

## *More Praise for Han Kang's*

# The Vegetarian

“A horror story in its depiction of the unknowability of others—of the sudden feeling that you’ve never actually known someone close to you....Its three-part structure is brilliant, gradually digging deeper and deeper into darker and darker places; the writing is spare and haunting; but perhaps most memorable is its crushing climax, a phantasmagoric yet emotionally true moment that’s surely one of the year’s most powerful. This is an ingenious, upsetting, and unforgettable novel.”

—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)

“The book insists on a reader’s attention, with an almost hypnotically serene atmosphere interrupted by surreal images and frighteningly recognizable moments of ordinary despair. Han writes convincingly of the disruptive power of longing and the choice to either embrace or deny it, using details that are nearly fantastical in their strangeness to cut to the heart of the very human experience of discovering that one is no longer content with life as it is. An unusual and mesmerizing novel, gracefully written and deeply disturbing.”

—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Like a small seed, Han Kang’s startling and unforgettable debut goes to work quietly, but insistently. Her prose is so balanced, so elegant and assured, you might overlook the depths of this novel’s darkness—do so at your own peril.”

—Colin Winnette, author of *Haints Stay* and *Coyote*

“A stunning and beautifully haunting novel. It seems in places as if the very words on the page are photosynthesizing. I loved this graceful, vivid book.”

—Jess Richards, Costa First Novel Award short-listed author of *Snake Ropes*

“Poetic and beguiling, and translated with tremendous elegance, *The Vegetarian* exhilarates and disturbs.”

—Chloe Aridjis, author of *The Book of Clouds*

“Dark dreams, simmering tensions, chilling violence...This South Korean novel is a feast...It is sensual, provocative, and violent, ripe with potent images, startling colors, and disturbing questions...Sentence by sentence, *The Vegetarian* is an extraordinary experience...[It] will be hard to beat.”

—*The Guardian*

“This is an odd and enthralling novel; its story filled with nihilism but lyricism too, its writing understated even in its most fevered, violent moments. It has a surreal and spellbinding quality, especially in its passage on nature and the physical landscape, so beautiful and so magnificently

impervious to the human suffering around it.”

—Arifa Akbar, *The Independent*

“This short novel is one of the most startling I have read...Exciting and imaginative...The author reveals how nature, sex, and art crash through this polite society...It is the women who are killed for daring to establish their own identity. The narrative makes it clear it is the crushing pressure of Korean etiquette which murders them...[A] disturbing book.”

—Julia Pascal, *The Independent*

“Shocking...The writing throughout is precise and spare, with not a word wasted. There are no tricks. Han holds the reader in a vice grip...*The Vegetarian* quickly settles into a dark, menacing brilliance that is similar to the work of the gifted Japanese writer Yoko Ogawa in its devastating study of psychological pain...*The Vegetarian* is more than a cautionary tale about the brutal treatment of women: it is a meditation on suffering and grief. It is about escape and how a dreamer takes flight. Most of all, it is about the emptiness and rage of discovering there is nothing to be done when all hope and comfort fails....A work of savage beauty and unnerving physicality.”

—*Irish Times*

“*The Vegetarian* is a book about the failures of language and the mysteries of the physical. Yet its message should not undermine Han’s achievement as a writer. Like its anti-protagonist, *The Vegetarian* whispers so clearly, it can be heard across the room, insistently and with devastating, quiet violence.”

—Joanna Walsh, *The New Statesman*

“[A] strange and ethereal fable, rendered stranger still by the cool precision of the prose...What is ultimately most troubling about Yeong-hye’s posthuman fantasies is that they appear to be a reasonable alternative to the world of repression and denial in which everyone around her exists.”

—*Times Literary Supplement*

“*The Vegetarian* is so strange and vivid it left me breathless upon finishing it. I don’t think I’ve ever read a novel as mouth-wateringly poetic, or as drenched in hypnotic oddities, taboos, and scandal. It seems to have been plucked out of the ether, ready-made to take us all by surprise. Exciting and compelling.”

—Lee Rourke, *New Humanist*

“*The Vegetarian* combines human violence and the possibility of innocence...[A] frightening beauty of a novel.”

—*British Council Literature*

“Uncanny.”

—*The Australian*

“Kang belongs to a generation of writers who aim to discover secret drives, ambitions, and miseries behind one’s personal destiny...[*The Vegetarian*] deals with violence, sanity, cultural limits, and the value of the human body as the last refuge and private space.”

—*Tiempo Argentino*

“[A] bloodcurdlingly beautiful, sinister story.”

—*LINDA*.

“The almost perverse seduction of this book originates in the poetry of the images. They are violently erotic and rather nightmarish; the novel is like a room full of large flowers, where the musky odor takes you by the throat.”

—*De groene Amsterdammer*

“For the fans of Haruki Murakami.”

—*Gazet van Antwerpen* (starred review)

“*The Vegetarian* has an odd kind of silent power that makes you want to finish it in one go and continue to think about it.”

—*NRC Handelsblad* (starred review)

“A shocking, moving, and thought-provoking novel.”

—*Trouw*

“Outright impressive.”

—*HUMO*

“One of the most impressive novels I have read recently... You need to read this book.”

—Arnon Grunberg in *De Volkskrant*

“*The Vegetarian* is exciting and original.”

—*De Standaard der Letteren* (starred review)

# *The Vegetarian*

*A Novel*

*Han Kang*

*Translated from the Korean by Deborah Smith*



*London / New York*

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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# The Vegetarian





Before my wife turned vegetarian, I'd always thought of her as completely unremarkable in every way. To be frank, the first time I met her I wasn't even attracted to her. Middling height; bobbed hair neither long nor short; jaundiced, sickly-looking skin; somewhat prominent cheekbones; her timid, sallow aspect told me all I needed to know. As she came up to the table where I was waiting, I couldn't help but notice her shoes—the plainest black shoes imaginable. And that walk of hers—neither fast nor slow, striding nor mincing.

However, if there wasn't any special attraction, nor did any particular drawbacks present themselves, and there was no reason for the two of us not to get married. The passive personality of this woman in whom I could detect neither freshness nor charm, or anything especially refined, suited me down to the ground. There was no need to affect intellectual leanings in order to win her over, or to worry that she might be comparing me to the preening men who pose in fashion catalogues, and she didn't get worked up if I happened to be late for one of our meetings. The paunch that started appearing in my mid-twenties, my skinny legs and forearms that steadfastly refused to bulk up in spite of my best efforts, the inferiority complex I used to have about the size of my penis—I could rest assured that I wouldn't have to fret about such things on her account.

I've always inclined toward the middle course in life. At school I chose to boss around those who were two or three years my junior, and with whom I could act the ringleader, rather than take my chances with those my own age, and later I chose which college to apply to based on my chances of obtaining a scholarship large enough for my needs. Ultimately, I settled for a job where I would be provided with a decent monthly salary in return for diligently carrying out my allotted tasks, at a company whose small size meant they would value my unremarkable skills. And so it was only natural that I would marry the most run-of-the-mill woman in the world. As for women who were pretty, intelligent, strikingly sensual, the daughters of rich families—they would only have served to disrupt my carefully ordered existence.

In keeping with my expectations, she made for a completely ordinary wife who went about things without any distasteful frivolousness. Every morning she got up at six a.m. to prepare rice and soup, and usually a bit of fish. From adolescence she'd contributed to her family's income through the odd bit of part-time work. She ended up with a job as an assistant instructor at the computer graphics college she'd attended for a year, and was subcontracted by a comics publisher to work on the words for their speech bubbles, which she could do from home.

She was a woman of few words. It was rare for her to demand anything of me, and however late I was in getting home she never took it upon herself to kick up a fuss. Even when our days off happened to coincide, it wouldn't occur to her to suggest we go out somewhere together. While I idled the afternoon away, TV remote in hand, she would shut herself up in her room. More than likely she would spend the time reading, which was practically her only hobby. For some unfathomable reason, reading was something she was able to really immerse herself in—reading books that looked so dull I couldn't even bring myself to so much as take a look inside the covers. Only at mealtimes would she open the door and silently emerge to prepare the food. To be sure, that kind of wife, and that kind of