

***Beyond Borders – A book Club, co-hosted by Tempe Public Library and Arizona State University’s Melikian Center: Russian, Eurasian and East European Studies.***

February 13 2023 - *The City and the City* by China Miéville (2009)

The Spectator identified as Miéville’s underlying point in this detective procedural that “...all city-dwellers collude in ignoring real aspects of the cities in which they live – the homeless, political structures, the commercial world or the stuff that’s ‘for the tourists’”

The story unfolds in three parts – Beszel, Ul Qoma, Breach (with a coda, Breach) – as the protagonist, Tylor Borlú, investigates the murder of a U.S. archaeology student whose body was carried (legally) across the border between the two cities which occupy the same physical space, but are politically, culturally and economically distinct. In the process he interacts with a range of citizen groups, including extreme nationalists/separatists, advocates or enthusiasts for integration of the two cities, and believers in a former, unified city, Orciny; as well as the mysterious, powerful agency, Breach, that polices the relationship between Beszel and Ul Qoma.

Questions for possible discussion

- 1) When did you realize, as a reader, that the novel is set in a world with rules and concepts that are entirely foreign?

*Was it, for example, p.14 “With a hard start I realized that she was not on GunterStrász at all, and that I should not have seen her. I looked back up, **unnoticing** the old lady...” or p. 21, “Some we realized when we glanced were elsewhere, so **unsaw..**”*

- 2) What is your favorite new concept, that helped you grasp the world that Miéville has imagined? (For example, **cross-hatched, protub, grosstopically, insile, Unif, breach,** others?). Does the author (or characters) fully explain the day-to-day logic of living in one of these two cities?
- 3) The book includes references to existing “split” cities (Budapest, Jerusalem, Berlin) and to international relations, investments. Does either city—or the relationship between them—seem like anywhere you know?
- 4) Which characters do you find most sympathetic, interesting or recognizable, and why?
- 5) Do you have a favorite passage—whether descriptive, reflective, provocative or infuriating—which stayed with you from the book?

*The fact that officially crossing the border requires going all the way to the ornate, imposing establishment of Copula Hall thus becomes a symbol of the illogical, inefficient, and arbitrary nature of borders. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-city-the-city/symbols/copula-hall>*

*In Beyond Borders, we read fiction by a range of award-winning authors based at the edges of the European Union, who draw from experience to imagine border-crossing, and the encounter with an alien world, from a range of perspectives. Tackling themes of mobility, curiosity and identity, these authors invite us to empathize with characters determined to make meaning out of fractured and divided lives. Across East Europe, a majority of citizens live less than two hours drive from the edge of their country. The challenge, excitement and risk of crossing into a different culture, history, language and worldview have captured the attention of writers, including those in countries that have joined the European Union, and those where international travel requires enormous sacrifices.*

*Future meetings*

Monday March 13th: *I'm not going anywhere*, Rumena Buzarovska, 2023. (including visit by the author). (North Macedonia)

Monday April 10th: *Flights*, Olga Tokarczuk (Poland)

Monday May 8th: *Time Shelter*, Georgi Gospodinov (Bulgaria)

Questions:

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