The Same Night Awaits Us All: Diary of a Novel
Reader’s Report by Izidora Angel, translator

*The same night awaits us all,*

*And the road to death is to be trodden once.*

Quintus Horatius Flaccus

Hristo Karastoyanov’s multi award-winning love letter to literature *The Same Night Awaits Us All: Diary of a Novel* was published in Bulgaria in 2014 by Janet 45 to near universal acclaim, becoming not only a best-selling Bulgarian title—a true rarity in a market dominated by foreign literature—but garnering multiple awards for its indelible contribution to contemporary Bulgarian literature. It has become, quite possibly, the author’s career-defining work—the culmination of more than 30 years of fascination, research and commentary on early 20th-century Bulgarian history and anarchism.

Hristo Karastoyanov’s body of work is characterized by an intellectual, literary nonconformity and a fascination with the unchanging elements of humanity throughout history. Although he is widely respected, he relishes in his outsider status, something which he strongly believes is necessary for authenticity. Historical fiction narratives are his specialty, and his work has been translated and published in German, English, and Turkish.

In my mind, Karastoyanov takes *Night* a step further from what we saw in Laurent Binet’s *HHhH*, going so far as to actually construct the world borne out of the question ‘How could it have happened?’. *Night* is also reminiscent of Tom Reiss’s *The Black Count* in the way its meticulous research presents a fascinating history lesson along with the seamless integration of its characters. (As in *The Black Count*, we envision a solid introduction and maps of Bulgaria and Sofia as they were in early 1920s.)

But unlike the oft-explored events in history which the above two books document, namely WWII and revolutionary France, early 20th-century Bulgarian history is largely underexplored, specifically its anarchistic movements, and it is
fascinating in its darkness. Karastoyanov’s lush, dark, and ‘true fiction’ account, is, as the author himself describes: "maybe not all true, but true to life."

*Night* is a natural fit for the UK market because readers are keen on strong books of historical fiction written with a modern touch, yet drawing poignant parallels with some of the sad political and social realities of today. And now, perhaps more than ever, the UK reader is extremely politically conscious. A book, which offers a familiar, European perspective, yet one with a distinct point of view, and humour—dark as it may be—presents a great market opportunity.

**About the book**

In 1954, the remains of the great Bulgarian poet Geo Milev were uncovered in a mass grave at the outskirts of Sofia, nearly thirty years after he had been secretly executed by government agents. The poet was recognized only by the blue glass eye in the right socket of his cracked skull—a glass eye which replaced the real one he had lost fighting for the very country that would execute him for publishing the politically non-affiliated, and therefore inconvenient, periodical *Plamuk*.

*Night* imagines and revives the last year and a half of the great poet’s life and the events leading up to his death, while resurrecting his friendship with (legendary in his own right) Georgi Sheytanov—notorious anarchist on the run, most wanted man in the land, and, crucially, financial sponsor of Milev’s periodical.

It’s probably very natural to frame the book around the question ‘Who killed Geo Milev?’ It’s a loaded question, raising many more with regards to the volatile nature of Bulgarian and European early 20th-century history, politics, and culture. But perhaps before attempting to answer ‘Who killed Geo Milev?’, we need to ask: Who *is* Geo Milev? If we don’t, it means his life, his work and his death have been forgotten.

In early 1920s Bulgaria, the international literary promise of the young visionary poet Geo Milev—German-educated, avant-garde writer, multi-lingual translator, and magazine publisher—is unbounded. He is contrarian, brilliant and erudite. But when he loses part of his skull and right eye fighting for Bulgaria in the Great War, something in him changes—he begins working almost obsessively in a
race against time to expand the horizons of the Bulgarian literary landscape. During the remainder of his short life, the writer becomes one of the fiercest apologists of modernism and expressionism in Bulgaria, authoring potent poetry and sweeping political commentary, and translating into Bulgarian no less than Lord Byron, Shakespeare, Goethe, John Keats, and de Musset, to name some. In turn, he is despised by the conformist literary circles, the pseudo intellectuals and, naturally, the government.

The novel’s narrative effortlessly weaves in real people and real, chronologically intertwined international events. Among them are the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, anarchistic gatherings in France, Lenin’s death, and British Labour politician Josiah Wedgwood IV arriving in Sofia to investigate the unprecedented terrorist attack on the St. Nedelya Cathedral, an act in which the main character and his partner are later implicated. It does this whilst exploring the explosive European climate between October 1923 and May 1925, and pointing a steady mirror to the inexcusable atrocities committed in Bulgaria in an effort to suppress freedom of thought and freedom of speech.

From the very first pages of the book we know Geo Milev will die, and we know Georgi Sheytanov will die. They will die because for Bulgaria—a country in the grip of a five-century-long identity crisis—avant-garde literary propositions, dissent and anarchism are persecuted with murderous fervour. But the book is unapologetic in the frightening political and social parallels it makes with the Bulgaria of today, begging the question: how much has changed?

The pertinence of the book cannot be overstated, as it details a period in time when Bulgarian literature was on par with that of its European contemporaries, before communism’s five-decade-long brutal suppression of cultural innovation nearly destroyed its voice. Bulgaria is, at last, again poised for literary greatness with authors such as Karastoyanov, and I believe this book, and its author, deserve to enter the international conversation.