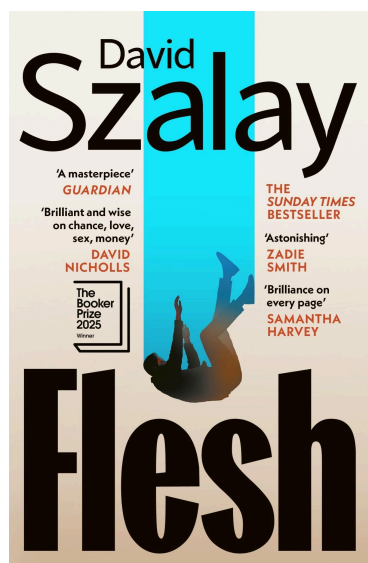


October 2026

Flesh, published in 2025, is the sixth novel by Canadian-Hungarian David Szalay and winner of the 2025 Booker Prize. The book opens with the protagonist, István, as a shy and awkward adolescent living on a Hungarian housing estate. The story follows his rise from poverty to married life amongst Europe's top-one-percent earners and economic descent afterwards. His life takes many turns in between. István is a virginal 15-year-old when he has a sexual relationship with a married 42-year-old woman. He gets into a fight with her husband and is blamed for his death, leading to juvenile detention and soldiering during the Iraq War. From these experiences he learns resilience.



Later, István works in private security and becomes a chauffeur for a well-to-do London family. He becomes part of their life, including their moneyed lifestyle, designer clothes, private jets, and exclusive restaurants. He has an affair with the wife, during which the husband dies of natural causes. István marries the widow. His stepson despises him.

István usually acts on instinct first and reflects on his actions later. István's inclination to follow his instincts rather than thinking things through is reflected in his speech patterns. He tends to reply to other people rather than initiating conversation, and he heavily uses banal phrases such as 'yeah', 'I don't know' or 'Okay'.

Most of our group readers were at a loss to understand how **Flesh** won the 2025 Booker Prize but it provided interesting and lively discussion. Some found the book very disturbing citing the main character as emotionally detached, having no morality, no sense of what is appropriate or acceptable, and with his maturity stunted at adolescent level. A couple of readers suggested that this was as a result of the trauma he experienced through his teenage sexual abuse, incarceration and participation in the war, thus being an insinuation of PTSD. The writing itself was spare, flat and unreflective, mirroring István's characteristics and the interactions between characters. This led some readers to be unengaged and without sympathy for any of the characters, although the relationship between István and his stepson, Thomas probably presented the most nuanced insight of the book.

Ratings: Hetta 4, Dianne 3.5, Margie and Sandy 3, Nicola and Lynda 2.5, Lesley, Jenny and Di 2, Viv 1

Other Books We Read

East of Eden by John Steinbeck, 5

Whistler by Ann Patchett, 4

A Diamond in the Dust by Frauke Bolten-Boshammer, 3

Diary of a Void by Emi Yagi, 2.5

Capture by Amanda Lohrey, 2
This other Eden by Paul Harding, 4
Clear by Clarys Davies, 3.5
John of John by Douglas Stuart, 3.5
The Hate Race by Maxine Beneba Clarke, 3.5
In a common hour by Sita Walker, 3
Yesterday by Caro Claire Burke, DNF 1.5
Born a Crime by Trevor Noah, 3
An African Love Story by Daphne Sheldrick, 3
Boys by Dr Justin Coulson, 3.5
Land by Maggie O'Farrell, 4
Rise Up and Kill First by Ronen Bergman, 3
The End of Everything by M. John Harrison 5
The Midnight Library by Matt Haig 0
Greek Lessons by Han Kang 4
The Hunger by Alma Katsu 4
A Scanner Darkly by Philip K Dick 3.5
Alice in Wonderland and Alice through the Looking Glass by Lewis Carroll Naxos Audio 5
The Wind in the Willows by Kenneth Graeme Belinda Audio 5
Say Nothing by Patrick Radden Keefe, 4
London Falling by Patrick Radden Keefe, 3.5
The Newer World by Sebastian Barry, 4
The Warmth of Other Suns by Isabel Wilkerson, 4