Anton: A Young Boy, His Friend & the Russian Revolution
by Dale Eisler

Reviewed by Gillian Harding-Russell

In Dale Eisler’s Antton, a young boy’s experience of the Russian Revolution unfolds before our eyes. With just a few scenes in which a third-person narrator fills in what the first-person child-speaker could not have known, the story is told by Antton, and for good reason: only through his innocent eyes, devoid of ideology and prejudice, may the reader see events as they happened, without partisan loyalties. Antton’s best friend Kaza, son of the Bolshevik sympathizer and double agent Sylowich, further balances the possible bias of the narration from the German Antton’s side. With a child’s logic, Antton offers two reasons for telling his story, one of which is why Kaza is included in the narration: since Kaza’s “remembered” life started when his brother was crushed under a wagon, Antton uses this timeline initiated by an event in his friend’s life to validate the commencement of his own “remembered” life, i.e., with his father’s murder:

I know what you’re thinking. You’re wondering why I can say right to the day and minute when my life began, or when other things happened. Or how I know Kaza and I were looking at clouds on June 26, 1922 at 1:42 in the afternoon. Or that I waited a minute and 10 seconds before I said something after Kaza said the cloud looked like the wagon that squished his brother. Or that Kaza was four years, two months and three days old when his brother Omar died. I’m not making it up. I just know because I honestly feel like I remember to the minute. Maybe it’s just my imagination, but it feels real and it’s been that way my whole life. Don’t ask me how I remember or why I remember things this way, I just do, and it’s true. (22–23)

The accuracy of the child’s memory may be attributed to its being uncluttered at that early stage of development, but also to the emotional impact of various traumatic events that occurred during that formative period of his life. Like the clouds in the sky – spaced apart and open to subjective interpretation – that the boys like to observe, Antton likens his experience of memory to that of watching a movie “where some of the frames are missing.” “You see images, but some of them are disconnected and don’t flow seamlessly one into the other” (29).

Through young Antton’s point of view, Eisler captures the brutality of the Bolshevik regime, with his father slaughtered in front of his own house and the shooting of all the men in a small German community, one that had been imported during the previous tsar’s regime to teach the local Russian population to till the soil. Again the child’s limited perspective and the shifting focus of his memory of these disturbing historical incidents bring alive their horror as no third-person, more journalistic reportage could achieve:

All I can say for sure is that the next thing I remember was the terrible sound of a woman shrieking, then wailing. I had never heard that kind of thing before, or since, and I have never been able to quite describe it. All I can say is that it was this forlorn mixture of fear, torment and anguish. So indescribable that the sound seemed almost inhuman, even alien. I couldn’t see her, but somehow I was sure it was my mother. (30)
Anton simply reports impressions and remembers that his “panic and fear” were so great that he vomited on his shirt and pants. Later we learn through Kaza (who has heard from his father) that Anton’s mother and sister, Emma, were raped by Bolsheviks, and thus the inclusion of Kaza affords the reader another perspective on the events of the novel.

The Roman Catholic priest Alois Frederick had turned to the Church to escape his traumatic experiences of being bullied and raped by Russians for his Germanic background. Although Frederick at first found solace there, this holy impulse quickly turns to a desire for revenge as the Bolshevik Revolution proceeds. For practical but no less desperate reasons, the priest uses the confessional booth to communicate in secret with a larger counter-revolutionary force:

> “Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been one week since my last confession,” said the man in a hushed voice, barely more than a whisper.
> “God bless you, my son, in the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Spirit. Amen. Tell me your sins.”
> “It looks like we’re almost there.”
> “Almost? It’s taken long enough. How soon?”
> “Days. A week, maybe; 10 days at the most.”
> “Not before?”
> “No.”
> “Why not? We’ve been hearing that this was going to happen for two months. What is taking so long? What else needs to be done?” (116)

The reader’s shared conspiratorial knowledge with the priest and his agent adds an intriguing dimension to other accumulating ironies. In a later scene Anton, who has become an altar boy, overhears one of these strange confessionals, and is shocked to hear the priest utter the word “Fuck.”

Anton the narrator, looking back on the child Anton, attributes his knowledge about the events in the community to the strategic position he liked to adopt by climbing a tree in front of his house from which he could safely watch the goings-on of the two-sided street that formed the community of Fischer-Franzen: “I was able to watch things from above without feeling like I was part of what was happening. So I was kind of detached from what I saw” (196). With the advantage that this perspective lends him, Anton describes his insights into the changes that were taking place in the community: women deprived of their husbands forced to do all the heavy labour and coerced into sharing their produce with the overlord regime, with the result that their own children often starved. Under these hard conditions, Anton as a very young boy achieves a maturity that, along with his loyalty to Kaza, results in his developing a strong conscience that marks his actions throughout his life. When Kaza, in a flash forward at the end of the novel, travels across the world to visit his old friend in a nursing home, the reader does not doubt the truth of that friendship or the visit (though the scene is one of the few that are overwritten, and would be more effective edited down to size).

This is a gripping, heart-warming novel that dramatizes an important period in history and tells the story of a rare friendship between boys whose fathers come from opposing backgrounds. The childhood scenes with Anton during his childhood ring with authenticity and are dramatically presented, but some of the sections told in the third person are disappointingly flat. Exceptions are the powerful scenes with Trotsky, which obviously gain from the fact that Eisler is an historian as well as a novelist. One additional tiny complaint: I found it difficult to get used to the modern slang and swear words used by the young men, and wonder if there might not be another idiom-in-translation that better reflects the language and culture of the times. Not to linger on these minor flaws, the novel is well worth reading for the strength of its child narrator, and for the difficult historic times that it reflects.