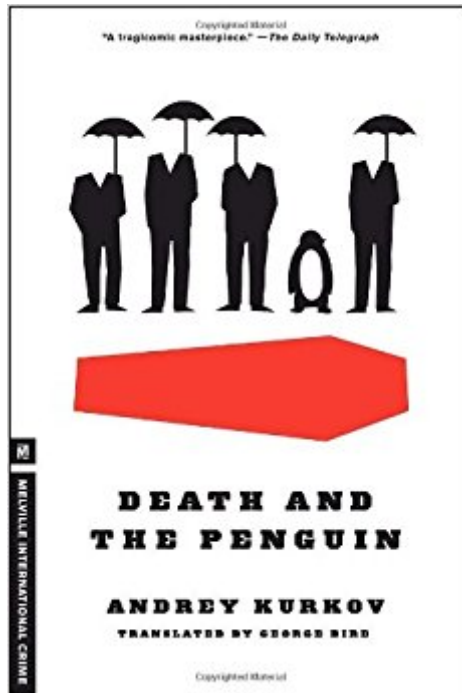




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# Death And The Penguin (Melville International Crime)



## Synopsis

A masterful tale set in post-Soviet Kiev that's both darkly-funny and ominous...In the widely hailed prequel to *Penguin Lost*, aspiring writer Viktor Zolotaryov leads a down-and-out life in poverty-and-violence-wracked Kiev. He's out of work and his only friend is a penguin, Misha, that he rescued when the local zoo started getting rid of animals. Even more nerve-wracking: a local mobster has taken a shine to Misha and wants to keep borrowing him for events. But Viktor thinks he's finally caught a break when he lands a well-paying job at the Kiev newspaper writing "living obituaries" of local dignitaries' articles to be filed for use when the time comes. The only thing is, it seems the time always comes as soon as Viktor writes the article. Slowly understanding that his own life may be in jeopardy, Viktor also realizes that the only thing that might be keeping him alive is his penguin.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"To every time, its own normality." As if to test the limits of his own premise, Ukrainian writer Viktor and his pet penguin, Misha, find themselves in a situation so bizarre as to challenge the very idea of normality. When Viktor is hired to write obituaries of Kiev VIPs to be kept on file, it seems like a great gig. Then the VIPs start to die with a regularity suggesting that Viktor has been signing death warrants, not writing obituaries. From there it's only a short step to Viktor's realization that someone is writing his obituary. As with Daniel Pennac's series about the Mallaussene family (see review on p.2089), Kurkov's novel exists in an all-encompassing vacuum that, like a kind of narrative narcotic,

insinuates itself into the reader's pores until, yes, what was once surreal has achieved its own normality. Viktor and Misha, in the grip of circumstances beyond their control, are like us in ways we would never have dreamed possible, and Kurkov, we realize with a bit of a shock, is a strangely entrancing writer. Bill OttCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Praise for *Death and The Penguin*"*Death and the Penguin* comes across as an almost perfect little novel ... fast-paced and witty and on the side of the angels." —John Powers, NPR's *Fresh Air* —"Pathos and humor shine through to make this a black comedy of rare distinction, and the penguin is an invention of genius." —The Spectator —"A striking portrait of post-Soviet isolation. . . . In this bleak moral landscape Kurkov manages to find ample refuge for his dark humor." —The New York Times —"Delicious... when Viktor finally finds Misha it is as if Woody Allen had gone to meet Kurtz." —The Spectator —"The deadpan tone works perfectly, and it will be a hard-hearted reader who is not touched by Viktor's relationship with his unusual pet." —The Times (London)"Misha, the most memorable character of his thriller *Death and the Penguin*, left web-footed prints all over my imagination" —NPR —"I loved the f\*ck out of it." —Paul Constant, *The Stranger* —"Death and the Penguin successfully balances the social awkwardness of Woody Allen, the absurd clashes of Jean-Luc Godard and the escalating paranoia of Franz Kafka." —Vikas Turakias, *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

Set in post-Soviet Kiev, the novel follows struggling writer Viktor and his pet penguin Misha through life in a time filled with poverty and violence. Viktor acquired Misha after a nearby zoo began selling off animals that it could no longer care for. The penguin spends his days wondering around Viktor's apartment, taking cold baths, and eating frozen fish. Meanwhile Viktor tries to write stories to pay the bills. Then one day Viktor gets a job offer to write obituaries for VIPs, mostly people with political ties. Thinking nothing of it, Viktor accepts and gets to work. It isn't until the VIPs start showing up dead that Viktor feels that something is not right. However, with Misha and now Sonya, the daughter of an associate who went from a weekend guest to full time responsibility, to think of, Viktor keeps writing. Settling into a pattern with Nina, the sitter turned girlfriend, Viktor's life takes on an air of normalcy. It isn't until he realizes that someone is writing an obituary for him that Viktor begins

seriously questioning the world around him. Kurkov's novel uses deadpan humor to explore the post-Soviet world, focusing in on Kiev, Ukraine. In a world where mobsters rule and the US dollar is supreme, one man is used to navigate the reader through actions that are seemingly wrong, but strangely commonplace. Misha is all Viktor seems to truly care about, and that leads to relationships with mobsters, a penguin doctor, and a penguinologist. Those relationships then take the reader out into the corrupt world around Viktor. The story is easy to read and gives people a look into the post-Soviet world they may not know. Despite little to no knowledge of the time a reader can still gain something from the story. Even if someone were not that interested in the time period, I would still recommend the novel as it provides insight into a lesser-known part of history.

In this novel, Andrey Kurkov opens a window into life in Ukraine during the 1990s. This was a unique time in Ukrainian history that is almost an era unto itself. The novel tells this narrative from the perspective of Viktor who is an unemployed writer living in Kiev with a pet penguin. Throughout this novel, the reader gets a sense of the collapse of society as shown through the morally ambiguous decisions made by Viktor and the other people he meets. Early in the novel, Viktor gets a job writing obituaries for people who are still alive. He later discovers that these obituaries pave the way for the subject's death. Despite gaining this knowledge, Viktor continues to write them with almost no thought to the consequences. He decides it's best to be more concerned with his own situation than someone else's. Viktor later befriends a zoologist, named Stepan, who specializes in penguins. Viktor later gets a call from Stepan in which he tells Viktor that he is sick. He finds out that the paramedics had come earlier but did not help Stepan. Viktor has to bribe the paramedics to help him and later has to bribe the doctor at the hospital just to get treatment for Stepan. It is a bad sign in society when a doctor has to be bribed just to keep an old man from dying. In the end, Stepan ends up dying despite Viktor's efforts. Late in the novel, Viktor finds out that Misha needs a heart transplant but the heart would have to come from a 3-4 year-old child since a penguin heart would be hard to come by. Viktor decides to go through with this surgery anyways. It is also worth mentioning that the doctor had no problems doing this surgery, after all, he was the one who came up with the solution. The willingness of a doctor to perform this surgery and Viktor's willingness to ask for it gives a glimpse of just how much the morals of society had collapsed. These are just some examples of the ways in which the morals of the society were shown to have degraded. This book sheds light on how the situation during the 90s in Ukraine led to a situation where people made questionable moral decisions

in order to survive in society.

Andrey Kurkov's *Death and the Penguin* lives up to its title. It is interesting, if a little strange, and of course, the novel features death and a penguin. Viktor, an unemployed writer living in 1990s Kiev adopts Misha the penguin when the zoo can no longer afford to take care of him. Viktor is then employed by a newspaper to write obituaries for people who are still living. At first, Viktor does not question this kind of job and contently does as he is instructed. With this kind of job, however, soon some fishy events begin happening around Viktor and the people he writes about. As time goes on, the plot becomes more and more complicated, in which even minor characters become wrapped up in the danger that is present in post-Communist Ukraine. This book is filled with symbols and parallels that are indicative of the state of Ukraine during the 1990s. With an economic collapse plaguing the country, Viktor is paid with dollars, rather than the Ukrainian hryvina. Additionally, the "bad guys" of the book can be seen driving foreign cars, while the "good guys" drive Russian cars, indicative of involvement with some kind of mafia. Misha is not just comic relief, but has some representative elements, reflecting Viktor's mood and his involvement within his shady line of work. While the book is an easy read, its content is meant for readers who appreciate darkness and dry humor. Post-Soviet Kiev is not a place for children, and Kurkov shows this both through his writing style and even with Sonya, the young girl from his novel. Some books have a tendency to be predictable, in that the reader knows exactly what will happen next because a certain subject has been covered over and over. With *Death and the Penguin*, however, the reader can be constantly caught off guard by the quirky twists Kurkov insists on using. If the story is a little slow at first the plot thickens enough so that the reader is intent on continuing. This is not just a novel to read when you're bored, *Death and the Penguin* is an insightful piece that is representative of post-Soviet Kiev.

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