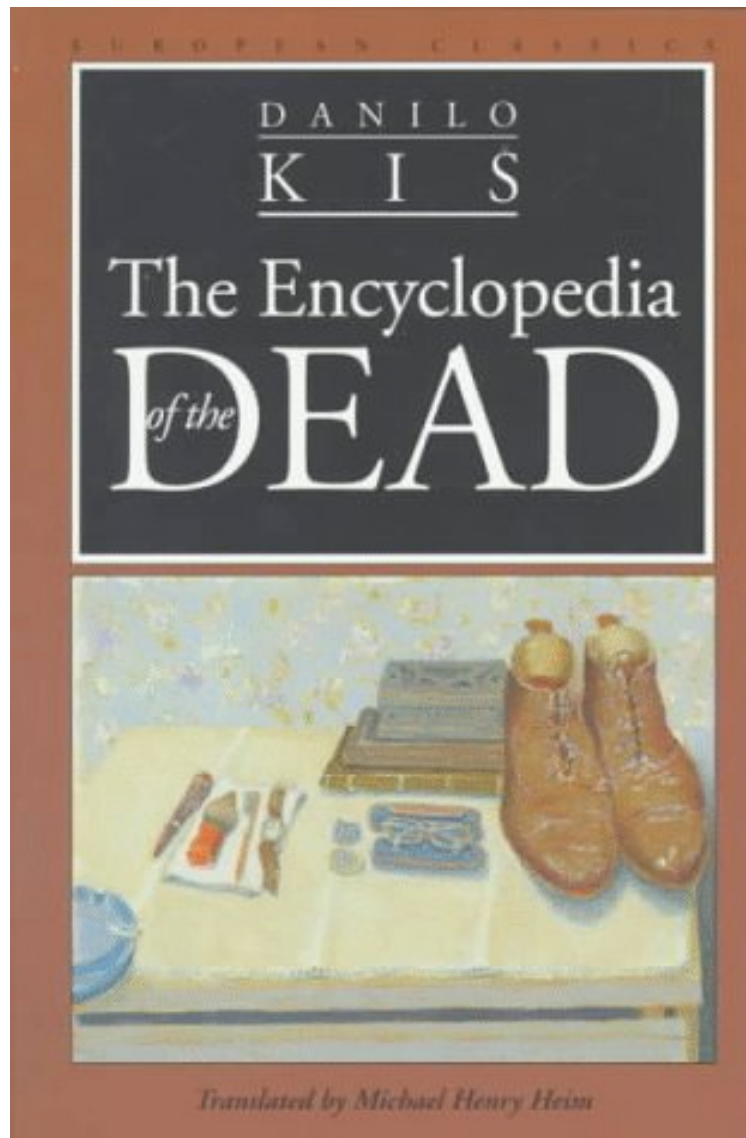


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Encyclopedia of the Dead (European Classics)

Danilo Kis

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Danilo Kis : Encyclopedia of the Dead (European Classics) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Encyclopedia of the Dead (European Classics):

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Stories from a twentieth-century masterBy R. M. PetersonDanilo Kis was one of the great writers of fiction from the second half of the twentieth century. He would have been a more deserving Nobel Prize winner during the 1980s than half of the writers who actually received the award. THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE DEAD is the third book of his that I have read. It was well worth reading and I

recommend it. But it takes a back seat to the two previous books that I read ("A Tomb for Boris Davidovich" and "Garden, Ashes"), which are both extraordinary works of fiction. That circumstance, perhaps unfairly, affects my assessment of THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE DEAD. This is a collection of nine short stories, ranging from seven to forty pages. As far as I can discern, there is no overarching theme, although the stories share a sufficient family resemblance to mark them as coming from the pen of the same writer. All, to varying degrees, have a dose of the fantastical. Some are very much in the mode of parables. Kis's penchants for lists and striking similes are often evident. A similarity to many of the tales of Borges is also evident, although in general I prefer Kis over Borges because of the former's greater humanism. The title of the book is also the title of one of the stories, the best of the stories for that matter. In "The Encyclopedia of the Dead", the narrator spends a night in the Royal Library in Stockholm. She looks up her father in the one and only copy of the multi-volume "Encyclopedia of the Dead". One striking thing about the "Encyclopedia" is that the single precondition for inclusion is that the person in question cannot be listed in any other encyclopedia. Beyond that, "what makes the 'Encyclopedia' unique (apart from its being the only existing copy) is the way it depicts human relationships, encounters, landscapes--the multitude of details that make up a human life." In the case of the narrator's father, the Encyclopedia records every aspect and detail of his life. For example, concerning his wedding the text gives a list of the witnesses and guests, the name of the priest who officiated, the toasts and songs, the gifts and givers, the food and drink. But the Encyclopedia "is concerned with more than material goods: * * * it deals with spiritual matters, people's views of the world, of God, their doubts about the existence of the beyond, their moral standards." The import of the "Encyclopedia of the Dead" is that "nothing in the history of mankind is ever repeated, things that at first glance seem the same are scarcely even similar; each individual is a star unto himself, everything happens always and never, all things repeat themselves ad infinitum yet are unique." This contrasts with Borges, where (as in his "The Library of Babel") the individual and the particular are obliterated and lost to eternity in the seemingly infinite universe of details. Two other stories from THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE DEAD warrant individual mention here. One, "The Book of Kings and Fools" is an elaborate account of a quasi-legendary book, "The Conspiracy, or the Roots of Disintegration of European Society". It soon becomes evident that "The Conspiracy" is a stand-in for "The Protocols of the Elders of Zion", and that Kis is telling about how a book of fantasy ended up having such vile real-world consequences. The other is "Red Stamps with Lenin's Picture", which is a love story of sorts, and probably, at bottom, a story of the love and devotion given Kis by his wife Mirjana, whom he treated rather shabbily. Kis is an author well worth reading. If you begin with THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF THE DEAD, don't stop there. Go on to "A Tomb for Boris Davidovich" and "Garden, Ashes". And if they captivate you as much as they did me, you probably will also enjoy the unconventional biography of Kis by Mark Thompson, entitled "Birth Certificate: The Story of Danilo Kis".

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Dark and original fiction
By Bibliophile I'd heard about Danilo Kis recently, and read this collection on an airplane trip. These metaphysical and strange stories captivated me. Without having plot or character in the usual sense, they manage to achieve suspense. The title story gripped me and had one of those lyrical endings hard to find in short fiction- but several others (not all) were on this level, too. Have ordered more of this author.

14 of 18 people found the following review helpful. Two Great Stories Out of Nine....
By Gio... and those two are enough in my card catalogue to justify a five-star rating. How many novelists have written even one great short story? I suppose I should have read one of Danilo Kis's novels first, as my first encounter with such an acclaimed author, but I like short stories. I especially admire coherent, cohesive collections of stories written as a suite. "The Encyclopedia of the Dead" is certainly just such a cohesive suite of stories, all of them concerned with death, all of them more or less metaphysical "conceits" in the older sense of the word. A comparison to Jorge (not Jose) Luis Borges, the Argentine master of metaphysical prose, is inevitable. Kis acknowledges Borges in his postscript to this collection. The title story is pure Borges in conception. 'Simon Magus' and 'Last Respects', the first two stories in the book, are well-crafted prose, at least in English translation, but left me quite unimpressed. They and several later stories are too-clever stylized parables, anatomizing in the mummified cadaver of the religious imagination. Jewish or Christian, it's been done, and done more persuasively. The third story, 'Encyclopedia of the Dead,' however, captured my imagination from the start. The conceit is this: a woman gets special permission to visit a mysterious library. Inside and alone, she searches out a certain book, an encyclopedia of all the people who have ever lived whose names are NOT included in any other encyclopedia. In that book, every detail of the lives of such otherwise forgotten people is recorded. The woman immediately begins to read about her father, who has recently died. I won't tell more; it's a superb construct, a profound synecdoche of the memory and forgetfulness of humanity. In his postscript, by the way, Kis ruminates briefly on his discovery, after the writing, of a real-time counterpart to the 'encyclopedia' -- the underground archives of genealogy maintained by the Church of the Latter Day Saints in Utah. The other Great Story in the collection, "The Book of Kings and Fools," also has a real-time counterpart, but the process of writing and recognition were reversed. Kis, in his postscript, tells us that he became fascinated with the "true and fantastic" pernicious history of the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion," that fraud that never seems to be properly exposed and discredited. Kis originally intended to write an essay about the route of dissemination of that anti-semitic forgery, but he discovered that there were so many missing links, between the well-documented initial perpetration and the world-wide self-sustaining

willful perpetuation of the lies, that he could only turn to his authorial imagination to complete his essay in fictive form. Once again, the result is a profound sardonic 'conceit,' a story worthy of comparison with the best of Borges. Two out of nine? Good enough! I'm hooked. Let's see, what Danilo Kis shall I read next...

The most famous collection of short fiction by acclaimed Yugoslavian writer Danilo Kis. In these nine stories Kis depicts human relationships, encounters, landscapes the multitude of details that make up a human life. Kis combines fiction and history in postmodern style, and in a postscript provides fascinating historical backgrounds and other notes for the reader that add interest and context. An enduring classic of Slavic literary fiction.

From Publishers Weekly These musings on the themes of death, literature and love include a surreal tale about a religious sect that meticulously records the lives of the dead in preparation for Judgement Day. "Kis attempts to dazzle with his showmanship as he restlessly dons one stylistic mantle after another in this richly inventive collection of stories," said PW. A Tomb for Boris Davidovich, the author's depiction of a totalitarian state, will simultaneously appear in a Penguin paperback (\$7.95 * ISBN 0-14-005452-*9). Copyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc. "... the [title] story is one of the most moving I have ever read, a testament to both the power and the weakness of literature and human memory; its both an elegy and a howl of impotence, resonating in more dimensions than the two of the printed page." The Guardian "[Ki's] pen, often literally verging into eternity, does to his characters what nearly every known creed aspires to do to the human soul: it extends their existence, it erodes our sense of death's impenetrability." Joseph Brodsky