Sex in Russia: New and Selected Stories
by Kenneth Radu

Reviewed by Ronald Charles Epstein

Kenneth Radu is a respected member of Quebec’s anglophone literary community. He has been shortlisted for the Governor-General’s Award and has won a Quebec Writers’ Federation Award for best English-language fiction. In addition to his novels and short-story collections, he has published the family history The Devil is Clever.

The anthology Sex in Russia features varied protagonists who struggle with personal dilemmas and/or historical forces. They include a fictional version of a historical Russian prince, a living relic of another age, as well as several relentlessly contemporary protagonists. Radu writes from the perspective of a man who is still hip, but too old to be historical.

The first story, “Sex in Russia,” may disappoint some readers, since its title is a clever tease. Delia, the aging protagonist, has a sexual relationship with a decades-younger French teacher named Yves, at home in Montreal. Since she is a wealthy “cougar,” her Russian tour exposes her to the possibility of sex with more exotic young men. Unfortunately, she is sidetracked by Frank “from the cruise boat, not a member of her particular group. He was too old for her . . .” (4) Even when she considers the possibility of a carnal relationship with him, she offers her a different – and disturbing – form of intimacy.

“Gifted” is set in a college in Montreal, a city traumatized by campus shootings. Two youths are contrasted: Siegfried, the campus punk, and Jason, a troubled thirteen-year-old prodigy. As the story unfolds, it is revealed that the younger boy is planning a horrible crime. The idea of the psychopathic conformist being more dangerous than the class rebel is hardly a fresh concept. Fortunately, Jason’s character development is skillfully described. His pathology becomes apparent when he aims a knife at his mother and clobbers family’s Labrador retriever with his violin. After therapy, his fearful parents leave him alone and “no dog greets him because the Lab was adopted by another family” (20).

The Montreal students live in the shadows of past tragedies, while others experience their own. In “Which is the Road to Florence?”, twentieth-century history has buffeted its unnamed protagonist, an elderly European lady who languishes in post-Mao China. A Western journalist’s arrival prompts her to recall her transformation from privileged expatriate to stranded foreigner. Fragmentary descriptions of Communist persecution, coupled with a description of her current existence in a special hotel, enable the reader to appreciate her sad fate.

“A Legend of 1918” covers the Russian revolutionaries’ massacre of Czar Nicholas II and his family by focusing on Alexei, the haemophiliac crown prince. His story is recalled in flashbacks that trace the teen’s deteriorating status. This is symbolized by the transformation of Derevenko, the boy’s sailor/servant, from companion to a mutineer who forces the prince to serve him. As for the act itself, it is presented as a student’s grim, final lesson, namely that “in revolutions, children also perish” (175).

Radu mixes social satire with compassion, presenting in the story “In Jeopardy” a Jeopardy contestant’s interior monologue. Oscar Sternhaus is a retired Winnipeg landscaper who harbours anti-American sentiments, scorning that country for its ethnocentrism and worship of its presidents, which supposedly inspires the contest category. He even refers to the expression “kick butt” (134) as
“betraying the cloacal tendency of the American mind” (134). Such statements will alienate the U.S. reader, but others may root for this character, because he plays in order to finance his wife’s experimental cancer treatments – a sorrow he cannot share with the television audience.

The author examines a society in which the elderly are viewed as potential financial life preservers by their overextended adult children. The cleverly titled “Old Money” raises the issue through its portrait of Cassandra, a college math teacher. She and her colleagues discuss their elderly mothers, covering inner fears with expressions of loving concern. That veneer is stripped; it is noted that “Cassandra thanked the God in whom she did not believe” (60) that her mother is not living with her. Her true nature is further exposed when the senior reveals that she is about to take an expensive Volga River cruise. Reminders of pressing monetary obligations lead Cassandra to surreptitiously leave brochures promoting voluntary euthanasia in her mother’s seniors’ residence. Radu wrote compassionately about his own mother’s Depression-era travails in The Devil is Clever and will not spare the feckless “boomer.”

Kenneth Radu’s greatest literary strength is his ability to draw others into his fictional settings, cleverly placing interesting characters in intriguing situations. He displays the necessary empathy to reveal his protagonists’ natures, while his morally centered prose provides perspective. ★

Ronald Charles Epstein reviewed Kenneth Radu’s books for the Canadian Book Review Annual.

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