

NOTES FROM: *Zorba the Greek*, by Nikos Kazantzakis

SUMMARY: Well, great, now I have to read every single other book that Kazantzakis has ever written. Seriously, *Zorba the Greek* is one of the most powerful, life-affirming books you're ever likely to come across, and I don't think that anyone who is somewhat alive and breathing can read this book and sit still.

But yes, I might have to mention that since it was written in 1941 it is certainly the product of a different time and it contains some "unpleasantness" where women are concerned. But I mean, we're all adults here. We don't have to agree with every sentiment or the views and opinions of every character in every situation. Instead, we can sense the Life-Force leaping off every page, the way that Kazantzakis shakes us each by the shoulders, shouting into our ears, 'Live! Live now! Breathe deeply! While you still can!'

Wait, what is the book about? Of course. Well, the unnamed narrator of the book goes into business with an older man, Zorba, and they both go on to operate a lignite mine on the island of Crete. The narrator is based on Kazantzakis and Zorba is a real person whom he met early in the 20th century and who irrevocably changed the direction of Kazantzakis's one and only life. He also changed mine.

"Yet if I wished to single out those individuals who did engrave their traces most deeply upon my soul, I would presumably designate these four: Homer, Bergson, Nietzsche, and Zorba. The first was a serene, all-bright eye for me like the sun's disk, illuminating everything with redemptive brightness. Bergson released me from insoluble philosophical anguishes that had tormented my early youth. Nietzsche enriched me with new anguishes and showed me how to transform misfortune, sorrow, and uncertainty into pride. Zorba taught me to love life and not to fear death."

"He possessed precisely what a pen pusher needs for deliverance: the primitive glance that snatches nourishment lovingly from on high; the creative artlessness, renewed at each daybreak, that views everything unceasingly as though for the first time, bequeathing virginity to the everlastingly quotidian elements of wind, sea, fire, women, and bread; the sureness of hand, the freshness of heart, the gallant stalwart's ability to poke fun at his own soul for seeming to harbor a power higher than the soul; finally, that wild, throaty laugh welling up from a source deeper than a man's inner depths, a laugh that erupted redemptively at crucial moments from Zorba's elderly chest, exploding with sufficient power to demolish (and did demolish) all the barricades – morality, religion, nationalism – erected around themselves by wretched, lily-livered humans to let them hobble securely through their diminished mini-lives."

"Mothers clutched sons, wives husbands, friends friends as though separating forever, as though this minor parting reminded them of the major one."

"How was it that I, who loved life so much, had been involved with paper and ink for so many years?"

“I took out my fellow traveler, a pocket edition of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Lighting my pipe and leaning against the wall, I made myself comfortable. For a moment I weighed my choice. From which part should I extract the immortal verses – from the scorching tar of the Inferno, the pleasantly cool flame of Purgatory, or should I pounce straightaway onto the uppermost floor of human hope? The choice was mine. Holding my microscopic edition of Dante, I rejoiced in my freedom. The verses I chose now, in early morning, would control my entire day.”

“Those two paths are equally uplifting and rugged; both can lead to the summit. To act as though death does not exist and to act with death in mind at every moment – perhaps both paths are the same.”

“Right now I’m thinking of our meal: chicken, plus pilaf topped with cinnamon. My whole mind is steaming just like the pilaf. Let’s eat first, stuff our faces; then we’ll see. One thing at a time in proper order. Right now we’ve got pilaf in front of us; let our minds be pilaf. Tomorrow we’ll have lignite in front of us, so let our minds, then, be lignite. No half measures, understand?”

“He stares likewise with protruding eyes and asks in the same way when astonished by the sight of a man, or a blossoming tree, or a refreshing glass of water. Each day Zorba views everything as though for the first time.”

“I remained silent. Listening to Zorba, I sensed the world’s virginity being renewed. Everyday things that had lost their luster regained the brightness they had possessed the moment they emerged from God’s hands. Water, women, stars, and bread returned to their primordial, mysterious source; the divine wheel regained its rotational momentum in the sky.”

“The house seems empty to you, yet it has everything. A true human being needs so few things.”

“We sense happiness with difficulty while experiencing it. Only when it has passed and we look back do we suddenly comprehend, sometimes with astonishment, how happy we have been. I, however, on this Cretan shore, was experiencing happiness while being simultaneously aware of my happiness.”

“As I get older I become wilder, by God. Why do people sit there and keep telling me that old ages tames a person, makes him lose his zest, stretch out his neck when he sees death and say, ‘Slaughter me, please, dear agha, so that I may become a saint’? As for me, as I get older I become wilder. I don’t quit. I want to eat up the whole wide world.”

“Have you ever seen the sort of ship’s sails that have been mended in a thousand places with red, yellow, and black patches sewn with a strong cord, so that these sails never tear again even in the greatest tempests? That’s what my heart is like. Pierced a thousand times, patched a thousand times, durable.”

“Confucius says: ‘Many seek a happiness higher than the human being; others seek one lower. But happiness is the same height as the human being.’ That is true. Accordingly, there are as many different forms of happiness as there are human heights.”

“‘You don’t want trouble!’ said Zorba, stupefied. ‘So, what *do* you want, Boss?’ I did not answer. ‘Life is trouble; death isn’t,’ Zorba continued. ‘Do you know the definition of being alive? To undo your belt and look for trouble.’”

“My life had taken the wrong path; my contact with fellow humans had ended up as an internal monologue. My degeneration was so great that if I were to choose between loving a woman or reading a good book about love, I would choose the book.”

“No other Paradise exists, my poor friend. Don’t listen to the priests. No other Paradise exists!”

“I felt that what he could not say to me with words (or preferred not to) he was saying to me with the santouri – that my life was going to waste, that the widow and I were two insects living for a split second in sunlight and then lying dead for eternity. Last chance! Last chance!”

“If hell exists, I’ll go to hell, and that will be the cause – not because I stole, killed, committed adultery. No! No! Those sins are nothing; God forgives them. But I’ll go to hell because on that night a woman was waiting for me in bed and I did not go.”

“Don’t laugh, Boss! If a woman sleeps alone, the blame falls on us men, all of us.”

“‘Tomorrow,’ he said, ‘I’ll need lots of strength. I need to wrestle with thousands of demons. Good night!’”

“I was happy. I kept saying to myself, ‘This is true happiness: not to have any ambition yet to work doggedly as though you had every ambition; to live far from other people, yet to love them and not need them; for it to be Christmas, to eat and drink well; yet afterward, alone, to escape every lure and to possess the stars above you, with the land to your left, the sea to your right, and suddenly to understand that life, having brought its final accomplishment to conclusion in your heart, has turned into a fairy tale.’”

“I recalled one dawn when I had chanced upon a butterfly’s cocoon in a pine tree at the very moment when the husk was breaking and the inner soul was preparing to emerge. I kept waiting and waiting; it was slow and I was in a hurry. Leaning over it, I began to warm it with my breath. I kept warming it impatiently until the miracle commenced to unfold before my eyes at an unnatural speed. The husk opened completely; the butterfly came out. But never shall I forget my horror: its wings remained curled inward, not unfolded. The whole of its miniscule body shook as it struggled to spread the wings outward. But it could not. As for me, I struggled to aid it with my breath. In vain. What it needed was to ripen and unfold patiently in sunlight. Now it was too late. My breath had forced the butterfly to emerge ahead of time, crumpled and premature. It came out undeveloped, shook desperately, and soon died in my palm. This butterfly’s fluffy corpse is, I believe, the greatest weight I carry on my conscience. What I understood deeply on that day was this: to hasten eternal rules in a mortal sin. One’s duty is confidently to follow nature’s everlasting rhythm. I perched on a boulder to enable myself to assimilate this New Year’s thought in peace. ‘Ah,’ I said to myself, ‘let me regulate my life in this fashion in this new year without any occasion of hysterical impatience.’”

Let this tiny little butterfly, which I assassinated because I was in too much of a hurry to bring it into life, always fly in front of me, showing the way! In the same manner, may a prematurely expiring butterfly help one of its sisters, a human soul, to avoid rushing and therefore to manage to unwrap its wings at a leisurely pace.”

“The more I weighed myself down with years, the lighter I grew. At age twenty I began to do crazy things, but just the usual ones. When I reached forty I began without stint to feel young and finally sailed off to do really crazy things. Now that I’ve reached sixty (just between us, Boss, I’m sixty-five), well, now that I’ve reached sixty I swear to God – how can you explain this, Boss? – the world’s too small for me.”

“Great visionaries and poets see everything in the same way – for the first time. They see a new world before them each morning. No, they do not see this new world; they create it.”

“Action, action! No other salvation exists.”

“Everything is the same: if I have a wife or don’t have a wife, if I’m honest or dishonest, if I’m a pasha or a porter. The only difference is whether I’m dead or alive.”

“‘Hey, Zorba,’ I kept asking myself, ‘how long are you going to stay alive with your nostrils quivering? You’ll smell the air just a little while longer, poor fellow, so breathe in deeply.’”

“The earth’s revolving wheel, the world’s four faces that are illumined one after the other by the sun, life’s passing and our passing with it. The voices of those cranes, echoing once again within me, was the terrible forewarning that this life is unique for each human being, that no other life exists, that we may enjoy it, enjoy it here, that it passes quickly, and that no other opportunity will be given us in the whole of eternity. Hearing this message that is so merciless yet so filled with mercy, one’s mind vows to conquer its own degradation and weakness, to conquer laziness and great futile hopes in order to catch full hold of every split second that is departing forever.”

“I knew that eternity is each moment that passes.”

“The great ascetic, gathering his disciples around him, cries out: ‘Woe to whoever does not have within him the source of happiness! Woe to whoever wishes to please others! Woe to whoever does not sense that this life and the other life are the same!’”

“‘There are mountains,’ I continued, ‘huge, God-inhabited mountains filled with monasteries occupied by monks in yellow robes who sit cross-legged for one month, two months, six months thinking of only one thing. *One* thing, do you hear, *one*, not two! They don’t think of women and lignite or of books and lignite, as we do, but concentrate their minds, Zorba, on a single thing only, and perform miracles. That’s how miracles happen. You’ve seen, haven’t you, Zorba, what happens when you place a magnifying glass in sunshine and gather its rays into just a single spot? The spot soon bursts into flames. Why? Because the sun’s power is not dispersed but is entirely concentrated on that spot. The same happens with the human mind. You produce miracles if you cast your mind on one and only one thing.’”

“The day gleamed like an uncut diamond.”

“God changes his countenance; happy are those who succeed in discerning him behind each mask.”

“Those who live the mysteries lack time and those who don’t lack time don’t live the mysteries.”

“As long as countries exist, the human being will remain a beast, a ferocious beast.”

“Half-finished jobs, conversations, sins, and virtues are what have brought the world to its present mess. Reach the end, everyone! Strike; win the fight!”

“As for me, I remained awake for quite some time. Following stars in the light-blue sky, I observed the entire heavens gradually shift their constellations. My skull, like the dome of an observatory, shifted in its own right as it followed the stars. ‘Watch the stars, and see yourself running with them.’ This sentence of Marcus Aurelius’s filled my heart with harmony.”

“Oh, if only I was as young as you! Women and wine galore, sea and work galore! Full blast no matter what! Work on full blast. Wine, sex, all on full blast. No fear of God; no fear of the Devil. That’s the meaning of youth and strength.”

Kazantzakis says that any good father will love his sons equally as much, regardless of what they’ve done or what mistakes they’ve made. God must be the same way if He is to be any sort of father figure.

“Viewing the miracle of the circumambient universe and the similar miracle within myself, I inquired, ‘What is this? How has the world chanced to be well suited to our feet, our hands, our bellies?’ Then I would close my eyes once again and remain silent.”

“‘How many years were required,’ he murmured, ‘how many years for dust to manage to create such a body!’”

“‘A bit of earth,’ he thought, ‘a bit of earth that hungered, laughed, embraced. A lump of mud that wept. And now? Who the devil brings us into the world and who the devil removes us?’”

“What I felt profoundly was that humanity’s highest reach was not knowledge, nor was it virtue, goodness, or victory, but something else, something higher, more heroic and despairing – namely, awe, sacred terror. Beyond sacred terror the human mind cannot go.”

“‘Aren’t you going to answer?’ asked Zorba with anguish. Replying, I attempted to make my companion understand the meaning of sacred terror. ‘We are small worms, Zorba, very small worms on the tiniest leaf of a gigantic tree. This tiny leaf is our earth; the other leaves are the stars you see moving at night. We drag ourselves along on our tiny leaf, eagerly ferreting around in it. We smell it: it has an odor. We taste it: it can be eaten. We strike it: it resounds, shouting like a living thing. Some of us human beings, the most fearless, reach the edge of the leaf. We bend over this edge with open eyes and ears, observing chaos below. We shudder.’”

We divine the terrible drop beneath us, occasionally hear a sound made by the gigantic tree's other leaves, sense the sap rising from the roots, swelling our hearts. In this way, leaning over the abyss, we realize with all our body and soul that we are being overcome by terror. What begins at this moment is – I stopped. I had wanted to say, 'What begins at that moment is poetry,' but Zorba would not have understood, so I kept silent. 'What begins,' asked Zorba eagerly. 'Why did you stop?' 'At that moment, Zorba, begins the great danger,' I replied. 'Some become dazed and delirious; others, growing afraid, take great pains to discover an answer that will brace their heart. These say, 'God.' Still others, calmly, bravely, look down at the drop from the leaf's edge and say, 'I like it.'"

"To say yes to necessity, transubstantiating the unavoidable into one's own free will, is perhaps our only path to deliverance."

"Eating, we would avoid reawakening those large demons inside us - love, death, fear."

"My words were made of paper; they descended from the head and were sprinkled with only a trickle of blood. Whatever value they possessed derived from that trickle."

"The summer sky was filled with stars flinging sparks into the night."

"I did this, that, and other things in my life, but still not enough. People like me should live a thousand years. Good night!"

Kazantzakis studied philosophy in Paris under Bergson!

According to Henri Bergson, the world is "a machine for the making of gods."

"But Kazantzakis takes this idea further; he proposes that even if Sisyphus succeeds in pushing the rock all the way to the top of the hill, he would then seek a higher hill, start a new ascent, for the ascent itself is the enlightenment."

"Kazantzakis writes: 'Zorba taught me to love life and have no fear of death. If it had been a question in my lifetime of choosing a spiritual guide, a guru as the Hindus say, a father as say the monks at Mount Athos, surely I would have chosen Zorba.'"