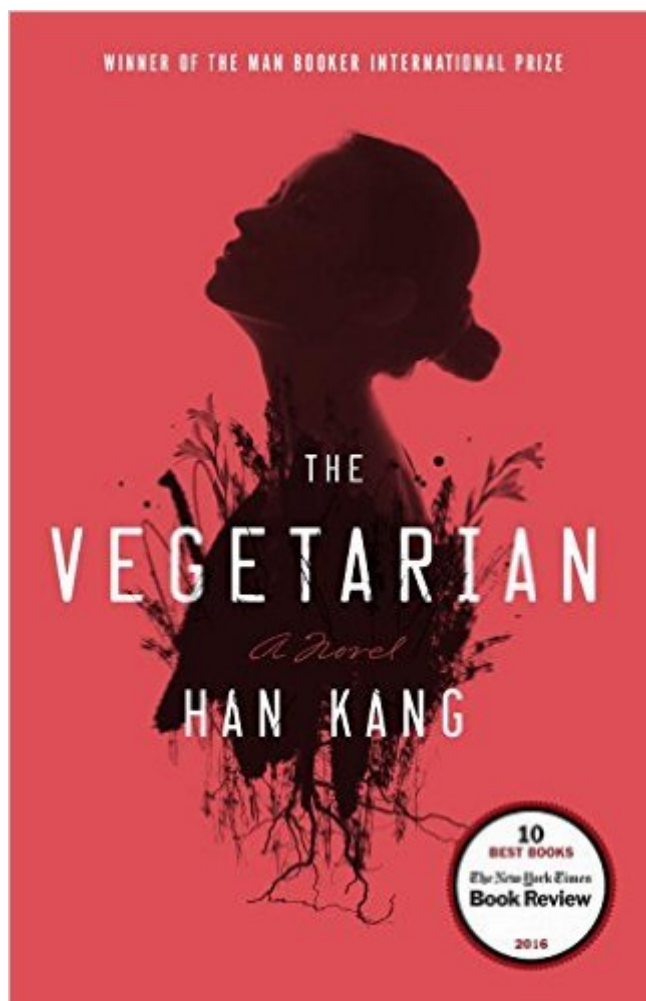


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# The Vegetarian



## Synopsis

Winner of the 2016 Man Booker International Prize  
NAMED ONE OF THE BEST BOOKS OF THE YEAR BY The New York Times Book Review  
The New York Times Book Review  
Publisher's Weekly  
Buzzfeed  
Entertainment Weekly  
Time  
Wall Street Journal  
Bustle  
Elle  
The Economist  
Slate  
The Huffington Post  
The St. Louis Dispatch  
Electric Literature  
A beautiful, unsettling novel about rebellion and taboo, violence and eroticism, and the twisting metamorphosis of a soul  
Before the nightmares began, Yeong-hye and her husband lived an ordinary, controlled life. But the dreams  
invasive images of blood and brutality  
torture her, driving Yeong-hye to purge her mind and renounce eating meat altogether. It's a small act of independence, but it interrupts her marriage and sets into motion an increasingly grotesque chain of events at home. As her husband, her brother-in-law and sister each fight to reassert their control, Yeong-hye obsessively defends the choice that's become sacred to her. Soon their attempts turn desperate, subjecting first her mind, and then her body, to ever more intrusive and perverse violations, sending Yeong-hye spiraling into a dangerous, bizarre estrangement, not only from those closest to her, but also from herself. Celebrated by critics around the world, *The Vegetarian* is a darkly allegorical, Kafka-esque tale of power, obsession, and one woman's struggle to break free from the violence both without and within her.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“Surreal...[A] mesmerizing mix of sex and violence...vivid, chiseled...Like a cursed madwoman in classical myth, Yeong-hye seems both eerily prophetic and increasingly unhinged.” • Alexandra Alter, The New York Times “Ferocious...[Han Kang] has been rightfully celebrated as a visionary in South Korea | Han’s glorious treatments of agency, personal choice, submission and subversion find form in the parable. There is something about short literary forms œ this novel is under 200 pages œ in which the allegorical and the violent gain special potency from their small packages... Ultimately, though, how could we not go back to Kafka? More than œ The Metamorphosis, œ Kafka’s journals and œ A Hunger Artist œ haunt this text.” • Á Á • Porochista Khakpour, Á Á New York Times Book Review “Astonishing...Kang viscerally explores the limits of what a human brain and body can endure, and the strange beauty that can be found in even the most extreme forms of renunciation.” • Á Á • Entertainment Weekly “Sometimes how a book or a film puzzles you œ how it may mystify even its own creator œ is the main point. The way it keeps slithering out of your grasp. The way it chats with you in the parlor even as it drags something nameless and heavy through the woods out back œ That œ the spirit in which to approach Á Á The Vegetarian œ Á Á The Vegetarian Á Á has an eerie universality that gets under your skin and stays put irrespective of nation or gender.” • Á Á • Laura Miller, Slate.com “This book is both terrifying and terrific.” • Á Á • Lauren Groff “The Vegetarian Á Á was slim and spiky and extremely disturbing, and I find myself thinking about it weeks after I finished.” Jennifer Weiner, popsugar.com “The Vegetarian Á Á is one of Á Á the best Á Á novels I œve read in years. Á Á It œ incredible, daring, and stunningly moving. I loved it.” • Á Á • Laura van den Berg “A short novel of sexuality and madness that deserves its great success.” • Á Á • Ian McEwan “If it’s true you are what you read, prepare to be sliced and severed, painted and slapped and fondled and broken to bits, left shocked and reeling on the other side of this stunning, dark star of a book.” • Á Á • Amelia Gray “It takes a gifted storyteller to get you feeling ill at ease in your own body. Yet Han Kang often set me squirming with her first novel in English, at once claustrophobic and transcendent | Yeong-hye’s compulsions feel more like a force of nature | A sea like that, rippling with unknowable shadow, looks all but impossible to navigate œ but I œd let Han Kang take the helm any time.” • Á Á • Chicago Tribune “Provocative...shocking.” • Á Á • The Washington Post “[An] utterly

deserving winner of this year's Man Booker International Prize...with haunting, almost hallucinatory beauty." [•Entertainment Weekly](#), Best Books of 2016 so far "This is a deceptive novel, its canvas much larger than the mild social satire that one initially imagines. Kang has bigger issues to raise | The matter of female autonomy assumes urgency and poignancy." [•The Boston Globe](#) "Compelling...[A] seamless union of the visceral and the surreal." [•Los Angeles Review of Books](#) "Indebted to Kafka, this story of a South Korean woman's radical transformation, which begins after she forsakes meat, will have you reading with your hand over your mouth in shock." [•O, the Oprah Magazine](#) "If you love books that grab you by the throat and keep you wide-eyed and shocked throughout, you've got to pick up Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*." [•EW.com](#) "A complex, terrifying look at how seemingly simple decisions can affect multiple lives...In a world where women's bodies are constantly under scrutiny, the protagonist's desire to disappear inside of herself feels scarily familiar." [•VanityFair.com](#) "A sharply written allegory that extends far beyond its surreal premise to unexpected depths." [•The Millions](#) "Visceral and hypnotic." [•Michele Filgate](#) "An elegant tale, in three parts, of a woman whose sudden turn to veganism disrupts her family and exposes the worst human appetites and impulses | [a] stripped-down, thoughtful narrative | about human psychology and physiology." [•Huffington Post](#) "Adventurous readers will be blown away by Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*, in which a once-submissive Korean wife's compulsion to stop eating meat spirals out of control. This moving story engages complicated questions about desire, guilt, obligation and madness." [•MORE Magazine](#) "This elegant-yet-twisted horror story is all about power and its relationship with identity. It's chilling in the best ways, so buckle in and turn down the lights." [•Elle.com](#) "The *Vegetarian* is the first | there will be more, let's hope | of Han Kang's novels to arrive in the United States | The style is realistic and psychological, and denies us the comfort that might be wrung from a fairy tale or a myth of metamorphosis. We all like to read about girls swapping their fish tails for legs or their unwrinkled arms for branches, but | at the risk of stating the obvious | a person cannot become a potted bit of green foodstuff. That Yeong-hye seems not to know this makes her dangerous, and doomed." [•Harper's Magazine](#) "This haunting, original tale explores the eros, isolation and outer limits of a gripping metamorphosis that happens in plain sight | Han Kang has written a remarkable novel with universal themes about isolation, obsession, duty

and desire." • Minneapolis Star Tribune "Complex and strange... Han's prose moves swiftly, riveted on the scene unfolding in a way that makes this story compulsively readable... this is a book that demands you to ask important questions, and its vivid images will be hard to shake. This is a book that will stay with you." • St. Louis Post-Dispatch "Brutally yet beautifully explores the gap between one person's expression and another's reception." • Harvard Crimson "The Vegetarian is incredibly fresh and gripping, due in large part to the unforgettable narrative structure... Han Kang has created a multi-leveled, well-crafted story that does what all great stories do: immediately connects the unique situation within these pages to the often painful experience of living." • The Rumpus "Disquieting, thought-provoking and precisely informed." • Shelf Awareness "A horror story in its depiction of the unknowability of others • of the sudden feeling that you've never actually known someone close to you. Its three-part structure is brilliant, gradually digging deeper and deeper into darker and darker places; the writing is spare and haunting; but perhaps most memorable is its crushing climax, a phantasmagoric yet emotionally true moment that's surely one of the year's most powerful. This is an ingenious, upsetting, and unforgettable novel." • Publishers Weekly (starred review) "[A] spare, spectacular novel... Family dysfunction amid cultural suffocation is presented with elegant precision, transforming readers into complicit voyeurs. Fans of authors as diverse as Mary Karr and Haruki Murakami won't be able to turn away." • Library Journal (starred review) "Korean writer Han Kang's elegant yet unsettling prose conveys her protagonist's brother-in-law's obsessive, art-centered lust; her sister's tepid, regret-riddled existence; and Yeong-hye's vivid, disturbing dreams. Readers will want more of the author's shocking portrayals of our innermost doubts, beliefs, and longings." • Booklist "[A] beautiful and disquieting new novel... concise and swift, its language often almost poetic... haunting." • Bookpage "The book insists on a reader's attention, with an almost hypnotically serene atmosphere interrupted by surreal images and frighteningly recognizable moments of ordinary despair. Han writes convincingly of the disruptive power of longing and the choice to either embrace or deny it, using details that are nearly fantastical in their strangeness to cut to the heart of the very human experience of discovering that one is no longer content with life as it is." • An unusual and mesmerizing novel, gracefully written and deeply disturbing." • Kirkus "Searing... [Yeong-hye's] extreme efforts to separate herself from her animal appetites reveal the sanity and normality of those closest to her to be mere matchstick

houses." •Helen Oyeyemi, author of *Boy, Snow, Bird* "Suffused with a sensibility that evokes the matter-of-fact surrealism of Franz Kafka, featuring a female protagonist as engagingly perverse as Melville's *Bartleby*, Han Kang's slender but robust novel addresses many vital matters •from the politics of gender to the presumptions of the male gaze, the conundrum of free will to the hegemony of meat •with a dark *ÁfÁ©*lan that vegetarians and carnivores alike will find hypnotic, erotic, disquieting, and wise." •James Morrow, *ÁfÁ*pagos Regained "A strange, painfully tender exploration of the brutality of desire indulged and the fatality of desire ignored, rendered all the more so by Deborah Smith's exquisite translation." •Eimear McBride, Baileys Women's Prize-winning author of *A Girl Is a Half-formed Thing* "Visceral and terrifying, *Á The Vegetarian* *Á* is *Á* a startling reminder of the utter unknowability of another's mind. Nonetheless, reading it, you will feel it in your flesh: the desire for peace, a plea for safety, for escape from your own inevitable mortality. It is artfully plotted yet reads like a fever dream, sweeping and surreal. It will leave you aching." •Sarah Gerard, author of *Binary Star* "Like a small seed, Han Kang's startling and unforgettable debut goes to work quietly, but insistently. Her prose is so balanced, so elegant and assured, you might overlook the depths of this novel's darkness •do so at your own peril." •Colin Winnette, author of *Á Haints Stay* and *Á Coyote* "The Vegetarian" *Á* is a story about metamorphosis, rage and the desire for another sort of life. It is written in cool, still, poetic but matter-of-fact short sentences, translated luminously by Deborah Smith, who is obviously a genius." •Deborah Levy, author of *Á The Unloved* and *Á Swimming Home* "The Vegetarian" *Á* is hypnotically strange, sad, beautiful and compelling. I liked it immensely." •Nathan Filer, 2013 Costa First Novel award-winning author of *Á The Shock of the Fall* "A stunning and beautifully haunting novel. It seems in places as if the very words on the page are photosynthesising. I loved this graceful, vivid book." •Jess Richards, Costa First Novel Award shortlisted author of *Á Snake Ropes* "Poetic and beguiling, and translated with tremendous elegance, *Á The Vegetarian* *Á* exhilarates and disturbs." •Chloe Aridjis, author of *Á The Book of Clouds* "Dark dreams, simmering tensions, chilling violence" | This South Korean novel is a feast | It is sensual, provocative and violent, ripe with potent images, startling colors and disturbing questions | Sentence by sentence, *Á The Vegetarian* *Á* is an extraordinary experience | *Á* [It] will be hard to beat." •The Guardian "This is an odd and enthralling novel; its story filled with nihilism but lyricism too, its writing understated even in its most fevered, violent moments. It has a surreal and spellbinding quality, especially in its passage on

nature and the physical landscape, so beautiful and so magnificently impervious to the human suffering around it." *Arifa Akbar, The Independent* "This short novel is one of the most startling I have read | Exciting and imaginative | The author reveals how nature, sex and art crash through this polite society | It is the women who are killed for daring to establish their own identity. The narrative makes it clear it is the crushing pressure of Korean etiquette which murders them | [A] disturbing book. *Julia Pascal, The Independent* "Immediately absorbing... The different perspectives offered are so beautifully distinctive... Every word matters." *Sunday Herald* "Shocking... The writing throughout is precise and spare, with not a word wasted. There are no tricks. Han holds the reader in a vice grip... The Vegetarian quickly settles into a dark, menacing brilliance that is similar to the work of the gifted Japanese writer Yoko Ogawa in its devastating study of psychological pain... The Vegetarian is more than a cautionary tale about the brutal treatment of women: it is a meditation on suffering and grief. It is about escape and how a dreamer takes flight. Most of all, it is about the emptiness and rage of discovering there is nothing to be done when all hope and comfort fails.... A work of savage beauty and unnerving physicality." *Irish Times* "The Vegetarian is a book about the failures of language and the mysteries of the physical. Yet its message should not undermine Han's achievement as a writer. Like its anti-protagonist, The Vegetarian whispers so clearly, it can be heard across the room, insistently and with devastating, quiet violence." *Joanna Walsh, The New Statesman* "[A] strange and ethereal fable, rendered stranger still by the cool precision of the prose | What is ultimately most troubling about Yeong-hye's post-human fantasies is that they appear to be a reasonable alternative to the world of repression and denial in which everyone around her exists." *Times Literary Supplement* "The Vegetarian is so strange and vivid it left me breathless upon finishing it. I don't think I've ever read a novel as mouth-wateringly poetic, or as drenched in hypnotic oddities, taboos and scandal. It seems to have been plucked out of the ether, ready-made to take us all by surprise. Exciting and compelling" *Lee Rourke, New Humanist* "The Vegetarian combines human violence and the possibility of innocence... [A] frightening beauty of a novel." -British Council Literature "Uncanny." *The Australian* "Kang belongs to a generation of writers that aim to discover secret drives, ambitions, and miseries behind one's personal destiny... [The Vegetarian] deals with violence, sanity, cultural limits, and the value of the human body as the last refuge and private space." *Tiempo Argentino* "[A] bloodcurdlingly beautiful, sinister story." *Linda* "The almost perverse seduction of this book originates in the poetry of the images. They are

violently erotic and rather nightmarish; the novel is like a room full of large flowers, where the musky odour takes you by the throat." *De groene Amsterdammer* *"For the fans of Haruki Murakami."* *Gazet van Antwerpen* (starred review) *"Piercing... I was touched the most by the directness, the images, the poignant phrases and most of all the imagination with which it was written."* *nrc Handelsblad* *"A shocking, moving and thought-provoking novel."* *Trouw* *"Outright impressive."* *HUMO* *"One of the most impressive novels I have read recently... You need to read this book."* *Arnon Grunberg in De Volkskrant* *"The Vegetarian is exciting and original."* *De Standaard der Letteren* (starred review) *From the Hardcover edition.*

Han Kang was born in 1970 in South Korea. In 1993 she made her literary debut as a poet, and was first published as novelist in 1994. A participant of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, Han has won the Man Booker International Prize, the Yi Sang Literary Prize, the Today's Young Artist Award, and the Manhae Literary Prize. She currently works as a professor in the Department of Creative Writing at the Seoul Institute of the Arts.[www.writerhankang.com](http://www.writerhankang.com) *From the Hardcover edition.*

This is a taut novella, about 190 pages, divided into 3 parts, written in lapidary precision, evident even in the translation. The first part is told from the husband's point of view: He watches in horror as his quiet, conventional life is disrupted by his wife's refusal to eat meat. Her vegetarian lifestyle is prompted at first by a dream, but strengthened by flashbacks of cruelty toward animals that she has witnessed in her childhood. The husband is a scoundrel. He possesses a cold rational aspiration toward mediocrity and does not want his masculinity challenged by an assertive woman, so he seeks in a wife a woman who is meek to the point of being a non-entity and a cipher, a being who will mold to his aspirations to corporate success and societal convention. But her vegetarianism disrupts his "carefully ordered existence." She even rejects intimacy with her husband because his body smells like meat, and he becomes an object of revulsion. The wife's refusal to eat meat, and her descent into madness, reminds me of two short stories, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" and "The Yellow Wall-Paper." Like Bartleby, the wife's refusal to comply with an authority figure's orders becomes a metaphor for rejecting the assumed reality of society's conventions. Like "The Yellow Wall-Paper," the wife is suffocated by her marriage and can only rebel by embracing insanity, which of course throws a wrench into the



husband's life of fastidiousness and convention. Everyone gangs up on the wife to coerce her back to a meat-eating lifestyle. Even her own mother threatens her and at one point screams, "Look at yourself, now! Stop eating meat, and the world will devour you whole." The themes of society's complicity with sanctioned cruelty toward animals and oppression against women feel real and not like a shrill militant polemic on feminism and animal cruelty. The themes grow out of the novel's original vision, one drawn from a weird insane logic. The tone of the novel is riveting and reads like a horror novel. This is one of the best novels I've read in a long time. Highly recommended.

Han Kang's novel, *The Vegetarian*, tells the story of Yeong-hye, a non-descript South Korean housewife who, after a disturbing dream, stops eating meat as well as all animal-derived products. The novel is divided into three parts, each told from the point of view of a person who is impacted in some way by her decision. The first part is narrated by her husband, a callous, uncaring salary-man, who chose her specifically because she was unremarkable in every possible way. In the second part we see her through the eyes of her brother-in-law, an unsuccessful video artist, struggling to realize some vague pornographic vision. Finally, we see how her transformation and subsequent struggles with mental illness affect her sister. This was a difficult one. It's very dark with an almost constant feeling of dread hovering over it. But the story is truly gripping, not to mention that trying to work out the author's agenda kept me turning the pages despite myself. It touches on so many large social issues like gender, conformity, moral accountability, as well as more personal things like family relationships, abuse, violence, rage and self-image. Yeong-hye is repeatedly victimized, in various ways, by men who are either manipulative, predatory or just plain cruel.

Yeong-hye's husband is an utterly conventional corporate striver, so her inability to conform to his expectations and societal norms ultimately destroys their marriage. As an artist, her brother-in-law views himself as an outsider and projects his dark, lustful fantasies onto her in pursuit of his vision. And her sister struggles with guilt over their upbringing with a monstrous father who singled Yeong-hye out for abuse. It's tough to summarize one thing that this deceptively slim little volume speaks to; just when I thought I had a handle on the author's over-arching "message" or theme, the book changed direction slightly and had me thinking about something else entirely. However, there is one particular instance of cruelty from Yeong-hye's childhood (one of the few passages told from her POV) that strongly suggests her vegetarianism and wish to reject her

humanity is a form of atonement for her role in a completely horrific act of cruelty, however powerless she was to stop it. But the story also illustrates how one person's refusal to conform can have a domino effect on those around them - and how that might be viewed by many as destructive to the fabric of society. The writing is extremely confident and impactful. The author makes you almost believe in the plausibility of Yeong-hye's physical transformation because her conviction seems so unimpeachable and her desire so ardent. This is a heartbreaking book that works on so many levels and touches on so many themes. Depressing, but worth it.

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