

“Brief Reviews”

Siberia

Nikolai Maslov

Translated by Blake Ferris with Lisa Barocas Anderson

Afterword by Emmanuel Carrère

Soft Skull Press

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by Jeff Bursey

Initially, *Siberia* comes across as a thoroughly bleak and depressing graphic novel. Yet despite its grey world, the resilience shown by its author-protagonist is as enduring as the state of the nation that is presented. A night watchman, whose exposure to drawing consisted of a year in art school and the study of a handful of art books and graphic novels, Maslov approached a French publisher in Moscow in 2000 with a few panels in hand. Impressed, Emmanuel Durand acted as patron for three years while Maslov worked on relating his autobiography in graphic novel form.

Emmanuel Carrère describes the result. “So much to say that it was on his own and in his own corner, with neither tradition nor models, that [Maslov] invented this clean and rigorous frame, this economic pairing of text and image, these muted nuances of grey.” Maslov shows the debilitating life led by a young man, who resembles many other young men. He drinks a great deal of alcohol, engages in casual and planned violence, has the occasional encounter with a girl, and is otherwise always enduring some form of oppression and limited horizons. There’s no Dostoyevskian spirituality here, and no Chekhovian bittersweetness. What there is is simply part of regular life in Russia for men of a certain position and generation: a sense of alienation, numbness, and trauma. At first glance the artwork looks tired, flat, unremittingly grey, and not solely because the work is done in pencil. At times people appear as shapes without eyes, ears, nose, and mouth, as if they so much like the next person in their defeat that they have no distinguishing features. But the mood changes as one reads on.

Maslov charts his life as a young man in a western Siberian school in 1971 and, later, working on a construction site. Drinking is the sole recreational activity. Eventually he is drafted. “And so that was it, adolescence was over,” is Maslov’s terse summation of this rupture. Military life in Mongolia, apart from a change in uniform and armed with more dangerous weapons, is not too different from village life, but on one afternoon he is exposed to a kind of beauty he had never seen before. There is a mountain which strikes Maslov as “an astonishing, magnificent and mysterious place! The mountain drew me towards it like a lover...” The panels display the gratitude Maslov felt at being freed from the confines of the barracks. The impressions he gathered of Mongolian life, even from afar, have obviously stayed with him.

After returning to civilian life, Maslov worked in construction again, where heavy drinking was again the norm. (“As always, however, there was little time for eating,” reads one laconic panel). He moves on to studying Soviet art and selling Lenin portraits. He meets his future wife, leaves Siberia for Moscow, and winds up in a “mental hospital.” As Carrère says, “I knew a psychiatric hospital just like the institution that Maslov landed in, and I understood that it was an

almost inevitable stop in the via dolorosa of the uprooted peasant who finds himself in Moscow.” The book concludes with a sentiment that would look simplistic if the reader had not seen how hard Maslov had worked to retain certain personal traits despite his arduous life.

Throughout, the artwork is intense, brooding, latent with emotions, potent in its criticism of Soviet life, and the character of Russians who have been reduced, in the eyes of the whole world, to unproductive violent alcoholics. Here is a novel that, in its deep personal pains and convictions, has no time for ideology or romanticizing. There’s nothing false about this novel. *Siberia* is an achievement well beyond its modest tale and its modest methods.

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