

## Oblivion

**Sergei Lebedev**

**Antonina W. Bouis, Translator**

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*With its vibrant, sophisticated prose style, this is a necessary historical novel in Gulag literature.*

Sergei Lebedev's *Oblivion*, translated by Antonina W. Bouis, creates a searing historical narrative that begins in a *dacha* and ends in an icy sinkhole near the Arctic Circle. Stalinist Russia and the horrors of the Gulag agency's forced labor camps are the focus of Lebedev's brutal and stylish debut novel. Combining the structure of a detective novel with a vibrant, sophisticated prose style, *Oblivion* is one man's journey to confront the chilling truth buried deep in Russia's collective memory.

The unnamed protagonist's story, told in first person, begins with his birth. His childhood is spent under the influence of his family's neighbor, a blind man called Grandfather II. Grandfather II's past is unknown, and the boy finds it difficult to love him due to an eerie feeling he senses when around him. When the boy is hospitalized following a dog attack, the doctors discover he needs a blood transfusion in order to stay alive; Grandfather II volunteers. The boy survives, the old man doesn't. Years later, filled with anxiety about the blood of this man that courses through him, the adult narrator, who has traveled extensively as a geologist, embarks on a journey to find the truth about who this man was.

Trekking from south to north, the narrator becomes a witness to the grim realities of Stalinist Russia. Grandfather II is a symbol, a representative of Russia's shameful legacy—genocide from the forced labor camps. Bouis's translation loses none of Lebedev's descriptive powers in this richly detailed voyage. In these details, Lebedev confronts the atrocities of the gulags through memory and place. The climax of the narrator's journey is horrific as he comes to terms with Grandfather II's murderous history.

*Oblivion* is compelling as a novel, but factor in the historical importance of this epoch in Russia's past and it becomes a necessary novel of Gulag literature. Stories can be rewritten, but first they must be written. Russia's collective memory can no longer deny the past, and, with the publication of *Oblivion*, it takes a vital step towards its ownership.

MONICA CARTER (Winter 2016)

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