

# Book review: Not for the faint of heart

By Kim Wyatt



## **“The Vegetarian”**

**By Han Kang**

**Hogarth, 192 pages, \$21**

**One-line Review: “The Vegetarian” is a dark and wild ride, and the best book I’ve read this year.**

Yeong-hye is a “completely ordinary wife” who in becoming a vegetarian upends her family and dismantles their lives. Yet “The Vegetarian,” a novel by South Korean writer Han Kang, is no simple morality play: Yeong-hye is the ultimate culture jammer, indicting a violent, repressed society on her journey to become a plant.

“The Vegetarian,” winner of this year’s Man Booker Prize, is a story in three acts. Told from the point of view of Yeong-hye’s crummy husband, obsessive brother-in-law and dutiful

sister, we see how her decision upsets them. She only exists as a vessel for their desires, projections, frustrations and failures, which are now played out on her body. Nature, sex and art are vehicles for breakthrough, but not in the way the characters intend. Ultimately, it's not Yeong-Hye's vegetarianism that fractures her family; rather, it's her assertion to do as she pleases.

Upon learning of her plant-based diet, her father tries to shove sweet and sour pork into his daughter's mouth. As she identifies more and more with plants, the violence against her body escalates. Yeong-hye's body is her only weapon in conformist South Korea—paradoxically, this could apply to any culture in which we mutilate and silence ourselves to belong.

The matter-of-fact language in this beautifully translated book heightens the characters disconnect until the elegiac third act when Yeong-hye determines to become an ecstatic tree, subsisting only on water and light, which begs the question: Is mental illness an appropriate response to a sick society?

The spare language and wild imagery echo Haruki Murakami; at other times, it's Kafkaesque. There was a dream. Some confusing things happened. There was blood, meat, an open refrigerator. A woman turns into a plant. Down the rabbit hole I went, where I finished the book in one sitting. For days, I couldn't stop thinking about it.

"The Vegetarian" is slim, subversive volume, a sly little bomb that explodes in your brain. No one is safe from the implications in this elegant, disturbing slip of a book. It's the "The Yellow Wallpaper" for a new generation trying to break free from the prison of roles and expectations.

Originally released as linked novellas in South Korea in 2007 and translated to English by Deborah Smith, "The Vegetarian" is a reminder that I need to read more widely. And I can't

wait to read it again.

*Kim Wyatt is the owner of Bona Fide Books.*