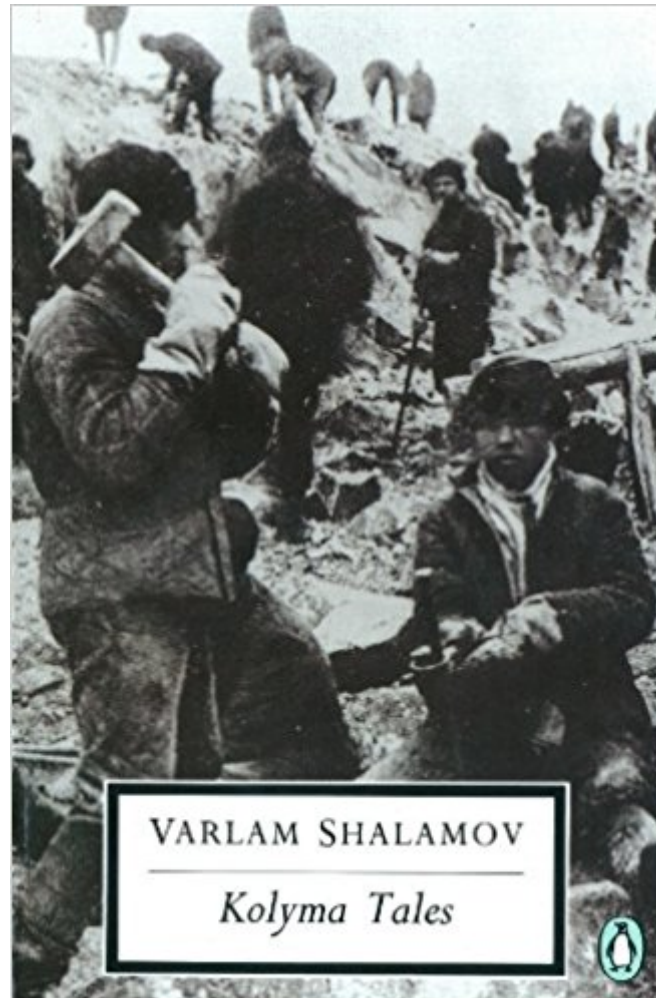




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# Kolyma Tales (Penguin Modern Classics)



## Synopsis

It is estimated that some three million people died in the Soviet forced-labour camps of Kolyma, in the northeastern area of Siberia. Shalamov himself spent seventeen years there, and in these stories he vividly captures the lives of ordinary people caught up in terrible circumstances, whose hopes and plans extended to further than a few hours. This new enlarged edition combines two collections previously published in the United States as *Kolyma Tales* and *Graphite*.

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## Customer Reviews

The Chekov of the Gulag, Varlam Shalamov, needs to be commended, one, for surviving seventeen years of imprisonment in the mines of the frozen north and two for telling the tale. The style, which, I believe, suffers from an indifferent translation, is spare and straightforward; Chekhovian, leaving the reader to make his/her own interpretations. There is none of the hopefulness of *One Day in the Life* or the sarcasm of *The Gulag Archipelago*, none of the ironic and deliberate distancing of the brilliant stylist Borowski's *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentleman* [ on Auschwitz ] or any of the moral questions that the memorialists of the Nazi concentration camp universe usually ask. Instead, things

are as they are: people starve, struggle to stay alive, work under brutal conditions for long hours, interact among themselves and with their jailers, get frostbite, go to hospital to rest and recover for the next round of work in the mines and so on. The end result is a portrait of the worker's paradise as a hugely inefficient and impersonal machine which is indifferent to human life and suffering, and, in one, which despite its stated and supposedly humanitarian aims, slave labor is the fodder for the continuous turning of the economic wheel. Once again with its rating system, it is a hard book to assign stars. While I can't say I love or like it per se, or that it is a work I would return to, *Kolyma* is important as a historical document and a unique blend of fact and fiction depicting a terrible world unknown to most of us.

This work is justifiably noteworthy as a chronicle of the horror of Stalin's slave labor camps as told by one who was there. Not as politically charged (or preachy) as Solzhenitsyn's more famous work, but it still tells the tale in the form of short stories of what life (?) was like in the camps and just outside them. It is becoming increasingly hard for the new generation to believe that such things took place, but this work should be required reading for all students.

In the far northeast corner of Russia, astride the Arctic circle, lies *Kolyma*, an desolate, inhospitable area named after a river and mountain range, inaccessible except by sea. Unfortunately for the hapless victims of Stalin, gold and other minerals were discovered there in the 1930s. Stalin barbarically ordered the area to be developed and mined using prisoner labor. That labor included victims of collectivization and unending purges, common criminals and political prisoners, captured enemy combatants and returning Russian soldiers who had the misfortune of having been captured rather than fighting to the death. It is estimated that about one million prisoners died in the 80 prison camps making up the *Kolyma* complex. They died of starvation, exposure, illness and abuse. Varlam Shalamov was a political prisoner who served a 17-year sentence in the *Kolyma* camps, managing to survive using his intelligence and cunning to avoid certain-death assignments. *Kolyma Tales* is a collection of vignettes describing events and incidents lived by the author and fellow prisoners. The stories are utterly fascinating, told in a personal intimate style, with a disarming sense of humor, without bitterness. Solzhenitsyn so admired Shalamov's writing that he named him one of the best writers of the period. Unfortunately, despite his talent and genius, Shalamov failed to fulfill his promise with further works. I highly recommend *Kolyma Tales* not only because of its historic value (there are few accounts of *Kolyma*), but also because Shalamov's writing style so wonderfully simple, direct, positive and objective. One ends up concluding that all Shalamov's

characters, prisoners and their keepers, are victims in a tragic irony, and asking oneself, "what is life?".

This is an important book even though it is a combination of personal experience and fiction since it chronicles the lives of several prisoners in the gulag system in Russia during the Stalin years. It is comparable to "A Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch" by Solzhenitsyn. Rather than concentrating on one particular day it covers many years and relates experiences of the author or that the author learned about when he was in captivity. Anyone interested in that particular subject or in the depths of suffering that humans can be put to when ruled by absolute power should read this book.

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