

White on Black

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By Ruben Gallego

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Maybe "universal health care" is really the last refuge of the scoundrel.

After all, you can debate a liberal on the subject of the welfare state by pointing out Europe's stagnant economies with permanent double-digit unemployment and generations of unassimilated immigrants who can't penetrate the rigid social and economic structure of their host country if they even want to.

But no matter how devastating your argument, the fallback trump card is invariably, "Well at least they have universal health care."

This has been the default setting for leftists defending the most repugnant tyrannical regimes since Phil Donahue popularized it in the 1980s. In response to conservative exposes of the atrocities committed by Cuba, the Sandinistas or the Soviet Union, Phil would wave his arms and smugly proclaim, "Well, at least Castro provides universal health care."

Ruben Gallego knows all about the horror cradle-to-grave "care" can produce. The Grandson of the Spanish Communist Party's secretary general, Gallego was dumped into Soviet institutions as a baby and abandoned by his family to a life of deprivation, indoctrination and assumed eventual extermination.

White on Black is Gallego's quirky and beautifully written book about his life as the ward of an uncaring state. Ostensibly a novel because he takes some literary license with the details and tells an occasional anecdote from the point of view of another character, the book undoubtedly is closer to reality than James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces*.

Hey, Oprah, instead of pushing fabricated memoirs like Frey's, how about publicizing the story of a guy who can't move his legs and only has one useful finger, yet triumphed over certain death in a Soviet health care gulag? That he became a great writer and a computer programmer, thanks to American technology and generosity, makes it an even better story.

But *White on Black* may be ill suited for a daytime talk-show host; it isn't a dark, horrifying tale of institutional abuse meant to shock the senses. While the book might do that (in surprisingly small doses), its main goal is to lift the spirit.

Gallego begins his book with a wrenching anecdote about trying to crawl to the bathroom in the middle of the night without useful hands or feet, as his cries for help go unanswered by the attendants at the children's home. But he soon clarifies the intent of his book, writing:

"I purposely avoid writing about anything bad. I'm convinced that life and literature have more than enough of the dark side. It just so happened that I've witnessed too much human cruelty and hate. To describe the vileness of man's fall and bestiality is to multiply the already endless chain of interconnected blasts of evil. That's not what I want. I write about goodness, triumph, joy and love.

"I write about strength. Spiritual and physical strength. The strength each of us has inside."

Gallego takes a matter-of-fact approach to his own triumph. "If you don't have hands or feet, you're either a hero or you're dead," he writes. Thus, he's profoundly unimpressed by literary heroes with the

advantages of mobility, such as the Three Musketeers.

Gallego displays a love for life and a gratitude for God's mercies - no matter how small - on virtually every page. He also has an irrepressible, and sometimes wicked, sense of humor reminiscent of that found in Ron Radosh's autobiography, *Commies*, though his experiences are more along the lines of Solzhenitsyn's.

The Soviet system of housing handicapped and severely ill children was very much another gulag. The children were shuttled through a series of institutions that varied only in the degree of their cruelty. Some were barely heated, Gallego writes, and others had better food (so the kids could enjoy a "holiday" of savoring bread dipped in oil and sprinkled with salt on occasion). Some had secretly religious and compassionate attendants, and others had stern apparatchiks at the helm. As Gallego explains when describing life in one of the worst children's homes: "Like prisons, children's homes vary."

Some of the children – the "ambulants," as Gallego calls them – would be able to learn some kind of simple trade and leave the system as teenagers for a life of simple work. But while Gallego was a brilliant student, the Workers Paradise had nothing for him. Both Gallego and the people in charge of him knew his fate would be the same as that of all children who could not move around on their own. At the age of 15, he would be thrown onto a bed in an old folks home and left unattended to starve to death in his own filth.

Meanwhile, Moscow's first priority for the children – regardless of whether they would survive to work in Soviet society – was indoctrination. The Communists needed to make sure even throwaways like Gallego would be pure in their ideology and die knowing the glories of the Soviet system and grateful to not have been consigned to the horrors of life in the hated United States.

"We were supposed to hate that country," Gallego writes. "We were supposed to hate all the capitalist countries, but especially America. The workers in America were constantly starving and dying, and an endless stream of people hoping to change their citizenship kept pouring into the Soviet Embassy in the United States."

"I loved America. I'd loved it since I was nine. I was nine when they told me there were no handicapped people in America. They were killed. All of them. If a handicapped child was born into a family, the doctor gave the child a fatal injection."

"Now do you understand, children, how lucky we were to be born in our country? In the Soviet Union, we don't kill our handicapped children."

In his book's sole surrender to despair, Gallego concludes: "I don't want them to feed me for free, and I can never have a useful profession. I want the injection, the fatal injection. I want to go to America."

But by the age of 10, Gallego was becoming suspicious of the rhetoric. A gifted student who loved the unassailable reality of math and the escape of literature, he applied logic to the propaganda about New York City that a supervisor fed the class. He then approached his sympathetic history teacher.

Working through the "facts" laid out by the other teacher, the boy works it through:

"Then according to my rough estimate, several hundred thousand unemployed people must be dying on the streets of New York, for instance, because they have nothing to eat. New York must be piled high with corpses! Someone has to keep cleaning them out. I don't understand these Americans... Why haven't they thrown out their landowners and capitalists yet?"

"The teacher gives me a serious, stern look, as if seeing me for the first time. 'Not a soul, you hear? Don't bring this topic up with a soul. You're a big boy now, you should understand.'

"The next day, he comes over to me, bends down, and puts a big handsome book on the floor. 'Read this, it's a serious historical novel. I know you'll like it.'"

Like he does about nearly every aspect of his life in the children's homes, Ruben finds the humor in the totalitarian impulse for thought control. When someone smuggled rock and roll recorded on discarded X-ray film into the home, Gallego recalls, "The innocuous Western hits horrified our teachers." The authorities cried, "'Do you know what they're singing about?'"

Gallego continues:

"We didn't. They took the music away, the transgressors' behavior was discussed by the school's pedagogical council, and a struggle against the capitalist influence went into full swing. A pointless struggle.

"The boys started wearing their hair long. Instructions were sent from Moscow on how to fight this 'contagion.' The pupils' hair was not supposed to fall below mid-ear.

Ears were measured with a ruler and their midpoints gauged by the eye. There was an unending struggle to have your hair be a little bit snazzier than your friends."

However, even this anecdote drives home the cruelty and inequalities in the Soviet utopia. "The arguments over long hair didn't concern me," Gallego reports. "They always shaved my head because I wasn't an ambulant."

Gallego has nothing even remotely humorous to say about the old folks' homes; he spent his life dreading them. Even after he makes it to America, he lives in fear of being returned to his home country and sent to a home to die. (When a Palestinian shopkeeper in San Francisco tells Gallego that America is an evil country and he should return to his homeland, Ruben is stunned.)

Gallego writes of two memorable characters, a lively female pensioner whose personality brought some light to the lives of those around her and a dignified crippled warrior from an elite unit, who were slated to be consigned to "the third floor" of a home to starve unattended and soiled. Both commit suicide instead.

Ruben escapes the third floor because of a bureaucratic loophole and the inability for anyone in the Soviet Union to make a decision. For once, the system works in his favor.

Because Gallego knew no other life and spent much of his early years drugged into submission, *White on Black* is, by necessity, not a chronological memoir. It is structured as a series of self-contained short essays. As brilliant and satisfying as they are, however, readers will be thirsty for more details of Gallego's escape from Soviet oppression. He reveals he is married, a Roman Catholic and living in the West earning a living as a computer programmer. How he got there hopefully will be the subject of another book.

When you finish *White on Black*, you will want to know more about Gallego's story, but you will know and admire the man. And you'll be even less inclined to suffer the collectivist fools who think the ultimate indictment of America is our health care system.

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