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All That Man Is: A Novel

ALL
THAT
MAN
DAVID SZALAY
IS



Synopsis

* Finalist for the 2016 Man Booker Prize ** Winner of the 2016 Paris Review Plimpton Prize for Fiction * A magnificent and ambitiously conceived portrait of contemporary life, by a genius of realism. Nine men. Each of them at a different stage in life, each of them away from home, and each of them striving--in the suburbs of Prague, in an overdeveloped Alpine village, beside a Belgian motorway, in a dingy Cyprus hotel--to understand what it means to be alive, here and now. Tracing a dramatic arc from the spring of youth to the winter of old age, the ostensibly separate narratives of *All That Man Is* aggregate into a picture of a single shared existence, a picture that interrogates the state of modern manhood while bringing to life, unforgettably, the physical and emotional terrain of an increasingly globalized Europe. And so these nine lives form an ingenious and new kind of novel, in which David Szalay expertly plots a dark predicament for the twenty-first-century man. Dark and disturbing, but also often wickedly and uproariously comic, *All That Man Is* is notable for the acute psychological penetration Szalay brings to bear on his characters, from the working-class ex-grunt to the pompous college student, the middle-aged loser to the Russian oligarch. Steadily and mercilessly, as this brilliantly conceived book progresses, the protagonist at the center of each chapter is older than the last one, it gets colder out, and *All That Man Is* gathers exquisite power. Szalay is a writer of supreme gifts--a master of a new kind of realism that vibrates with detail, intelligence, relevance, and devastating pathos.

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Customer Reviews

David Szalay's *All That Man Is* features nine chapters, each about 40 pages long and each a self-contained story with separate, fully realized characters, that are supposed to be so interconnected that this book is not a collection of short stories per se but a novel. I'm not persuaded of the book's claim to be a novel. It is indeed a collection of separate short stories with different characters. The characters are men of various ages, and these men tend to be literate, possess fine critical thinking skills, are self-involved, displaced, suffering from a crisis of meaning, purpose, and belonging. The younger ones feel awkward, naturally, about their carnal pursuits and suffer a certain frustration in this regard. The men work in the professional or creative class, or if they are in their late teens they are students, flaneurs, world travelers, overcome by angst and wanderlust. Perhaps the book's theme can be encapsulated by the novel *The Ambassadors*, which one young man reads as both a novel to kill time while he waits in European train stations and as a guide to his own life: "Live all you can; it's a mistake not to. It doesn't so much matter what you do in particular so long as you have your life. . . . Still, we have the illusion of freedom; therefore don't, like me to-day, be without the memory of that illusion. I was either, at the right time, too stupid or too intelligent to have it, and now I'm a case of reaction against the mistake. Do what you like so long as you don't make it. For it was a mistake. Live, live!" These words and their pervading melancholy suffuse this book's characters whose crises have caused them to lose faith in the idea of their own freedom and the idea that their lives belong to them anymore.

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