

Strange Telescopes: Following the Apocalypse from Moscow to Siberia

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A crazed old man spends his life tunneling under the vast reaches of Moscow. Caked in grime and sewage, he pronounces himself “Lord of the Underground.” Despite his regal title, he labors in near-total obscurity. Then there’s the priest in the Russian Orthodox Church who finds his calling in exorcising demons in the Ukraine, where the fall of the Communist state has led to a resurgence in the occult. The strangest of all is the Siberian traffic cop who suddenly realizes he is actually the reincarnated Jesus, the Son of God on earth, and convinces thousands of his disenchanted countrymen to sell all they have and follow him to the top of a snow-encrusted mountain. The fact that he teaches that there are two Supreme Beings—the God of the Universe who created the planets and stars *and* God the Father who created souls—does not faze them in the slightest.

The author chronicles the lives of these men and more on his trek across the former Soviet Union as he seeks to view their worlds as they see them, through their “strange telescopes.” His somewhat disjointed, choppy writing style is a cross between formal prose and blog posting, and it is perfect for his subject matter. After all, this is no disinterested newspaper reporting of these curious men; this is a personal travelogue, where the protagonist (who just happens to have the author’s name and background) enmeshes himself in their bizarre alternate realities.

The author lived in the former Soviet Union for ten years, so he has a deep knowledge of the people and languages he encounters. He is so wondrously skilled at description and character development with the blending of real places and events that the reader cannot easily separate reality from his fictitious constructs. For example, he so realistically describes the neo-Christ and his followers that there surely must be a sparkling commune called the Abode of Dawn at the top of a Siberian mountain, peopled with soft-spoken acolytes and the “holiest man on earth.” Yet when the author asks the chief disciple of the Siberian Jesus why there are sixty-one “rules of the soul,” the other snaps at him with the sort of sophisticated reply so prevalent in the sect: “Because there are rules and there are sixty-one of them.”

From the awful stench and loneliness of the Diggers underground travels, to the ghastly shriek of a “demon-possessed” woman and his odd encounter with the beautiful young concubine of the Siberian Jesus, the author has created a compelling work of East European verisimilitude. Anyone with an interest in fascinating snippets of modern life in the former Soviet Union will enjoy accompanying the author on his remarkable journey.

ALAN J. COUTURE (April 13, 2009)

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