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*The Big Green
Tent – we
under it*

Reflections and Comments



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Аннотация

This book of reflections present comments on the book by L. Ulitskaya – The Big Green Tent. The purpose of the commentary is to reveal the main idea of the novel – «What gives meaning to life, gives meaning to death». Comments lead the readers to the depths of author's feelings and thoughts about time and about oneself. This is a fascinating journey «back to us as we were conceived», according to L. Ulitskaya. Bon voyage, dear readers.

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*“To have time to realize who in God’s name we are.”
L. Ulitskaya, “Jacob’s Ladder”.*

Translator Eugene Kernerman

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To The Reader

Hello, dear readers. Henceforth, I shall call you dear friends. For, firstly, you are friends: with whom else could I share personal reflections on the mind's aspirations and soul searching of our beloved writer Ludmila Evgenevna Ulitskaya? I state, she is beloved, otherwise we would not be having now this conversation under the shelter provided by the *Big Green Tent* erected with such tenderness and empathy over our heads so vulnerable to life's hurricanes. Secondly, my friends, I value your apparent acquiescence to undertake together a difficult voyage in search of life's meaning, its inevitable conclusion and, possibly, its extension under the green canopy of the Universe.

There is no doubt that some of you have already made your own "journey" into the depths of the author's compassionate mind and wise soul. But the reason for being of our collective journey is its openness: each of you can join the virtual conversation with other readers and with the author on the website for this book —

https://ridero.ru/books/pod_zelenym_shatrom/

You can each suggest your own interpretation for the existential and social issues raised by Ludmila Evgenevna in her novel and suggest your personal approach to their solutions.

Each of your reviews will be accepted and considered with

gratitude. Thus, you will become co-creators of a new structure of our common thinking – the knowledge of the essence of love and mercy which were initially laid down for us by the Eternal Nature, by all-encompassing wisdom of the Creator, or by God, or by whichever force one considers to be possible.

Do you not think that this is where the purpose of our voyage lies? If so, let us proceed!

From this point forward the author's text is given in quotes. All quotes originate from L. E. Ulitskaya, *The Big Green Tent*, (translated from the Russian by Polly Gannon) and extracted from – <https://www.amazon.com/Big-Green-Tent-Novel/dp/0374166676>

Part one

I. “Those Wondrous School Years”

With these words, Ulitskaya delves into the meeting of three boys. At first glance, it seems that the three have nothing in common. Sanya is a product of a family of intellectuals; he is musically gifted and is inspired by the spirit and mind of the great composers, past and present, in printed music compilations. His innate intelligence helps him endure the persecution by the hooligan elite of his schoolroom. Ilya, an illegitimate son of a lonely, unhappy, ineffectual mother, is awkward, thin and “long as a pole”. Irony and jest are his shield of self-protection and of concealment of the patched up dressing of his poverty. His hands are not used to touch piano keys, but to bat at columns of pennies in the backyard games to bring the precious little of extra money to his family. Mikha is an orphan wandering from one relatives’ house to another in accordance with the games of fate, which have so far kept him from being returned to the orphanage.

Clearly, Mikha’s fiery red hair and pronounced Jewish features are not able to compensate him neither for dominant Sanya’s detachment, nor for Ilya’s reliance on humor, for nothing what can deflect hatred and disdain of a crazed pack of cruel

adolescents led by two competing young hooligans – Mutyukin and Murygin.

Now, it is clear what unites and makes friends of the three extraordinary boys – the hatred and contempt of the flock of the criminal teenage elite. Its leaders view cruelty as “courage” and act with seeming impunity, which inspires their underlings and keeps them in line. These acts of “courage” blacken Mikha’s eyes and break his glasses; they bloody Ilya’s lip; Murygin’s knife cuts into the tendon on the wrist of the future pianist Sanya, forever determining the future of his ambitions. Through the efforts of the school’s headmaster, these matters are hushed up giving the pack a renewed inspiration which they use for the beating and robbing of Mikha who fortuitously came to possess a pair of new skates. This venture must have seemed fruitful and fun as the “heroes” decide to merrily run away while being pursued by the barefoot Mikha. But it ends tragically for the leader of the teenage elite Murygin, who, in the rush of the chase, ends up under the wheels of a street car, having had little time, as the author notes, to be frightened by the specters of his own death. The aftermath, however, becomes personal tragedy for Mikha who blames himself for this horrible death.

At this point, dear friends, by reading the translation of the original script, you can truly appreciate how limited the analytical retelling of these events is in comparison to the living text of the novel:

“Mikha, the witness, and, as he believed, guilty party of this death, kept reliving that tragic instant: the skates flashing through the air, the metallic shriek of the streetcar, and an untidy raggedy heap under the wheels instead of pathetic, mean boy who had been grimacing and racing through the streets a moment before. Pity of enormous proportions filled Mikha’s mind, his heart, his entire body. It filled him to the point of overflowing, it overwhelmed him, and it was a pity for all people, both bad and good, simply because they were all so defenseless and fragile, so soft, and because of mere touch of senseless steel was enough to shatter their bones, to break their heads open, to make their blood flow out, so that all that was left was an unsightly heap. Poor, poor Murygin!..”

Quoted from – <https://www.amazon.com/Big-Green-Tent-Novel/dp/0374166676>

This tragedy does not determine Mikha’s fate but, in some way, highlights his tragic future. But let us go to comments.

Comments. 1

And so, dear friends, are we sheltered under the *The Big Green Tent* of life? Is it a tent which Ulitskaya erects with sincere love, sorrow and compassion toward her characters to shield also our vulnerable heads with lament to our reason and memory? Or do winged human souls reside underneath it, truly meeting

“...as if without any special help from fate, without elaborate convolutions of plot, following the natural course of events...”

Let us not get ahead of ourselves, however. Have patience. A fascinating, in-depth dialogue with L.E. Ulitskaya is waiting for you below. In the meantime, let us analyze the phrase

“without any special help from fate...”

Ulitskaya is right that, in fact, no such help exists as the defining way of life for all, from “bandit” Murygin to the “poet” Mikha mourning his death. It is true that, innate to us all, is the full spectrum of genetic propensities, from aggression to empathy. Yet, we also all possess the freedom of choice, which, as we will learn later, is defined by the nature of educational “initiation”. This nature, in turn, is determined by the author’s concept of “the natural course of events”. For the “bandit” Murygin it is course of aggression and violence, but for the “poet” Mikha it is way of compassion, and

“...pity of enormous proportions filled Mikha’s mind, his heart, his entire body. It filled him to overflowing, it overwhelmed him, and it was pity for all people, both bad and good...”

By this description, Mikha is the true “Christ of Our Time”.
Later we shall see his “Revealing to the People”.

II. “The New Teacher”

“In the sixth grade, Victor Yulievich Shengeli, a literary teacher, replaced the Russian teacher whose name no one could remember. From the very first day he captured the attention of the entire school: he walked briskly down the hallway, with the right sleeve of his gray striped blazer pinned shut just below the elbow, his half-arm dangling inside. In his left hand he carried an old briefcase with two copper locks – far older than the teacher himself, from the looks of it. And, by the end of that first week, he already had a nickname: the Hand.

He was fairly young, with a handsome face, almost like a film star, but excessively animated. He was in the habit of smiling for no discernible reason, then breaking into a frown, then twitching his nose or lips ... He was improbably polite, addressing everyone with the formal “you”; but he could also be very caustic...

Within three months, all of them, including Ilya, Senka Svinin, and, in particular, Mikha, thought the teacher could do no wrong. They clung to his every word, twitching their lips and furrowing their brows in perfect imitation of him...

Half of the class did not quite understand what the literature teacher wanted from them. The other half clung to his every word. Victor Yulievich tried to treat everyone equally, but he did have his favorites – Mikha, emotional intense and sensitive to a fault; Ilya, energetic and capable;

and Sanya, polite and self-contained. The inseparable trio..."

Quoted from – <https://www.amazon.com/Big-Green-Tent-Novel/dp/0374166676>

The author devotes this part of the novel to the enabler of minds and souls of three inseparable friends whose boyish union of hearts, “the trio”, grew under the mentoring of their teacher into a school club “Lovers of Russian Literature” or LORLs. Every Wednesday, when Victor Yulievich’s class was the last of the day, he brought his boys to “nature”, on a tour of memorable places of literary Moscow.

“We are learning literature, he explained repeatedly, each time announcing as if it were news. Literature is the greatest possession of humanity, and poetry is its heart, the concentrate of the best that humanity finds in its world. Solely they are the food for the soul. It is up to you if you are to evolve into human beings or remain on the primal level.”

Quoted from – <https://www.amazon.com/Big-Green-Tent-Novel/dp/0374166676>

But now comes March 1953. The death of Stalin...

Victor Yulievich asks his disciples not to leave their houses. He himself goes out for groceries only on the third day after the funeral of the leader...

“...The streets were almost deserted. Trucks were still lined up. The scene that greeted him was reminiscent of the

aftermath of St. Petersburg's infamous flood: crushed shoes and hats, briefcases, forever parted from their owners, broken lampposts, smashed-in first-floor windows. By the archway to a building, there was a wall covered in blood. A trampled dog lay in front of it...

Just there, on a lane a good distance from his home, Victor found a little shop that was open. The stairs led down into what was nearly a cellar. Several women were talking with the proprietor in hushed voices, but went silent when Victor entered. It's as they they've been talking about me, Victor Yulievich said to himself, amused.

One of the woman recognized in him as a teacher, and peppered him with questions.

"Victor Yurievich, what happened? People are saying that the Jews were behind the stampede, that they organized it. Is it true? Maybe you've heard something about it yourself? Do you know anything about it?"...

"No, sweetheart, I haven't heard anything like that. We'll down a glass or two this evening for the repose of the soul and then get on with our lives. Why single out the Jews? They are people just like us. Two bottles of vodka, please, a loaf of white bread, and half a dark. Oh, and two packages of dumplings"

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