

ruben gallego

WHITE ON BLACK



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Gallego, Ruben (Author)

Schwartz, Marian (Translator)

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To be a crippled orphan anywhere is a sad thing; worst, undoubtedly, in the Third World, but no picnic in the Soviet Union. Gallego, a brilliant boy born with cerebral palsy, with hands and feet so twisted that though he could crawl he could use only his left index finger, was abandoned to state institutions by his grandfather in the 1960s. That he survived this "cruel and terrible" childhood is a tribute to a remarkably strong will. The most atrocious fact of many that readers learn is that eventually, usually at age 15, institutionalized boys, Gallego included, were transferred from children's wards to the "old folks' home," where they lay in their own urine until they died; in one month, seven out of eight perished. Amazingly, Gallego lived to marry, have children and write this extraordinary book of "stories," spare, elliptical, often fierce vignettes centered around remembered figures and events: "a bite of lard, a salami sandwich, a handful of figs, a blue sky, a couple of books, and a kind word." These glimpses of adversity and triumph are quirky, sometimes appalling, often funny and touching without being sentimental. The book won the 2003 Russian Booker Prize and should receive similar acclaim here. (Jan.)

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