

**Headline:** Rats for cats;Books;Literary criticism

**Source:** The Times Literary Supplement

**Issue Date:** Friday May 07, 2004

**Byline:** George Walden

**Page:** 28

**Word Count:** 936

**Edition:** TLS

**Story Text:**

BYELOYE NA CHERNOM (White on Black). By Ruben David Gonzales Gallego. 220pp. Moscow: Limbus. 86roubles. - 5 8370 0180 8 Byeloye na chernom (White on Black) is an extraordinary book. The winner of the 2003 Russian Booker Prize, it is about a severely disabled child. Essentially, this is the story of the author. Ruben David Gonzales Gallego is a thirty-five-year-old Russian-born Spaniard. Afflicted from birth with cerebral palsy which paralysed his arms and legs, he used one of the two fingers he could manipulate to type this, his first book; his title refers to white letters on a dark ceiling, and also of course to his own determined optimism. In line with Russian tradition, the nature of the Russian Booker Prize for fiction is fluid; and its latest winner is so immediately engaging that classifying it by genre - autobiography, novel, short stories, fragments of memory -soon ceases to matter. The opening sentence reads: "I am a hero. Being a hero is easy. If you have no arms or legs you are either a hero, or you die". In his early years, Ruben's mother took care of him, but his grandfather, Ignacio Gallego, Secretary-General of the Spanish Communist Party, secretly had him sent to a Soviet home for the disabled and told her that the boy had died. (Only recently were they reunited; Gallego now lives in Spain.) The homes he was moved to varied only in degrees of awfulness. He describes how he would drag himself naked along the freezing corridor of an orphans' home to get to the toilet. Some of the carers -nyanechki -gave him sweets, others rubbed his face in his shit when he dirtied his pants. At the age of fifteen he was sent to an old people's home. Tales of brutality and stoicism are matter-of-factly told: Old women died in spring . . . . Life was better, but having clung on stubbornly all winter, they waited for spring only to let go, hand themselves over to the will of nature, and die . . . . The old boys died irrespective of the changes of season . . . . If life refused them its routine satisfactions, like a bottle of vodka or a tasty snack, they went into another world without resistance. There are Gogolesque moments, such as a discussion Gallego overhears between officials about how they will deal with him when he dies -they assume it will be soon -since the home for the elderly is not allowed to issue a death certificate to anyone under eighteen. There is also humour. In one home he asks: "You have a lot of cats here?" "No, none at all." "But I saw one, running along the corridor." "That wasn't a cat, that was a rat." Gallego's idiosyncratic vision yields its own truths. When at last the Berlin Wall comes down, and he visits America, he hesitates before coming back: "Good Russian folk will give me food, and drink vodka with me . . . . I shall obediently follow orders and mutely endure shame and humiliation . . . . Everything that I am allowed will be poisoned by vodka and hopes for a stomach ulcer or a heart attack". Yet if he stays in America, "Without documents and money I shall never be able to live in this cruel and beautiful country". In Russia he has had his "fill of pity" and of enclosure between four walls; while in America, whose wheelchairs are for him technological miracles, he would be free to move about. Eventually he goes back and spends a month completely drunk, telling himself he had made the wrong choice. 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. He was warned not to lay himself open to exploitation by foreign spies after receiving his first and only mail -a postcard from Spain - and told he was lucky to be fed and educated for free, so he could learn a useful trade; in America disabled children were given a lethal injection. "I don't want to be fed for free", the child replies, "I'll never learn a useful trade. I want an injection, a lethal injection . . . I want to go to America". 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. Like its tsarist predecessor the system at least believed in education, and it made a clumsy effort to educate Gallego, who was taught German, among other things, and read Goethe. Categorized as feeble-minded (Russian borrows the French word *debile*), he has done more than survive: he has married, had children and written a remarkable book. Better than any appeal to the heart, his book has the appeal of truth. Our feelings are aroused not by the author, who does not want us to pity him, but from the facts he so starkly conveys. The style, which would translate well, is sometimes reminiscent of Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*, whose title transfers easily to this book. Ruben Gallego wants to grow up, move his limbs, develop his faculties, take responsibility for himself, be free. "To be a man is hard, very hard, but not impossible. To do it you don't necessarily have to stand on your hind legs. Absolutely not. I believe this."