



About the author:

DANIEL BERGER (born 1983) is a film director and producer from Kyrgyzstan. He is the Development Director of the International Documentary Film Festival Artdocfest/Riga and the Executive director of the Artdocfest/Asia Festival. As a film director and producer Berger released a number of short films with a sharp social focus, including *May I Not Die?* (2023), *On a Game* (2022), *Virtual Reality* (2021), *You Are Not Alone* (2021). Now, with the support of Current Time and Radio Liberty, Daniel is working on a documentary about the consequences of Russia's brutal colonial policy in the countries of Central Asia. The film tells about the natives of Kyrgyzstan who died in the war in Ukraine.

Selected Bibliography

2023 — **Soviet Demons and Other Beasts**, *novellas and short stories*

Nominated for the **Yasnaya Polyana Award 2023**
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Soviet Demons and Other Beasts



Elena Shubina Publishing (AST)
Novellas and short stories, 2023
315 pp

Daniel Berger's ingenious debut book of prose offers readers a funny and dark kaleidoscopic journey into myth, covering pivotal moments of the twentieth century throughout the former Soviet Republics.

Daniel Berger inventively and seamlessly weaves together local myths from various regions of the collapsed Soviet empire — from Siberia through the country's South and North, to his native Kyrgyzstan — as he tells stories of pivotal moments in the twentieth century from the perspective of mythical creatures. Along with familiar ghouls, mermaids, forest sprites, and house elves, the stories' inventive bestiary includes creatures endemic to specific regions. We read of Bashkir shulikuns (small demons who plague humans, often with evil tricks), Kyrgyz Albartsy (an evil mountain creature resembling Big Foot), and even an invented ethnic group, the Erylas and their warlocks, who marry trees in order to give birth to their common offspring.

These mythological creatures are all part of Soviet and post-Soviet reality and are firmly integrated into the daily routines of humans. Some creatures choose not to interact with people, serving as silent witnesses to the flow of time. Others prefer to adapt in society, as they find professional occupations in tune with their natural gifts.

The elderly evil spirit Albartsy works in a regional natural science museum. By day, he's a museum exhibit, pretending to be a Pithecanthropus, but by night, he works as a janitor and a guard, dreaming of a well-deserved pension. When refused by the museum's director, Albartsy hires a pair of elderly cemetery ghouls to threaten the director into granting him a leave and a proper severance package. Meanwhile, the starved ghouls have their own plans for the chubby director (Albartsy).

The story Ene and Soho is set in the Volga region, where Berger places two invented ethnic groups — Erylas and Shulges. In fine and colorful details, the author depicts their history, cosmogony, traditions, and rituals. What's more, the author coins a language for the Erylas, based on Hungarian and Chuvash languages. Severpi, a young woman from town and a hereditary Eryla witch, comes to her native village for her grandfather's funeral. As a girl who's become accustomed to city life in the late 1990s, Severpi knows little of her people's beliefs. But when the funeral ceremony goes wrong, she appeals to the village's female elders for help. They remind her of Ene and Soho, the ancient patrons of their kin, and guide the young woman to the adjacent wood, which seems to be rooted into village life in ways Severpi would never have imagined. What begins as a duty

turns into a scary but rewarding journey in search of her true self and a true love (Ene and Soho).

Mimosa, a once-immortal Siren, runs a school canteen in a Caucasus village and grieves for her youth, when she reigned together with her sister, enchanting kings, and the bravest warriors, invading new lands and demolishing empires... Until the day her sister bears a son, and their divine powers begin to dissipate (Good Night, Mimosa).

The devilishly attractive demon Strekopytov, a brilliant farm manager and procurer thanks to his irresistible magnetism, suffers from his unrequited love for a young farmer girl (Strekopytov).

A devoted house elf is forced to leave his home together with his "host" family, after being deported to the far north in the early 1930s as part of dekulakization. Thanks to him, the family survives an ice-cold winter at a labor camp. They become the first residents of Soviet settlements in the Sakha region (Khonzia).

Senia, a young shulikun (a small but mighty devil from Bashkir lore), is drafted into the Red Army, and fights along with his kin in Moscow and Siberia, but dreams only of returning home to his native Bashkiria and marrying his beloved. To approach an angel is severely painful for shulikuns, yet Senia pleads to a passing angel to send his love to his girl while he is away. The angel fulfills the request though he knows that Senia will not return home from this war (Shulikuns).

An old forest sprite decides to go against his own rules of not engaging with humans. Fighting the instinct to go into hibernation, the old sprite takes children from their Belarus village, which Nazi troops demolished in their persecutions of partisans, and brings them to a new family. He loses his magic powers when leaving his home forest, but he is prepared to face all hardships of war along with the children, in what will become his last journey (The Forest Children).

Darkly humorous, moving, and often eerie, Berger's book is more than simply a patchwork mythological bestiary from different regions of the former Soviet Union. The intricate blend of myth and reality gives a unique perspective to the historical narrative. In Berger's universe, these mythological creatures change neither history nor human nature. Their magical interactions, though, display the best and the worst in people, ultimately forcing them to look deep into their hearts, often make illuminating discoveries.

Selected quotes

This text is both serious and funny, and sad at the same time, while the representatives of the "evil" or supernatural beings, supposedly dangerous to humans, are in their own way quite endearing and totally humane.

Nezavisimaya Gazeta

These stories of rather hapless transcendent beings are simultaneously funny, somewhat eerie, and yet, in their own way, very touching.

Afisha

[In describing the supernatural,] the author has found their own unique approach and style. Moreover, from one story to another, it evolves: the allegory gives way to a funny anecdote, and in "The Treasury of Goznak," the narrative style

resembles an Eastern fairy tale, which fits the plot just perfectly...

Psychologies

If we believe Berger's stories, the devil is not as frightening as the people surrounding him. Next to aggressive power-seekers, representatives of the supernatural seem to be innocent kids, albeit with a mischievous streak. People perceive the evil spirits as a matter of course. Some help them settle into everyday life, while others exploit them for selfish purposes. There is some consolation in this: despite their superhuman abilities, even magical creatures succumb to this country's drastic history.

Prochtenie

In Gaiman's *American Gods* the supernatural creatures are petty, weak, cruel and flawed – in short, they are not different from humans. Daniel Berger, on the contrary, is more optimistic (or less so if you like). The mythological creatures in his universe are alluringly sympathetic and, in a way, more human. This difference gets emphasized when depicted against the backdrop of real historical events.

Yana Vagner
the author of the internationally bestselling novel *To the Lake*