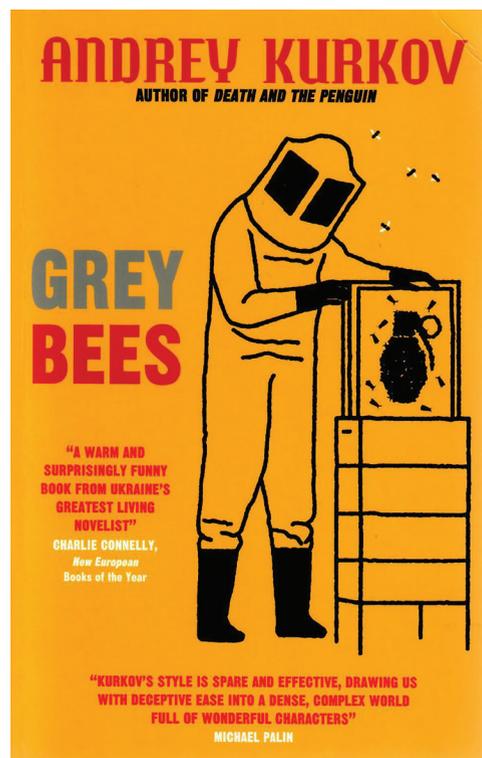


Grey Bees

A Ukrainian Novel

by Andrey Kurkov

Reviewed by M.E.A. McNeil



In novels with beekeepers as characters, the bees often provide no more than a buzzing soundscape, local color. “Grey Bees,” by Andrey Kurkov, is considered the same way in reviews, where the presence of bees is barely mentioned, if at all, despite the title. But the book itself reveals that the bees are integral to the heart of the story.

Kurkov, one of Ukraine’s most successful authors, embodies the antitheses that galvanize the story. He is Russian-born, grew up in Ukraine and considers it his home. Although he writes in Russian, his books are banned in Russia because of his criticism of the Kremlin. He owes our access to this work to a fluid translation by Boris Dralyuk.

Although the writer is not a beekeeper — as is so often the case — the bees are not décor; they are indeed

“Grey Bees” is a widely-reviewed novel that captures the life of a small-scale beekeeper who has stayed in an all-but abandoned village in the Donbas zone between Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces.

translated from Russian
by Boris Dralyuk

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drivers of the narrative. Perhaps it takes a reader who keeps bees to appreciate that and to be aware of the authenticity of detail, such as it is. (The author says he took lessons from a beekeeper, one who can be proud, mostly, of the resultant accuracy — with the exception of one rookie oversight that makes the eye-rolling, knowledgeable reader wish that beekeeper had reviewed the manuscript.)

Nonetheless, the book is engaging on several levels as it follows the state of the bees and their keeper amidst an ongoing conflict. The year is 2017, three years after the Russian annexation of Crimea and during the incremental Russian invasion of the Donbas region of Ukraine. There, in an all-but-abandoned village in the no-man’s land between the warring Russian separatists and Ukrainian forces, Sergey Sergeyich lives and keeps his six overwintering beehives in a shed. He has remained behind to look after his bees.

The writer, Kurkov, has himself refused to leave Ukraine during the current war. He has been living in Kyiv with his wife and children in a small flat with only a kitchen table for writing. As he volunteered to bring medicines to Donbas, he experienced those who stayed behind in villages, living without electricity, gas, mail or supplies in the strip of land between the forces. That grey zone, only some 19 miles wide, at that time stretched

the length of the battle lines, over 350 miles. Kurkov noted that although over a hundred books on the conflict had been published, they were all about the fighting from one or the other side. “Military actions are not helping to explain human story. I wanted to give voice to these forgotten people,” he said.

In “Grey Bees,” Sergeyich lives a block from the only other person who stayed behind in the fictional village of Little Starhorodivka, amidst the nearby shelling in a shaky cease-fire. “This is about what war brings to ordinary people,” said Kurkov, “people who work hard and do what is expected of them,” as Sergeyich did as a mine inspector until he retired with black lung disease and turned to keeping bees.

Grey is a theme of the book that describes waning of spirit, landscape and sick bees. Sergeyich’s house faces the Ukrainian forces and his neighbor’s faces the Russian side. Just as they live in the grey zone between adversaries, their lifelong relationship is in the grey area between friend and enemy. Sergeyich’s most partisan act is to switch street signs with him, giving him Lenin Street and taking the street name for his own house of the Ukrainian national poet. While he keeps his Russified name while his passport has the Ukrainian version, he stays neutral, out of the conflict. “It wasn’t his fault that his home was

now in the middle of the war. In the middle, yes, but taking no part in it."

These in-between choices are grey, as is most everything else about his life except his connection to his bees. He has a deep relationship to them, a reason he remains in his perilous home so as not to move them in winter. For them, he is partisan, planning come spring "he would release an entire army of bees ... six regiments of bees onto the wild flowering fields. Indeed, was a hive not a regiment? Or a barracks to house one?"

The nickname his neighbor calls him is Greyich in English, ("Seryi" is a short name that means "grey"). His nostalgia and fading memories are personified in an old photo of him wearing a grey suit, his wife and her bright red dress long gone. The grey days, the ticking clock, the landscape — a mix of abandoned industrial wasteland and snow-covered steppe. For Sergeyich, grey is refuge. Whenever he's asked if he's from Donetsk, a nearby city then controlled by Russian-backed separatists, he says, "No, my house is in the grey zone."

Kurkov said in an interview, "Grey on a grey background is inconspicuous. And that means protected. Such is the psychology of many people of Donbas. They do not want to stand out from the crowd because it is dangerous. It is dangerous when they see that you are different from others. In Donbas, indeed, people rarely painted the fences of their houses in bright colors. This was too risky, too foolhardy. Therefore, the dullness of an urban or rural landscape only intensified the dullness of life and created a dullness of thought."

In contrast, for Sergeyich the bees have a comforting kind of intelligence; the laws of nature make more sense than the laws of state. His respect and attachment to his colonies developed as he decided early on that they organize their communal collective life much better than the Soviets had in the USSR.

The sounds of his hives are for him "not only proof of the presence of the health of his bees, but also proof of his own presence. He wasn't merely the owner of an apiary, after all — he was the representative of the legitimate interests of its bees." He thought, "Some people were worse than bees, and some were as good as bees. But better? Unlikely."

The reader is drawn into the grey zone, anxious along with Sergeyich for his colonies with each shelling.



Andrey Kurkov is the author of "Grey Bees," a novel that follows a Ukrainian beekeeper in a war zone. His books have been banned in Russia.

We grow apprehensive with him over the gamble of remaining in tentative safety relative to the unknown beyond — "powerless to help the bees in any way." His hives are packed away in the frozen shed, each covered with batting and metal. We listen keenly with Sergeyich to discern whether the blasts are at a safe distance or loud enough to frighten his bees. The church and neighbors' houses, after all, are rubble.

It is with that unnerving vigilance that both Sergeyich and the reader watch for signs of spring, when his bees can fly and he can move them to safer forage. His perilous situation reveals the nearly religious dedication he has to his colonies. "He had to maintain his health not only for his own sake, but also for the sake of the bees." He has no access to medicine — only remedies from his bees. "If something should happen to him, they would perish in all the multitude — and he just could not allow himself to become, whether by his own will or otherwise, the annihilator of hundreds of thousands of bee souls."

Sergeyich's therapeutics are honey, bee pollen, various tinctures he had made (perhaps from propolis, we want to know) and — what? — a bee bed. According to the translator Dralyuk, such beds are commonly advertised along Ukrainian roads as available for travelers to take remedial rests atop active hives. By March, Sergeyich moves his boxes out of the shed and fashions his healing bee bed on them — two hives wide, three hives

long, topped with a sheet of wood and a thin mattress. "A nap on the hives would fix me up, he thought." Then, cold as it is still, he sleeps on his hive bed for a week: "Better than any medicine! Better than vitamins! It's like charging up a special human electricity — not the kind that powers lightbulbs, but the kind that powers human vision, allowing a person to see further than usual."

If it weren't for the bees, he wouldn't have seen beyond his village. "But leave he must, if not for himself, then for his most valuable possession: the bees." He loads his bee trailer, hitches it to his Lada, and packs a dozen or so jars of honey. "After all, honey is also money ... whether buckwheat or motley grass (Eastern European wildflower), [it] resolutely maintains its value. Like the dollar." He asks a Ukrainian soldier the safest road for moving his bees; "The one with fewer mines" is the answer, and he sets out to find safe forage. He drives in a light, cold rain, "good for traveling with bees."

Sergeyich settles his hives in a neighboring region, near Vesele, in a forest that seems safe enough. Being a beekeeper makes it possible for him to draw on a kind of fraternal assistance from a beekeeping stranger — much as it is in our bee world. "Any beekeeper would help a brother in need, wouldn't he?" he asks, and for the help he gets, only the cost of petrol is requested in return. But, with license plates from the grey zone, he is perceived as an enemy by those affected by the war. Still depending on the camaraderie of beekeepers, he moves on to visit Akhtem, a Tartar he met 20 years ago at a beekeeping conference and who, he assumes, still lives in Crimea, now occupied by Russia.

It would not be fair to give away the plot of this book, which is well worth the reading — particularly for Sergeyich's musings on the bees. For example, in Russian-held Crimea, "He reflected on the fact that bees and ants also had their guards, who maintained order and protected families from foreign incursions. He also thought that people might learn a thing or two about

For a dependable way to support beekeepers under siege in Ukraine, Bees for Development and Apimondia together have a donation page:

<https://www.beesfordevelopment.org/bee-involved/support-beekeepers-in-ukraine/>

Also, see the website of the NGO Brotherhood of Ukrainian Beekeepers, <https://veterans-and-bees.com/> for the project Help on Bee Wings.

maintaining order from bees. After all, bees alone had managed to establish communism in their hives, thanks to their orderliness and labor. Ants, on the other hand, had only reached the stage of real, natural socialism; this was because they had nothing to produce, and so had merely mastered order and equality. But people? People had neither order nor equality. Even their police were useless, just loping around by the fence."

The beekeeping reader will have some questions. Given that without his bees, "the meaning of his life ... would evaporate, abandoning him to a meaningless state," he has little curiosity about their biology and behavior. "Sergeyich regarded the internal rules of their life (relations between the worker bees and the drones, all that petty, everyday nonsense) to be their personal business, the same as with people. It was no concern of his. The only thing that would concern him would be the unexpected death or loss of one of the queens, but, thank God always well on that score; the queens lived, reproduced and died as and when nature ordained, passing their batons to their replacements, who were born in the same hives." Such a *laissez faire* attitude seems either dated or fictional for those of us who need to be so watchful.

Perhaps the character is simply naïve, since he believes that if his supers are full of honey the bees will stop forging. He is eager to extract because "otherwise the bees would think that's all they needed. Then they have no reason to fly off and work."

The reader's amply measured benefit of the doubt runs out when Sergeyich and another beekeeper set up to centrifuge their honey in daytime in the midst of their apiary, "taking turns cranking the handle ... watching with a smile" as they filled buckets and jars. The beekeepers among us will be hooting with laughter — knowing well that in reality those naïfs would not be smiling as they were inundated by robber bees.

While we are amused, consider a question asked of Kurkov by an interviewer: Why a beekeeper for your main character? He said, "The people who are beekeepers are very different from normal people, I can tell you. I talked to many of them. They are individualists. They can be grey and not interested otherwise. They are very individual; they are singles. They are living together with the bees, not together with the human

society. They live in society less than with the bees, only if there is a necessity, so I thought that Sergei must be a beekeeper. That would explain a lot of things in his behavior and his attitude toward human society."

This depiction is dismissed as a worn cliché familiar to us as beekeepers — although we will own up to an independent spirit. The question of whether Ukrainian beekeepers might better fit that description was posed to Tetyana Vasylykivska, of the Ministry of Agrarian Policy and Food of Ukraine for Development of Beekeeping. She said, "To some extent, Mr. Kurkov is right that the Ukrainian beekeeper, like any representative of this profession in any country, is an individualist and devoted to bees. You cannot be a beekeeper and not love bees, not be loyal to them. This is not just a profession. This is a certain way of life. Ukrainian beekeepers mostly have small apiaries — from 20 to 300 colonies. ... Beekeepers treat bees as family members. In Ukraine, even a bee colony is called differently, we call it a bee family. ... However, I cannot agree that beekeepers are not interested in anything but bees. Ukrainian beekeepers have wonderful families. Mostly everyone in the beekeeper's family helps to work in the apiary — both women and children work. There is work for everyone."

Fact and fiction, this book is an absorbing read: "The air will be filled with the sweet and pleasing, close and peaceful buzzing — a buzzing that makes every bee lover's world feel smaller, cozier, more homelike. And then the distant shots and explosions will not seem so important; after all, a person can get used to anything."