

Written with one finger

Gallego sees his writing as a protest and as an instrument designed to help those who are trying to survive in this black-and-white world.

Anna Isakova Jun 04, 2004 12:00 AM **Updated:** 10:49 PM

"White on Black" by Ruben David Gonzales Gallego, St. Petersburg: Limbus Press, 220 pages [in Russian]

The Booker-Open Russia Literary Prize traveled to Madrid last year. Ruben David Gonzales Gallego, a Spaniard who writes in Russian, received the award for his autobiography, "White on Black." As a child stricken with cerebral palsy (CP), he was in effect given a death sentence: hospitalization in Soviet treatment facilities. But he was a survivor and he triumphed in the battle for life. A number of members of the jury selecting the winner of the prize - a highly prestigious Russian award modeled after Britain's Booker Prize, which provides the laureate with \$15,000 and assistance in sales promotion - felt that, in this case, the prize was a medal of valor, rather than a literary award. It would have been unthinkable not to have granted it to Gallego.

The chief juror for the 2003 award, Yakov Gordin, explained why "White on Black" was chosen: "People today need a 'courage vaccine.' We tend toward panic and catastrophic black moods. Gonzales Gallego's book, besides being a very respectable literary work, is a remarkable lesson in courage. As one of the jurors for this award put it, this book belongs in the same category as Nikolai Ostrovsky's 'How the Steel Was Tempered,' which describes the process of an individual's death and which was also written by a handicapped person. Ruben's book is the story of an individual's resurrection with the help of a mighty intellectual effort. It represents the triumph of spirit over matter."

Ruben Gallego's full story is not recounted in his book and will apparently never be told. Meanwhile, the Russian Internet is packed with biographical information relating to him. There are those who have written that he is the son of Aurora, rebellious daughter of Ignacio Gallego, a former leader of the Spanish Communist Party. According to some accounts, Aurora studied in Paris, acquired the reputation of being a radical leftist and thus "betrayed" the communist ideal. Her father sent her in the 1960s to the Soviet Union so that her ideology could be "corrected." She lived in Moscow for eight years - some say as "collateral in the hands of the Kremlin." There she met and married a student from Venezuela, the son of a racially mixed family of Indians and Chinos (Chinese of Latin American origin).

The leader of the Spanish Communist Party did not like this racial blend and opposed the marriage. Aurora stuck to her guns and, in 1968, she gave birth to twins. Immediately after the delivery, she was informed that one of the infants was dead and that the other had CP. Eight days later, the mother

was told that the second twin had also died. In truth, however, the infant was transferred to an outside facility. No one knows who gave the order for the transfer - whether it was the Kremlin or the grandfather. An even deeper mystery is concealed in the fact that the infant retained his full name.

Secrets and mysteries

The child was placed in several treatment facilities, for want of a better word. He was simply neglected, undergoing a seemingly endless series of painful treatments, with his future already predetermined. In the Soviet Union, it was customary to keep severely disabled children in closed institutions until the age of 18, whereupon they were placed in closed facilities for the chronically ill, where they died soon after placement due to neglect.

Gallego was saved from this fate by a woman whose name has remained a mystery. No one knows who she was or whom she represented. The author does not solve the mystery in his book or in his many press interviews. After having been saved from life in a treatment facility, he attended college, got married twice and became the father of two daughters. By pure accident, he arrived in Prague, where he met his mother (again, under mysterious circumstances), and subsequently took up residence with her in Madrid. Today

Gallego's health is shaky; however, he says that he has no desire to visit Russia, even if he would be up to to such a trip.

The book does not relate to the secrets and mysteries of this bizarre tale. Instead, it starts on one cold winter night in a Russian treatment facility. A little handicapped boy has to urinate. It would make no sense to summon for help, because no one would respond. The child already knows that, given his inability to use either his arms or legs, he must be a hero or die. The young boy decides to be a hero. He pushes his body to the edge of the bed and falls to the floor. He feels pain, and yet crawls in the direction of the door, opens it with his head and continues to crawl along the frozen corridor. He spends almost the entire night crawling to the bathroom and back. Since he cannot manage to return to his bed, he pulls the blanket off the bed with his teeth and remains on the floor until morning.

In the morning, he is taken to school. He is a good student. He is a hero. This hero lives among other similar heroic figures. The disabled children are survivors and even manage to display gentleness, friendship and love toward one another.

"White on Black" is a relatively short book, written in short, simple sentences. The author typed out the manuscript with only one finger. He relates that this was painful, and it would be safe to assume that his physical condition encouraged him to be laconic. In an interview with Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, which today broadcasts from Prague (passages from Gallego's book were first heard on that radio station's literary program), the 2003 Booker - Open Russia Literary Prize laureate confesses that he learned from Gertrude Stein how to divide up sentences into small segments, thereby forcing readers to stop and think after each period. This technique does not always work in his book: Gallego does not attain the plastic sophistication of Stein's balanced sentences, and sometimes passages in his book sound much like telegrams.

One can perhaps consider "White on Black" an antithesis to William Golding's "Lord of the Flies," although it is unclear whether Gallego ever read it. In his book, Gallego is continually reading books, although the only one that is specifically mentioned is "How the Steel Was Tempered." The body (in both the anatomical and textual senses), and the missing parts of that body, occupy such a prominent place in Gallego's book that one can sense a striking similarity to Jean Genet's writing.

The book has no plot. In episode after episode, we learn how handicapped infants, young children, adolescents and adults manage to survive in conditions that rule out the possibility of survival. The infants learn how not to die, the children learn how to help one another, the adolescents learn mathematics although they are clearly aware that their end is near. The adults learn nothing. They are dead.

Here is a passage from one of the book's final chapters:

"Institution. A home for the aged. The last asylum of my life. End. Dead end. I am writing down irregular English verbs in my notebook. Along the corridor attendants are carrying a cot with a dead person in it. I am writing down irregular English verbs in my notebook. Handicapped people of various ages are organizing a Komsomol rally. In the auditorium, the institution's director delivered a speech in honor of the anniversary of the October Revolution. I am writing down irregular English verbs in my notebook. One grandfather, a former prisoner, got drunk and smashed in the head of his roommate with a pair of crutches. A grandmother, a distinguished Labor heroine, went into a wardrobe cabinet and hanged herself. A woman in a wheelchair gobbled down a handful of sleeping pills in order to take permanent leave of this irregular world. I am writing down irregular English verbs in my notebook."

Needless to say, Gallego does not consider his writing a literary product; instead, he sees it as a protest and as an instrument designed to help those who are trying to survive in this black-and-white world, in the demarcation line that separates daylight from eternal darkness. After you have read "White on Black," the problems of ordinary people lose all importance and, in the final analysis, it is possible to see it as a decidedly optimistic book.

Dr. Anna Isakova is a journalist and writer.

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