

THE MISFORTUNATES: A NOVEL BY DIMITRI VERHULST



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Frank, tender, and brutally funny, Dimitri Verhulst's semi-autobiographical story details the vibrantly entertaining journey of a boy growing up in a family of alcoholics in Belgium

Sobriety and moderation are alien concepts to the men in Dimmy's family. Useless in all other respects, his three uncles have a rare talent for drinking, a flair for violence, and an unwavering commitment to the pub. And his father Pierre is no slouch either. Within hours of his son's birth, Pierre plucks him from the maternity ward, props him on his bike, and takes him on an introductory tour of the village bars. His mother soon leaves them to it and as Dimmy grows up amid the stench of stale beer, he seems destined to follow the path of his forebears and make a low-life career in inebriation, until he begins to piece together his own plan for the future.

Bringing to life the shambolic upbringing that The Guardian describes as, "the odd, ugly, excremental poetry of their grubby lives," The Misfortunates "can be unexpectedly tender as well as uncomfortably funny... this novel continually surprises and intrigues."

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"...my father blew his boozy breath in my face for the first time."

By sdk

First, is this a memoir, or fiction? The Misfortunates begins with the following disclaimer, which clears things right up: "Any similarity between existing people and certain characters in this book is due solely to insight into human nature."

In any case, this moving story about a "lower lower working class" family (grandmother, several sons, grandson) living in (fictional) Arsendegem, Flanders (Belgium), plagued by alcoholism, essentially defined by alcoholism, is so full of insight into human nature, and love, and dryly humorous observations, it is difficult to know where to begin. Here is a representative slice: "My grandmother emerged from the kitchen with a bucket and a rag, just the way a commemorative statue would represent her." The bouts and binges and day-to-day drinking are of a truly monumental proportion, and provide scenes both horrifying and humorous, including a Tour de France of alcohol consumption no mortal could survive.

Beyond alcoholism, there is the theme of social class, and the internal struggles that occur for those who, like the author, "rise above" a deprived and depraved family populated by those deeply flawed humans who you love so deeply. You can no longer be with this family, but you are undeniably of this family. "Girder will invariably call me his little brother--and there's not much that can make me happier than having this villainous pig call me his little brother."

This uncomfortable status of the writer who has emerged from family misfortune (and worse) reminded me of Rick Bragg's "All over but the shouting" and, especially, Tobias Wolff's "This boy's life" along with his later memoir/novels "Old school" and "In pharaoh's army." I would rank Verhulst (through David Colmer's masterful translation) as a writer and storyteller on par with Wolff, whose books I greatly admire. I hope, like Wolff, Verhulst will write the story of the next part of his life, that of his intellectual emergence from misfortune through fosterage.

Bottom line: this is a deceptively powerful story that suggests more understanding of what is true about people and important in life than is fair for a youngish middle-aged writer like Dimitri Verhulst to command. I can only hope that he keeps the books (and translations) coming. Very highly recommended.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

AA

By Shannon Pease

5 Stars

I received this ARC copy through goodreads first reads

Dimmy is young when his mother leaves and his father moves them in with his grandmother and three uncles. Sobriety is a bad word in their house and Dimmy has to navigate his adolescent years among unapologetic alcoholics and chaotic relationships. It is expected for Dimmy to follow in their footsteps but life could always pass on an opportunity if he's willing to take it.

As someone who has seen loved ones battle the disease of alcoholism this novel felt familiar in some ways. A lot of readers will be able to relate on some level which makes this a subject that will never get worn out. I almost felt guilty for liking some of the characters or finding their antics funny, but comedy can help swallow a bitter pill as long as the importance is not pushed aside. I am not going to get too wordy because this is novel is really about personal taste more so than some. I will recommend this one but I will say that if you cannot read comic antics along with alcoholism it might not be the right fit. The author in no way diminishes alcoholism in my opinion.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Beer-swilling Flemings on the Road of Salvation.

By erisgeenhoop

Dimitri Verhulst takes off from where Louis Paul Boon , the often Nobel-prize nominated, socially conscious chronicler of the industrial revolution in Flanders left it. The former sixteen hours a day textile workers or Feet Warming marauders are now lowly employed or social benefit receiving drunkards who try to make the best out of a life with little promises, but in which beer is a comforting constant.

It would all be quite depressing where it not for the writer's ability to put a humorous slant on things, something he also shares with his illustrious predecessor Boon.

There's another excellent Verhulst book translated into English: Problemski Hotel.

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