

Selected Episodes Relating to the Life of Vladimir Daniilovich Myukis, Deceased

Daniel Marcus

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Myukis, or Voldoya, as he is familiarly known, was a Russian-American artist of some talent who might have been famous had he really lived. This imaginative, sometimes funny, sometimes frustrating novel was inspired by Daniel Marcus's trip to a New York museum. From this visit, Marcus came away with the story of the fabricated Voldoya.

The book, as Marcus says, has no plot. It is instead comprised of a nonlinear series of vignettes that follow Voldoya from his harsh life in the USSR to his immigration to the United States in 1994 where he lived the last ten years of his life. By age nine, Voldoya was left homeless when his parents and grandparents were killed during World War II. As a teenager, his artistic talent saved him from a life on the streets and set him onto a career as a commercial artist and document forger for the KGB.

When the USSR collapses, Voldoya loses most of his government pension and joins the migration of former Soviet citizens to Brooklyn. There he becomes the only "goy" employee of a kosher deli, a job he likes and does well. Tragically, Voldoya dies at age sixty-eight from sepsis, contracted by an unsanitary scope used on him during a routine colonoscopy.

Fictionalized artist Voldoya is portrayed unevenly. Some stories are told with verve and hold the reader's interest while others lapse into tedious description, most painfully the revealing of the "disenfranchised artists of south Brooklyn." The author makes good use of sarcasm, but he relies on it too much—almost all events in the protagonist's life take an ironic turn, up to his untimely death. However, Marcus does effectively use irony to expose the corruption of the supposedly socialist USSR, where power, in reality, was wielded by ruthless bureaucrats.

At his best, Marcus depicts Voldoya as a vulnerable man whose early traumas left him scared of commitment. Yet, one of the most enjoyable tales in the novel tells of the artist's romance with Lizveta who, like Voldoya, was a KGB operative. Only a few days before their wedding, she is "transferred to another job" and Voldoya never sees the love of his life again. Other entertaining episodes recount Voldoya's work at the deli and his friendships with Russian expatriates.

Marcus's writing shows promise, and his better stories will remind some readers of funny *Seinfeld* episodes. He deftly weaves together the nonlinear tales, which careen from life in Brooklyn to the Soviet Union and back again. This keeps the novel moving as lighter US vignettes offer breaks from bleak and harsh remembrances of Soviet life. An attractive cover accompanies this well edited book. In all, greater attention to plot and less focus on description would make the story more enjoyable.

KARL HELICHER (April 16, 2013)

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