

# The Devil's Library Episode 12 – “Roadside Picnic”

[Intro Music]

Pike

Priviet, nas zavut Devil's Library (hello, we are Devil's Library) and I am Pike, I'm here with Leraje

Leraje

Hail Satan

Pike

and Lithos.

Lithos

Priviets, tovarischi. (Welcome, comrades)

Pike

That's awful, sit down and Ligeia.

Ligeia

Slava satanje! (Hail Satan!)

Pike

And we are reading a, uh, Roadside Picnic by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky. So I will introduce the book briefly. Uh, there will be spoilers in this episode, like in every episode. If you haven't read the book and would like to read the book, please go and come back later. So, in this book, aliens visit Earth and leave with no meaningful contact.

They just leave contaminated land, deadly traps, um, and artefacts strewn about. An economy establishes around the exclusion zone, which is guarded by the military and studied by special specially constituted institute. Stalkers are, um, people who enter the Zone illegally to collect pieces of alien tech which they sell in the black market. It's deadly work, and the children of stalkers are born with mutations.

The main character is a veteran stalker, Red, who comes out of prison and finds his daughter is medically no longer considered human. Unable to speak and screaming at night, he. He sets out for the Zone one last time for the ultimate prize, a sphere that grants wishes. To reach it, he has to trip a deadly trap, for which he brings with him a sacrificial lamb, the son of a black market dealer.

So I read out my notes in a way that sounds very, um. Yeah, it sounds like a machine. I'm sorry. Whenever people read their notes, I think they sound like machines, and I always think I would read so much better, but there you go.

Ligeia

No, no, it's good. It's good. It's very, very good.

Lithos

Well, I read out my Russian greeting, like, um, like bad AI. So there you go.

Pike

No, AI wouldn't. Wouldn't do it like that. Uh, I think AI would do it.

Lithos

Are you saying AI would be better than me?

Pike

Well, you know, I. I grew up with people laughing at my bad Russian pronunciation. So, you know, I mean, here.

Ligeia

You know what? Here we can speak however we want. This is our podcast.

Pike

That's right. I think it, uh, would be interesting to have Leraje start things off, because I know he doesn't like reading a translation, especially if translation is from Russian.

Leraje

Yeah, I do struggle with it. I struggled with, uh, um, what's that book? Do you remember that book you mentioned a long time ago, Pike, that we've both read?

Pike

And I really struggled with Master & Margarita...

Leraje

Yeah, yeah, yeah, that one. I got a really bad translation of it, and it just killed me. I couldn't read it. Well, not with this one. There was no struggle at all, um, Lithos and I were talking briefly just before you two came on, uh, the recording. Just to say that you're kind of constrained in your stylistic choices of the author when it's translation, because the translation is always filtered through the lens of the translator.

So it's going to be very difficult to judge the stylistic choices of the Stragatsky brothers in that respect, I think. But it's obviously a good translation and it's got the seal of approval from Ursula, which is good enough for me. Uh, so, yeah, I thought it was really good. I think it was a really good read.

I thought the translation was obviously very good.

Pike

That's right. The foreword was written by Ursula K Leguin.

Lithos

So we all have the 2012 translation by Olena Bomachenko, because there was a 1977 Warner by Antonina Buis, but which I've mispronounced horrendously as well. But I don't think we've got that one.

Pike

Yeah, no, I don't think so.

Ligeia

I would just like to add that I. I remembered correctly at the end of the book, it says Arkady had studied English and Japanese. Um, so maybe they were able to actually not translate the whole book, but understand how it's going to be translated and we're able to like, keep an eye on.

On what they wanted to say, maybe.

Lithos

Well, Arkady would only have been able to judge the original because he died in 19. In 1990 or something. Hang on a sec. He died in. Arkady. Died in 91. But Boris would have read this one. He died in 2012. So after this translation.

Ligeia

Mhm.

Leraje

But he would have been able to have some input with the translator.

Ligeia  
Yeah, that's what I.

Lithos  
There was. There's something I really want to ask, and I want to ask you this, Pike. Right. This is. There's a theme here, Right. The last book you suggested was about, uh, a wasteland where weird things happen and the rules of physics don't apply and everyone who goes in there ends up being fucked up in some horrible manner.

And, um, this one is the same kind of theme.

Pike  
I like horror as a place. Right. So the haunted houses, which we all love. But Area X is also a good horror setting, even though this is not a horror book.

Leraje  
I think Jeff Vandermeer has given a hat tip to Roadside Picnic as an inspiration.

Lithos  
I did wonder. I thought he must have read that. Yes.

Leraje  
Yeah.

Pike  
Mhm.

Leraje  
I mean, I think even in the film version of Annihilation, the place is called the Zone. I think rather than m. What it's called in the book. Yeah, yeah.

Lithos  
I've been trying to, to find the film. It'd be interesting to watch that. I. I have only watched one Tarkovsky so far, the Solaris, and it was so depressing. I, uh, just remember at the end thinking, God, which window do I throw myself out of here? This is.

Leraje  
Yeah. Sorry. I'm sorry, Confusion. My, my fault. I meant the movie version of Annihilation, not the movie version of...

Lithos  
Oh, sorry. No. Annihilation. There is a movie version of this. There was also a TV series which got canned after the pilot.

Pike  
I will say that the, uh, film, um, Stalker is. Or Stalker. Yeah, that's right. Um, is, um, very different from this. Whilst the book takes place in, um, the area surrounding the zone and then to some degree the zone itself, but it's more about the whole economy that develops around the zone. The film is just set in the zone.

You get a brief glimpse of the town in the beginning and that's it.

Ligeia  
Yeah, that's it.

Lithos  
Yeah.

Ligeia  
It's a beautiful movie.

Pike  
It's quite slow.

Ligeia  
It is. It's more like it's. It's an art piece. Like, it's beautiful to look at.  
It's absolutely.

Lithos  
Yeah. I did not want to sort of like this Tarkovsky, uh, but with my comment about Solaris, it was a beautifully shot movie. It was just grim.

Pike  
If you didn't like Solaris, you probably will. Will also not like, uh, Stalker. I loved it.

Lithos  
I'm not sure if I watched it again, if I, if I would not like it. It's just not what I expected. Uh, it is kind of like, oh shit, this is going kind of deep into, you know, the people disintegrating.

Ligeia  
I think this would be different because now you have read this book, obviously.

Lithos  
Mhm.

Ligeia  
It wouldn't surprise you that much.

Pike  
I think I like Tarkovsky, but my partner says he'd rather watch a paint dry. So it's, you know.

Ligeia  
Yeah. Ah, it's not for.

Lithos  
They are long, long movies. There's. Yes, very slowly paced.

Pike  
But this is about the book.

Lithos  
Yes, yes, absolutely.

Pike  
So let's come back to the book. How did you find the whole setting of the book? Uh, right. They say it's. It's, uh. Ursula K. Le Guin at the beginning says that it's supposed to take place in some kind of a western country, but it's a real hybrid.

Lithos  
I thought it was the States, but then there was a bit of the helicopter at the end which had a Royal Air Force logo on it. So I thought maybe it's Canada. But it could have been the uk. It's just an English speaking country.

Pike  
But then the bar is called Borscht.

Ligeia  
Yes. It is such a weird. I think it's, it's uh, a. It's just a made up place.

Pike

It's a mix. It felt like. It did feel like someone in the Soviet Union is trying to write the west, but the west is very far and very different.

Ligeia  
Oh yeah.

Leraje  
I saw a parallel between the kind of ambiguity of the setting and um. This kind of like this is what um, a rush. A Russian citizen of the 70s might envisage a Western place to be like.

Lithos  
Yeah.

Leraje  
With how the Zone is. It's kind of like exotic but essentially unknowable. And I think someone from the Soviet Union in the 1970s might have seen the west in those terms too.

Ligeia  
Mhm.

Leraje  
That it's kind of, you know, it's there but you don't really know an awful lot about it. Information is restricted about it and it, it might be kind of there and not. And not there at the same time.

Ligeia  
Maybe it was intentionally just kept like that. Uh, I don't think they were trying so hard set the space so we, we would like place it on the map. I think they knew their limits of knowing what it's actually like and, and that's just my feeling. I thought they were not trying to like project, but it was more like artistic.

Like this could be, you know, like I will take these aspects of, of the Western life and I will just mix it together with all this that I know.

Leraje  
Yeah, I think that's. That's right.

Ligeia  
Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Leraje  
That's inevitable though. I mean it's uh. I. What I'm saying is I agree with you and it's kind of like the inevitability of it is the fact that it's written by a couple of people who live in one place and trying to describe another place that they're not necessarily that familiar with. So it's going to end up as this kind of like hybrid kind of description.

And that doesn't make it bad, that just makes it unique.

Lithos  
I found it kind of deliberately. I thought it was deliberately ambiguous to add to the. This is what my feeling. To add to the complete dystopian atmosphere of the thing. It was kind of like you're not sure where it is. And that is a deliberate choice because it gets you into the atmosphere of.

Well, the Zone is completely un. Understandable by human beings. So let's make the actual real world a bit. Well, where's that as well, if that makes sense.

Ligeia  
Mhm.

Lithos

What did you think as, uh, somebody

Pike

who was, uh, born in the Soviet Union? Uh, that is exactly how I imagined the west was, you know, the Margaret Thatcher's Britain of the 70s. Very well might have been that way,

Leraje

pretty much.

Pike

Can you confirm?

Leraje

Can confirm.

Pike

Were you collecting, uh, artefacts?

Leraje

Right. Yeah. Yeah. Many of the night we snuck out, looking out for meat grinders and stuff and, uh, yeah. Barely getting away with our lives.

Ligeia

Meat grinders.

Pike

Dear M, There's, I think in a few places of the book, characters, uh, are offered to move out of the town, uh, next to the Zone, and they don't want to do it. Even when they're offered, uh, relocation. I think they're offered, uh, free, some money, um, place to live somewhere else. They are very attached to it.

Did you think that was realistic?

Lithos

Yeah, I thought that was explained later on, wasn't it? That people who had been there when it happened, when the alien visitation happened, wherever they went, disasters happened. Like death followed them around.

Pike

Oh, uh, that's right, yeah.

Ligeia

Yeah.

Lithos

So maybe it was that.

Leraje

Wasn't there a section when Red basically. Or repeated sections when Red basically said, I don't fucking want to go anywhere else. I'm quite happy where I am. Or, you know, worse to that effect. So even if he was offered that choice, or even if the majority of the stalkers or anybody else was offered that choice, I don't know, I think it spoke to that.

That refusal kind of like spoke to the sort of, I don't know, the. Almost the institutionalisation that all people feel when they're in a situation that might not be 100% safe, but also it's what they know.

Ligeia

Yeah.

Leraje  
And people tend to stick with the familiar.

Ligeia  
Yeah. Um, you just have to suffer through it. And that is your home.

Leraje  
Yeah.

Pike  
Institutionalisation is a good word here because at the end, you know, when Red brings Arthur, the son of, um,

Ligeia  
you

Pike  
know, the artefact dealer, with him and Burbridge. Yeah.

Lithos  
The vulture.

Ligeia  
Vulture, yeah.

Pike  
To sacrifice him to the Grinder. I thought he's thinking at the, you know, uh, he's going to get the Sphere and he can have a wish. And he's struggling to even articulate what it is that he would want. And I thought, he's so institutionalised, he's so stuck in that system. It's like he's been through the grinder of his society.

He cannot even be clear on what he. He has an opportunity to win, but he cannot even imagine what that winning would look like.

Leraje  
Yeah, I really identified with that because, uh, if someone says to you, you can have whatever you think is best, or you can have something for you, you're also aware that these, these decisions have consequences for people. And it felt like Red knew that too.

Pike  
Yeah.

Leraje  
And he was caught in this kind of paralysis of wanting to wish for something but not wanting to hurt anybody else as well. And he just couldn't make up his mind what it was. I mean, even before that, the, the, the, the, the. I loved the fact that poor Arthur that he sacrificed or Arthur and that liked it.

Ligeia  
Okay.

Lithos  
Yeah.

Leraje  
Not because I had anything against Arthur as a character, because it felt like. It felt like these are how large countries sacrifice their young to protect the old kind of thing. Uh, somebody had to die in order to get. To protect the status quo sort of thing.

Ligeia

I saw the whole thing with Arthur as a metaphor. Like he, in my, my mind, he represented the innocence and the belief in goodness and the night. Like, he was a naive young man. I was crying when it happened to him because the whole time he was walking with this guy, he was just like a child almost.

You know, like he was, he relied on, on, on this guy behind him and he was just like it. I, I thought that was absolutely awful. So I thought it was there to represent the, uh. Like, no, there is nothing good here. It's gonna die. The Zone doesn't, doesn't want that. It's not a presence that you can bring as a.

You know, like, it's not gonna survive. It's too pretty, it's too beautiful to be this wholesome, young, naive person with like these high beliefs in, in goodness. Nah, it's not gonna. There you go.

Leraje

Yeah. It's the old guard crushing the youthful optimism, basically.

Ligeia

It's like, oh my God, why did this happen? I knew it's gonna happen. Obviously from the moment he appeared in the story. Like, there we go. There's the sacrifice. Yeah. No, please don't.

Lithos

Well, I mean, the irony is that, that, yeah, this kid was Burbridge the Vulture's son. Um, who. And, and the Vulture had organised this, um, to try and, to try and get the artefact. And the Vulture knew that his son would have to die because the way the trap works is it's a trap that shreds you to pieces, basically.

And the first person to go through dies and then anyone else who follows on can get through. And so he knew that someone had to die and he knew the experienced stalker would not fall for it. So he was throwing his Own kid under the bus.

Pike

Basically, he didn't know that his son was the one who, uh, went along with Red. My understanding was that Red took his son without telling him because he thought, oh, this is gonna be a great laugh when he finds out.

Lithos

Possibly. But also something he said to Red, and I'm trying to remember the exact phrase is, daddy said, well, you can have one of mine if you need to. I've got plenty kind of thing. Whether he meant his kids or not, I don't know. So that's interesting. Yeah.

Pike

How did you two read it?

Leraje

I thought the same as you, Pike, and I thought that line that you just said, Lithos, was him saying, kind of like exaggerating the point, saying, hey, I care so much about this, I would even give you one of my children.

Lithos

Oh, yeah, Okay.

Leraje

I don't think he was necessarily saying, I will definitely give you. But, uh, you know, I think that point is very open to interpretation. And your interpretation could equally be right.

Pike

Could he have meant his minions, though? Because he had this crowd of.

Lithos

Yeah, quite, quite possibly, because he did get very sentimental about his kids at one point, but that's when he lost both his legs in the hell.

Leraje  
Slime. Yeah.

Ligeia  
But it is close to that kind of, if I can generalise, you know, that kind of mindset in the eastern part of part of the world where the collective thought or idea is more important than the individuals. If a few people need to die and be sacrificed, it's. It's all good. If we are going to achieve the plan, like, there is the aim.

Like, we need. We don't need. Like. This was actually really interesting. I. I still don't know what I'm thinking. Like how stupid we are humans. Like, we didn't need any of those things. We didn't know what to do with them. And still people are dying. Uh, money m. Is exchanged and like, what are you.

You're bringing artefacts that we can't even use, but we want them so much. It's like, why.

Lithos  
Yeah.

Pike  
Do you see any parallels to anything modern there?

Leraje  
God, yeah. I mean, the whole zone itself is kind of, uh, like this technological playground that we don't understand and don't really know what the. The outcome or the, the implications of it might be.

Ligeia  
Yeah.

Leraje  
And yet, like, as Ligeia just said, there's this kind of like bureaucratic powered rush to get these things and use them, even though we don't really know how it's going to turn out. And nobody really wants to take a serious look at these things, you know, and uh, this bureaucratic tendency to sacrifice individuals for the supposed collective good of us all, which is at, uh, best.

Ligeia  
I'm not even sure if it's a collective. Collective good because we don't know exactly. It is a collective.

Leraje  
It's a kind of like collective.

Ligeia  
What if we don't know we need this because it's something that we don't understand and everybody's paying big money. Even though, like, I don't know who started with that, you know, like, who was the first person who was like, I'm gonna pay for this. Which I don't know what it is. And yeah, you're right, it is still here.

It is. It is in the human nature. It is very much in the human nature. I'm not saying in like each person,

Lithos  
but yeah, it could be seen. I felt it could be seen both ways. It could be seen as profoundly anti capitalist. As in, well, they're just doing all this shit and putting themselves at risk for money. Right. Money is the driving factor. But it

could also be seen as a criticism of kind of like an organisation trying to get overarching control of everything.

M. So a criticism of the Soviet state as well. And he had an eight year uh, battle with his brother of getting it published in Russia. They did get it published in the end, but it was quite expurgated. They had to take out all the swears and all the bad.

Ligeia

Did you read all that? I did, yeah.

Lithos

Because the state censors didn't. Apparently with sci fi they didn't care so much about whether there was uh, a uh, sort of hidden message, anti Soviet message. It was more seen as sci fi, something for kids. So we've got to take out all references to anything bad and all swears because we don't want to poison our Soviet youth, our uh, communist young people.

Ligeia

I had a good laugh when they were like these examples of what was the problem. Like they said, monkey like what?

Pike

Hello.

Ligeia

Sorry, it's. Nothing is funny about this book. I mean there was a good portion of you.

Lithos

Yeah, there was really dark humour.

Ligeia

Yeah, very dark. I like certain parts. I actually was really laughing and then I was like, behave yourself. This is a sad book.

Pike

I think you are allowed a few laughs in between.

Lithos

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Leraje

It can be both.

Ligeia

Yeah, yeah.

Pike

It's best when it's both, I think because that's when the sad parts hit you. It's not trying to wring it out of you.

Ligeia

Yeah.

Pike

To me, the probably the funniest part, there was this exchange between two characters. Um, Valentine And. And Dick.

Lithos

Yeah. Yeah. And their conversation with.

Pike

Yeah, it was just pure example of a kind of Soviet bureaucratic satire, which I think is a genre in itself. It was just a short sketch. Some, uh. I think some people can write whole stories just on that.

Ligeia

And what do you know what happened? Like, can you. Or you don't have, like, a quote?

Pike

I don't have a quote.

Ligeia

I don't have that quote.

Pike

I was gonna say I can find it for you later, but then it's gonna be. Because I have one podcast.

Ligeia

I have one and I don't know. Well, just like this was at the beginning, so I was not sure, like, how many, like, notes will I have? But this one was really, like, funny to me, so I'm not sure. It's red speaking to somebody. I can't find the name. So it's just like I grab him by the shoulder belt and tell him exactly what he is and just how his mother conceived him.

He spit on the floor, returns my ID and continues without any more pleasantries. This is such a Slavic humour. Like, off. Yes.

Pike

That's where he's speaking with a Swedish guard, probably.

Ligeia

Yes. Yeah, it's very close to my. You know, I was like, yes, yes, I will exactly tell you where you conceived.

Lithos

So with the conversation, you're talking about I presume that's not the one. The longer one at the end where he's talking to the scientist.

Pike

No, but that one, I thought was of particular interest to us as, ah, Satanists.

Ligeia

Oh, yes. I have all pages. Like, I. I have no quotes. I just have, like, pages, pages, pages. I need to go back to those. Such a brilliant part of this book. I am so happy I read this.

Pike

Yeah, there is this, um. It's this philosophical exchange. I'll just read one sentence out of it. Um, the God Hypothesis, for example, allows you to have an unparalleled understanding of absolutely everything while knowing absolutely nothing.

Ligeia

Yes, yes. Brilliant. Brilliant.

Leraje

Yeah.

Ligeia

Love it so much.

Lithos

It's quite a unique point of view and explains the whole title of the book, you know. You know, the human arrogance assumes, oh, the aliens visit us and wanted to talk to us. And it's like, no, they stopped off for a roadside picnic and left their crap behind. They probably didn't even realise we were here.

That's how insignificant we, uh, are. And I. I love that, that conceit, that idea.

Ligeia

Because I was wondering why this. Why this name, you know, Roadside Picnic. And I wasn't going to ask. I was like, maybe you guys know. Exactly. And I'll be like, I'm not gonna look stupid. Hi. But then I was like, there it is. I actually now understand, I have to tell you, I found it, found the solution.

Such a clever thinking, you know. I love it so much because you will remember that it is such a good also metaphor, I guess that like we are like little ants going through some stuff left by other species that are much higher than us and they don't care and we are going through it and thinking whatever and they don't no acknowledgement of us.

Leraje

It's almost um, Lovecraftian really. And it's like.

Ligeia

Yeah.

Leraje

Portrayal of us, as these alien beings is kind of like utterly indifferent as to whether we exist or not.

Ligeia

Yeah. It is kind of scary actually that the horror is there. It is a sci fi book, but the horror is like underlining it is subconscious and it's absolutely there. Exactly. The indifference. How small we are and how we don't know much and how funny it is when we start to think or tired of the society.

Things that they. They know I love how to follow their rules.

Pike

Takes us back to Winter Tide.

Ligeia

Yes.

Lithos

Yeah.

Pike

Which to the listener is another episode we've done and another book we've read which some of us liked and some.

Leraje

Yeah, but the themes are similar in this kind of, you know, cosmic indifference and the kind of insignificance of us as a species which is something I think is possibly something that humans need to be occasionally reminded of.

Ligeia

Yeah.

Leraje

You know, we're not that uh, important in the grand scheme of things. And we're just one species on one planet in an infinite universe. And you know, there's no particular reason for us to feel significance.

Ligeia  
Mhm.

Lithos  
Yeah. There's also, it's also the counterpoint to sort of what I'd call trad sci fi, which is, you know, focusing on the science and like we will solve things with science. We're brilliant and we'll use technology, you know, for good. And this one's like, no, we just fuck about with stuff we don't understand and worry about the consequences later.

Which is I think a lot more close to what humans do largely with technology.

Leraje  
Well, yeah. I mean, it's no coincidence surely that the first person who dies is a scientist.

Ligeia  
Yes.

Lithos  
Yeah.

Leraje  
And he's, he's possibly the sole heroic and um, likeable character in just about the whole of the novel really.

Ligeia  
Mhm.

Lithos  
What did you feel about the. And I know it's right. Talking about stylistic choices when it's a translation is moot. However, I Don't think this is the translation choice in the second chapter. I'm sorry? In the first chapter, um, Redrich is narrating in the first person voice.

Ligeia  
Mm.

Lithos  
And then on the next chapter, he's older, he's married, he's. He's got his furry zone baby. And it suddenly switches to third person voice and it maintains third person voice throughout. So, you know, and that was a deliberate choice. Why did he write the first chapter as Redrick speaking in a first person voice, and then switch to third person thereafter?

Leraje  
Do you know what? I didn't even notice.

Ligeia  
Me neither.

Pike  
You didn't notice?

Ligeia  
You're saying it. You're probably right, and I have no idea.

Leraje  
Well, he's definitely right, but, yeah, sorry, that's.

Pike  
You didn't notice that the different characters narrating. No, because Red is even absent in the beginning of that chapter.

Leraje

Yeah, no, I, I. What I mean is, I didn't notice at the first section was first person.

Ligeia

No, that's what I meant.

Leraje

I did at the time when. I did. At the time when I was reading it, but then it never occurred to me that it had swapped, uh, perspectives.

Ligeia

It is really. I, I have not noticed that.

Leraje

It's a good point.

Lithos

Yeah, it's. And I thought, I mean, the way I saw it was the first chapter, he was very young and he was still sort of quite excited about. He got the job, um, to get artefacts back from the official people who are supposed to look after artefacts. He was getting paid well and he was still quite enthusiastic about it.

And I thought the first person voice was deliberately chosen to give that youthful vitality. Whereas by the next chapter, he's thoroughly disillusioned. He's just doing it to try to try and earn, uh, m. Money.

Ligeia

Yeah.

Lithos

You know, and he's, he's got, he's got this, this baby that. Or this young daughter who is affected by the Zone. So she is not entirely human looking. And then there's his wife and, and the, the situation's changed so that it's kind of like he's become more disillusioned. So it's more m. Of a dispassionate point of view.

I don't know.

Leraje

Makes sense.

Ligeia

Yeah.

Pike

I thought, you know, when we were talking how, um, the aliens don't care about us, how they just passed through. I thought if you zoom in, that's kind of what's happening in the human society there as well. So Red is working class, um, and him and other stalkers. When I, when I said that by the end of the book it's like he's been through the kind of society, societal grinder they have.

No, the powers that be don't care about them at all. They're completely disposable. They go in, they just care about getting their artefacts, whereas their lives, you see a little snapshot, you know, of a house, the child. It's all kind of.

Ligeia

It.

Pike

It doesn't really matter.

Leraje

Yeah, I mean, red, Red does go on this kind of like prolonged. I wouldn't call it rant exactly, but a sort of like discussion, uh, or maybe an inner debate about what the sort of lack of choice that he's had throughout his whole life and also his fellow stalkers have had their kind of.

They're kind of commodities themselves in that uh, the people who are uh, higher up the food chain and you notice the kind of like the value of these things increases only beyond a certain point. So the stalker who fetches something incredibly dangerous and unknown out of the zone might get paid a couple of hundred.

And then further up the food chain, these things are worth tens of thousands of whatever currency, you know. And like Lithos was saying earlier, that's kind of like a critique on capitalism and possibly a critique on uh, Soviet economic systems at the time in that there was a thriving black market. Uh, you know, and it was.

Ligeia

No way.

Leraje

Yeah, maybe.

Ligeia

No, I can't believe this.

Leraje

It's a, uh. It's a very kind of like multi layered novel, this in lots of ways.

Ligeia

Yes. It's got a lot of shorts. So I am really impressed how much they were able to like put in this short, tiny book, which I, I must say when you mentioned pike, you mentioned the Winter Tide. This is exactly what I think would have worked for, for that book. Like, it could have been a little shorter because the story was amazing.

It was a little bit draggy for me, as we know. Yeah. But this one, I did not feel like there was anything that was not necessary for the story. It was keeping me still like, interested.

Lithos

And yeah, you know, it was quite hard um, to put down. I found it was a very, very. Once it. Once you started, I found it's like, oh, this has really pulled me in. It's. It's kind of got a really quick style as well. Um, there's a lot of conversation and even the, the inner dialogue is not over elaborated.

Like it was by an author we recently talked about. His name shall not be mentioned.

Ligeia

I have no idea. What do you think?

Lithos

It was kind of like really, you know, at the End when he's coming up to finding the artefact and he's getting annoyed and he's gone through various things and he's been burnt, um, physically, but it's like really quick and urgent internal dialogue which is quite incoherent, uh, in the way that, you know, that fits very well with what he would be feeling in that desperate situation.

Um, extremely well done. And again, you know, the whole thing, he goes over where he liked to think himself as he was master of his own destiny. He's a bit of a maverick. He does what he likes and then he realises, no, I've always done for the man.

Ligeia  
Yeah.

Lithos  
Whether it's the International. I can't remember the name of the organisation he worked for at first. The International Institute of Extraterrestrial Cultures.

Ligeia  
Yeah.

Lithos  
Or whether it's for the vulture. Um, on the illegal side of things. He's always just put his life at risk for other people.

Pike  
That's the part that I really liked where he, you know, he said that, uh, he was never going to go and work for somebody. He's never going to have a boss. Somebody. Yeah, I can really identify with that feeling. And then in the end he says, well, we got chewed up and spat out all, ah, whilst thinking that we're doing things our own way.

Lithos  
Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

Ligeia  
Quite rough.

Lithos  
Very.

Leraje  
There is no ethical consumption under capitalism.

Ligeia  
Oop. Yeah. What can we do?

Pike  
This would be a great, uh, segue into selling our products and services.

Leraje  
Yeah.

Ligeia  
But we don't have any.

Leraje  
Except we have none.

Ligeia  
No.

Lithos  
Do you have problems, um, when you're busy and you haven't got time to prepare a meal at home? Well, why not?

Leraje  
Using Satan's microwave.

Lithos  
Satan's microwave. Satan's lunchbox.

Leraje  
Mini grinders.

Ligeia

Meat grinder for your kitchen with a little pitchfork.

Pike

I will say that just for the benefit of the listeners, because they can't see you. Lithos, uh, is holding up a microwave

Ligeia

and

Pike

a grinder and Leraje is holding up a meat grinder and they're both.

Ligeia

Yes.

Leraje

Looking suggestively at meat grinder? Jesus Christ. No kink shaming or what?

Pike

Well, you are trying to sell it.

Ligeia

That's true, that's true.

Leraje

I think one of the things that really struck me about this book was how life imitated art after Chernobyl.

Pike

Say more.

Leraje

Well, they have their own, uh, stalker subculture in Chernobyl. Uh, in that, uh, there is the official tours of the. Of where the reactor melted down. I think it was Reactor four. Was it? And then they are the Unofficial tours, which are, uh, conducted by young men who call themselves stalkers, who take groups of, uh, visitors who don't necessarily want the official tours into the exclusion zone around Chernobyl.

Lithos

Well, apparently the Strugatsky's, um, introduced the word stalker or stalker, however it would be pronounced in Russian to the Russian language. I'm not going to try and do Russian accent again. So that would make sense that they're actually doing that in Chernobyl.

Ligeia

Mhm. Yeah. As they do in Paris in the catacombs. You know, like you have to pay somebody. You know, it's really illegal. It's actually like a black market. You shouldn't go there. There are people living in there. They can kill you.

Leraje

By the way, if you ever want to see a movie about why you shouldn't do that, about the Paris catacombs, go and watch a movie called 'As above. So below.'

Ligeia

Yeah,

Leraje

That, uh, will put you off doing it for life.

Ligeia

I like that movie, but I think the reality is actually much worse. Yeah, I have seen a documentary. Like, uh, one guy really went there. I don't know why. I can send you a Link. It's on YouTube. It's like, why Are you crazy?

Pike

Oh, good. I was really into that idea when I was 18.

Ligeia

Yeah.

Pike

Just moved to London. It's good.

Ligeia

I didn't go, no, no, I would like to see it. But not like this. Like they're actually people who are waiting there and they might absolutely take your stuff and nobody will find you ever, ever, ever. But I have. I have a question for you guys. Like, I have a short theory about the ending.

I don't know. I would like to know how you. Because I think it can be seen and understood in few different ways. Do you. Would you agree with me or is it for you?

Pike

Oh, yeah, no, no.

Ligeia

Yeah, yeah, yeah. So. So I thought, I don't know which one. One do I want to believe. I think I know which one it was. But I was like, uh, this can't be. So I went through this process. Like, one is good. So listen to me, listen to me. The first one I called just a selfless wish.

Okay? The hopeful reading. So rhetoric overcomes his selfishness and chooses a, uh, universal good. Right? So there is this moment of redemption and it ends with this, like, maybe fragile, but still hope. Okay, One ending. Then there was the second ending, which I called tragic ending. So Redrick doesn't know what to wish for.

He doesn't even know who he is. You know, at the end he was like, I have no idea what I want. There are no words. It's not wording. Like I want to formulate words. It's not. It's not going. Which is my usual state, but I'm, uh, not in this book. And so I think in this ending he is broken, exhausted and completely lost.

Not even just like he's in the zone physically, but like morally completely lost. He doesn't know. There is nothing he can. He can actually grab and like, oh, this is the good. He doesn't know. Right. So that's a hollow, tragic ending. And then my third option was really dark reading where the sphere, the golden sphere is supposed to give you, like, grant, uh, you the wish.

One wish. Right. And I think this is actually what happened. Like, it doesn't matter what words you will say. It will grant you the wish that is actually in your heart. M. So I wanted to ask you if this is what you actually also understood. Like, is the sphere going to. If it's going to grant you this wish, is it just going to read through you like an X ray and grant you what is your, you know, the subconscious deepest desire?

It doesn't matter if it's good. It's. If it's corrupted, if it's like.

Leraje

There is a fourth option.

Ligeia

Riches. Is it. Okay, give it, give it here, give it here.

Lithos  
He died.

Leraje  
That. But the fourth, My fourth option was the golden sphere is of so alien a construct that it doesn't understand whatever it is you wish for and does nothing.

Ligeia  
Does nothing.

Pike  
Yeah.

Ligeia  
Oh, yeah, yeah. That's a four. Is there a fifth option?

Leraje  
Probably hundreds.

Ligeia  
Yeah. These were my three options.

Lithos  
Yeah. I mean, my personal reading at the end was the way I imagined the ending was he died and the sphere did nothing. It was. This was just wishful thinking because it was really hard to get to it and no one knew what it was. So they went, oh, it's magic. And grants you.

And it's like, no, you just end up going there. You're thoroughly shattered. The sphere does all. And you just lie there and die. That was my reading.

Ligeia  
Yeah. Uh, after you realise it doesn't do anything and it just. Everything was for nothing and you were just like, oh, it. Okay, good.

Pike  
It will sound like a cop out, but my reading was that the sphere doesn't matter in the end. Uh, then he, he goes there and he's been this person of action throughout and he goes with his dogged determination and in the end he realises he cannot think. He cannot think outside of the box that he ended up.

Leraje  
Yeah, this button, um, the box has been constructed by all the people that have led him to this point.

Ligeia  
Yeah.

Leraje  
And all the, all the actions that he's taken and he's just. He just finds it impossible to articulate anything meaningful and just dies.

Ligeia  
Mhm. Yeah.

Lithos  
Yeah. So he realises the futility of everything and.

Ligeia  
Yeah.

Lithos

Whether he dies or not, he's dead inside. Effectively.

Pike  
Yeah.

Ligeia  
But the only way why I was still like keeping that sphere in my mind or this, this whole thing that I just, I just said was because of the, like the quote taken from Arthur. Like his last words. What was it where I. I written it down. Like the happiness. Happiness, um, for everybody free and no one will go away.

Um, unsatisfied. Yes. So he repeats the rhetoric. He repeats these words that made me think. Because he can't find any words of, of his making, he just repeats this to say something. Because that was like, okay, we were coming to find this sphere to say something. He's like, I should probably just say something at least.

I don't know.

Lithos  
That was his guilt. He just watched. He just let that kid die who was enthusiastic. And all he could remember was the last words of the kid. That's the last word that the kids.

Ligeia  
I think he was stealing the goodness from like the memory of the good chat. I don't think he felt any guilt.

Pike  
Leraje is frowning.

Leraje  
No, not at all. I think both of those explanations are completely, um.

Ligeia  
Yes, of course, of course I wanted to hear yours. Yeah.

Leraje  
I saw it more in terms of what we talked about earlier. We were talking earlier that possibly, um, subtextually parts of this book are about the fact that young people get a raw deal from the state from uh, so called progress and stuff like that. And maybe this was Red's decision to. By echoing what Arthur had said, this was Red's decision to try and ally himself at the very end with that.

Cause that life, you know, that life should be for the next generation, for the young. That's possibly assigning an optimism to Red's character that doesn't exist. But it's possible.

Pike  
Here's a pessimist. Do you remember the quote at the beginning of the book, before the story starts, there's a quote, uh, by an American author. It says you have to make.

Lithos  
Oh yes.

Pike  
Goodness out of badness because you can't

Lithos  
make it out of anything else. Yeah, yeah.

Ligeia  
Oh yeah.

Pike

And I thought that in the end that's what Red is trying to do and that's. That idea fails.

Ligeia

M. Yes, it does.

Leraje

Oh yeah. I think whatever his intent was, um, and whatever he. He did, I Don't think any of it worked. I think it, it all failed.

Ligeia

Yeah, the indifference was just like we, like the humans only wanted to think that, oh, it's going to grant you a wish. It doesn't care. It's a freaking ball. Maybe it was just like some rubbish, you know, when these people travelled, mud

Pike

and everything, all of it was probably rubbish to the alien.

Ligeia

Like, what are you doing?

Leraje

If we take Dr. Valentine's hypothesis of a roadside picnic accurately, there is no way that any alien civilization would forget to take something as, uh, life changing, as, uh, a sphere that granted your wish, you know, that's not something that anybody would leave lying by the side of a road.

Ligeia

That's true.

Leraje

Uh, no, the other thing as well is how do they know that's what it does? Who tried it? You know? Was it all just always bullshit?

Ligeia

Nobody could find it? Right, yeah, that's a good question.

Pike

The way I understood, I understood that Vulture had been there multiple times because he wished for his children, his beautiful, intelligent children that the Zone gifted to him. And that's why he went to the Zone with some novice to stalker accompanying him and then returned without them. And people started looking at him weirdly because he was getting people killed.

And he. I think there is a moment where they mentioned that he, uh, uh, that's how Red finds out, because how to get to the Sphere and how to get that he has to get past the Grinder because Vulture explains it to him.

Ligeia

Hm.

Leraje

Yeah, I do remember that bit. And I remembered it at the time when I, When I first thought, how do they know this, what, what it does? But all those things that the Vulture, uh, wished for, they're not particularly kind of. I mean, he could have just had kids, you know, I mean, there's no could, uh, that just be his own kind of like wish fulfilment.

Oh, I wished for this. And now I've got kids.

Pike

No, he couldn't. He couldn't. Because as soon as you enter the Zone, your children are going to have mutations.

Leraje  
That's true.

Ligeia  
Do you think, like, all these humans, all of them, like in one group, do you think they are completely corrupted? Or are they just a result of the. The environment? How, how did you feel about the,

Leraje  
the people who lived in the town?

Ligeia  
I'm not sure if I'm saying it right.

Lithos  
Yeah, I, I thought he had. And he did mention this as well at some point. I think the scientist mentions. Have you read Kurt Vonnegut? And there was something similar in the way Kurt Vonnegut writes, where all his characters are human and are essentially flawed. They are deeply flawed. And this was the same thing.

All these characters are human and flawed. Rather than actually having a hero in there or someone, it's like, no, we're all a bit at this kind of thing we call life.

Ligeia  
Yeah.

Lithos  
Uh, and I'm happy.

Ligeia  
Exactly.

Lithos  
One of my favourite authors.

Ligeia  
Yeah. Oh, we should do something. Yeah.

Lithos  
Mhm.

Leraje  
I think a lot of science fiction writers started, started doing that. I mean, I know obviously we've already talked about Ursula K LeGuin and she does it with her characters as well. None of them are these kind of like perfect hero type people. Even poor Estevan who got murdered escaping down the hill from.

Or trying to escape, you know, he wasn't perfect. Uh, so there are, you know, and you could look at, look at a character like Red and think there's something almost heroic in his determination to keep pushing and keep succeeding. But uh, his self realisation at the end of that kind of destroys that myth.

Ligeia  
Was awesome work with the characters in as I said, like such a short book. But I felt like, yeah, I know somewhat about the characters of these people here. Even, even the wife, Guta, what's her name? Like few sentences and I could absolutely see her, hear her like. Yeah, yeah, that's, that's her.

Then that's the other one. The, the pretty girl that was.

Lithos  
I forgot, uh, the vulture's daughter. Yeah.

Ligeia  
Forgot the name. Whatever. Yeah, like you could. Absolutely. Yeah. Okay. That makes sense. I love that.

Lithos  
Very well drawn characters in the short novel as opposed to something that happened recently that I'm going to refer to again where there was very badly drawn characters in a very overlong novel.

Pike  
Oh. So why did you have to bring this in again?

Ligeia  
We need to stop mentioning that.

Leraje  
I think we're all mentally scarred from that book. Does anybody want to bring up anything else before we wrap up and do pitchforks?

Pike  
Uh, just one, one thing. There is a bit where Red says that he's going to. He hasn't slept all night and he's going to sleep for half an hour to clear his head. That was the only unrealistic bit in the book.

Ligeia  
Yes, but he didn't. At the end he didn't sleep. He didn't. Half an hour.

Pike  
It just doesn't work that way.

Ligeia  
No, I was exactly. I was like, please don't go to sleep. That's. That's gonna you up even more. Sorry. Uh, that's gonna not work. That's not good.

Pike  
So on this highbrow. Uh, no.

Ligeia  
Yes.

Leraje  
So let's do pitchforks, then. Ligeia?

Ligeia  
Uh, it's me first. Yeah, yeah, I would give it. Well, 10 sounds okay. Nine and a half.

Leraje  
Nine and a half.

Ligeia  
I still need to keep that 10 for something. I don't know, more word book. Uh, anyway

Leraje  
Lithos?

Lithos  
10, no doubt.

Leraje  
10...Pike?

Pike  
I'll say nine. I probably won't read it again, but it was very good, and I'm very glad I read it.

Leraje  
Um, I'd also give it a 9. It's for the same reason I would give it a 10. But, like Ligeia, I like to save my tens for the Carrion Crows of this world.

Pike  
Also, if you give it a nine, it was. You sound a little smarter than whoever gave it a 10. You're like, I'm not that easily impressed.

Ligeia  
Yeah, like, I have my reservations here.

Lithos  
I just like to do extreme scores. I can't be bothered with any of this in the middle. I would read it again.

Lithos  
I want to find the translation, the original one from 1977. And read that.

Pike  
No, read it in Russian.

Lithos  
I would.

Ligeia  
Yeah.

Lithos  
Yes. Do you know what? I would love to. One thing I've never understood with people. You say to people, oh, what superpower would you like? And people say, like, invisibility or super strength. And I just like, no, it's obvious. To be able to understand every language. That's a superpower that I, uh, want.

And that's a superpower. If you like books, you should want. It just makes no sense to ask for any other.

Leraje  
Who's our. Oh, I am, aren't I? Is it?

Ligeia  
Yeah, I think it's you. Uh, yeah.

Leraje  
Uh, yes, it is. Sorry,

Ligeia  
Did you forget? Oh, dear.

Pike  
Waiting and looking at us. We'll skip Leraje. He clearly hasn't made his mind up yet.

Ligeia  
Yeah.

Leraje

So our next read is going to be The Wax Child by Olga Ravn. I'm guessing her last name is probably...

Lithos

R A V N or something like that, as it's Danish.

Leraje

Yeah. But I'm gonna say Raven because I'm stupid and English. So, yeah, that's what we'll be reading next.

Pike

No one contradicted you.

Leraje

No, they didn't. Did they? You fuckers.

Ligeia

Did you Pike?

Pike

I was waiting to see if someone else would.

Ligeia

You are not stupid. You are English. No, that is true.

Leraje

I have a disability and it's English. Okay, that's it from us for another episode. Next time, as I said, we're going to be reading the Wax Child, and, uh, we'll see you on the next episode. I've been Leraje. Hail Satan.

Pike

Hail Satan friends.

Lithos

Hail Satan.

Ligeia

Golden sphere.

[outro music]