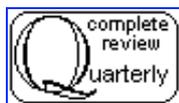


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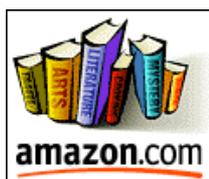


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# *White on Black*

by  
Ruben Gallego

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Title: *White on Black*  
Author: Ruben Gallego  
Genre: Memoir  
Written: 2003 (Eng. 2006)  
Length: 168 pages  
Original in: Russian  
Availability: [White on Black](#) - US  
[White on Black](#) - UK  
[White on Black](#) - Canada  
[Blanc sur noir](#) - France  
[Weiß auf Schwarz](#) - Deutschland

- Russian title: Белое на черном
- Translated by Marian Schwartz
- Awarded the Open Russia Booker Prize, 2003

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Our Assessment:

**B+** : disarming, but too loosely structured

See [our review](#) for fuller assessment.



### Review Summaries

Source	Rating	Date	Reviewer
<a href="#">FAZ</a>	.	19/6/2004	Kerstin Holm
Neue Zürcher Zeitung	B+	16/6/2004	Adam Olschewski
TLS	A	7/5/2004	George Walden

### Review Consensus:

Impressed

### From the Reviews:

- "Gonzalez' Buch nimmt mit in eine Normalhöhle, aus der kaum jemals literarische Funksprüche an die lesende Öffentlichkeit dringen. (...) Seinen Lebenstreibstoff jedoch hat er offenbar aus der in Rußland zäh wuchernden Liebe gesogen, deren merkwürdigen Metamorphosen er eindrucksvolle Denkmäler setzt." - Kerstin Holm, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung
- "Während viele Kapitel aus der Periode der Sowjetunion (...) trotz sachlichem Schreibstil starke Emotionen auszulösen vermögen, fallen die Texte danach etwas ab. Es ist lediglich die Person des Verfassers, die fortan das Konvolut zusammenhält. Die Texte reden von Amerika und dem Leistungsdruck dort, vom Leben mit der Behinderung -- über nichts, was man nicht kennt. Auch die Einfachheit der Sprache (Gallego lässt alle Figuren im gleichen Tonfall reden) erschöpft sich ein wenig. Nicht schlimm. Wir haben verstanden, und --- wichtiger -- wir haben mitgeföhlt." - Adam Olschewski, Neue Zürcher Zeitung
- "Reticence about politics is another source of the book's power. Gallego suffered more than most from Soviet squalor and lies, but this is indirectly conveyed, in often burlesque episodes. (...) If the entire book is an allegory of Communism, it is one that is unforced, and maybe unconscious. The Soviet Union emerges as a country in which good people existed, though most were morally disabled, metaphorically without arms or legs. Yet the tone is not one of despair, and the individual can survive against the odds." - George Walden, Times Literary Supplement

Please note that these ratings solely represent the [complete review](#)'s biased interpretation and subjective opinion of the actual reviews and do not claim to accurately reflect or represent the views of the reviewers. Similarly the illustrative quotes chosen here are merely those the [complete review](#) subjectively believes represent the tenor and judgment of the review as a whole. We acknowledge (and remind and warn you) that they may, in fact, be entirely unrepresentative of the actual reviews by any other measure.

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## The *complete review*'s Review:

*White on Black* is basically a series of autobiographical vignettes, scenes (mainly) of a childhood. It's a far from ordinary childhood, as Ruben Gallego has cerebral palsy. As he describes it:

I don't have hands. What I'm forced to make do with can only be called hands at a stretch. I'm used to it. I can type on the computer with my left index finger and I can hold a spoon in my right hand and eat tolerably well.

Such limitations are one thing, but he observes:

Living without hands isn't that hard if you have all the rest. All the rest -- my body -- developed even worse than my hands.

For the most part *White on Black* recounts Gallego's years as an orphan in a variety of children's (and old-age) homes, hospitals, and institutions. And all that in the Soviet Union. (Gallego was not, in fact, an orphan, but he was dumped in the institutions by his grand-father, the general secretary of the Spanish Communist Party: "I don't understand him. I'll never understand him", Gallego writes in the one chapter addressing that sorry piece of family history.)

*White on Black* is a story of astonishing good cheer. Gallego's life is hard, his physical limitations making it difficult to do most things by himself, and many of the attendants at the various homes he is in annoyed by the care demanded by the residents. He almost always tries to make the best of things, and he aims to please -- at one point going so far as starving himself so he wouldn't be so much of a bother and such a burden to lug around.

Goodness and badness come unexpectedly, great acts of kindness alternating with petty meanness. There's little self-pity here, though Gallego is often frustrated that his physical condition is equated with mental retardation -- especially since he seems, in fact, to be a pretty smart kid. But he accepts most things matter-of-factly.

The institutions where the disabled kids are kept and taught vary greatly. None are particularly comfortable, but the kids make the best of their situations. Drinking, smoking, pranks, companionship -- even a brief mania for working out: it's like most any boarding school, except that the kids are considerably more limited in their physical abilities. Often it seems Gallego is more jealous of the fact that most of the others have parents who visit or send things or take the others away than he is concerned with his disability.

Some of the scenes are heartbreaking, though for the most part

Gallego's touch is one that doesn't overwhelm the reader with pity and guilt. There are a few particularly mean people he encounters, but most of those things work themselves out. Reality is often so harsh that it veers towards the absurd -- the fact that he has obviously endured helping lighten what would otherwise be nearly unbearable, as when he is shoved off to an old folks' home when he is fifteen and the director doesn't want to take him because he poses a peculiar logistical problem:

"He's going to die here in a month, two maximum. I only have the right to bury people who are at least eighteen. This is an old folks' home, understand ? Where am I going to keep him for two years ? All the refrigerators are broken. Broken, understand ?"

A few scenes also reveal later episodes from Gallego's life -- including that he married, as well as a visit to America, where he gets to revel in a wheelchair. America was presented as the hated, evil empire to the children, but that didn't quite take in Gallego's young mind:

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. We teach you, treat you, and feed you for free. You have to study well so you can acquire a useful profession."

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.

So, yes, the pain does sometimes show through, brightly and starkly. But overall *White on Black* is not a depressing book; indeed, it is almost irrepressibly life-affirming.

The short chapters, each focussed on an episode or a brief period, are arranged roughly chronologically, but there's no clear progress as he jumps back and forth and about. This isn't straightforward autobiography, but rather touches upon representative or defining moments, occurrences, and encounters. There's no keeping track of which home or hospital he is in when, or the series of medical procedures he undergoes. For the most part, this isn't much of a problem, especially as the chapters -- short stories, practically -- are almost all gripping by themselves, but by the end one misses an overarching connexion, and there are a lot of open questions. Of too much there are only glimpses. Still, it's a powerful and very readable book.

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## Links:

### *White on Black*:

- [Harcourt](#) publicity page
- [John Murray](#) publicity page
- [Limbus Press](#) publicity page
- [Actes Sud](#) publicity page

- [Schirmer Graf](#) publicity page
- [Profile](#) in *The Observer*
- [Article](#) in *The Moscow News*

#### Reviews:

- [BookPage](#)
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- [Lire](#) (French)
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#### About the Author:

Russian author Ruben David Gonzalez Gallego (Рубен Давид Гонсалес Гальего) was born in 1968. He now lives in Germany.

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