

3-5-2015

A Body Outside the Kremlin

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DOI: 10.25148/etd.FI15032128

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FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

Miami, Florida

A BODY OUTSIDE THE KREMLIN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

CREATIVE WRITING

by

James May

2015

To: Dean Michael R. Heithaus
College of Arts and Sciences

This thesis, written by James May, and entitled A Body Outside the Kremlin, having been approved in respect to style and intellectual content, is referred to you for judgment.

We have read this thesis and recommend that it be approved.

Asher Z. Milbauer

Les Standiford

Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

Date of Defense: March 5, 2015

The thesis of James May is approved.

Dean Michael R. Heithaus
Arts and Sciences

Dean Lakshmi N. Reddi
University Graduate School

Florida International University, 2015

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of those who were imprisoned and suffered at the Northern Camps of Special Significance in the Solovetsky Archipelago.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the members of my committee for their attention and patience throughout a long process. Each has had a hand in making this book what it is. Dr. Asher Milbauer assigned the coursework that launched my interest in Soviet history and alerted me to Solovetsky's potential as a topic. Dr. Les Standiford encourages all of his students to regard genre writing as worthy of serious literary effort, and inspired me to do so by his example.

I am especially grateful to Professor Lynne Barrett, who provided important guidance at every stage. Her patient good-humor and collegiality supported me through the difficult process of writing a first novel, and I have formed myself as a writer on her thoughts about plot and meaning.

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS
A BODY OUTSIDE THE KREMLIN

by

James May

Florida International University, 2015

Miami, Florida

Professor Lynne Barrett, Major Professor

A BODY OUTSIDE THE KREMLIN is a historical mystery novel set in the Northern Camps of Special Significance, a Soviet Russian penal institution based in the Solovetsky Archipelago during the 1920s. The protagonist, working first with the camp authorities, then in spite of their disapproval, solves the murder of a fellow prisoner. In the process he improves his position within the camp, while also becoming hardened to the brutal necessities of camp life. Prior to the establishment of the penal camp, the Solovetsky Archipelago was the site of an important Russian Orthodox monastery, and the mystery proves to involve valuables, particularly icons, seized from the monks by the Soviet secret police. Thus the novel treats themes not only of statist repression, but also religious epiphany and the problems of true perception in a world of symbols.

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CHAPTER ONE

Someone must have been telling the Information and Investigation Section about me and Gennady Antonov, for I was summoned from roll call for questioning the morning they discovered the body.

And who was I who they were summoning? A freezing, sickly young man. A prisoner waiting for the count of prisoners to finish so he could move and force a little heat into his arms and legs. From where I stood, I could look up from the ragged coats and hats worn by my fellow *zeks* to a pair of snow-swept churches, hemming us in on either side. They were heaps of shapes in the dark. The towers of Preobrazhenski Cathedral, larger of the two, were blackened, stunted, disproportionate. They'd lost their cupolas in a fire. Men who'd been here longer than I had said it had happened shortly after the Bolsheviks took the place over from the monks, two years before. The rest was arches, boarded windows, or dirty whitewash slapped over brick and stone. The cupolas must once have anchored the church in the air. Without them, the whole structure floated off into abstraction, flat in the lamplight, like geometry on gridded paper.

“Seven.”

“Eight.”

“Nine.”

“The eighty-seventh group of ten.”

That was concrete enough. I could hear the count taking place somewhere to my right. We were waiting to be tallied before they split us into our usual work detachments and gave us our assignments. This was my customary spot, which meant I'd be part of the

one-hundred-and-fiftieth or one-hundred-and-fifty-first group of ten. Between me and the tally's progress hung six-hundred prisoners'-worth of fogged white breath.

This was October, 1926, on the island of Solovetsky. I was twenty years old.

Solovetsky. Then, as now, people called it Solovki for short, as if they were mentioning a friend. Solovetsky, Solovki: new words of the Soviet state, which like so many others were old words with new meanings attached. Before 1917 they'd been names for a monastery. It was the oldest in the north: you imagined holy cassocks and beards, snow-covered shrines among the evergreens, rocky shores, the pealing of bells over empty distances. For five-hundred years monks drank *kvass* and upheld Orthodoxy against the Antichrist's advances. If you were devout, you might have made a pilgrimage during your summer holidays, sent back a postcard showing white spires and a shining bay. Even if you weren't, you might have seen the postcard.

And after? After the revolution, Solovki was no longer a spot to visit. Its name meant distance, cold. It meant disappearance. Solovetsky was a place where people were sent for three-, five-, or ten-year sentences, and who knew what might be waiting for them when they got out? The state itself had not yet existed for quite ten years. Solovetsky was for embezzlers, wreckers, and Mensheviks. Or, depending on your revolutionary zeal, for anyone who did not sufficiently repudiate the bourgeois conventions of the past. It was the space between two parentheses. Certain elements were to be isolated from the rest of the social equation until, at some uncertain, later moment, the time would come to evaluate them. I suppose there was general consensus among speakers of Russian that Solovki was an icy hell. But distance is one of hell's properties. We like to believe that hell is somewhere else.

Those of us confined there naturally acquired still another perspective. Solovetsky was a prison-labor camp, with lumber as its main product. With Arkhangelsk, the nearest city of any size, 150 miles away by boat, it was remote. And so Solovki also raised vegetables, manufactured bricks, operated a power plant, washed clothing, administered programs for the edification of its inmates, buried them when they starved or had to be shot... It scattered its outposts throughout the islands of the Solovetsky Archipelago, but operations centered on the former monastery kremlin and its outbuildings, which stood on the main island of Solovetsky itself. The official name for all of this was *SLON*: *Severnye Lagery Osobogo Naznacheniya*, the Northern Camps of Special Significance. The word *slon* means “elephant,” of course. Another new meaning for an old word.

The count went on.

“Three.”

“Four.”

Being hungry enough for a long enough time can produce a sensation like moving backwards very slowly while staring straight ahead. That morning, the objects before me — the churches’ arcs and angles, the coats, the hats, the swollen features of my neighbors — seemed to have receded a little more every time I looked at them, without my ever quite catching them in motion.

The counting stopped. When, after a minute or two, it hadn’t resumed, the men around me began to murmur.

Then the same voice, shouting a name instead of counting: “Bogomolov! Prisoner Anatoly Bogomolov!”

The name was mine. It had never sounded quite so alarming. I couldn't think of anything I'd done, but on Solovki the wheels of justice ground erratically. You could have a bad day and for an imaginary crime get a real bullet in your real head.

"Better go quick, Tolya." That was my friend Nikolai, muttering behind me. "Don't forget about yelling." He gave me a push forward.

Faces turned to look as I hurried to the front of the column, some pitying, some resentful. Being singled out by name promised nothing good for the named *zek*. Hence pity. But a delay at roll meant a slow start on the day's quota, and then in turn less time for food and rest before curfew, of which there was little enough already. Hence resentment.

Wind sluiced through the alley between the churches. I'd thought it was bad before, but stepping out from the sheltering mass of bodies made it worse. The Company Commander waited there for me, a man named Graski.

Graski's sadism was famous. When your work platoon was shaken out of bed at midnight to toil squelchingly at shoring up the walls of a canal, it would inevitably be on his orders. Our boots were thin and full of holes because he didn't think we should be coddled. Weevils in your bread? Graski laughed about it somewhere. So, yes, sadism — but not of a very inventive kind. Too much work, too little food, noxious living conditions, the occasional beating death of a prisoner by the guards, another prisoner being made to stand naked in the cold during winter, or among clouds of mosquitoes in the summer: most of his monstrosities simply arose from his position as Company Commander. Even the most personal of his abuses towards us — he would require us to yell "Good morning, Commander," more and more loudly in response to his "Good

morning, prisoners,” until he grew bored — was tedious and unoriginal. But it was that we hated him for the most, that made us spit when we said his name.

There was also the fact that a fellow prisoner might have been expected to be more sympathetic. But really, that was unrealistic. Most of the men who ensured Solovki’s continued functioning as a prison were serving sentences. Should we have expected that to make it a paradise for us?

The difference was that they were also members of the Bolshevik secret-police agency, the Cheka, under whose authority the camp was administered. The laws of demography ordained that the Cheka would have its share of Russia’s rapists and mean drunks, men who had to be sent to jail like other criminals. The genius of the organization, in those days as today, lay in its adaptation to those laws. It recognized that such operatives don’t lose their political suitability when the State is forced to lock them up: most still make good Communists, effective spies and bosses. And this realization solved yet another problem: a camp with a population like Solovetsky’s — some 20,000 souls in 1926, a big-enough number, if nowhere near what it would grow to in time — needs administrators, while a Party as progressive as the Bolsheviks has few personnel to spare for the care and feeding of wrecking workers and reactionary class enemies. Did it take some arch-bureaucrat to untangle the dilemma, or was it such a rational piece of political economy that its obviousness slapped even the freshest Party member in the face? At any rate, the solution was elegant: let the prisoners run the prison, with the ideologically correct ones ministering to the incorrect.

You were told when you arrived that you’d stepped out of the sphere of Soviet power, and onto a shore where only Solovki power mattered. Every new group of