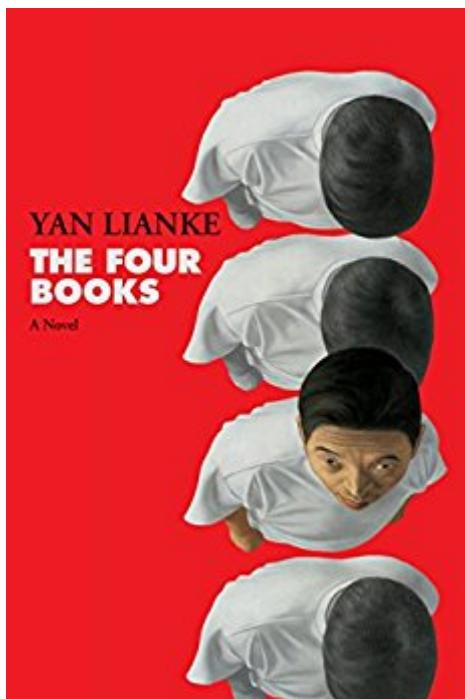


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The Four Books: A Novel



Synopsis

From master storyteller Yan Lianke, winner of the prestigious Franz Kafka Prize and a finalist for the Man Booker International Prize, *The Four Books* is a powerful, daring novel of the dog-eat-dog psychology inside a labor camp for intellectuals during Mao's Great Leap Forward. A renowned author in China, and among its most censored, Yan's mythical, sometimes surreal tale cuts to the bone in its portrayal of the struggle between authoritarian power and man's will to prevail against the darkest odds through camaraderie, love, and faith. In the ninety-ninth district of a sprawling reeducation compound, freethinking artists and academics are detained to strengthen their loyalty to Communist ideologies. Here, the Musician and her lover, the Scholar; along with the Author and the Theologian; are forced to carry out grueling physical work and are encouraged to inform on each other for dissident behavior. The prize: winning the chance at freedom. They're overseen by preadolescent supervisor, the Child, who delights in reward systems and excessive punishments. When agricultural and industrial production quotas are raised to an unattainable level, the ninety-ninth district dissolves into lawlessness. And then, as inclement weather and famine set in, they are abandoned by the regime and left alone to survive.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"The Four Books" is a difficult read, although it moves very quickly. The book follows a series of characters within a re-education camp during The Great Leap Forward, a disastrous political and economic campaign that ended in famine. The director of the camp is a selfish, petty man who wants to please his superiors while keeping his inmates satisfied. The inmates, all intellectuals accused of rightism, vary from complacent to entrepreneurial in their relationship with the camp and their desire to leave it. Although the surface stories are put together very well, there are several long and ever-present allegories that I had great trouble piecing together. Translator Carlos Rojas tries to preempt the confusion readers might have with an introduction from which many professional reviewers seem to have borrowed. Magical realism plays a huge part in these allegories, with certain characters making personal and physical sacrifices that represent the effects of China's totally misguided policies. A group of inmates tries to escape multiple times, only to find themselves magically back in the same spot and hungrier than ever, perhaps like the Great Leap Forward itself. Another character fertilizes plants with his own blood, while yet another offers pieces of his own flesh as penance so that other inmates may eat. Other allegories are more ironic, like the director of the camp crucifying himself. While some of these allegories made sense, there seemed to be others that I simply couldn't piece together. Having read "Dream of Ding Village," also by Yan Lianke, I had trouble seeing why other reviewers compared Yan to Kafka and Garcia Marquez, but "The Four Books" makes it clear. "The Four Books" is less smooth and less traditional.

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