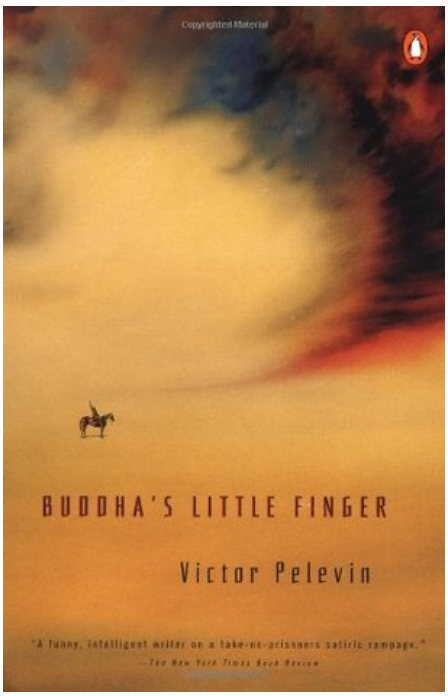

Buddha's Little Finger

Victor Pelevin , Andrew Bromfield (Translator)

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Buddha's Little Finger Victor Pelevin , Andrew Bromfield (Translator)
Russian novelist Victor Pelevin is rapidly establishing himself as one of the most brilliant young writers at work today. His comic inventiveness and mind-bending talent prompted **Time** magazine to proclaim him a "psychedelic Nabokov for the cyber-age." In his third novel, **Buddha's Little Finger**, Pelevin has created an intellectually dazzling tale about identity and Russian history, as well as a spectacular elaboration of Buddhist philosophy. Moving between events of the Russian Civil War of 1919 and the thoughts of a man incarcerated in a contemporary Moscow psychiatric hospital, **Buddha's Little Finger** is a work of demonic absurdism by a writer who continues to delight and astonish.

Buddha's Little Finger Details

Date	:	Published December 1st 2001 by Penguin Books (first published 1996)
ISBN	:	9780141002323
Author	:	Victor Pelevin , Andrew Bromfield (Translator)
Format	:	Paperback 352 pages
Genre	:	Fiction, Cultural, Russia, Literature, Russian Literature, Philosophy, Magical Realism, Novels, Contemporary, Fantasy, 20th Century

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From Reader Review Buddha's Little Finger for online ebook

Arkadiy Volkov says

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http://mkazak.narod.ru/cult/texts/pel...
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Vanja Šušnjar ?ankovi? says

?apajev i praznina je najpoznatiji roman ruskog pisca Viktora Peljevina, a smatra se i jednim od najboljih svjetskih romana s po?etka tre?eg milenijuma. Svaki pokušaj prepri?avanja ovog izrazito slojevitog i ozbiljnog djela je uzaludan. Mene je uvodnom atmosferom podsjetio na Majstora i Margaritu zbog ?ega sam predosjetila da ?e dalje ?itanje biti mu?no i nisam se mnogo prevarila. Daleko od toga da Peljevin nije kvalitetan. Naprotiv, malo je pisaca u ?ijim djelima se stalno prožimaju razli?ito mjesto i vrijeme, samim tim i radnja, u kojima ne postoji jasna granica izme?u sna i jave, apsurda i logike, ludila i razuma uz istovremeno konstantno preplitanje sovjetske istorije i svjetske stvarnosti.

Više na blogu: https://sputnjik1.wordpress.com/2018/...

Ursula says

Weird, deeply weird. Multiple storylines, interludes from other points of view, philosophy and history all rolled into one. The main character, Pyotr Voyd (the name is no accident), is in a present-day mental hospital, but he's also living a life in early-20th century Russia as an associate of Chapaev (an actual historical figure). Or is that just Pyotr's delusion? Does he need to be cured or does the rest of the world?

I'm not much for philosophy, and I admit that my knowledge of Russian history is spotty, but I enjoyed this book immensely. It prompted me to read a little about the Russian sense of humor and their liking for jokes in the form of anecdotes. Not something I would have expected to end up learning about! This one isn't really for linear thinkers, but if you're willing to give yourself up and go for the ride even when it gets absurd, I think you'll find it rewarding.

Recommended for: Buddhists, amateur philosophers, fans of stories within stories.

Quote: "As I grew older, I came to understand that the words 'to come round' actually mean 'to come round to other people's point of view,' because no sooner is one born than these other people begin explaining just how hard one must try to force oneself to assume a form which they find acceptable."

David Katzman says

Wow. This is one messed up book. It’s not typical messed up. It is screw-with your-head messed up. And it’s

messing-with-novelistic-conventions (which I typically love) messed up.

When I started writing my first novel, *Death by Zamboni*, I had only one original intention in mind. To break every single convention of fiction writing that I could think of. I approached it from a comedic perspective and had fun with it. It's also a satire, of course, of commercialism and "entertainment," as it turned out and as such is often intentionally didactic. That's about all I can claim in common with *Buddha's Little Finger*, which is also often didactic, but in quite grim and oddly fascinating ways.

BLF (not to be confused with your BFF) is a tale split between two realities, both featuring the same main character. In one case, our hero, Pyotr Voyd (note the name, as in Void) kills a man who is about to turn him in as an anti-red during the 1919 Russian Civil War and then finds himself accidentally mistaken for the man he killed. He continues the ruse in order to escape detection and ends up becoming a heroic soldier with the Bolshevik army on the front lines. The other reality features our hero as a schizophrenic in a mental hospital in 1990's Moscow. He slips from one reality to the other as in a dream, and he is unable to distinguish which is "real." This dialogue between the two halves is a rather didactic demonstration of the Buddhist dictum that life is but a dream.*

The problem with this structure is, of course, that it doesn't "prove" anything. It's a literary technique. And as such has no greater weight than, say, *Twilight* proves the existence of vampires. It does make for an intriguing story, however, and the time travel effect allows for interesting symbolic juxtaposition of the communist war and the present decadence and poverty of Russian society.

Another didactic element used throughout the book is the Socratic dialogue. Many conversations in the book come across as debates about the nature of reality rather than as believable conversation. The most common sentence in the book is, "What do you mean?" (in various forms) in order to allow some character or another to expound a philosophical belief. Fortunately, the writing is solid, and the philosophy is fascinating so he manages to get away with it to my mind. And I appreciate his bravado at breaking the rules. Did I love it, though? No. The Buddhist philosophy strewn throughout this book was not very comforting. In fact, I found this to be a deeply sad and lonely book. It portrays a cold existence for our narrator. Some critics seem to find humor in the story, but for me, except for a brief moment or two, it was primarily bleak.

But the novel has stayed with me. BLF has a surreality to it that lingers in disturbing and creepy ways. It managed to get under my skin. Despite feeling forced at times, despite being didactic and in some ways misrepresentative of Buddhism, Pelevin captures the underlying sadness and absurdity of life. For that, along with the outstanding writing, I salute you.

*I note here that I have strong Buddhist leanings myself. There are many sects within Buddhism. Some of which are purely philosophy-focused, others being somewhat more religious in nature. And each variant has a different focus and or approach to what Buddhism means. Life being "a dream" is not necessarily a global Buddhist belief. Some Buddhist's would say that there is nothing to believe at all. Other Buddhist beliefs discussed herein are even *less* accepted globally, such as the existence of limbo and reincarnation. Although Tibetan Buddhists believe in reincarnation, most Buddhists do not.

BlackOxford says

A Dialectical Comedy

Victor Pelevin has created a dialectical dream-world: two opposing dreams contained within each other, dreamed by the same protagonist. In one, he suffers the traumas and excitements of the Russian Revolution. In the other, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, he undergoes therapy for "split false-personalities" and loss of memory. He attempts to find himself, or Russia as the case may be, in both dreams.

"The Russian people realised very long ago that life is no more than a dream," says one of the characters in Buddha's Little Finger, thus establishing the allegory about Russia half-way through (it would have been far more helpful on page two). The two dream-searches touch on milestones of literature, philosophy, psychology, art, religion, and history, with the occasional empathetic experience of other personal histories thrown in. Complicated? Not half.

In one dream, the educated aesthete, Pyotr, high on cocaine and very bad vodka, gets caught up in the Russian Revolution. By luck and pluck he escapes the Checka secret police and assumes the identity of a sometime friend he has murdered. He embarks on a military train-journey to an indeterminate destination in the East as political commissar in a cloud of socialist, idealist propaganda. Wounded heroically in a battle of which he remembers nothing, he recuperates in a mountain village which is remote from the conflict.

Pyotr's revolutionary life takes place in a kind of masquerade in which various roles are being played out. The Master of Ceremonies for this production is Chapaev, part Commander in the Red (or White, depending on circumstances) Army, part sorcerer, part philosopher, part spirit-guide. Chapaev is a master at solipsism as well as dialectics and can argue any point from any angle. He supplies stability and then snatches it away. "What I have always found astounding is the starry sky beneath our feet and Immanuel Kant within us," he says with obvious irony.

The other dream-Pyotr, the one institutionalised and under therapy, can't remember his name much less his past. He is "infected with the bacillus of insanity that has invaded Russia" during the Revolution. He undergoes "turbo-Jungian therapy" in the asylum, an attempt to recover the meaning of lost symbols. He is also injected with drugs that provoke hyper-empathetic responses to the tales his fellow patients tell about themselves in group sessions.

The symbols being recovered include those of the Revolution itself - class, history, consciousness, disciplined thought - which exist in Pyotr's unconscious as reality. But there are quick-fire references to the 'new' world: Nabokov's Lolita, TV soap operas and block-buster movies. Arnold Schwarzenegger, CNN, and Harrier Jump Jets are the featured symbols from another patient. Donald Trump even gets an allusive reference in "You're fired." Remarkable for a book published in the year 2000. Things are somewhat chaotic, but as his psychiatrist observes, "Russia cannot be grasped by logic."

Therapy is interrupted through a blow by a fellow-patient using a plaster bust of Aristotle. Their argument had been about alternative metaphysical accounts of dreams. This throws Pyotr back into the Revolution on his train to the East. Rationality gives way to mysticism. Chapaev resumes command and continues Pyotr's dialectical education. Oxymorons like "lascivious chastity" abound. Women are goddesses and the source of all evil. G. B. Shaw's syllogistic aphorism about progress depending on the unreasonable man is transformed into one dependant upon scoundrels.

Throughout the book, time is malleable, as is identity, memory and space - that is, all the Kantian categorical certainties. The two dreams leak into one another, confirming that there is one protagonist. But none of the personae, or names, Pyotr adopts as either revolutionary or patient is authentic. Ultimately there is nothing behind the eyes. What sort of person, after all, is possible within the context of Russian history of the last century?

To say that Pyotr's dream-worlds signify the "inner drama of Russia," as one character puts it, verges on the trivial. But what else is there to say? That Russia and its inhabitants are neurotic after their self-inflicted totalitarian nightmare is inevitable. The inevitability arises from the nature of a revolution grounded in rationalist principles, principles which are then further used to rationalise mass killing and incarceration. To admit that faith in rational thought - including its forms in literature, art and history - is just as dangerous and just as anti-human as faith in religion feels like death to an intellectual... or for that matter to a democrat.

Hitting the buffers of human thought - not just in logic but in practice - is bound to dismay anyone. For someone educated in thought itself, philosophy, the continuing trauma in Russia must be acute. Educated residents of the United States - the other rationalist country - are only feeling a tiny fraction of this trauma with the election of Donald Trump. But they share the fear of an authoritarian nostalgia and the basic issues are the same: How did it all go wrong? Can anything about the social world be trusted? Can anything prevent the persistent self-delusion of human beings?

When neither thought nor faith is reliable, one of the few paths left is humour in one form or another. Humour, especially if it's about philosophy, is a risky business. Some might take Pelevin as making a philosophical point through his fictional survey of thought. I don't think this is wise. Such a stance certainly wouldn't help to understand the text, which if anything throws suspicion on all thought, even its own. The point of comedy, I think, is to have a chuckle, in this case at oneself and the unstable character of everything about oneself.

Sandra says

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Jelena says

Postmodernizam. Ruski postmodernizam. Bio je to ringišpil.

Roman po?inje pronadjenim tekstom/spisom i koji objašnjava tekst koji slijedi poslije njega. I tu se ve? postavljaju pitanja koja su klju?na u romanu.
Roman prati Petra Prazninu koji živi u Rusiji 90-ih godina i koji završava u ludnici (to saznajete tek na kraju jer nemate blage veze šta se radi bar do polovine, ali tek na kraju možda saznate šta se dešava). U ludnici se ve? nalaze tri bolesnika Volodin, Marija (muško) i Serdjuk i mi pratimo njihove epizode.

E sad, ono što Peljevin radi jeste da postavlja pitanje stvarnosti. Šta je stvarnost? I time roman gradi na iluziji. To otkrivamo u epizodama Petra Praznine, kada on diskutuje o praznini i stvarnosti sa ?apajevim. Ali Peljevin to radi tako majstoriski. Prelaze?i iz stvarnosti u stvarnost, odnosno iz iluziju u iluziju pomo?nu snova, ludila i opojnih sredstava (kao i medicinskih pomagala) on stvara roman iliuziju. U tom romanu gubite osje?aj za stvarno i nestvarno. Osje?ate se kao glavni junak koji tek na kraju dolazi do spoznaje jer na kraju sam govori da se on zapravo sve vrijeme kre?e postranstvom, ali prostranstvo en postoji što zna?i da se on kre?e unutar samog sebe.
Odnosno, ono o ?emu se govori jeste ?injenica da je stvarnost subjektivna. Da je ona ilizija svakog pojedinca. Kao što to ?apajev kaže votka je votka, ona postoji sama od sebe ali joj ?ovjek daje oblik.

?ak i kroz epizode ostalih bolesnika vi gledate stvar Petrovim o?ima. Onda se postavlja pitanje da li su bolesnici stvarni ili su oni samo plod Petrovog bolesnog uma?

Roman je, uprkos gunguli stvarnosti i iluzijama, nevjerovatno ?itko napisan. Izuzetno lagan stil. Veoma se brzo ?ita (s tim što je moja malenkost zbog potreba ispita, roman završila na srpskom jer prevod ima 50 strana manja; to ?ini svu razliku). U romanu se još i povla?e pitanja postsovjetskog ?ovjeka, onoga koji je preživio teror i raspad komunizma i koji se našao u novoj stvarnosti, te tako stvara svoju. ?ak i na samom kraju romana (koji se završava relativno cikli?no) ne zna se da li je to zaista realni svijet koji je osoba stvorila ili je to samo još jedna od epizoda Petra Praznine.

Joselito Honestly and Brilliantly says

The 1001 list says "The Clay Machine-Gun" but when I typed the title here at goodreads what came out was this. If I didn't finish reading the book, I would have been flummoxed by this change from a machine-gun to Buddha's finger (indeed, briefly, I was, except that I quickly remembered that the clay machine-gun here supposedly contained Buddha's finger which, when fired, makes things disappear).

Anyway, despite the buoyancy I enjoyed while drinking bubbly San Miguel beer (the best beer in the world) and the remembrance of my philosophy subjects during my college years, this book proved to be too deep for me to wade in that I sank and drowned.

With scenes alternating between Russia at the time of Lenin and Russia after the break up of the USSR (in both, Russians lived a "life of shame and desolation" because of the "bacillus of insanity that has invaded the country") metaphors, allegories, allusions, symbolisms abound with a lot of big talks about heavyweight topics like life, death, God, consciousness, existence, self-identification, dreams, time, eternity, immortality, body, soul and Arnold Schwarzenegger.

What, you may ask, is Arnie doing here? Well, he symbolizes the Imperial USA--a country with a split personality. The title of the film is not mentioned here but Arnie in this novel is apparently the Arnie we knew from the movie Terminator--in the scene where his face was revealed as half-human and half-robot. The half that is human (the benign USA) smiles and you see his boyishness with a quality "between mischief and cunning, a guy who will never do anything bad." The other half (the Imperial USA) is "cold, focused and terrifying."

The "secret freedom" of the Russian intellectual reminded me of another book I enjoyed, Martin Amis' "Laughter and the Twenty Million" and I do not know who stole the idea from whom. Then a quote reminded me of some leaders my country has had:

"Why does any social cataclysm in this world always result in the most ignorant scum rising to the top and forcing everyone else to live in accordance with its own base and conspiratorially defined laws?"

I was hoping to find chess here, since that is Russia's favorite sport, but didn't find any.

Alexei says

In a word: horrible. In two: disastrously horrible. I have a dubious advantage to read this book in Russian - Pelevin's mother tongue (and mine too). Its original title is "Chapaev and Pustota" (Chapaev is a famous Soviet commander of Civil War-period and Pustota, the surname of protagonist, means "emptiness" or "void" in Russian). Here Chapaev is a boddhisatva (well, sort of) who preaches to Pyotr Pustota - decadent poet and a patient of asylum runned my mysterious doctor Kanashnikov. Not only Pelevin's knowledge of indo-buddhist mysticicsm and philosophy is very superficial and weak but worse, he uses this theme only to add "philosophical depth of non-eurocentrist variety" to his otherwise plain and primitive novel. It's like playing with the words: oh, it seems that all these oriental terms (satori, ajiva, moksha, etc.) are really trendy. So it's time to use them in my brand new novel (even though I don't really understand their meaning). Yes, "Chapaev and Pustota" is a showy amalgam of narcotics, deviant sex, florid catchphrases, burlesque anecdotes and philosophical pretensions. But does this make it a good novel? Obviously not. For example, heroes are so one-dimensional that their "wise" dialogues look very affected. Full of pseudo-philosophical meditations and "hard-boiled" writing style "Chapaev and Pustota" is a very appropriately named book, because not only "emptiness" and "void" are meanings of "pustota" in Russian, but also vacuousness and frivolousness. It's a real catastroph when something from mainstream pop culture pretends to be "intellectual" and "original". And this is a case of this book.

El says

I'm not ashamed to admit when I don't "get" a book. I'm a pretty smart cookie for the most part - I finished school, got a degree, read a bunch, like to learn things and have discussions - but when something is beyond me I don't like to pretend that it must be cool just because I didn't get it. This is one of those books that people have raved about since it came out. They say things like, "It's not an easy book, but..." and they imply that if you don't "get it" then you must not be very smart or very hip. But then they can't really talk to you about the book either. I used to work with a guy like that. I'll bet he loved this book. I'll bet he even talked to me about this book and I tuned him out by repeating *Stab, stab, stab* over and over in my head until he moved on to someone or something else.

I know a little about Buddhism. I know a little more about philosophy. I know even a little more about Russian history; I know who Vasily Chapaev was. Put them all together in one book, throw in a little Arnie Schwarzenegger and you have *Buddha's Little Finger*. I'm not saying that Victor Pelevin is completely full of shit. Some parts of his book were actually very interesting. But as a whole, complete with tripping on mushrooms, it was all just uninteresting. Some books and some writers get off on spewing out this pseudo-philosophical swill (Tom Robbins, Jostein Gaarder) but it never does much for me. It makes me sad to have to add Pelevin to this list of fauxlosophers, and I'll do my best to at least give him one more chance to turn my head around before casting him to that ring of my personal Inferno.

And for those of you who read this and "totally got it", well, then... bully for you.

Nate says

Long live Chapaev. And Arnold Schwartzenegger.

Lisa says

What does it feel like to be on a roller coaster?

It is hilarious, and it makes you feel giddy, dizzy, confused, almost weightless, and slightly nauseous and disoriented.

Well, I think “Roller Coaster” would have been a great title for this wondrous novel, even though I eventually managed to understand both the British publisher’s choice of “The Clay Machine Gun”, and the American title “Buddha’s Little Finger”. Basically, those two titles mean the same thing, just viewed from different perspectives. Yes? Clear? If not, don’t worry. This is my fourth Pelevin novel, and despite loving his writing immensely, I have only managed small glimpses of fleeting understanding so far.

Why?

Because that is his overarching topic. Who are we? How do we know that? Is there any proof for us that we are real? If so, what is reality and is there any meaning underneath the random nonsense we call life?

Trying to sum up the story must turn into a complete failure, as the moment it makes sense, I must have misunderstood something. But vaguely speaking, it is about a character who moves around in a shifting historical context, between the Russian revolution and the post-Soviet era in Russia. He meets different characters, all of which have a dreamlike appearance, and he also seems to be locked into a madhouse. He definitely has brutal nightmares, and is encouraged to write them down. They all revolve around the question of the place of an individual human being within his own consciousness and the universe, and feature a fictionalised Schwarzenegger, a Japanese businessman who convinces another man to commit seppuku, gangsters taking drugs and turning violent after finding the path to an “eternal high”, a failed love story, and a journey to a very peculiar kind of Underworld, where warriors wait to be reborn, some of them in less than perfect incarnations: as bulls for meat production, partly because that is part of their journey, and partly because of Russia’s need for meat. Metaphysical and practical aspects covered in one simple nightmare.

There is a red thread through the loosely knitted psychedelic adventure, though.

Human beings long for knowledge. They want to know where they come from, and understand their historical roots. They want to know how they are perceived by others, and how their own minds work. They want to be able to divide the world into reality and fiction, dream and conscious thought. The fact that they fail at their endeavour most of the time does not stop them from continuing to question their existence: through dialogue, action, literature, art and violence.

Even when they detect a nonsensical pattern, they prefer to continue living within it, rather than being in a void - a deliberate wordplay, as that is the main character's name: Voyd.

When the confusion is almost unbearable, a fleeting moment of clarity feels like salvation:

"I experienced the same feeling I had several minutes earlier - I felt as though I were on the verge of understanding something extremely important, that any moment now the levers and cables of the mechanism that was concealed behind the veil of reality and made everything move would become visible. But this feeling passed, and the enormous white elephant was still standing there in front of us."

He almost got to see what Pelevin called The Helmet of Horror: The Myth of Theseus and the Minotaur in another of his mind-boggling stories, a huge machine generating a reality that the machine is part of itself.

It may not sound so, because I am inept at describing the roller coaster ride properly, but it is an incredibly funny book, poking at political and religious nonsense with a dark streak of sarcasm. The description of Russian Christianity in analogy to Stalinist reality is hilarious: the choice you have is between labour camp (hell, obviously), if you are a dissident free-thinker, or blind worship of Stalin (heaven, sort of) if you are an orthodox communist. The poor characters are left pondering on the lose-lose of their religious/political life.

Underneath the confusing plot, and the sarcastic jokes, there are philosophical questions and reflections on historical processes which I enjoyed a lot, often making me laugh out loud. I was quite grateful that I had read Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction quite recently, as it made me understand (ha!) what I didn't know (eh?) on a theoretical level.

I doubt that I have made a convincing case for this novel, but that is entirely my fault, and I highly recommend it, along with his equally hilarious The Life of Insects, which looks at human identity from the angle of creepy crawler metamorphosis.

Please read it, despite me.

Rick Slane says

I think the narrator was a mental patient who thought he was in the red or white army between 1921-1923. He also records some of his dreams. There are 10 chapters and I did not really enjoy much but the last two chapters redeemed the entire work for me. I would think this is a must read for Russian readers. I thought of so many other authors and works to compare this to that it became unmanageable to do so and I will call it very original instead.

Alex says

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Emma says

One of my favourite books of all time. A mind-blowing, orgiastic blend of Buddhist philosophy and Russian humour, with so much depth you could read it a hundred times and still miss something. I only wish my Russian were good enough to allow me to read it in the original and understand the many allusions to modern Russian life. Even in translation, this is a work on consummate genius, and it's astonishing that Pelevin isn't better known in the West.
