

Spotlight on Ilya Kharkow

Anarchism, Ukraine, and war in the new book THE MINING BOYS

Ilya Kharkow

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*Ilya Kharkow is a writer from Ukraine who refused to fight. After nine months of trying to escape the country, he finally crossed the border. That experience became *The Mining Boys*, a novel about war and the cost of staying alive. His work explores masculinity, queer identity, and life in wartime Europe.*

More of his work can be found at ikharkow.com

1. Why do you write books that some people probably shouldn't read?

Because not every book wants to be liked.

You know, I'm a gay guy from a homophobic country. A bookworm from a mining town. A pacifist at a time when everyone demands that I die for a country.

I simply describe my life in Ukraine and in exile. People do the hard work of finding it offensive. That makes it even more fun.

2. What's the biggest misconception about your work?

At first glance, my work looks like it's about war. It isn't. It's about what war does to intimacy. I'm interested in people, not governments.

My short story "Hotel," for example, is about guys trying to go on sex dates while hiding from forced mobilization.

3. Do you keep a journal / notes?

Some people pray when they're afraid. I take notes. That's probably the biggest difference between me and healthy people.

4. Bataille, Mishima, and Palahniuk all influenced your writing. What's one book by each that you'd recommend?

I'd recommend throwing all your books away and going outside. Don't even read me. To hell with literature. Grab your friend and go swim in the nearest lake. Eat something greasy. Food poisoning is an underrated teacher. Then come back to Bataille, Mishima, and Palahniuk.

5. Who are some contemporary writers (besides Palahniuk) you're excited about, and why?

Over the past month, four different people recommended that I read Denis Cooper.

Then, a few nights ago, I couldn't sleep. In moments like that, I usually choose between masturbation and self-improvement. That night, I chose self-improvement and decided to Google Denis Cooper.

Damn... the more I read about his books, the more I thought: I wish I'd written that. And that. And that.

Then I realized why I'd never heard of him. He'd barely been translated into Russian. His subjects, his tone of voice, the intention behind his writing – they all felt strangely close to me. Suddenly it hit me that my own books will probably never be published in Russian for the same reason.

So there really are nights when masturbation is the better choice.

6. What projects are you working on right now that we can look forward to?

I just finished the second volume of *Holes in the Shape of Humans* and returned to *The Mining Boys*.

There's still one publisher considering the novel. I sincerely hope they reject it this autumn. When they do, I'll make it available on my website.

The best thing about having no publisher is having no limits. I have no contracts, no sponsors, no permanent address, and no country whose censorship I need to worry about. My only responsibility is my own conscience. And I intend to use that freedom to prove that a world without violence is possible. If that made you smile, let me remind you that in wartime, being a pacifist can be dangerous as hell.

7. What was the reader reaction to the first volume?

I thought I knew what my work was worth. My readers disagreed.

Only two people paid the asking price. Everyone else paid more. One reader paid \$50 for a \$10 book. Readers like that make it possible for me to continue after years of writing into the void.

What stayed with me wasn't the money. It was realizing that somewhere in the world, a complete stranger believed in my work that much.

But what stays with me even longer are the emails and comments I receive from readers. Recently, someone from the US left a long comment on my *Buy Me a Coffee* page about his father, who refused to fight against Hitler. One day, I'm certain it will become one of my short stories.

8. Have you ever regretted publishing something?

Who cares? Once a text is published, it's already too late. Literature is a severe form of alcoholism. I only pretend to have control over it.

9. Do you listen to music while you write?

Sometimes.

I never get tired of literature. I get tired of myself. After a long writing session, I often listen to The Knife's "Still Light." It's sung from the perspective of someone waking up from a coma. That's exactly what writing feels like.

10. If your books were banned tomorrow, what sentence would you want people to remember?

The moment someone wants to protect you from a book is the moment you should read it.

11. The worst advice you could give us?

Don't read books by writers you wouldn't sleep with.

12. Which text of yours should people read first?

"Hotel." I made it free on my website because it's an excellent filter. It's short. It has weird dates, civil disobedience, and an unhealthy fascination with anonymous sex. Most people probably won't finish it. If you do, welcome. The stories only get more dangerous from there.

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