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A brilliantly crafted novel about one man's betrayal of his talent, his friends, and his principles—a work of demon energy, startling imagery, and utter originality.

At fifty-six, Anatoly Sukhanov has everything a man could want. Nearly twenty-five years ago, he traded his precarious existence as a brilliant underground artist for the perks and comforts of a high-ranking Soviet apparatchik. Once he created art; now he censors it. His past is a shadow, repressed to the point of nonexistence. But a series of increasingly bizarre events transforms his perfect world into a nightmare. Buried dreams return to haunt him, his life begins to unravel, new political alignments in the Kremlin threaten to undo him, and little by little, he finds himself losing everything he sold his soul to gain.

Told in dream sequences that may be true, in real time that may be nightmares, in shifting time frames and voices, Olga Grushin's novel is a highly sophisticated, often surreal exploration of self-dissolution, faithlessness, and transformation.

The Dream Life of Sukhanov Details

Date : Published 2007 by Penguin (first published January 1st 2005)

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Author : Olga Grushin

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From Reader Review *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* for online ebook

Manray9 says

Olga Grushin's *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* is a peculiar novel. As I read my opinion fluctuated. It was captivating, then it was tedious. Captivating again and then tedious. It has been compared to the works of Gogol and Bulgakov, but the drifting characters and the impressionistic flavor left me with the distinctive feel of Chekhov -- laced with just a touch of insanity. The references to Chekhov's plays reinforced my perspective. It was very "Russian."

Grushin traces Sukhanov's life and the Russian art world from the period of Stalinist rigidity, through Khrushchev's "Thaw" in Soviet artistic circles, to the reimposition of ideological orthodoxy that presaged the Brezhnev era. Even though the "Thaw" was more prominent in literature than the visual arts, hopes for a new era bloomed. These hopes for freedom of expression were dashed, as described by Grushin, with Khrushchev's public outrage over the Manezh show in 1962.

By 1985, as the Soviet experiment sped toward its end, the rules that governed existence there changed, quickly and irrevocably, ruthlessly exposing the vacuity and moral compromises underpinning so many people's lives and careers. The changes wrought emptiness, confusion, and anger. This is Sukhanov's fate. In 1962, he sacrificed his true artistic sensibilities to achieve success within the stultifying world of Soviet artistic conformity. He sold his soul. The disintegration of his comfortable world in 1985 confronts him with his past, but also takes him on a phantasmagorical journey to rediscover his artistic spirit.

The Dream Life of Sukhanov is described on the front flap as "a novel of rare virtuosity" and Grushin as a writer of "large and original talent." Both may be true, but only in flashes. Virtuosity must be sustained to be genuine and cannot lapse into pretentiousness. While a respectable start for a young writer, she has a way to go yet. It's a Three Star book to me.

DonaAna says

One of the best books I've read this year. Gripping, yet feels instantly like a classic, feels slightly like Bulgakov. Just simply loved it. Wish more people could write like this.

Dawn says

'Haunting', 'Stunning' & 'Heartbreaking' claims the cover. The blurb is something I always take with a pinch of salt - but on this occasion, for me, the book was all those things.

I think it would strike a chord with many, as most people have to compromise and sell out to some degree in order to have comfort and security for themselves or their family - often losing who they are in this life process. Thankfully, these days not many are in the extreme situation that Sukhanov (and others) faced, in which case nor can we truly imagine it - but due to the accomplished writing here, we experience the culminating poignant aftermath of his past life choices along with him.

Poor, dear Sukhanov, my heart was hurting.

As the book progresses, he increasingly wanders in and out of the past. When he visits a place which triggers a memory, he steps right into that memory and relives the events of long ago. The past manifests so strongly that it seems to overlay the present completely, temporarily obliterating it.

As his mind crumbled things progressively became more confused and blurred, and I felt quite dreamlike myself. That was probably because the writing is astounding - and this was Olga Grushin's first novel.

My copy was a library book I had requested, but I have now ordered my own - along with her other two currently available novels. Yes ladies and gentlemen, I liked it very much indeed.

Lorenzo Berardi says

On The Vicissitudes of the Dream Life of Sukhanov.

In the beginning it was fire...

I've rescued this book from a mouldy crate (which once contained Portuguese tangerines) left on the floor of a firemen station in a provincial English town on a placid Saturday afternoon of early May.

The first novel by Olga Grushin was lying on her meek ivory back crushed beneath a pile of heavy-weighted low-browed gaudy rubbish labeled Sophie Kinsella, Danielle Steel and E.L. James.

(BBC Oxford set the mood broadcasting 'Total Eclipse of the Heart' by Bonnie Tyler)

The local firemen were sipping cups of tea wrapped up in their fluorescent-striped uniforms chatting amiably with elderly bystanders and enjoying their charity event. They couldn't save The Dream Life of Sukhanov.

And no one of the reluctant book-scurers of Abingdon-on-Thames had the keen eye or the noble heart needed to pick up this gem of a novel. What they did, little by little, was making room for The Dream Life of Sukhanov by taking the aforementioned Kinsella, Steele and James away.

(BBC Oxford adjusted their standards by switching to 'Ring of Fire' by Johnny Cash)

Thus, I was able to spot the novel, lift it up and - taken by a sudden impulse - decide to save it from oblivion and bring it home, across the street. It costed me one quid. Sgt. Sam Fireman said: 'thanks, mate'.

You may be surprised to know that I had never heard of Olga Grushin before.

However, put a nice sketch of the Red Square in Moscow on the cover as well as a line stating 'shortlisted for the orange award for new writers 2006' and a broad spectrum of praise from Vogue (do they know books?) to The Financial Times (do they care about books?) and that's it: you buy me.

What I thought is this: in the worst case scenario - say, if this is going to be awful cheap Russian-flavoured crap like 'Snowdrops' - I will have good fun in writing an evil review smashing this novel to bits. But if the novel proves to be good, that would be almost better than being sarcastic about it.

And then came water...

It happened that the very same night my partner in life and in book-rescuing were invited to a social gathering involving the making and baking of a half-dozen pizzas, multilingual chatting and the occasional warm beer.

You know, we're not exactly the Oxford University Ball types. Falling hopelessly drunk in a college quadrangle blabbering obscenities in Latin is not our idea of entertainment. Or not anymore.

Anyway, what matters here is that I put 'The Dream Life of Sukhanov' in my rucksack so that I could have something to read on the bus (my partner abhors noise on the public transport and wears fancy earplugs which do not encourage conversation). And that's when I begin to understand that this novel was stunning. A few pages were enough to make me realise that Olga Grushin likes adjectives but does have talent.

I left a postcard from Lisbon (a homage to those Portuguese tangerines) as a bookmark between page 16 and 17 and left the bus with my partner to reach our social gathering. We wanted to walk a bit. The problem is that we didn't expect a deluge to welcome us in Oxford.

It took us half an hour to reach our destination where our friends had already started to make dough, warm up the ovens and assemble the ingredients for the pizza bonanza. We were desperately wet but beastly hungry and after fishing bottles of beers from my rucksack, I forgot to check what happened to The Dream Life of Sukhanov.

We baked. We ate. We chatted. We drank.

We said goodnight see you later guys.

My partner and I left.

Back home - despite the late hour - I spent twenty minutes hair-drying my freshly rescued book page after page. The first novel by Olga Grushin took so much water that its last 80 pages were like a single thick plank of plywood. The Red Square was flooded beyond recognition. Only the faintest outlines of Saint Basil and the Kremlin were still there.

(I hope my neighbours have forgiven me for the noise. If you meet them, say sorry on my behalf and tell them that the hair-dryer bit wasn't a song by Kraftwerk and was for a good cause).

Ok, to cut a long story short, I am glad to tell you that The Dream Life of Sukhanov survived the deluge. The Red Square is back on dry soil. One can actually leaf through each of the last 80 pages. Luckily.

In short. Go, fetch this book. It is truly exquisite.

It doesn't have much of a plot but it's masterfully written. It includes some of the best pages about art which I've ever read (not that I'm an expert, but still). There are sentences which are worth of Nabokov and others which would have pleased Bulgakov. Believe me.

The likes and works of Chagall, Dalí, Rublev are here. Moscow in the mid-1980s is here.

The moral miseries and sour memories of a privileged man - Tolya Sukhanov, you bet - are here.

Some interesting literary experiments in switching from the first to the third person narrator (and back, and back again!) are here. Beauty is here.

Just keep this novel in a dry place, please.

Beverly says

Lyrical, but strangely un compelling, this is the story of a moral and mental breakdown. An artist of brilliant promise in his youth, Sukhanov sells out to the Soviet way, becoming an art critic/apparatchik promoting 'Russian' art as opposed to decadant Western art. In 1985 at age 56, the combination of mid-life and glasnost brings his past crashing down on him. As in European literature of the 20th century, politics shapes life in a way that is unknown in this country.

Manny says

Emanuel Lavrentievich closed the book and returned to his review. There was an odd sensation in his eyes and the back of his throat, and a number of thoughts, all of which he knew he would be well advised not to dwell on, were doing their best to gain his attention. He moved his gaze over the words he had already written, but they refused to cohere into sentences. And some of them surely had nothing to do with it? He deleted "Chekhov", "ineluctably" and "icon", pondered a while, and then put back "icon".

No, he thought, it was entirely unsatisfactory. With a few decisive keystrokes, he erased the whole review. The now empty window, a minimalist, Malevitch-like rectangle of white delicately flanked by bars of blue, gray and black, seemed more appropriate; he was examining it intently when a noise disturbed him. Turning to his right, he slowly resolved the two irregular poppy-colored ovoids into the outline of Ekaterina Pavlovna, wearing her red dress and looking at him with a concerned expression.

"I thought you were nearly finished," she said. "But you haven't even started."

"I can't decide what to say," said Emanuel.

Mary says

This paranoid, dark, twisted, funny and moving novel enthralled me. Once I got used to it, I loved Grushin's writing. She has a style that's hard to describe; descriptive, blunt, and lush. I was hooked pretty quickly by this strange tale and found myself impatient to get back to it whenever I had to put it down. The world of Sukhanov was highly addictive. You never really knew what was going to happen next as this Soviet official wandered around 1980s Moscow in a fog, dipping in and out of reality, and creating some very amusing scenes with those around him.

The past is always lurking *right there* ready to claim us. One minute Sukhanov is living his cushy life, the next he's entire being is overcome by the force of nostalgia and regret. The narrative switches up without warning from third person to first person and it works magnificently.

Is Sukhanov an unreliable narrator? Looking back, I'd say yes. But aren't we all? How clouded by hindsight and remorse are we? When everything is filtered through the lens of the present, it's easy to see what we should've done; easier still to justify what we did do. Nothing is isolated. Everything we do sends ripples that touch those around us and alter the future.

Life is nothing but forks in the road. Sukhanov went one way, his friend went the other. Who was wiser? *We are our choices*, Sartre said. Indeed. I'd go one step further and say we are also our consequences. We have to live with what we've done and that never goes away, no matter how deeply you bury it. There were parts in this novel that made my chest tighten. The hold memories have on us is something so powerful and absolute. Sukhanov's mental break was beautiful, claustrophobic and hopeless. This book is a gem.

Kseniya Melnik says

Can I just say: WOW. And not just because Grushin is a Russian lady writing in beautiful, crisp, evocative English, that's grand and all, but what an approach to a classic subject matter! She addresses the things we (aspiring writers, artists and such) think about constantly, mumble to ourselves and talk to others, passionately when drunk: what is talent? can it be confused with youth and energy? does an artist have a duty to fulfill himself, and at what expense to his family and friends? is to create a right or a luxury? what's the purpose of art in society? and what price is too high to pay for staying true to one's ideals in a life, in a country, in a time when everything is shifting and changing. and then, there is the question of crazy...I'll leave it at that. I recommend the book highly-highly. Would be curious to see what everyone else thinks. Grushin was named one of Granta's best young writers this year blah blah blah and if you read it, you'll see why.

David says

A fascinating and deeply imaginative novel, beautifully written, surreal and all too real. To an American audience it may read as a high-art tale of midlife crisis, with a Russian twist. That is fair enough, and the novel is highly accomplished on that level. But it is also shot through with quintessentially Russian metaphysics. You will particularly like this book if you are a reader who appreciates writing that exploits words' ability to do more than represent a simulacrum of reality.

Bonnie says

Wow! Best novel I've read in quite some time, and it's a first novel. Echoes of Tolstoy, Nabokov, and Bulgakov. English is Grushin's 3rd language, but you wouldn't know it. Story of a 55-year-old man in 1985 Soviet Russia, having a nervous breakdown as his work and family life fall apart and as Soviet Russia is on the brink of falling apart. As a young man, Sukhanov showed promise as a Russian surrealist in the tradition of Dali and Chagall, but in fear for his life and career, he suppresses his guilt and ultimately becomes the editor of a Soviet art magazine, promoting "Soviet" art and denigrating Western art as immoral and supportive of capitalism. The novel seamlessly weaves past and present in a pastiche of surrealistic images from Sukhanov's "waking" dream life. A must read!

John says

Sukhanov's wife, Nina, describing her husband's early, experimental paintings, when she first saw them, says: they are dark, very dark indeed, darker than expected but, also, strange and...beautiful." This is a pretty good summing up of the novel, too.

Simply put, hahaha, this is a dark, colourful novel, bleak, dripping wet, grey, heavy and light as snow flakes, bright, slow, annoying in parts, and rising to flights of fancy so beautiful, painful, and inspiring in its anguish and salvation that I wanted to stop reading it at times to allow its sheer brilliance to sink deep into me.

I started out not liking this book; it had too many instances of the word "dark" and "darkness" for my liking; but, by the end, with its many dreams, rainbows and elegant wings, Grushin, the authour, was speaking my kind of language and I loved her palyfulness immensely.

Like the protagonist (Sukhanov), many people have burried their calling in life deep into the concerns of everyday life (work, family, a roof over ones head); like the protagonist, this calling sometimes seeks ways to break free of its shackles until oneday, hopefully, it breaks out in fantastic ways.

I don't know, for a first novel, it's hard to imagine how she could improve on it. I really can't wait to read her next book.

Alta says

The Dream Life of Sukhanov (2005, 2007) by Olga Grushin

I don't know about you, but as I grow older, I rarely read a book with the total abandonment I used to experience as a child or a teenager. Olga Grushin, a young(ish) American writer who emigrated from Russia at eighteen, must have some special powers in order to cast this spell with both her novels, *The Line* and *The Dream Life of Sukhanov*.

The first thing that separates Grushin's novels from those written by her American contemporaries is that, unlike them, she is still interested in something called "the human condition." I am always puzzled by the fact that, while apparently political, most (relatively) young American writers, don't integrate this interest into something one might call "our universal condition." But then, how could they, when those of them who are in academia, are taught to run away from notions of the "universal" as if they were plague? On the other hand, many writers who integrate a contemporary political experience into their writings—usually poets—do this in such a righteous, sloganeering way that one is instantly tempted to become apolitical. I am thinking here of the numerous bad poems simmering with righteous indignation at W. Bush that I had to listen to during endless poetry readings.

All this to say that it may take a writer who has actually lived in a country where one couldn't run away from politics, where every gesture ended up being political whether one was aware of it or not, to write in a mature way about the individual versus the collective, the singular versus the universal, fate versus will, and the relationship between the individual destiny and history. One cannot deal with such subjects when one has that nihilist ironic tone many contemporary American writers feel obligated to exhibit.

The historical background of *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* is that of Russia between the 1930s and the 1980s. The protagonist is the director of the main arts magazine in Moscow, and son-in-law of the most famous painter of day. Both titles implied a privileged position under communism, since one couldn't get them without bowing to the Communist Party, and they came with numerous perks: access to special stores of the nomenklatura, a private chauffeur, etc.

Little by little, the reader is drawn into the hero's dream life, and finds out that he had grown up in poverty and fear, having witnessed the killings of the Stalinist era and his father's suicide. As a young man he fell in love with surrealism, and despised the official rhetoric and the socialist realist paintings depicting optimistic laborers singing the beauty of their tractors. And then, one day he had to choose between continuing to be a poor, unrecognized painter, faithful to his ideals, and selling out to those in power in order to provide for his family.

At the heart of the novel is the choice, or rather, the question: what would you do if you had to choose? Sukhanov has to choose between killing the artist in himself and collaborating with the regime, on one hand, and keeping his artistic integrity, but having to survive by doing hard, low paid jobs, on the other hand. But choosing the latter also means committing suicide as an artist, since he wouldn't be able to exhibit his paintings, and what good is a painting without a viewer?

In appearance, the novel gives us the story of a man who has betrayed his youth, but the closer we get to the end, the more we realize that the novel doesn't have any easy answers, and that whatever the man would have chosen, he would have failed. At the end of the novel, a character introduced in the very first pages reappears: Sukhanov's friend, Belkin, who had taken the opposite path, that of artistic honesty and everyday misery. Belkin, who is poor and whose wife has left him, finally gets his first show when he is in his mid-fifties, but then he realizes that he is a mediocre painter.

Until his world suddenly unravels, Sukhanov is rich, happily married to a gorgeous woman, respected (or rather, feared) by those in his profession. In the end, his entire world falls apart, and although as readers we know that he is justly punished, the author doesn't give us a straight answer regarding the better choice. As Sukhanov's wife says during their younger (and poorer) days, "There is more than one way to lose one's soul."

This is an extremely mature novel, and it is amazing that a writer who left Russia at such a young age can recreate so well not only the people's daily lives and the country's atmosphere, but the existential choices communism imposed on people. As rooted as the novel is in a particular time and place, this very anchoring makes it universal insofar as in many ways we are all products of our choices. Last but not least, Olga Grushin is a great stylist, and her paragraphs on art are among the best in the novel.

Mark says

Beautiful and lyrical and satirical all at the same time. It's clear that Grushin has read the Russian masters - Bulgakov, Gogol, Dostoevsky - and it shines through in this gorgeous little book. I picked it up from the library, but now I wish that I'd bought it...

My other comment is that it frequently reads like a Chagall painting. And while I didn't necessarily care for Chagall before I read this book, I think I like his work now. I need to go to the MOMA to check.

Victor says

The Dream Life of Sukhanov follows Soviet apparatchik Anatoly Sukhanov as his carefully constructed life unravels before the readers' eyes. Through the numerous flashbacks we see the protagonist as a child, growing in the shadows of Stalin's terror and WWII, then an aspiring artist and wanna-be revolutionary, and then a complacent bureaucrat and a sell-out. You can see a big slice of Russia's turbulent history through the prism of a singular life, but the book's main focus is on Sukhanov the individual. Olga Grushin is a talented author and the Dream Life of Sukhanov is a remarkable work that achieved a great balance of story and character, historical scope and individual focus, power writing and lyricism. It's one of the better books I've read in 2017. I hope you enjoy it too.

Anna says

The best book I have read in a really long time. I'm partial to it, of course, because the novel floats through the world of artists in Soviet Russia. (How could I not love a book like that?) The book really shines, though, because Grushin's prose has that special something that makes the story absolutely haunting and unpredictable. At any moment you feel like her characters could find redemption, come across a ghost, walk away from life as they knew it, or throw themselves off a bridge, and it would be profound, regardless. It makes me feel good to know that people can still write like this. Read this book.

Donna says

He has a realization—

Something was happening to him—something strange, something, in fact, extremely unsettling—something that he was unable to explain, much less stop or control. He was being assailed by his past.

Anatoly Sukhanov is a man with a past he has edited, a past that now haunts him as those edited parts suddenly make themselves known in both his dreams and his waking hours. Just what is it that Sukhanov has suppressed all these years and that at the age of 56 now has him inhabiting a different plane of reality than those around him? Why do his dissatisfied wife and children, and his estranged associates look at him differently now? And what about his cousin whom he can't remember, a man who comes out of nowhere and is now turning his life upside down when coming to live with him and his family? What else does the cousin want besides room and board? Read this book and you'll know, bit by bit, what Sukhanov has kept hidden from himself and why.

You'll also learn a lot about art in Russia during the mid twentieth century in which innovative artists seeking self-expression through their work were forced underground or worse for the greater good. Sukhanov was one of those underground artists, but he now writes articles for a Russian magazine that criticizes free expression and extolls the virtues of conformity so the common people will strive to be productive citizens, not have flights of fantasy about freedom promoted by surrealism and other subversive movements. Though times are changing, as is Sukhanov. But are they changing for better or for worse? And will he bend with them or break?

Before he knew it, he was staggering through the uncharted territory of the basement, criss-crossed with low-ceilinged, cramped, poorly lit corridors. The smells of cabbage stew and detergent cling to walls the color of sickness; an ill-looking striped cat slunk past him, its invisible tail bristling; shapeless objects cringed in the corners, briefly suggesting rags, pails, brooms, a rolled-up poster, a three-legged chair, a doll with a missing arm, then sinking back into the shadows...After the sparkling expanse of the lobby, the buildings faintly unclean, unsavory underside jarred his senses, and he felt a dull oppression descending on him, as if all nine stories of human existence above were weighing heavily on his spirit.

Sukhanov is a man in trouble, something the writing in this book makes very clear. It is an hallucinogenic marvel and one of the best parts of this book, as I never connected much with the characters. Many of the scenes were as surreal as the paintings by Dali that Sukhanov scoffed at. But it was never too much, just surreal enough to unsettle the reader as the author seamlessly blended reality into fantasy, fantasy into dreams, dreams into reality, then back again, all of them melting together and dripping languidly off the page like the clocks in Dali's most famous painting. This caught me off guard and kept me on edge throughout the entire story, as I wasn't sure if what I was reading was truly happening or not, since not even Sukhanov knew.

But this story is much more than a literary, illusionary magic trick. It's about selective amnesia and survival. It's about sacrifice and irony, the purpose of art, the power of the conscience. It's about following one's dreams and living through other people's dreams, and more. The list goes on and on, the story perfect for any book club, with an ending that begs to be interpreted and compared within a group. Thanks again to my book club for giving me the chance to read an author new to me and a book I'd never have discovered on my own.

Cat {Wild Night In} says

I don't know about you, but normally I run to a novel to hide from the world and get transported as quickly as possible to a far-away place. At first, (until chapter 6) I found it hard to sink into this story, not because of a dislike of it, but because of the richness of the language. The beauty of the descriptions made me stop to luxuriate in them, for example, "...the sun shot out through the glass in a fiery orange zigzag, and out into the street spilled the zesty smell of roast chicken and the honey notes of some classic romance". You can't not savour that.

Then, after chapter six, I settled down to read and, to quote Sukhanov, "The rest happened with the magical facility of a dream".

I'm not well-read enough to compare it to Bulgakov or Gogol's work, but I can say with total sincerity that this novel is a modern masterpiece that is worth experiencing before you die.

Stacia says

At first, the long, flowery sentences overfilled with adjectives put me off the story a little bit. But for just a few pages... because, somehow, the story, the writing morphed and these became beautiful, startling descriptions. Melancholy. Surrealism. Art. Life. Youth. Aging.

Truly, this book is sublime. It's like a breathtaking painting put into words. Grushin has an incredible talent

for merging the real with the unreal, a current life and a dream. You smoothly drift from reality to dream and back again....

Definitely recommended, especially if you enjoy art (Grushin's art background shines here) and have at least a passing acquaintance with surrealist artists including Chagall, Dali, Magritte, etc....

Read it & savor the beauty.

notgettingenough says

.....Much later after finishing this wonderful book.

I did talk a few people into reading this. The first, Margaret, who has read many, many books over the decades immediately declared that she could call it the best book she's ever read too. Phew. I was afraid I was not overselling it, but creating a situation where expectation could not equal experience.

The review is here, unchanged since I first put it on GR:

[https://alittleteaalittlechat.wordpre...](https://alittleteaalittlechat.wordpress...)

jennifer says

Quick quibble: aggravatingly adverbby. (A little alliteration for what ails ya?) It slows the reader's pace, which is a fortunate side effect, because this book does so much in the way of imagination, paranoia, and simple historical narrative. There's a lot worth paying attention to.

My favorite stylistic flair is the author's true stealth in sliding from third-person to first-person narrative in service of flashbacks. The stitching is impeccable. They never felt sloppy or even a tinge pretentious.

I recommend this to anyone who loves art and/or Nabokovian prose. His ghost was smiling through this one.
