



Sandro of Chegem

Fazil Iskander, Susan Brownsberger

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Sandro of Chegem Details

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Nemalevich says

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Victoria A. says

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Wrpainting says

It's been a while, but I loved the comic terror of Sandro as toastmaster at an important dinner that included Lavrentiy Beria, chief of soviet security, and probably Stalin's assassin.

Mark says

Of a different time and place but identifiable at the same time. Amusing.

Katya Kazbek says

I'll review this in English even though I read it in Russian. I wish it was more popular among English-speaking people with a knack for world lit, because it's just as insufferably delicious as some of the best Latin American novels, like Lezama-Lima's "Paradiso" or "One Hundred Years of Solitude" to which it draws comparisons for themes and year of publication. It was my favorite, life-transforming book as a young adult and rereading it now I understood more things, and was peeved by some things, but loved it none the less.

I have no idea how editing in publishing houses worked in the USSR, but while reading some parts of the book I was aching for a blue pen. The narrative drifts and shifts, there are random observations from the narrator which take away from the plot, and some fact checking omissions, like Paul Robeson being called Roy Roysen, are glaring. However, the stories that Iskander tells are simply remarkable, unique, covering the history of Abkhazia from sometime in the Byzantine era to USSR circa 70s, all through the lens of the history of one big family, its happiness and pain, the births of children and untimely deaths of others. There is Stalin and collectivization, a magical quest for a princess in a fortress, slavery, displacement, blackness, heroin addiction, corruption, crime, a bunch of wars, endless romantic dramas, a sassy mule, a determined buffalo, and a bunch of lovesick donkeys. And of course in the middle of it all, Sandro Chegembra, Abkhazian feast MC extraordinaire, a skilled dancer, and a man who never doubts himself, although this self-assuredness is not offensive but endearing.

It's essentially 31 novellas loosely linked by plot. Some novellas are perfect, others take time and patience to

get through but the rewards are worth it each time. Abkhazia may not be a known destination on the literary map of the world but it sure does have its Great Abkhazian Novel.

Suraj says

A great account of life in mofussil USSR under Stalin

Claire says

I randomly picked this book up at a used book store last summer, intrigued by the back cover description of Iskander as the "Gabriel García Márquez of Abkhazia." This book is a series of semi-connected episodes, all involving or centering on Sandro, a virile *tamada* (toastmaster). It was interesting to learn some about Abkhazian culture and the changes brought about by the rise of communism (I had never even heard of Abkhazia before; formerly part of the USSR, it is now a de facto but unofficially independent republic located within Georgia), but this book did not ever fully hold my attention. Some chapters stood out, especially *Tali, Miracle of Chegem*, the final episode, and *The Tale of Old Khabug's Mule*, where the point of view unexpectedly shifts to Sandro's father's mule. I'm certainly not sorry I read it, but I was relieved to finally reach the end.

Max says

Like an Abkhazian Huckleberry Finn.

Trounin says

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(c) Trouni

Helene says

Best dang Abkhazian novel I ever read.

Lakmus says

Well, not entirely finished, just a meager 1000 out ~1200 pages. But I am going to call this a day, mostly for reasons irrelevant to the quality of the book.

Read in the original Russian, as published by "Azbuka" in the "Big Book" series. Great quality, by the way, this (gargantuan) volume is really sturdy.

As for the book itself, it is a collection of short stories roughly revolving around one particular village in Abhazia, roughly focusing on Uncle Sandro and his adventures. Roughly. To me this book was described as a work that 'placed Abhazia' on the map of the literary world, the same way as Colombia was placed there by "One Hundred Years of Solitude". And it does pretty much that, although with less magic and more realism, except maybe for the heartbreakingly chapter told from the perspective of the village buffalo. That one is just a work in its own right, imo.

It doesn't follow any plot — it sort of throws you at the deep end, like you were just spat out from a space-time traveling machine on the road to Chegem, and are being lead through all the meaningless and fascinating nuances of local life, with its gossip, old squabbles and unpaid vendettas, love affairs and daily routine.

You can read it all together or as individual stories, probably in any order, too. Like life itself, this book has no real beginning or end, it just runs out of pages on both sides.

Staren says

I almost hated this book. I am not able to understand why it is so popular. It is funny at some places, but mostly just boring tales about nothing... maybe, with some pretension for "national flavour." No, "????????? ?????" is not my cup of tea at all.

Irish says

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