

From Russia with Love



Robert L. McLaughlin

***PU-239 AND OTHER RUSSIAN
FANTASIES***

Ken Kalfus

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Ken Kalfus's first collection of stories, *Thirst*, published in 1998 and recently released in paperback, was wide-ranging in its style, settings, and subjects. His new collection, *Pu-239 and Other Russian Fantasies*, is more focused and less stylistically daring but nevertheless intelligent, engaging, and thought-provoking.

The pieces in Pu-239 do a magnificent job of conceptually linking the bad old Soviet Union with the not unproblematic new Russia.

The focus and setting of these pieces—six stories and a novella—is Russia. In a brief preface Kalfus explains that they were inspired by a four-year sojourn in Russia while his wife was the Moscow bureau chief for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Interestingly, though, only two of the stories are set in the post-Soviet-era Russia that Kalfus would have known. Instead, most of *Pu-239* explores life during the Stalin, Khrushchev, and Brezhnev years, at times inspiring memories of *Darkness at Noon* and *Doctor Zhivago*. But Kalfus's contemporary perspective and his experience of the new free-market-driven Russia result in a more sophisticated exploration of the workings of power, a more problematic and, perhaps, less totalizing take on totalitarianism.

The Soviet-era stories cover various times and various characters, from a young girl who

first menstruates on the day Stalin dies to an ideologically disgraced writer who must redeem himself with a review of Brezhnev's memoirs. But their thematic concerns arise from a continual conflict between the human, cultural, and linguistic impulse toward diversity and indeterminacy and the Communist Party's insistence on unity and a rigidly determined reality. In "Orbit," Yuri Gagarin, on the night before he becomes the first man in space, tries to reassure the shaken Chief Designer, rocket pioneer Sergei Pavlovich Korolev, with tales of future space stations where the perfect scientific and communist society will at last be achieved: "Perhaps it was only in space that a true communist society could exist, floating free of terrestrial compromise, its economy as finely regulated as its air and water supplies." But this vision is undercut by the very unscientific practices that pervade the launch preparations: Yuri, seeking the company of a willing nurse, must first participate in the folk custom of the false bride; Korolev's prelaunch panic is caused by premonitions and omens; those who return to the launch compound for something they've forgotten must look in a mirror and stick out their tongue; by urinating on the tire of the bus that's brought him to the launchpad, Yuri begins a custom repeated by all Soviet cosmonauts. The wedding of science and communism is further problematized by Korolev's history: in the late thirties he had been sentenced to hard labor in Siberia for "subversion in the new field of technology"; that is, developing the technology that would lead to space flight. It's only through an unlikely chain of lucky encounters that Korolev survives until the government is willing to accept his discoveries as legitimate knowledge. No wonder his belief in superstition is as strong as his belief in science: "The evil that worked on our lives, producing the world's

actual, quotidian brutality, was something magical; to spit or to cross oneself was to pretend to a magic of one's own."

In "Birobidzhan," another attempt to plan a perfect society, a Jewish homeland within the Soviet Union, fails because of the participants' inability to reconcile contradictions within the totality demanded by the Party. Israel Davidovich Shtern leads a group of Jews campaigning for a homeland; he tries to adhere to Party orthodoxy despite the potential dangers of promoting religion in an atheistic state and nationalism when the Party Line is internationalism. Through force of personality, Israel plows over these contradictions, just as he plows over practical objections about tools

and transportation. The theories Israel weaves to hold the contradictions and the project together start to come apart on the train ride east, when the settlers are detained at a station by anti-Semitic police: "As communists, they had believed they had mastered history; now, as Jews, they knew that history still

possessed a stick, a pitchfork, or a gun, hidden in a cellar or a corncrib." The theories come apart completely when the settlers arrive at Birobidzhan to discover that there are few buildings, no tools, little food, and no supplies to plant any. The disaster of their first year there results in the purging of the leaders, for nationalism and sabotage. Israel is arrested for a joke he makes about Lenin and Stalin. When he defends himself by saying he was being ironic, the interrogating officer answers, "Did it ever occur to you, Shtern, that there are some subjects, some ideals, too important to be mutilated by satire and ridicule? Or that this characteristic rhetorical effect, this racial stance, could be a curse upon the Jewish people? That it is their inbred sense of irony that prevents their social progress and

threatens their physical survival?" Israel and the settlers are caught in the double bind of Soviet power. On the one hand, the Party insists on a single, centralized truth: an official stand on nationalism; a single interpretation of language. On the other hand, the Party uses its power as it wishes: it persecutes the Jews; it manipulates language to mean whatever is expedient at the moment.

In the new Russia, reminders of the failure of the Soviet Union are everywhere: in the decaying infrastructure; in the polluted air and water; in the numbers of the unemployed; in the nationalist violence of Chechnya. But even though the Party is gone, more or less, a totalitarian power is still the

problem, now the power of the free market. As ubiquitous and unforgiving as the Soviet state, the free market is in a sense more dangerous since it touches everything, its effects are everywhere, and yet it is intangible, unable to be called upon to address protests or redress grievances. Moscow, in the title story, is a nightmare city, reminiscent of the run-down future of *Blade*



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Runner or *Brazil*, where everything from weapons-grade plutonium to human life has become a product. Everyone is a buyer or seller; no one is responsible for or to anything but profit. The critique of the decentered power of the free market is most obvious in "Salt," where Kalfus puts a Foucauldian spin on an old folk tale as a Russian merchant with salt for sale delves into the illogic of the concepts of value and wealth.

Themes of Soviet totalitarianism and free-market value come together in the novella, "Peredelkino," the crown jewel of this collection. It's narrated by a self-satisfied writer who has turned his two novels into the perks of a reasonably lucrative position in the Union of Soviet Writers: provincial lecture tours, sexual favors from groupies, and a small dacha in the

Moscow suburb of Peredelkino. He's gradually forced to reconsider what he values about writing and what he values about himself through his infatuation with Marina Burchatkina, a sort of literary Eve Harrington, who comes out of the provinces to become a widely admired author, attacks the state after the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and defects to Hollywood. Marina achieves success because she is able to balance aesthetics with the official discourse and messages of the Soviet state, a balance the narrator has been able to maintain himself until he can't bring himself to jump on her bandwagon: "Contrary to acclamation, her literary voice was stale, her cry foolish, and her stances hypocritical. I counted those who must have been involved in the construction of Marina's celebrity.... How could she be sleeping with all of them—and not be sleeping with me?" The narrator sees his own petty ambitions and hypocrisy revealed in Marina. He reexamines his ideas about the purposes of literature and the responsibilities of an artist; not surprisingly, his star falls as Marina's rises.

The pieces in *Pu-239* do a magnificent job of conceptually linking the bad old Soviet Union with the not unproblematic new Russia and making a transition from an Orwellian critique of totalitarianism to a more postmodern critique of power. They embrace a large chunk of Russian history, and they bring us sharp portraits of people struggling in the web of history and power.

Robert L. McLaughlin is senior editor of the Review of Contemporary Fiction. He edited Innovations: An Anthology of Modern and Contemporary Fiction, recently published by Dalkey Archive Press.