„Cred c? atunci când ?i-e foame, orbirea ?i vederea sunt acela?i lucru, foamea oarb? vede cel mai bine mâncarea. Exist? cuvinte de foame mute ?i altele zgomotoase, la fel cum în foame exist? o parte secret? ?i-o alta public?. Cuvintele de foame, deci cuvintele de mâncare domin? discu?iile, ?i cu toate astea tot singur r?mâi. Fiecare-?i m?nânc? singur cuvintele. Ceilal?i care m?nânc? o fac tot pentru ei în?i?i. Participarea afectiv? la foamea celorlal?i e zero, nu po?i fl?mânzi împreun? cu al?ii.”

„Abia acum mi-a atras aten?ia c? popând?ii m-au sim?it c? merg prin step? singur, nu sub paz?. Popând?ii au instinctul ager, se roag? pentru fuga din lag?r - a?a mi-am zis. Fuga ar fi acum posibil?, dar încotro? Poate c? vor s? m? avertizeze, crezându-m? de mult fugit. [...] Cerul, întins peste step? ca o plas? albastr?, se lepea în zare de p?mânt f?r? porti?? de sc?pare.”

„?i pe terasamentul c?ii ferate - când se-ntâmpl? ca vreunul s? r?mân? lat - exist? ?i plictiseala z?pezii în care zace cadavrul ?i lopata sa. De cum l-ai îndep?rtat de-acolo, ai ?i uitat de el, fiindc? în z?pada groas? conturul cadavrelor sl?b?noage nici nu se vede. Ci numai plictiseala lope?ii p?r?site. Nu-i bine s? stai în preajma lope?ii p?r?site. Nu-i bine s? stai în preajma lope?ii. Când vântul bate u?or, sufletul î?i ia zborul împodobit cu pene. Când bate puternic, sufletu-i purtat valuri-valuri. ?i nu numai el - odat? cu fiecare cadavru pesemne se elibereaz? ?i câte-un Înger al foamei care-?i caut? o nou? gazd?. Dar nici unul dintre noi nu-i în stare s? hr?neasc? doi Îngeri ai foamei.”

„C? Bea Zakel a tras moarta de cap peste marginea mesei, pân? ce p?rul i-a atârnat în jos. C? moarta Corina Marcu, ca prin minune, nu fusese înc? niciodat? ras?-n cap ?i c? felceri?a a tuns-o acum zero s?-i ia p?rul. C? Bea Zakel a pus grijuliu p?rul într-o l?di?? de lemn. C? Trudi a vrut s? ?tie la ce-i rebuie p?rul, ?i c? felceri?a

i-a spus: Suluri pentru ferestre. C? Trudi a-ntrebat: Pentru cine, ?i c? Bea Zakel a zis: Pentru croitorie, domnul Reusch ne coase suluri pentru ferestre, p?rul în geam opre?te curentul.”

„P?rin?ii mei ?i-au f?cut un copil, fiindc? pe mine nu mai puteau conta. A?a cum mama prescurteaz? „n?scut” cu un n., tot a?a ar prescurta ?i „mort” cu un m. A f?cut-o de-acum. Oare mamei nu-i e ru?ine cu tighelul ei grijuliu de a?? alb?, când printre rânduri sunt nevoit s? citesc: Din partea mea n-ai decât s? mori unde e?ti, am economi spa?iu acas?.”

„Goi cum eram, ni?te creaturi chelboase, r?sucite, ar?tam ca ni?te vite de povar? reformate. Nici unul din nou nu se ru?ina. De ce s? te mai ru?inezi când ai r?mas f?r? corp? ?i totu?i din cauza lui ne-aflam aici, ca s? depunem munc? fizic?. Cu cât corpul ?i se împu?ina, cu-atât te pedepsea el mai stra?nic. Înveli?ul ?asta le-apar?inea ru?ilor.”

„Comorile micu?e sunt cele pe care scrie: sunt aici.
Comorile mai mari sunt cele pe care scrie: ?i-aminte?ti...
Dar cele mai frumoase comori sunt cele pe care va scrie: am fost aici.”

„Am cheltuit mult la propozi?ia asta. Apoi am scris-o pe-o pagin? goal?. În ziua urm?toare am t?iat-o. În r?surm?toarea am scris-o din nou. ?i din nou am t?iat-o, ?i din nou am scris-o. Când pagina s-a umplut, am smuls-o. Asta înseamn? s?-?i aminte?ti.”

Stephen Durrant says

When Herta Müller received a much-deserved Nobel Prize in 2009, she was lauded for her portrayal of "the landscape of the dispossessed." These words are a very fitting description of "The Hunger Angel," a tribute to her fellow German-Romanians, who were deported to Siberian prison camps after the war for their supposed or real collaboration with Hitler's Germany. Müller's mother spent five years in such a camp, but the protagonist here is a young man, whose story is apparently based upon a detainee Müller interviewed over several years (see her "Afterword"). Müller's economical, poetic language is very much on display in "The Hunger Angel," in which she so brilliantly conveys the landscape and the physical things that define the prisoners' world--for example, the sacks of cement carefully carried day after day, the cinder blocks used for housing, the white lice that clusters along a strand of wool to escape when a garment is exposed to sulfurous smoke, etc. So many of these descriptions, as well as her description of an unforgettable group of people, are written in her characteristically simple, haunting, and strangely poetic prose. Overarching the landscape and the characters is the theme of hunger: "Until you no longer have a brain inside your head, only the hunger echo . . . when your flesh on your body disappears, your bones become a burden, and the ground pulls you downward." In the midst of this terrible "landscape of the dispossessed," there are still moments of surprise: "Sometimes things acquire a tenderness, a monstrous tenderness we don't expect from them." Müller is one of our most important contemporary writers. She deserves her prize and a larger audience.

Isabelle says

This book has sneaked its way into my life in a very impertinent manner; for three years or so I had the cover gaping at me in various bookstores, and while I must have been dimly aware that Herta Müller had recently won the Nobel Prize (which is possibly also the reason I picked *Atemschaukel* up in the first place), I'd avoided it for quite a long time due to its ubiquity and because the cover photograph anticipates only too well the book's subject matter. (I have the same problem with films; for almost a year I've been walking past a

DVD edition of *Törless* because the leading actor looks so decidedly stupid on the cover that it made me angry each time I saw it; it's an excellent film, by the way). Here, the man on the dust jacket looks exactly like one of those ruined people that are the product of concentration camps (I was not too far off, it mainly takes place in one of Stalin's forced labour camps), and unless I really have to, I prefer keeping away from these kind of themes since most books' treatment of them is usually pointless, hence the hesitation.

Basically *Atemschaukel* has two major problems:

i)

The subtitle 'Roman' (novel) is very misleading, since this is better described as a collection of loosely connected anecdotes; there is no climax and hardly any storyline at all.

ii)

(my problem, really) For me, history is history and fiction is fiction, and I detest it when the latter assumes a documentary style. Obviously, Müller's book is based on the recollections of mainly one individual, it's autobiography in a fake fiction coat. I am simply not interested in reading about detainees eating ants and dog shit in order to survive just for the sake of the description, neither do I like the people-have-to know-about-these-things vibe the book ultimately gives off.

In this sense, *Atemschaukel* ('breath-swing', by the way) is limited by its materials. Müller actually writes well, her language is poetic and yet subtle; especially the first third contains *fantastic* writing (she uses so many words I haven't read for years in print). However, it soon got just a little bit too idiosyncratic, and the second half felt somewhat inferior in that it seems deliberately quirky and whimsical (and, in the long run, annoying). I thought about giving another Müller work a try, but as communist dictatorship in Romania seems to be her major theme I'm a bit ashamed to say that our ways possibly have to part here.

Marc says

In each of her books Herta Müller succeeds in creating a very ingenious world, with its own language and idiom that illustrates the traumatic effect of what her main characters have to undergo. Also in this case, the experiences of a 17 year old Romanian German, which at the beginning of 1945 is arrested by the Soviets and transported to a camp, deep in Russia (or Ukraine), to do forced labour. The boy describes his experiences in short chapters, and they are absolutely shocking.

But it aren't plain observations, Müller describes them with a huge sense of the psychological complexity of people who are driven to the margin of what's liveable. In this her work does not differ very much of what Primo Levi did *Survival in Auschwitz*: wondering what a human is, in the middle of the most extreme inhumane. But Müller adds a linguistic layer to it: her character brings his trauma in a poetic-fantastic-horribly distorted language as with the handsome description of the "Hunger angel" who constantly pops up, or the "breath-swinging" movement in shoveling cement or coal; this magical-realistic language is clearly a means to survive.

All this is handsome, clever and gripping, surely if you reread it a number of times. But again I have to confess (this is already the 3rd book of Müller I read) that it really didn't captivate me, I don't really like it, it's just too strange. Maybe I don't have the stomach for it?!

H Wesselius says

I rarely read fiction but this one sparked my interest given its subject material. However, it was almost impossible to read with any interest or desire. With only short stories or pictures, there was very little character development to have the reader feel any sympathy or understanding for the difficult life in a soviet labour camp. Furthermore there wasn't any continuity in the story which made it difficult for the reader to gain an appreciation for life in a labour camp. Thus, as a vehicle to describe human suffering and to inform the reader of a historical wrong, it failed on both accounts. And if the story was written for any other reason, I failed to see it.

Hadrian says

Exile, hunger. The hunger angel is not a kind and gentle cherub, but like a Gnostic messenger of God's will, or the angel of death. Its constant presence gnaws away at those within the camp.

This reminds me of both Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Victor Frankl, but with a unique description, almost tender in its starkness. Double dispossession - being a German in Romania, and a German in the Soviet Union. Little details of work camp life which stand out.

William2.1 says

A book which must not be rushed through, that's how beautiful the language is. It's hard to believe it was translated from the German. A book about the will to live, among other things, and the richness of life even under horribly reduced circumstances. To read it merely as an account of life in the Gulag would be too limiting. It goes much deeper.

Late in life a gay man remembers what it was like to be transported from his family home in Romania to the Russian Gulag. It was 1945 and he was a 17-year old ethnic German and so must be made to pay for the crimes of Hitler. Romania had been a combatant allied with the Axis Powers. Needless to say, this young man had nothing to do with the war. Moreover, what should have been for him a memorable period of sexual awakening, was in fact a time when homosexuality was a crime punishable by death, a time when Stalin—the murderer of 25 to 50 million of his own people—still ruled.

The novel is based on the true story of the poet Oskar Pastior who lived just long enough to give Herta Müller the background for the novel. That's why it's so filled with authentic facts and vivid description. Every little trick of survival is recalled. How he starved is given particular depth and resonance. With regard to the small cooking fires inmates would make to prepare meals in the evening, the narrator says:

When I had nothing to cook, the smoke snaked through my mouth. I drew in my tongue and chewed on nothing. I swallowed my spit with the evening smoke and thought about bratwurst. When I had nothing to cook, I walked close to the pots and pretended that I was on my way to brush my teeth at the well before going to bed. But by the time I put my toothbrush in my mouth I had already eaten twice. First I ate the yellow fire with the hunger of my eyes and then the smoke with the hunger of my mouth. As I ate, everything around me went still, all I could

Galina says

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Nathan says

In 1945 the Soviet general Vinogradov presented a demand in Stalin's name that all Germans living in Romania be mobilized for "rebuilding" the war-damaged Soviet Union. All men and women between seventeen and forty-five years of age were deported to forced-labor camps in the Soviet Union.

My mother, too, spent five years in a labor camp.

The deportations were a taboo subject because they recalled Romania's Facist past. Those who had been in the camp never spoke of their experiences except at home of with close acquaintances who had also been deported, and then only indirectly. My childhood was accompanied by such stealthy conversations; at the time I didn't understand the content, but I did sense the fear.- Herta Müller, on why she wrote *The Hunger Angel*

This is one of the most original, daring and innovative books I've read in quite some time. Focusing on 17 year old Leo Auberg, *The Hunger Angel* recounts five years in a gulag. While stories like Leo's are left out of the public consciousness, what makes this novel so powerful has little to do with its plot. Müller's style is the literary equivalent of an expressionist painting. Using poetic prose as her brush, she drags the reader through inhuman conditions to examine the guilt of a nation so prejudiced to its weakest group.

Müller has her eye on the world in this novel. Leo feels hated not only because he is German, but because he is gay. As Müller wrote this, Russia began passing its laws against "gay propaganda". Couples have begun to

face legal and social hurdles for existing openly. Looking to the past to inform the future, Müller gives an impassioned account on government accepted oppression. In fact, the portions dedicated to Leo's sexuality are some of the most compelling moments she offers. His self loathing does not make him any more heterosexual. It is only when he learns with who he is that he can be a more empathetic and caring person. As other prisoners hate some women for having trysts, Leo realizes his shared humanity with them as well. He notes: "No one could have guessed that I understood them all too well, that I knew about arousal in disheveled clothes, about roving desire and gasping delight in Alder Park and the Neptune Barhs. No one could imagine that I was reliving my own rendezvous, more and more often"

It's empathy that ties this whole book together. To the downtrodden, afraid, and even the malicious, Müller gives nothing less than a shared humanity. Her Nobel often gets dismissed for her being "just another political writer" (I'll admit that I said something similar before I read *The Hunger Angel*), but she can write with a level power and tenderness that is hard to find. What else even matters?

Mike says

Won this in a goodreads giveaway.

I write too much for other reasons to ever give reviews any effort, so:

Like watching a silk string coil and uncoil in the dirt.

Like the slow waves of grass.

Leo is nothing but his voice, his observation, his desires, his exhaustion and hunger, his memories. As the years drain by he becomes more and more indistinguishable from what he describes, but never completely, instead more like the shadow of a cloud passing by, and then later the land beneath the shadow.

Like the best poetry captures instances (in this case, hunger, boredom, isolation, loneliness, futility, identity, separation to name a few) in an economy of words.

Highly, highly recommended.

Kristin E. says

Sometimes things acquire a tenderness, a monstrous tenderness we don't expect from them.

Every short chapter of this is like poetry; it forces you to dwell on the words and glide through its haunting imagery. The depiction of life in the Soviet forced labour concentration camp under Stalin's regime is based on the true experiences and recollections of Romanian-born German poet Oskar Pastior who died in 2006. It is immensely insightful; there is not exactly a lot of hope or humour to be found but a sharp-cutting perceptiveness. The atmosphere is icy-cold as the air of January in which it begins; the fear of an uncertain future is mixed with a particular almost guilty sense of anticipation.

The place is Romania, the year is 1945; the war is ending. Leopold Auberg is seventeen when he, among a group of other German-Romanians, is shipped off to Russia in the dead of winter to pay for Hitler's crimes and to inevitably worship at the shrine of the hunger angel for the next five long years of his life. Prior to being deported Leo is secretly not all-together unhappy about going away. He knows the feeling of uncertainty and fear well enough; they are under his skin and he knows how to tend to them as well as at all possible. His fear is of a double disgrace; that the state will lock him away as a criminal for meeting with other boys and men in parks and bath houses in a time when that act is illegal; and that his family will disown him out of shame. In his mind the concentration camp becomes almost a place of escape rather than a

prison; a place that doesn't know who he is. But the place in its very essence is dark and merciless; pervaded by a feeling of sickness from longing for a home that starts to lose its meaning as time passes and, more than anything, by hunger. The hunger becomes all-consuming to the point of defining every act, every thought. It becomes a significant part of the very being:

What can be said about chronic hunger. Perhaps that there's a hunger that can make you sick with hunger. That it comes in addition to the hunger you already feel. That there is a hunger which is always new, which grows insatiably, which pounces on the never-ending old hunger that already took such effort to tame. How can you face the world if all you can say about yourself is that you're hungry.

The different descriptions of hunger are startling and eloquent. As seasons melt together, the only point of orientation in terms of the passing of time is the fixed, circular evolvment of the orach; a plant that provides the residents of the camp with modest and tasteless but pivotal nourishment as long as the season allows it. Then it starts to grow jewelled flowers in poisonously colours that stabs the eyes before it finally freezes to death. By then it no longer serves the hungry; rather it becomes a servant adorning the hunger angel. The hunger angel is always there like a guardian except it's not guarding you but your hunger. It's company, nonetheless and it can't not be there; its presence is accepted or at least endured.

Leo and his fellow labourers become shells of someone they used to be; someone the place refuses to let them remain as. Like the skeletons of wild oats shimmering like fish bones as they sway (a literal example of the haunting imagery), they become empty, sexless. They lose every perception of gender. All is taken from them, but the only thing valued is their labour. Meanwhile the hunger angel become increasingly powerful as it feasts on their hunger and tempts with alluring, peaceful and orange images of death. But there is also an unspoken and necessary stubbornness to accept. To not let death or the sadness that follows dwell or settle too long, to not wither into nothingness and be swept away. *When the wind is strong, the soul is carried off in waves.*

Everything that happens is always simple. And there's a principle to how things proceed, assuming that they last.

Steve says

The quiet poetry of hunger, powerlessness and death, written in perhaps 80 short episodes, often like prose poems, with only occasional changes of tone towards the ironic or mildly humorous. To be read slowly, and not in one sitting...
