



The Book of Zinik

A Collective Experiment

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Contents

Foreword 7

In Bed 11

Out For a Ride 18

Paging Zinik 24

A Natural Mystic Zinik 31

Prism 47

A Squid's Tale 56

Flight to Shanghai 62

Zinik 73

Afterword 81



Biographies 83







Foreword

Zinik is in his fifties. He has a limp. He is recently divorced. He has lost all his money in the recent financial crash. And now he has to go to Shanghai for the first time in his life, on a business trip.

This is all we knew of Zinik, before we began a seminar called *A Tentative Experiment to Form a Literary Collective* at the Freie Universität, Berlin in June and July, 2011. And so one task of our seminar would be to invent a collective of collectives — groups of no more than 5 — who would have to imagine what might happen to Zinik in Shanghai. The other task of the seminar would be to analyse the history and theory of the collective as a literary practice — a kind of tool box for the *Book of Zinik*. We presented the Surrealists, the Situationists, the Simpsons: cadavre exquis, script writing, editing, translating, plagiarism. We invited Wolfgang Becker and Thomas Wendrich to talk about script writing, Thorsten Ahrend to talk about editing, and Jeffrey Eugenides to talk about the collective narrator in *The Virgin Suicides*. We tried to form our own collective on collectives.



The reasons why we wanted, collectively, to make this experiment with collectives, were possibly complex. About two years ago, we had started a project which we called *The Book of Tasks*. This project is very much unfinished. The idea had been to write a collective book — and our solution to this problem had been that we would each set our collective of two, alternately, literary tasks. These tasks would in some way be an attempt to extend each other's style.

Gradually, we delayed this experiment — the problems of methodology turned out to be more difficult than we had imagined. But we still wanted to examine this idea of the collective. And so we came up with the seminar as a form of continuation.



Foreword

On the one hand, we would analyse other collectives. And on the other hand, we would make other people work as a collective. We would institute our own laboratory. And these are the results.

DANIEL KEHLMANN

ADAM THIRLWELL





In Bed

1

m4w, relight my fire — 50

Hello ladies,

I'm in town for a short while and looking for someone to show me around Shanghai. My Chinese is pretty basic — maybe you can teach me a few words! :) Ex-pats and all global souls are welcome but I'd prefer a European/English woman. Absolutely no Australians.

I'm a laid-back, pretty attractive rogue looking for someone lighthearted, aged 18-40, who is interested in sightseeing, meeting new people, good food and maybe more ... I'm staying in a nice hotel, all expenses paid, and the travel reviews online say it has a great restaurant.

I'm quite sensitive and understanding and enjoy the usual activities of a worldly cultured gentleman including reading, cycling, whisky tasting, visiting galleries and campanology. I'm 50 years young and I've the energy of an 18 year-old — so I'm told!

At this point, I should admit that I've been going through a pretty difficult divorce — just warning you in advance so you're not shocked when we meet and I'm crying my eyes out (joke!).

Maybe you've gone through a divorce too and you know how I feel? I'm interested to hear from anyone with a kind word to offer.

This is my first time using craigslist. Am I the only person wondering who Craig is?! One of my former colleagues used to use it on work trips. I remember him raving about all the interesting women he met so I've decided to give it a go.

Who knows — there might be someone special out there for me.

Please be nice, open and spicy. I promise I will be too.

Z

It was hotter in Shanghai than expected. Zinik was sweating as he stood on the pavement outside his hotel. He briefly considered heading back to his hotel room for another shower, but then he would have to face the gluey smile of the porter and his insensitive flush of black hair. He could remove his jacket, but all things considered it was too much of a hassle. The heat was just about bearable for the two-minute walk from the hotel to the bar.

A taxi stopped across the street. From within a woman emerged with sunglasses and the same kind of curls as Anne, tightly wound chestnut strands with sparks of blonde. Zinik paused; the woman entered a restaurant-bar called Libo. He had an urge to follow her. His foot was on the edge of the curb, but Libo's blue-tinted glass exterior was positively terrifying. Zinik turned and carried on towards the only destination he had in Shanghai, an Irish pub. The place was disgustingly expensive, an international sellout, but it was safe. And it was close.

Well-manicured trees lined the street, set at twenty feet apart, casting little clumps of shade that Zinik treated as little pools of paradise. He paused in each shadow thankful for a moment of relief from the relentless sun. The pavement had gone soft from the heat. Every step felt as if he was walking on moist ground. He was surrounded by black concrete and foreign neon signs, advertisements for fast food, massages, medicines for God only knows what. The crowds were out today, they appeared undaunted by the sun. Busy locals hustled their way through flocks of tourists.

Anne. What if she was here? What if she just happened to get out of that cab? Zinik knew these were just idle daydreams. Their last goodbye had been numb — she didn't get up from the living room couch as Zinik stood lingering at the front door holding a giant envelope. Zinik turned, closed the door quietly, walked across the lawn that no longer belonged

to him, not even half of it. The envelope enclosed the freshly-signed loss of ownership.

The demise of his marriage had been a process of something he had come to know, come to be comfortable with, to wallow in silently. But the final termination; it had been civil, it had been calm. At least, Anne had appeared calm. But that was Anne as always, halcyon, an unperturbed brow, devoid of a poker tell, perhaps with nothing to tell — nothing good to tell Zinik anyhow. Zinik had driven away from the house with the sound of a static television-set in his head. Now, with an ocean between them, he realized it had been the most violent experience of disunion; the insidious creeping nature of separation and divorce felt like a tumor in the back of his brain, growing. Zinik still couldn't help but imagine Anne step out from the Shanghai taxi, turning to him, and smiling. He crossed the street — almost crashing into a fat white lady in her fifties stopped dead in the middle of the road to take a photo of Peking ducks in a restaurant window — and entered the pub.

The Irish bar sold the most Guinness in all of China. He had found it during his first trip to the city four years ago, in the bitter cold of January. Guinness and a hot stew had saved him. His second time in China's darling city had been in the beauty of late fall, seasonally tolerable. Anne had never liked his business trips, but that changed two years ago. He hadn't noticed her shift in attitude about his absences. Now, a third time, the relief with which he plunked down on an Irish barstool was almost with the same amount of gratitude as on that first cold January evening. What if he was back then, back on the same chair he sat on in winter, holding on to a pint? Everything could still be saved. He felt like he had dropped out of a story that was supposed to be his, but higher forces had decided to dump him because he had failed in too many ways. Back in January — when the warm steam rising up from his meal had told him that there was still a chance everything might turn out alright. Obviously that was a lie. The heat in

In Bed

China was more oppressive now than any heat he'd known. Thick smoggy dew was hanging about his skin. Zinik had been meaning to take one step further this time round, to head over to the west side of Shanghai and try Paddy Wang's — it had a decent reputation on the ... but always found an excuse not to go. It was too out of the way and for all he knew, Paddy Wang was a dickhead. Zinik stripped off his jacket and flung it on the neighboring barstool.

In the corner of the bar, underneath a fresco of lime-green shamrocks, sat four 20-something tourists, perhaps siblings, perhaps lovers, perhaps classmates. The bartender placed the check with a bowl of fortune cookies in front of them, and returned to Zinik, in a wide-smiling hurry.

A Guinness, please.

Overzealous, *You got it, sir!* the bartender poured a glass of Guinness in a single pull and placed it on the bar with a suave animated nod. Zinik shuddered but thanked him anyway. He took a lengthy sip and looked at the young tourists reading their fortune cookies aloud. *A secret admirer will soon send you a sign of affection.*

One of the others added, *In bed!* One pathetic laugh, one eye-roll.

Zinik thought, *Oh dear god. Half-wits.*

Okay, okay, now read yours.

Okay: One who admires you greatly is hidden before your eyes ... in bed!

Zinik glided his hand down the perspiring glass, and wiped his sweaty forehead with his wet palm. Tiny victories of relief. Zinik had always been bad in hot weather. He listened to their fortunes, wondering if there was the slightest possibility that he'd been bad in bed. The tumor swelled and said to him: *drink.*

When you speak honestly and openly, others will listen to you ... in bed.

Your talents will be recognized and suitably rewarded ... in bed.

Afterword

Do we have conclusions? If only we had conclusions! We had a list, at best, of possible truths. Some collectives are happier than other collectives. On the most practical level, the collective that seemed to us the happiest was the scriptwriting collective. And when we thought about this, we came up with two reasons why this might be true. The thing that's easiest for collective writing is dialogue, because dialogue has no style — or at least, dialogue has the least style of any form of writing, and so it's more transferable to more than one person. And also because the scriptwriting model is the most finely organised. Because if we learned one thing, it's that collectives need to be organised. They need, in the lingo, a show-runner.

And this was kind of sad. Because we had begun this project with avant-garde intentions. This idea of the collective, after all, is a constant movement of the avant-garde: a way of attacking the mythology of an individual style. But our investigations into the avant-garde made us realise how simplistic the avant-garde collective could be. Too often, the avant-garde collective used chance in opposition to the usual ideas of style and content. But how boring chance turned out to be! They tried to refuse the idea of the necessary, of logic, or the rational — but this only led either to the total arbitrary, or in fact to logics which were, however much suppressed, too sadly obvious. *Les Champs Magnétiques*, this collaborative novel by André Breton and Philippe Soupault — it wasn't a masterpiece of objective chance. It was only a bad lyric poem of nostalgia.

Or so we thought, when we considered our theory of the theories ...

Whereas it turned out, when we listened to the stories of our collectives, that we were wrong. No one had written a script; no one had used a show-runner. Instead, our collectives had come up with pure democracies. Sometimes, this was with the help of Google Documents — a method we



Afterword

hadn't even thought of; and sometimes it was through the ordinary prosaic method of argument and persuasion. Some groups had created in this way something that was so finely revised that it sounded as if only one person could have written it; and others had invented different forms: multiple characters, or multiple viewpoints, or multiple narratives.

In other words, they had offered us hope.

And so, we began to think. So OK: a collective might need a discipline: or at least, every collective that's bigger than two might need a discipline. But this doesn't mean that the discipline can control everything. And so what might be the future of a truly avant-garde but sober collective would be a collective that proceeded in the same way as a single writer might proceed — in the full joint investigation of form and content, but where the ownership of a work's meaning would be more and more impossible. Because this is what we concluded: it really is still a scandal, this idea that a work doesn't quite belong to any one person, not even a work produced by one person. Yes, every collective has to disguise itself as a single person: like Matt Groening's impersonation of the Simpsons. Whereas the scandal is that collectivity is everywhere. But readers still need a name.



DANIEL KEHLMANN

ADAM THIRLWELL

Biographies

KATHARINA ASBROCK was born in 1985 in Hannover. She is completing a Master's in Drama Studies and Comparative Literature at the Freie Universität Berlin.

MIRIAM BARTOSCH was born in 1985 in Erfurt, Germany. She has lived in Berlin since 2004. Alongside studying Publishing and Media, Comparative Literature and Art History at the Freie Universität Berlin she worked for various cultural institutions like a magazine dealing with international sub-cultures and a project space for contemporary art.

JULIA BAUDISCH (born 1986 in Berlin) is a student of Comparative Literature at the Peter Szondi-Institut, Freie Universität Berlin. She currently works as a student assistant at the Humboldt-Universität where she received her Bachelor's degree in German Literature and Linguistics. She is particularly interested in the field of music in literature, aesthetics as well as in contemporary literature.

ANJA BIPPUS, born in 1987, studied Literary, Cultural and Media Studies at the University of Siegen where she graduated with a thesis on 'the art of hunger' in Paul Auster's work. After spending several months in Israel as well as working as an intern in a PR agency in Stuttgart, she moved to Berlin in October 2010 to start her Master's degree in Comparative Literature at the Freie Universität Berlin. Her interests include modern and contemporary American literature, Jewish literature and visual studies.

ISABEL BREDENBROEKER, born 1986 in Duisburg, studied Comparative Literature and English Philology in Bonn, Paris and Berlin. She currently studies in the Comparative Literature Master's program at the Freie Universität Berlin. Isabel writes and still practises analog photography. She lives in Berlin.



Biographies

MARIE DAHL is a musician, artist and student. She was born in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1978 and now lives in Berlin.

DANIEL DAVIES, born 1989 in Manchester, is an undergraduate English Literature student at the University of Edinburgh. For the past year he has studied as an Erasmus student at the Freie Universität Berlin. Daniel's main interests are anything to do with books and next year he will be President of Edinburgh University's Literature Society. Aside from books, Daniel is an avid fan of three great British institutions: those of Tottenham Hotspur FC, the Smiths and Melvyn Bragg.

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PHILIPP GOESER was born in 1989 in Mannheim. He studies Philosophy and Film Studies at Freie Universität Berlin.

RACHEL HARDING grew up in Connecticut and studied history and literature at Bennington College in Vermont. Dreams of reading Rilke in the original brought her to Berlin but it was the good beer and cheap rent that enticed her to stay. She currently studies Comparative Literature at the Freie Universität, which means she spends most of her free time agonizing about her future (or at least the monetary aspects thereof). Aside from that, she enjoys good books, witty people and traveling.

MARGARET HART was born in 1991 in New Jersey. She studies at Hampshire College in Amherst, Massachusetts and is interested in humans and language.

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MICHA HUFF was born in 1985 and raised in Osthessen. He has worked as a theatre actor and a helicopter pilot, and studied German Philology and Sociology in Göttingen, and Comparative Literature in Berlin. Micha Huff knows karate.

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Biographies

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MARIA PERNER (born in 1982) lives in Berlin, Germany. After graduating in Media, Culture & Literary Public, she moved to Berlin to work as a film production assistant in 2008. Currently, she is a Master's student in Comparative Literature at Freie Universität Berlin. Her main interests are Arthouse & Political Cinema, the Berlin Music & Art Scene as well as her own writings and films.

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SARAH THIELEN, born in 1986 in Soltau, Germany, has lived in Berlin since 2006. She is a student of Comparative Literature as well as French Language, Culture and Literature at the Freie Universität Berlin. She has job shadowed as an assistant director in theatres in Hamburg and Berlin since 2005.

ISABELLE TOPPE was born 1985 in Berlin and has German and French nationality. She holds a Bachelor's degree in Media and Communication Studies and German Studies at Freie Universität Berlin and spent a semester abroad in Århus,



Biographies

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DANIEL KEHLMANN was born in Munich in 1975. He has published six novels, including *Ich und Kaminiski* (2003), *Die Vermessung der Welt* (2005), and *Ruhm* (2009), one collection of short stories and two collections of essays. His work has been translated into 40 languages. He has been awarded several prizes, among which are the Kleist-Preis, the Thomas-Mann-Preis, and the Prix Cévennes.



ADAM THIRLWELL was born in London in 1978. He has published two novels, *Politics* and *The Escape*, both of which are published in German by S. Fischer: *Strategie* (2004) and *Flüchtig* (2010). His essay on the international art of the novel, *Miss Herbert*, which won a Somerset Maugham Award, will be published by S. Fischer next year. His work has been translated into 30 languages. In 2003 he was placed on *Granta* magazine's list of the Best Young British Novelists.