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The Vegetarian: A Novel
Synopsis

Winner of the 2016 Man Booker International Prize
ONE OF ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLYâ€™S BEST BOOKS OF 2016 SO FAR
ONE OF TIMEâ€™S BEST BOOKS OF 2016 SO FAR
A beautiful, unsettling novel about rebellion and taboo, violence and eroticism, and the twisting metamorphosis of a soul. Before the nightmares began, Yeong-hye and her husband lived an ordinary, controlled life. But the dreamsâ€”invasive images of blood and brutalityâ€”torture her, driving Yeong-hye to purge her mind and renounce eating meat altogether. Itâ€™s a small act of independence, but it interrupts her marriage and sets into motion an increasingly grotesque chain of events at home. As her husband, her brother-in-law and sister each fight to reassert their control, Yeong-hye obsessively defends the choice thatâ€™s become sacred to her. Soon their attempts turn desperate, subjecting first her mind, and then her body, to ever more intrusive and perverse violations, sending Yeong-hye spiraling into a dangerous, bizarre estrangement, not only from those closest to her, but also from herself. Celebrated by critics around the world, The Vegetarian is a darkly allegorical, Kafka-esque tale of power, obsession, and one womanâ€™s struggle to break free from the violence both without and within her. From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Han KangÃ¢â„Â™s novel, The Vegetarian, tells the story of Yeong-hye, a non-descript South Korean housewife who, after a disturbing dream, stops eating meat as well as all animal-derived products. The novel is divided into three parts, each told from the point of view of a person who is impacted in some way by her decision. The first part is narrated by her husband, a callous, uncaring
salary-man, who chose her specifically because she was unremarkable in every possible way. In
the second part we see her through the eyes of her brother-in-law, an unsuccessful video artist,
struggling to realize some vague pornographic vision. Finally, we see how her transformation and
subsequent struggles with mental illness affect her sister. This was a difficult one. It’s very
dark with an almost constant feeling of dread hovering over it. But the story is truly gripping, not to
mention that trying to work out the author’s agenda kept me turning the pages despite
myself. It touches on so many large social issues – gender, conformity, moral accountability,
as well as more personal things like family relationships, abuse, violence, rage and
self-image. Yeong-hye is repeatedly victimized, in various ways, by men who are either
manipulative, predatory or just plain cruel. Yeong-hye’s husband is an utterly conventional
corporate striver, so her inability to conform to his expectations and societal norms ultimately
destroys their marriage. As an artist, her brother-in-law views himself as an outsider and projects his
dark, lustful fantasies onto her in pursuit of his vision. And her sister struggles with guilt over their
upbringing with a monstrous father who singled Yeong-hye out for abuse. It’s tough to
summarize one thing that this deceptively slim little volume speaks to; just when I thought I had a
handle on the author’s over-arching message or theme, the book changed
direction slightly and had me thinking about something else entirely. However, there is one
particular instance of cruelty from Yeong-hye’s childhood (one of the few passages told
from her POV) that strongly suggests her vegetarianism and wish to reject her humanity is a form of
atonement for her role in a completely horrific act of cruelty, however powerless she was to stop it.
But the story also illustrates how one person’s refusal to conform can have a domino effect
on those around them - and how that might be viewed by many as destructive to the fabric of
society. The writing is extremely confident and impactful. The author makes you almost believe in
the plausibility of Yeong-hye’s physical transformation because her conviction seems so
unimpeachable and her desire so ardent. This is a heartbreaking book that works on so many levels
and touches on so many themes. Depressing, but worth it.

This is a taut novella, about 190 pages, divided into 3 parts, written in lapidary precision, evident
even in the translation. The first part is told from the husband’s point of view: He watches in
horror as his quiet, conventional life is disrupted by his wife’s refusal to eat meat. Her
vegetarian lifestyle is prompted at first by a dream, but strengthened by flashbacks of cruelty toward
animals that she has witnessed in her childhood. The husband is a scoundrel. He possesses a cold
rational aspiration toward mediocrity and does not want his masculinity challenged by an assertive
woman, so he seeks in a wife a woman who is meek to the point of being a non-entity and a cipher, a being who will mold to his aspirations to corporate success and societal convention. But her vegetarianism disrupts his carefully ordered existence. She even rejects intimacy with her husband because his body smells like meat, and he becomes an object of revulsion. The wife’s refusal to eat meat, and her descent into madness, reminds me of two short stories, Bartleby, the Scrivener and The Yellow Wall-Paper. Like Bartleby, the wife’s refusal to comply with an authority figure’s orders becomes a metaphor for rejecting the assumed reality of society’s conventions. Like The Yellow Wall-Paper, the wife is suffocated by her marriage and can only rebel by embracing insanity, which of course throws a wrench into the husband’s life of façade and convention.

Everyone gangs up on the wife to coerce her back to a meat-eating lifestyle. Even her own mother threatens her and at one point screams, “Look at yourself, now! Stop eating meat, and the world will devour you whole.” The themes of society’s complicity with sanctioned cruelty toward animals and oppression against women feel real and not like a shrill militant polemic on feminism and animal cruelty. The themes grow out of the novel’s original vision, one drawn from a weird insane logic. The tone of the novel is riveting and reads like a horror novel. This is one of the best novels I’ve read in a long time. Highly recommended.

Yeong-hye is a plain ordinary housewife. That’s why her husband married her. But one night, she has a vivid nightmare, and the next day she swears off meat entirely. This decision wreaks drastic changes on her health and family life, with sometimes violent repercussions. THE VEGETARIAN is a hard novel to describe. It’s probably easiest to relate to in a grad school sort of way: a novel of how a woman’s identity is beaten down by the people around her. But there’s more to it than that. It’s a very visceral novel at times; you feel it under your skin, you think about it afterwards. And yet, the plot moves sluggishly; Kang’s writing (and Smith’s subsequent translation) is poetic and engrossing, but the novel takes a surprisingly long time to get through. I eventually realized I wasn’t actually looking forward to picking it up again. And yet I did. THE VEGETARIAN leaves me a little estranged, but not necessarily in a bad way. I wish there was more to it...but then again, I don’t know what that would be.

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