

## Body, Memory, and Moral Disintegration in David Szalay's *Flesh*

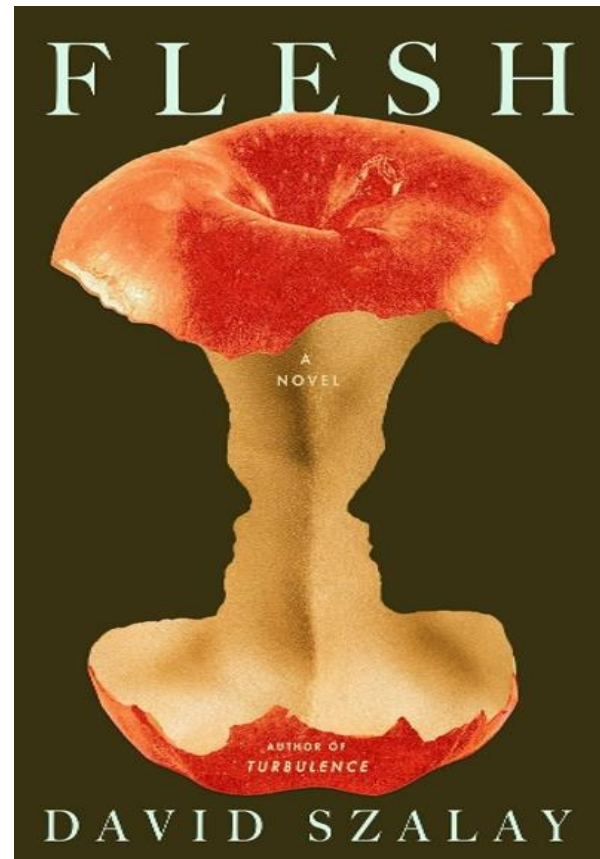
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*Flesh*, the winner of the 2025 Booker Prize, is one of the most challenging and morally acute novels in contemporary fiction by David Szalay. Szalay has always been known for his wonderfully depicted psychological realism and his uncanny insight into the delicate framework of male psychology, and is a writer who explores the unseen forces that shape contemporary existence: class, desire, migration, isolation, and the tacit violence of social aspirations. In *Flesh*, he takes this literary project deeper into the darker and more philosophically complex waters, resulting in a novel that not only explores the body as a locus of desire and power, but also the moral rot at the surface of average success. The formal restraint, depth of psychology and unsparing social intelligence of *Flesh* have earned the Booker Prize for him and ensured his position as one of the most important novelists working in English today.

### A Life Measured Through the Body

Though the book has a provocative title, it's a novel that avoids sensationalism. It is not a contemplation on the excess of the erotic but also a study of embodiment, a study of the human body as a document of social history, as a text of class, gender, ageing, memory, and the unending consequences of desire. The heart of the novel is a series of European landscapes, from working-class youth to the corrupt world of successful



adulthood, brought into focus by the life of one man, István. His body is both instrument and cage, object of desire and object of exploitation and suffering. It distances itself from his own sense of self over time. Szalay explores masculinity not in terms of identity, but in terms of performance—appetite, silence, physicality, and fear of emotional exposure are his focus. The title of *Flesh* is very suggestive. *Flesh* represents death, hunger, sex, fragility and decay. It is holy and disposable; private and public. Szalay is not only using this metaphor to examine desire but also to uncover the social meanings that shape

the ways that humans are stuck in their bodies. The novel demands to be considered an embodied novel. This is a book without comfort, no emotional security. Instead, it calls for moral consideration. Stripped prose, the discipline of structure and the precision of psychology make *Flesh* one of the most significant novels of the past few years, a novel which turns physical existence into philosophical inquiry.

### **The Body is a measure of life**

*Flesh* is not a book about coming of age in terms of redemption, like traditional coming-of-age stories. István's life is not a progression, but a collection of compromises, memories, shame and emotional remoteness. Each phase of his life illustrates the kind of moral degradation needed to survive, instead of moral development. The novel starts in a world that is hard on men and is economically precarious. Youth is not a state of innocence but a very early learning in the power; who can be dominant, who must bear with it, who can learn to be silent and protect themselves from what others say. Physicality precedes language. Humiliation is a learned behaviour that goes hand in hand with desire. The body is always the main medium of the person's apprehension as István travels through the social worlds of work, relationship, migration and economic aspiration. It opens up doorways for him and exposes him to risk. He is wanted, valued, worked and schooled by being visible. The flesh is made into the flesh of the biography. In the novel, relationships are of an asymmetrical nature. Relationships of intimacy rarely lead to understanding; they

only bring to light forms of negotiation, debt and misrecognition. A transaction is often an inextricable part of Love. Marriage, sex and desire are entangled webs of commerce. Male emotional illiteracy, as written by Szalay, is the epitome of being to the point. István frequently only comes to know his life after the damage. "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who's the fairest of them all"? Masculinity is displayed in no other way than as an internal exile. A line that is particularly devastating for the novel is the line "He had always thought strength meant silence" (Szalay). This is a succinct statement of the emotional syntax of the novel. The quiet becomes an inheritance, discipline, and finally, failure. This is an example of the old habits persisting in the old body.

### **Masculinity without Heroism**

Perhaps one of the best things that *Flesh* did was to depict men without the romanticism or ideology. István is no tragic hero or symbolic villain. He is the middle-of-the-road bad boy, able to be tender and selfish and morally blind and vulnerable without being reduced to any of those moral categories. The conventional dichotomy of male dominance and redemption, characteristic of literary tropes, is rejected by Szalay. Instead, masculinity is alluded to as a "discipline of emotional lack." Men learn to perform before learning to love; to lust before they learn to think. This is most evident in István's relationships with women. Often, desire hides behind dependency, and intimacy is hard to achieve, especially as vulnerability is about to be a disruption to the man's coherence. Throughout the novel, women often see what

István fails to name. He is a wealthy man with limited self-awareness, which is demonstrated by his emotional intelligence. One telling moment is when the woman tells him, “You believe that people are better left alone. They learn how insignificant they were” (Szalay). The line reveals the moral sloth that is the essence of withdrawal. You cannot be neutral on a matter; you must be on one side or the other. Silence is a consequence. Ethically, not sentimentally, Fatherhood is dealt with. Men are passed down some emotional distance they don't know how to break. Children learn silence as their inheritance, and experience a lack of masculinity. Throughout the novel, male characters rarely serve as individuals and more as representatives of “allowed emotions. Fathers, bosses, competitors, and lovers instil their ideas of manhood that are based on suppression. It is their incompleteness that makes these characters powerful. They are not pictures of bad boys but depictions of common failure.

### **Desire, Class, and the Violence of Aspiration**

Sex is not the novel's sole subject; it's as much about desire and social mobility. Bodies are never private, but are read in the context of class, beauty, labour and cultural expectation. First, to be seen is to be already set in place in the hierarchy. István's traversal of the spaces of Europe brings to light the classed nature of gesture, accent, appetite, and physical confidence. Even when successful, it will not remove origin; new types of self-surveillance will be learned. The drive to be better means one more way of exercising the

body. In the novel, sex is always associated with power. Inequality, Economic, emotional and social, is an attraction. Individuals fall in love with each other with the fantasies of escaping, being recognised, and being held in possession. Desire turns into aspiration as well as erotic. Szalay also explores the subject of ageing in a fresh and unprecedented way. The promise of possibility is dramatically replaced by time's lack of caring. The flesh fades and goes away, and so does the idolatry of illusion that desire will be stabilising to identity. Death does not come in a flash; it comes by way of recognition. “The body remembers what the mind prefers to call over” (Szalay) is one of the novel's most haunting lines, which tells this truth. In this case, it is not mental memory but physical memory. Shame, pleasure, fear and history are alive in flesh itself. Violence is not so much a violent act; it is more of a repetition, a pressure of the economy, a neglect of the emotions, the embedding of humiliations in silence. Each of these nights around a dinner table, a workplace, a marriage bed is a place where power is negotiated. The title of *Flesh* is a perfect fit with the brilliant theme of the book. The human being walks along the earth, showing and revealing herself/himself in her/his body. Embodiment is always the restriction of Freedom.

### **Style as Moral Precision**

The prose of David Szalay is well known for its economy; in this case, it is a moral technique. His sentences are clean, precise and intensely moving, for that they eschew theatrics. There is nothing that can be too much; all is cumulative. The idea of

confessional psychology is not very popular. Rather, there are humiliations and inconsequential observations and gestures that makes feeling. The length of the pause while eating, the unfinished sentence, the awkwardness of the exchange of money, these and more have more interpretative value. The moral issues in the novel are mirrored by the structure of the novel. The plot does not take huge jumps, but rather a series of small recognitions. Revelation is not a way of changing life; life changes by repetition. The form is unemotional and realistic. The novel makes use of dialogue for much more than just revealing information; it is often a means for the characters to communicate. Characters make themselves known by running. Characters come out through the evasion. Unsaid is more than clout than words. Szalay's realism is reminiscent of writers like J. M. Coetzee and Kazuo Ishiguro, whose emotional economy and moral gravity have propelled them to the forefront of the literary world of the last half-century. But his focus on the mobility, class performance and male embodiment of Europe is very contemporary. Reading *Flesh* is not an easy read, as it brings you discomfort and not entertainment. But it is its literary seriousness that is its demand. The novel is unsuspecting of the reader's admiration.

### **Critical Reception and Literary Position**

*Flesh* was well known to be one of the great novels of 2025, and was awarded the Booker Prize for its formal rigour and deep psychological understanding. Its skill in making the ordinary experience and

examining it philosophically, while maintaining a narrative intimacy, was praised by judges. This was a novel that featured extraordinary treatment of masculinity, something that was hit on by critics. In Szalay's work, instead of an ideological statement, the normal emotional structure is revealed in which men alienate themselves from themselves and others. It was a subtlety that added an extraordinary critical force to the novel. Literary journals on both sides of the Atlantic praised the book for its focus on class mobility and on Europe, and for its exploration of the newness of the social novel as a study of embodiment. The body is not just a metaphor; it's social evidence. The novel's exploration of how silence is passed from father to son as a form of masculinity has also been met with great response from scholars. Emotional absence has been subject to feminist and psychoanalytic interpretations as a personal failure and structural repetition. Some readers found the novel's emotional severity, and felt that it was emotionally distant due to its restraint. But for many, it was this very rigour that led to a greater awareness. The novel neither requires sympathy nor empathy, but a reflection on ethics. Its significance isn't in the plot but in the moral action that it can take. When realism does not abide by the rules of comfort, it can still be radical, says *flesh*. The novel is part of a literary tradition that considers the most profound source of philosophical torment to be ordinary life.

### **Final Considerations**

*Flesh* is the rare novel of great intelligence, intellectual control and moral

courage, by David Szalay. It doesn't provide an alternative to change as a comfort or a yearning for freedom. Rather, it presents the reader with the bodies' burden of history, class, shame and longing beyond the limits of language. It's its majesty that it rejects heroism when it is not warranted. The gendered, ambitious, intimate and successful are revealed as precarious performances that are found to be both constructed and contested. In the course of István's life, Szalay reveals how the idea of wisdom that comes with adulthood is a myth. Repetition is the only thing that can come from experience if you are not willing to face what silence will keep you safe. The body is the central, not only erotic symbol, but an archive too. Memory is of flesh, memory is of editing consciousness. Detailed records are kept of all compromises. Flesh is certainly one of the most significant novels of the last few years and a testament to the talents of one of this generation's most important literary voices, David Szalay. It is quiet, it's devastating, and it's really necessary. In a world that is fixated on the visible and self-creation, Flesh is much more revolutionary: a celebration of what is concealed that might control everything.

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