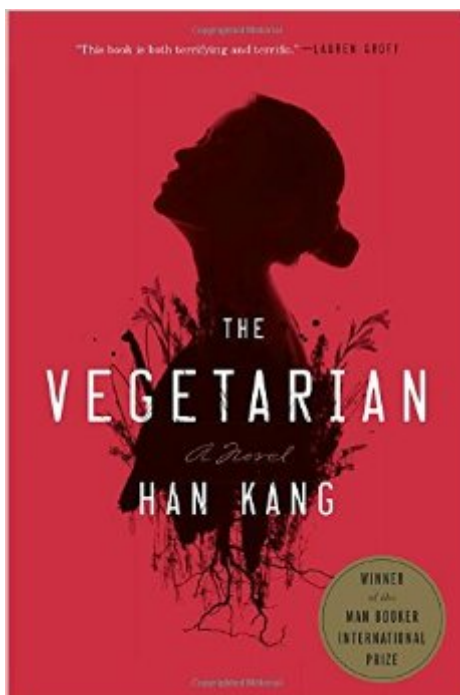


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The Vegetarian: A Novel



Synopsis

Winner of the 2016 Man Booker International Prize
ONE OF ENTERTAINMENT WEEKLY'S
"BEST BOOKS OF 2016 SO FAR" • ONE OF TIME'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 dreams—“invasive images of blood and brutality”—torture her, driving Yeong-hye to purge her mind and renounce eating meat altogether. It'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 that'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 woman's struggle to break free from the violence both without and within her. From the Hardcover edition.

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Customer Reviews

Han Kang'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 facade 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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