

Devil's dance

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SATANTANGO by LASZLO KRASZNAHORKAI
trans GEORGE SZIRTES
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Satantango is the extraordinary first novel by the acclaimed but (here) little-known Hungarian author Laszlo Krasznahorkai. Sometimes cited as a possible Nobel laureate, Krasznahorkai was 31 when his debut was published in Hungary in 1985 and turned him into a national star. Twenty-seven years on, it has finally been translated into English for the first time.

As in the author's other novels (only two have previously appeared in English), Satantango is written without a single paragraph break. Like a tango (which repeats its steps forward in reverse), the narrative manages to dance across its subject, before twirling back to where it began.

The story is outwardly simple. In communist Hungary, probably some time in the 1980s, the estate of a collective farm lies in ruins. The local mill has been shut down; hulks of machinery rust in mud. It rains constantly, the sound broken by "the howling of dogs in the distance". The estate's residents sit in their derelict hovels, staring out of their windows. They drink brandy. They fantasise about their neighbours' wives. Gradually, we realise that they are waiting for the mysterious arrival of two men: Irimias, the former manager of the local "works", and his henchman, who were presumed to have been killed 18 months before. A young boy, though, has spotted them walking towards the estate. They have, it appears, come back to life.

In its mixture of eerie fairy tale, feverish internal monologue and hellish bureaucratic logic, the novel recalls everything from Franz Kafka's *The Castle* to Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (the ceaseless images of mud and disorder pound away, as in Beckett, at the idea that life is futile and hope a delusion).

Yet Satantango is, in the end, like none of these. Its plot might seem, at times, to verge on allegory: when Irimias finally appears, he promises to lead the despondent peasants to a new farm where they'll work for their own profit — a project we can already tell is doomed. But Krasznahorkai's narrative is too immensely strange to boil down to a critique, say, of socialism's broken dreams. The novel is made up of a torrent of the characters' inner lives; details of time and place bob up only glancingly on the surface of the "slow lava-flow of narrative", as the author's immensely gifted British translator, George Szirtes, puts it.

Krasznahorkai's prose doesn't elucidate; it simply accumulates. His huge, rolling sentences have no edges to hold on to: nothing is ever explained or set out. And the denouement, after all this, is so brilliantly and insanely bizarre, it turns the entire novel on its head.

Satantango is, for all its stifling, inward atmosphere, intensely and vividly visual — little wonder it was made into a 7½-hour film by the Hungarian director Bela Tarr. This majestic translation finally gives us its inimitable, nightmarish pleasures at first hand.

Available at the Sunday Times Bookshop price of £11.69 (including p&rp) and £7.49 (ebook) on 0845 271 2135