

## FICTION



### ABOUT THE AUTHOR SERHIY ZHADAN

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**ZHADAN Serhiy**

Serhiy Zhadan (born 1974) is an extraordinary writer. Sometimes it seems that he can see through the walls of human souls. He penetrates the souls and extracts such information about people that remains a mystery even for themselves.

And then he writes, both poetry and prose, where he reveals human fears and hopes, passions and loneliness, dreams and frustration... He actually writes about the things people could have been totally unaware of. It is especially interesting to read Zhadan when he writes about women. Apparently, something opens to him, a certain veil behind which the Woman appears as an unfathomable being with her body and soul. And he simply reads this information and interprets it to his reader. Just read and you will see that.

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**“Fire Arms and Knives”**

**(Kharkiv: Family Leisure Club, 2012)**

**Writing about women**

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He spoke differently about women, women, he claimed, provided the change of seasons. This is indeed what happens: you think winter is when it snows. But nothing like that. In fact, it is when she wakes up around noon and, without getting out of her bed, she begins to complain, say, it's the end of December, but there's no snow, and the birds in the park merge into the black ground, open like a wound. And she says so, as if it were your fault that there's no snow, as if it were you who, in the morning, while she's sleeping, gets out on dark streets and shovels the snow that fell overnight, to the basements, manholes and bags of passers-by.

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And she finally gets out from under the blankets, and pulls on men's sweaters, and warms her hands for a while under hot water, rummages through the rooms, looking for everything that was so consistently lost and arranged yesterday – her phone and notebook, keys, computer and business cards, puts all things in their places so that they, these things, are hopelessly lost. And only then she makes herself some tea and gets onto the balcony. She stands there and gazes at the smooth celestial plain, freezing quickly, but stubbornly unwilling to leave her air watch. And in the frosty air the tea smells so desperately of Ceylon, and she burns her fingers so persistently on the hot mug, that the snow, eventually gives in and begins to fall. And thus it will go on for the next three months.

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In summer, instead, she is calm and sensible. In summer, her skin loses this feeling of passing darkness, the feeling of the sky moving. She loses track of time, without noticing how dusk is gradually falling after an endless day and the dry horizon is filling up with colors and charcoal. In summer, her skin is as warm as sand, and even at night it does not lose its warmth, as summer nights are too short to change anything. But summer days are long and measured, and there is no point in keeping

track of time, there suddenly is so much of it that keeping track of it becomes the same as keeping track of the changes in the surrounding darkness – it is not clear yet who is on whose track.

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And the watch on her wrist is just a piece of jewelry that shines in the sun, without performing any functions. The air assumes all the functions, it pushes her forward through hot alleys and stops her in a dark suffocating archway, where no daylight enters. In summer, she catches the sun, it stays on her clothes and hair, it warms her palms and calves, dazzles her, reflecting from the windows of offices and trams. In summer, trams stay at their terminals so long, that after getting on one of them and taking a window-seat, she gets off it after a while and walks, passing a stop after a stop and feeling how much time and how many stops she has left.

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And the most interesting thing is the conversations, something that she shares when we meet. This does not happen in men's conversations – men are usually reserved and silent, even if they say something, they either immediately start bragging and lying, or concealing any information that is important for them, so that after these talks, you still won't understand anything. She, on the other hand, always shares so openly as if you were a doctor, and she were afraid that by not telling something she will complicate your work, and won't allow you to make the only right diagnosis.

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That's why she shares everything: the men she dreams of, who roam around her flat at night, quietly sneak to the kitchen, take alarm clocks and phones out of pots and bowls, pour sand and grain out of bottles, open windows, letting in the smell of leaves and smoke. She speaks about women she befriends, who complain to her every morning about the strange sounds behind the wall, about the birds looking in the windows, about the voices in the corridors, and about the threats in literary magazines.

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She speaks about superstitions, formulas and codes, numbers used to open doors and make troops retreat; she speaks about children she meets on the streets and retells their conversations, she describes quarrels between janitors and the homeless, she mentions all the traffic guards she knows, describes the houses she ever visited, advertises fortified wines, that make her speech tart and slow, and the words intertwine like grass after rain.

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But most of the time she speaks about her love: found and missed, gained and despised, stolen and lost, true and illegal, happy and doomed. Love that came suddenly and unexpectedly, love that she carefully built, love with a taste of fire and metal, with the remnants of night fights and morning silence, love that she went through quickly and then returned to all the time, love that she shunned and that helped her stay balanced.

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She speaks, remembering and imagining, forgetting and shuffling the memories, protecting friends and blaming her female friends, revealing bloody secrets and showing crime scenes. She names the places where she was feeling good, shows the yards where she lost her faith, complains about the subway that made her feel lonely, recalls the bus routes that each time gave her strength. She repeats the names of her fiancés, says how she got along with them, what she liked about them, why she couldn't live without them and how she finally got rid of them all.

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Maybe she needs someone else to know these things that are important for her, or maybe it is the other way around, maybe it is all worthless to her, that's why she tells her stories and parables with such ease, but either way, he said, the words of women have to be recorded, and if their words were written down, let's say, in the Scripture, it would be much more voluminous. And the world itself, he added, would be different if just women's words were written down in the Scripture. There would

be much more passion in this world. And far fewer crusades.

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Writing about women, about their habits and fears, their words and deeds, you know in advance that you will not write the whole truth. The whole truth must remain outside the verses, it does not fit into the letters, it breaks the lines and banishes the punctuation marks. In relationships with women, there is such a strange thing that defies retelling, something like tenderness, although not quite – tenderness is still more tangible, more present in our lives.

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There is something beyond tenderness, and it is this thing, this mechanics of mutual destruction and interdependence usually disappears from the poems, gets lost in the folds of clothing, falls under the beds, settles to the bottom of the glasses. The system of hints and insights, something related to faith – it is this very side of the relationship that is mostly avoided by poets: consciously or subconsciously they feel that it is better to remain silent about such things, it is better to keep them, it is better not to cling to what will still pass.

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Poets, in general, are superstitious people, sometimes they take their superstitions for the laws of versification, for the principles of rhyming, that is why they write about women so, as not to say the main thing. They write about women's hair and jewelry, about clothes and dreams, about hearts, memories and worries, about laughter and concerns, about pregnancy, journeys and homecomings, about their own doubts and beliefs, about their own pleasure and distrust, about their incomprehension and fascination, about their tears and silence, their courage, devotion, strength and expansiveness, in a word, writing about women, they write mostly about themselves.

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Just because they have to keep some things for themselves, they can not and will not get rid of them, voice them and lose them. So they try to fill all that void with

letters and exclamation marks. And since it is simply impossible to act otherwise, we all accept this exciting game, we turn pages and find the hints and signs that only we are aware of, the traps and marks that only we understand. We study them, deciphering and memorizing, as if we were reading a textbook in the first language for the primary school.

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