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## White on Black by Ruben Gallego



*Translated from the Russian  
by Marian Schwartz  
Harcourt, 2006*

### Reviewed by Boris Fishman

In 1968, Ignacio Gallego, the patriarch of the Spanish Community Party, severed ties with a willful daughter, who had just given birth to a toddler with cerebral palsy in Moscow. The Kremlin covered for Gallego's callousness and informed his daughter that the boy, who was being held in a special hospital, had died.

This illustrious, troubled pedigree and diplomatic intrigue are nowhere to be found in that boy's memoir of having grown up, amid inconceivable humiliation and want, in a succession of Soviet orphanages and old-age homes where he was anonymously registered after his official "death." Gallego's very first line defiantly telegraphs that he would rather do without special treatment or easy sympathy: "I'm a hero. It's easy to be a hero. If you don't have hands or feet, you're either a hero or dead."

The rest of this blistering memoir proceeds with equally clear-eyed reflections on growing up handicapped in the Soviet Union, a place where disability was viewed with embarrassment and disdain. Gallego does not wish for sainthood, only for as much right to coarseness as to virtue. Discussing Monsieur Coquenard, a character in a sequel to *The Three Musketeers* who dies, leaving his wife and fortune to the lovable Porthos, Gallego writes: "Monsieur Coquenard did not arouse my sympathy . . . If that pathetic old man had had the strength and smarts to sprinkle poison into Porthos's wine, I would've been on his side."

Gallego is above self-pity, but not above rage, and a bitterness that happily makes room for humor: "In Russia, there's a custom of honoring the dead by sharing food . . . The more unfortunate the person fed, the more you've pleased the deceased. But where was one to find them, the unfortunates, in the most fortunate country in the world?" The Soviet Union kept the disabled out of public view in understaffed homes short on even the most basic equipment. Young Ruben crawls to the bathroom because there are no wheelchairs.

But there are drinking parties with other boys in the home, an occasional chocolate, nighttime visions on the ceiling. Gallego conveys these experiences without any care for antecedent or historical, geographical, or logistical detail. Wives--Gallego seems to have married twice--appear in later years without any introduction; the narrator leaps from youth to adulthood without warning; the procession of homes where Gallego found himself receive no elaboration beyond generic references. Gallego's memoir is a brutal impressionist painting--his abstract and free-associative prose aims above all to convey the blur of pain and somehow persisting hope of which his life consisted in the two decades he spent in the system.

In the Russian original, the contextless prose universalized Gallego's

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experiences without abandoning too many readers: those who had lived in Soviet times knew the code. In this way, a phrase like "it was explained to me that my mama was a black-assed bitch" needed no explication for most because "black-assed" was a common epithet for darker people, whether from the Caucasus, or, like Gallego, from southern Europe. When a pineapple appears in a home and Gallego is the only ward that takes to it, a nurse exclaims, "I'll bet his papa grew up on these pineapples." In the Soviet imagination, African blacks--dark-skinned Gallego's presumed parentage to the unknowing attendants--swung from trees and ate fruit.

One wonders if the transcontinental trip is too far for all this cultural shorthand. Marian Schwartz's lucent translation preserves Gallego's unique mix of fury and bittersweet laughter-- one part perennial child, one part old man, an uncanny facsimile of the orphanages and old-age homes where he lived--and she admirably resists the impulse to clarify Gallego, either in the text or with footnotes. It's a rare, bold case of valuing craft above sales, and even above readers.

***Boris Fishman** is a writer, editor, and translator whose work has appeared in Harper's, the New York Times, the American Scholar, and other publications.*

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