

literary fiction

Sfumato: Dead Birds are Flying

Political dystopia. Zakharov Publishers. Moscow 2019. 189 pages

Welcome to Russia 2032. There is peace in the world. Russia, Europe, the United States and China signed a convention ten years ago that completely ruled out a nuclear war of aggression. Tired of the Kremlin's aggression, the world community reached an agreement with Russia: in exchange for its own security, the West no longer cares how the Russian government treats its citizens under its isolated power and only occasionally checks whether foreign policy agreements are respected. Human rights or repression within Russia are considered to be their internal affair. Russia is fenced and the borders are closed. America is no longer the enemy, the rhetoric has changed completely. The taiga is almost entirely cut down, the Chinese – Russia's 'fraternal allies' - have founded productive farms on the permafrost. The whole country is divided into 'clusters': the more critical you are of the regime, the further away from Moscow you are banished. Moscow is the zero cluster and has already been cleaned of all harmful elements.

This frightening dystopia is shrewdly realistic and timely, with the author drawing on his own knowledge and experience from today's prison and law enforcement system in Russia, instead of simply staging a darkly conceived scifi reality. The hyper-real political landscape of the novel is explicitly not post-apocalyptic, but rather develops consistently from today's political realities. The fact that the political dimension of this dystopia extends beyond Russia makes it an Orwellian warning call. A radically austere style that takes your breath away. A shocking unemotional look at a not too distant possible future, in which there is nothing that could not already be found in today's Russia.



THE AUTHOR

other works

Agami - the sequel to Sfumato

Man in jail - narrative non fiction

"An evil and sad dystopia – and the saddest part is that it's probably true. The purity and power of its first part is in no way inferior to Orwell's despair." VIKTOR SHENDEROVICH

"Conscious of human nature, Alexei Fedyarov demonstrates his insight to the highest degree ... It is hard not to believe his warning of the future, a future that lies ahead of the young and inexperienced as much as the old and wise. The brazen won't escape, nor will the fearless; neither the destitute nor the wealthy; neither the stupid, nor the clever – the planners of our future have a solution ready for everyone." ANNA BERSENEVA

"A successful dystopia is always a warning. It needs a very careful look at the present with a complete understanding of all psychological, historical and social mechanisms and trends, and then you have to pick up on these trends and persuade them convincingly. This is exactly what Fedyarov did ... This novel has frightened many readers and critics. And rightly so. Because it was written by a man who knows this world very well, and not just by hearsay." CARINA COCKRELL

"Fedyarov describes with astonishing exactitude the inability of our current elite to maintain the country in its current size and configuration. From this perspective of irresponsibility, the possibility of external administration seems anything but fantastic." ARKADI DUBNOV

"I was shaken, left reeling just like after reading Kafka." VASILI GENERALOV

Aleksei Fedyarov was born in Chuvashia in 1976. After studying law, he worked as an investigator for the public prosecutor's office for ten years. In 2007, he started his own business. In 2013, he was suddenly arrested and convicted of 'particularly serious fraud' – a fate shared with many Russian entrepreneurs. He served a three-year sentence in a camp in the Urals. While still in custody, Fedyarov began filing appeals on behalf of other prisoners. Today he is not only a human rights activist, he is now head of the legal department of the Rus Sidyashchi Charity Fund, the only fund that helps Russian prisoners and their families. At the same time, he is the managing partner of a law firm. Fedyarov lives in Moscow.

Aleksei Fedyarov

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SUMMARY

The widower Anatoli is a postal clerk in the northernmost cluster FJL (Franz Joseph Land), to which those condemned for 'terrorism' or 'sodomy' are banished. However, they don't live in prisoner barracks, but in their own houses, sleeping on bed linen instead of bare beds. And they can send letters to other clusters with the exception of the zero cluster Moscow, which has already been cleansed of all harmful elements.

When Anatoli delivers the post to the neighboring island for censorship, as he does every week, he is arrested on account of a denunciation because, when drunk, he had spoken out in favor of using nuclear weapons against the 'brother states'. Under torture, Anatoli denounces his drinking buddy, both of whom are executed. Their neighbor Victoria is now taking care of Anatoli's son Stanislav. What she does not know: it was her own brother David, collaborator with high-up connections, who had denounced Anatoli.

Anatoli's son Stanislav also grows up unaware. At 16, he and his girlfriend Masha find themselves in a network of betrayal and envy that also affects their friends and families. Fortunately, the old secret service agent Sergei holds his protective hand over Stanislav and Masha. Along with other old intelligence officers, Sergei had become an enemy of the new convention. The old KGBers had only persevered because they alone were competent enough to organize the large-scale resettlement campaign. Done with the intellectuals, the oligarchs would have been the next and last ones. Most of the depopulated old cities have already been flattened and dug up by the Chinese, leaving no home to go back to. The maligne elements in the clusters die out so that less and less clusters are needed and the old intelligence officers finally get the situation back under their own control.

But Sergei can read the signs of the times: the old oppression system no longer works. Either Sergei himself becomes a victim and rots in a cluster or he joins in with the new slogan of 'integration', which promises a faster revival of Russia as an economic power.

Sergei sees himself not as a traitor to his old comrades in the secret service, but as far-sighted, since he is now pursuing the plan to take Stanislav and his girlfriend Masha to a special school on the site of the former Kremlin in Moscow. There the future generation will be vaccinated with the great historical significance of the Great Renovation. In fact, Stanislav tells his foster mother Victoria that he and his girlfriend will go to this school because they don't want to be victims; they hope to be influential in the future.

Horrified, Victoria doesn't understand whether Stanislav made this decision out of conviction or out of immaturity. But then she herself, as the last representative of the old Moscow Intelligentsia, gets an offer from Sergei to manage the Integration media project, to gather as many survivors from that time as possible and re-educate people to the new system. Only after promising her a long life through medical intervention, Victoria agrees. And from now on, as a teacher, she always can stay connected, via a hologram bracelet, to her foster son Stanislav in the distant zero cluster Moscow.

Aleksei Fedyarov