

literary fiction

The Unknown

Novel. AST. Moscow 2017. 500 pages

Big Book shortlist 2017

Publishers: Slovak Republic - Slovart

The subtitle of Slapovski's most recent book is: "Novel of a Century 1917 to 2017". And indeed, the story begins with Nikolai Smirnov's entry into his diary on the 17th December 1917 and ends with a letter from Gleb Smirnov to his father Victor in 2017. Thus the novel is also a family saga spanning five generations, but not in the usual way as there is neither a clear picture of the family Smirnov nor of 20th century Russia. The family-tree is shown in the appendix and only a few of the members of family are given a chance to speak. Two separate branches of the family are presented, whose narratives either overlap or leave gaps in time.

What may appear to be a design error in the novel, is intentionally so composed with style and content consistently applied. Noteworthy are the gaps in the family mosaic which automatically bring the fissures of the previous Russian century to the fore. Slapovski holds the family together over a century merely by story-telling, which in hindsight, does not yield any final truths. Every character is influenced by their own epoch and narrates in their own particular style - diaries, letters, interviews, short stories, emails – thereby mirroring the time in which they live. It is only in a judicial report that we learn of Anton Smirnov's career as an unwitting crook, for which he was sentenced to death in 1962. The only common thread in all these different lives is the presence and influence of the Russian secret service.

In THE UNKNOWN Slapovski's well-known ability of remaining authentic over the whole stylistic bandwidth as well as his much-vaunted empathy with each of his insignificant and bungling protagonists, which were recently reviled as "too soft" by patriotically disposed critics, come together creating a magnificent multi-faceted novel. There is no single style that smooths the image of the century. No hubristic judgment of the individual fate. Many members of the family recognize that they are on their way into the unknown. Significantly, the succession stops for those who react with a closed life-plan because they fear the unknown future too much. THE UNKNOWN is thus a courageous response to new and old political reflexives in Russia: the rising self-emancipating and self-opening society being harassed from above and isolated from the world.



THE AUTHOR

translations
8 languages

awards
Big Book shortlist 2017
Penne Award (Italy) 2009

other work
Genii

Slapovski was born in 1957 in Saratov. He holds a degree in philology from the university of Saratov. He worked as a school teacher, truck driver and journalist. His writing debut was a theater piece in 1985. He won several awards (Eugin O'Neill Drama Festival/USA, European Theater Festival/D-Kassel, Moscow Theater Competition). He has successfully written several novels and TV-series and has been nominated four times for the Russian Booker and two times for Big Book Award. His works are translated into many languages. Slapovski lives in Moscow.

Aleksei Slapovski