Worse Than Radiation and 7 Odd Chernobyl Stories. By Sergii Mirnyi. Ed. Frank Williams, trans. Igor Ilyin, Alexander Kalinichenko, Sergii Mirnyi, Frank Williams, and Victor Yevmenov. Budapest: Bogar Kiado, 2001. 77 pp. 1 illustration. Paper.

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In the days, weeks, and months following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster on April 26, 1986, an untold number of civilians and military personnel suffered radiation poisoning and died trying to seal Chernobyl's collapsed fourth reactor and decontaminate the surrounding countryside. Among those who witnessed this haphazard and dangerous clean-up effort firsthand was writer, scientist, and former platoon commander Sergii Mirnyi.

His short novel, *Worse Than Radiation*, is a two-part account of one reconnaissance platoon's efforts to meticulously document the radioactive fallout near the Chernobyl nuclear power plant. Unlike the narrative of heroic liquidators featured in state propaganda, it is a tale not of sacrifice and selfless deeds but of daily routine that offers glimpses into the life of workers in "the zone." Blending prose and poetry, Mirnyi describes a world in which "recce (reconnaissance) men" ride across a landscape saturated with radiation in armored vehicles, collect dosimeter readings, and tabulate radiation dosages in an attempt to classify and understand the invisible threat around them. Above all, Mirnyi's novella tells the story of ordinary men faced with the difficult task of trying to make sense of something utterly incomprehensible.

In "Part 1. The Day," the narrator, undoubtedly Mirnyi himself, and his driver Kolya and dosemetrist Andrei set out on a regular patrol in their armed vehicle (or "armic") that almost ends in disaster. In a risky attempt to cross a large trench near the damaged reactor, their armic gets stuck, leaving them stranded and exposed to high levels of radiation. With the help of another vehicle, they manage to pull the armic to safety, but Kolya is nearly killed in the process. Unwinding after their close call, Mirnyi, becoming increasingly aware of his own mortality, reflects in the novella's most poetic passage, "and once again – how many times is it now? – it is so painfully clear: *life is finite…*" (30).

Near the end of the chapter, Mirnyi suggests that if Soviet and U.S. political leaders were to visit Chernobyl and see the aftereffects with their own eyes, they would quickly come to a consensus on the dangers of nuclear power: "I wish they'd hold the summit somewhere near here, *at the highest levels we've measured!* They'd strike a deal in minutes, the zone isn't Geneva, not by a long chalk – you could talk there till Kingdom come!" (36). Diplomats, he adds sarcastically, could tour the radioactive "Red Forest" in their spare time, meet with "chemical protection crews," and relax by "*the cooling pond*" during their stay (36).

In the second half of his novella, "Part 2. The Night," Mirnyi delves into the politics of radiation exposure. As he toils over a pile of tedious paperwork – Mirnyi must calculate radiation dosages for the entire company by hand – in the wee hours of the morning, the reader encounters the two "iron laws" of the zone: workers shall receive no more than two roentgens of radiation per day and no more than 25 during their service. After reaching that limit, they are demobilized and receive bonus wages. Though a certain hierarchy of labor exists – the reconnaissance men pity the power plant workers who in turn pity the wreckage removal crews – all servicepersons realize that the riskier the assignments, the sooner they will be able to go home.

Permission to leave, however, requires official approval. Mirnyi reveals that senior officers actively prevent their men from qualifying for special benefits by reducing their dosages in daily records and assigning them low-exposure tasks in the rear when they approach the 25-roentgen threshold. Even though workers are repeatedly exposed to unacceptably high levels of radiation, commanders downplay the risks to protect their careers and keep the men serving beneath them ignorant of the true dangers they face. Upon learning that a comrade had his camera taken away for photographing the disaster area, Mirnyi thinks to himself, "…Everything is secret here. Levels, machinery, what work's being done, where and how, the number of people involved…" (51). Even in the zone, a world far removed from mainstream Soviet society, dishonesty, corruption, and excessive bureaucracy are a part of everyday life.

Though only twelve pages long, Mirnyi's *7 Odd Chernobyl Stories* serves as a poignant and humorous appendix to his novella, addressing topics such as unethical experiments on human subjects, memory after trauma, and even the connection between Mayakovsky's poetry and male bonding at the latrine. In "Simplicity Itself or All Great Historical Events," the author ponders the state media's portrayal of the Chernobyl clean-up operation as a heroic, efficient, and modern endeavor and concludes the opposite: "It all has to be done by ordinary people, using simple techniques, with simple tools." (67) In the "X-ray," Mirnyi struggles to contain his laughter as an X-ray technician straps lead protection on him, knowing that the radiation dose from a simple procedure pales in comparison to levels in the zone. Finally, in "The Testimony," Mirnyi discusses an absurd official order, which stipulates that new recruits "be exposed to exactly two roentgens daily," even though it is impossible to voluntarily control such precise amounts (68). Indeed, the cartoon drawing on the book's front cover of a squat liquidator wearing an oxygen mask and clutching a net seems to underscore the futility of trying to contain radiation.

Aside from the inconsistent spelling of names and the occasional typo, Mirnyi's translated collection is a valuable addition to the overlooked literature of Chernobyl. Although suitable for a general audience, readers familiar with Soviet history and culture will appreciate certain details scattered throughout the text such as boots made by zeks (labor camp prisoners) and the battalion Lenin room. Mirnyi does not present his experiences in Chernobyl as non-fiction, but his stories clearly bear witness to the precarious nature of life in the zone from the perspective of an insider. His conclusion to "The Testimony" thus speaks for the work as a

whole: "You might think this is just a short story, a 'work of fiction.' Like hell it is. *Remember the title?*" (70)