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Please Buy and Read Georgi Gospodinov's *Natural Novel* Immediately

Natural Novel by Georgi Gospodinov. Translated from the Bulgarian by Zornitsa Hristova. [Dalkey Archive Press, 2005.](#)

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There exist books (*If On a Winter's Night a Traveler*, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, *Flaubert's Parrot*), which offer such grand opportunity for discovery, so many delicious tangents and relapses, that even the shortest, most banal discussions might ruin the experience of reading them. Georgi Gospodinov's *Natural Novel*, wonderfully translated by Zornitsa Hristova, is exactly such a book. This review's title states all you really need to know, so read the rest at your own risk.

Gospodinov throws quite a bit into the small space (just over 130 pages) of *Natural Novel*. Perhaps slyly, he includes every exhausted and clichéd postmodern trick. The book is self-reflective. Its narrative contains no real beginning, middle or end, and it draws attention to the mundane and trivial, memorializing such things as toilets and words. Gospodinov blurs the lines between reality and fiction; he simultaneously shares a name with the main character (a writer who creates alternative identities for himself) and a minor one: a mad novelist who rids himself of everything but a rocking chair and retreats to a park. *Natural Novel* wanders through themes of human alienation, lost love, infidelity, death and birth, but the novel consistently finds ways to subvert its own narrative and never really settles down to be "about" one thing. Behind this overt survey of postmodern devices, however, *Natural Novel* is rich and engrossing: hilarious, darkly comic and deeply moving.

The plot deals with a novelist/editor named Georgi Gospodinov who learns that his wife, Emma, is pregnant with the child of a friend. Struggling to come to terms with his divorce, Georgi both distracts and torments himself by writing a "natural novel". At one point, his book-in-progress (readers follow its composition) attempts to become only a series of beginnings. Georgi calls the device *decapitation*: the presentation of first paragraphs of famous novels, *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Anna Karenina*, *Robinson Crusoe* (among others) with their bodies removed. The chapters that follow only partially leave this idea behind, and the book soon transforms into a classical dialogue on the importance of toilets. Later, Gospodinov writes the beginning of a Bible told from the perspective of flies, retells stories of quirky villagers who interested him as a child - but who now fill him with loathing - and collects absurd stories overheard in a café. After burglars break into his flat and steal only his TV, he writes a story about a woman who allows thieves to rape her so that she can keep her television set. His "natural novel" also ponders insects,

cats, the relationship between bees and language, and attempts to become a novel of nothing but verbs.

Despite Gospodinov's apparent convolution, *Natural Novel* reads smoothly and guides readers carefully through short, precise chapters. The book is laugh-out-loud-funny but also touching; occasionally, it approaches the sublime. When so many postmodern novels are content to play their structural and thematic tricks, *Natural Novel* is an honest and human tale about loss and the awkward abyss on the other side of divorce. Readers forgive Georgi constant self-deprecation and digression, because he accepts his own fallibility, communicating the absurdity of life with childlike sincerity. He is creative and obsessively observant, but these talents are useless, especially to him. Georgi understands, somewhere beneath the distraction, that Emma's infidelity is nothing special; in fact, divorce is common, almost expected in the modern world and perhaps more trivial than an insect bible or a beggar in a rocking chair. A universal tragedy drives *Natural Novel*: Georgi's life might be ordinary and mundane, even boring. But the ideas and emotions rising from this triviality are vitally human and, in that way, extraordinary.

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