CHERYL SENTER

When performing, Jeff Rapsis generally prefers to play his synthesizer (on the "world music setting"), though he's recently gained facility with theater organs.

it is really important."

If interpretation is an art, playing for a film's entire running time is an endurance sport. Humphreville reports that after a particularly long film, he feels the strain less in the fingers than in the neck, which gets sore from being craned toward the screen. "The last thing you want to do when you're playing is look at the clock," he cautions: it takes the mind off the action and timing. "The scene changes suddenly—you have to be ready for that," he says. "You also have to know when the movie starts and the movie ends. If you don't know when that will be, you can get caught flat-footed." Rapsis jokingly compares the experience to flying a plane. "You can't start thinking about the noise of the engine and where you are in relation to the ground. You have to stay in that zone until you come in for the landing." When "The End" flashes on the screen, "I can finally taxi to the gate and take a break."

Silent motion pictures can look baffling today. They seem to operate with an entirely different syntax of gesture and facial expression, antic physicality and sly suggestion. The jumps from scenes to intertitles, and the lack of synced, continuous dialogue, require viewers to exert their imaginations differently. Musical accompaniment, says Rapsis, can help viewers "read" these films. Still, he believes that people intuitively take to Buster Keaton's melancholic humor, or the almost operatic "Love with a capital L" emotions of silent melodramas. The audience isn't aging out, in his view: "If anything, it's getting younger." (And as *New York Times* writer Amanda Hess has pointed out, today's audience is continually awash in silent short films—in the form of the GIFs and memes eddying on the Internet.)

Marks advocates for silent film as a distinct art form: with it, "You can create an emotional depth and a rhythmic depth, and a feeling of life, really, and a sense of movement, a sense of time passing." His music does not aim to *translate* that feeling for viewers; he wants to *transport* them. "Some scores tell you, you are here," he says. "But others tell you, you are there. They try to put you back there in that world."

Cold Comforts

Returning to Russia in A Terrible Country

by MAGGIE DOHERTY

Perusing social media in recent months, you get the sense that Russia once again looms as America's great antagonist. Russians are meddling in our election and colluding with our president. The KGB is stealing our private data and spreading "fake news." Anyone who says something controversial on social media can scapegoat a Russian bot. The Cold War is back, this time as farce: rather than a global contest between workers and capitalists, there are oligarchs and thugs on all sides.

In this moment of high-pitched, heated commentary, *A Terrible Country*, Keith Gessen's second novel, arrives like a cold, welcome wind. Gessen '97 packs his book with observations about contemporary Russian life. The liberal radio station, Echo, criticizes Putin freely; the trains still run every two minutes, but they are horribly overcrowded; only older cars, usually driven by Chechen men, pick up passengers on the street.

But *A Terrible Country* is less a travelogue, or a guide to post-Soviet Russia, than it is a novel about life under neoliberalism—a political ideology that dictates that the market, not the state, rules the citizenry. Under neoliberalism, citizens identify primarily as consumers, and competition—for housing, healthcare, employment, even for affection and care—becomes a feature of daily life. Neoliberalism manifests differently in different countries, and Gessen takes care to describe the forms of political and economic oppression specific to the novel's setting. Nevertheless, to an American reader, life in Putin's Russia looks more familiar than she might expect.

To show the continuity between these former Cold War enemies, Gessen deploys an ideal narrator: Andrei Kaplan, a Russian-born American academic, who observes Moscow with a useful combination of knowledge and naïveté. Preparing for his trip, Andrei expects to encounter a country in turmoil. "I had half expected to be arrested at the airport! I thought I'd be robbed on the train." But when he arrives, he is struck by how copacetic he finds the country, and by how much has changed since he visited as a college student in the late nineties. Russia "had become rich," he muses. "Looking out the window, it was hard to square all the talk of bloody dictatorship with all the people in expensive suits, getting into Audis, talking on their cell phones. ...For me—and not just for me, I think—Soviet oppression and Soviet poverty had always been inextricably intertwined." But laissez-faire economics don't benefit everyone. *A Terrible Country* aims to show how oppression and luxury coexist.

A Terrible Country, by Keith Gessen '97 (Viking, $26)

Gessen, who immigrated to America with his family in 1981, when he was six, has written elsewhere about the country of his birth. A founding editor of the leftist liter-

ary magazine *n+1* (and the younger brother of activist and journalist Masha Gessen), he has written frequently in its pages about Russian literature and politics. In his journalism, Gessen follows the Marxist theorist Fredric Jameson's dictum: "Everything in the last analysis is political." "Moscow, August 2013," an autobiographical essay, describes protest under Putin; even an essay about Moscow's infamously bad traffic, for a 2010 issue of *The New Yorker*, contains a critique of capitalism.

Such political analysis is trickier to accomplish in fiction. Some writers stage debates in their fiction; others write satire, and still others produce novels of ideas. Gessen tries to make politics a primary concern of his *characters*. In his 2008 novel, *All the Sad Young Literary Men*, politics most often served as material for a character's creative or intellectual work. One protagonist is more interested in dating than in finishing his dissertation about the Russian Revolution. Another plans to write a "great Zionist epic," but cares more about the number of hits his name gets on Google than about the history of Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In his second novel, Gessen takes politics more seriously. *A Terrible Country* is a more mature work, written in pared-down prose noticeably different from the headlong style of the first novel. The sentences are simple and direct, as if subordinate clauses were the stuff of youth. The book is funny, but darkly so—many of the best jokes are about the protagonist's disappointment in himself and in others. If that earlier work sometimes presented political consciousness as simply part of one's personal style, this novel describes what it means to live politically, with all the excitement and hazard that accompany such a life.

A TERRIBLE COUNTRY opens in the summer of 2008, just a few months shy of the global financial crisis. A scholar of Russian literature and history, Andrei has failed to find a tenure-track position and has been reduced to teaching online sections for a New York university's "paid massive online open course," or PMOOC. It's a dismal job, and he can no longer afford New York City. When his older brother, Dima, offers him the chance to move to Moscow and tend to their 89-year-old grandmother, Andrei jumps at it. Baba Seva, a Ukrainian-born Jewish woman who became a lecturer at Moscow State, lives in a centrally located apartment, gifted to her by none other than Stalin himself. Andrei plans to interview his grandmother about all she has witnessed in her long, difficult life—the war, the purges, the rise of Stalin and the fall of communism—and shape an academic article out of her remembrances. Drunk at a farewell party, he contemplates the "glamor that might attend spending time in an increasingly violent and dictatorial Russia."

But his life there is decidedly unglamorous. The apartment is old and small; the sheets are scratchy; the plumbing fails. Baba Seva's memory is going; she can barely remember who Andrei is, let alone provide an oral history. She is preoccupied with her dead friends, her dead daughter (Andrei's mother), and her lack of a dacha. Though Andrei is stunned by the wealth he sees all around him, Baba Seva barely registers it. She instead asks Andrei repeatedly why he has come to this "terrible country."

It's a good question: Andrei feels as poor and useless here as he did back in New York. He spends his days in the only coffee shop he can afford, downloading student emails and blog posts, and his nights trying to find a pickup hockey game (the sport features often in the novel) and failing to make friends. His life in Moscow changes, and the pace of the novel picks up, when two fortuitous events coincide: he finds a game and he meets a girl. Hockey helps him assimilate and teaches him to curse liberally, like a Russian. Yulia, a girl with big eyes and bad teeth, helps him become politically conscious. She invites Andrei to speak at a public discussion about neoliberalism in higher education where, to his surprise, a hockey teammate is also speaking. Sergei—who is also an underemployed academic—proceeds to offer an incisive account of how the "dictatorship of the market" has replaced the dictatorship of Stalin. Andrei is stunned, not only by what his teammate knows but also by how he came to know it. "You didn't have to go and read a thousand books," Andrei thinks. "You just had to stay where you were and look around."

Inspired, Andrei joins Sergei and Yulia's socialist organizing group, October. The activists protest against fascism and collectively read Marx. They even organize a

Illustration by Sonia Pulido

demonstration to prevent the sale of Baba Seva's apartment. Andrei's resulting political revelations are simple but potent: "Cute cafés were not the problem, but they were also not, as I'd once apparently thought, the opposite of the problem. Money was the problem....Private property, possessions, the fact that some people had to suffer so that others could live lives of leisure: that was the problem. And that there were intellectual arguments ardently justifying this—that was a bigger problem still."

Money *is* a problem, especially in Gessen's fiction. Reading it, you learn exactly how much any commodity costs at a particular moment, whether it's a car ride, a drink on a date, or a cup of coffee. This fixation with money is personal as well as political: Gessen has written openly about the financial challenges he faces as a writer, and in his reflections on teaching undergraduate fiction writers, he has noted, only half-jokingly, that some students fail to imagine how their characters could survive financially. The members of October are also acutely aware of how much everything costs. They come from families who are "barely hanging on" in capitalist Russia. They are precariously employed and can't afford to live without roommates.

The sad young literary men (and women) in *A Terrible Country* don't study Marx, or deliver lectures on neoliberalism, simply to show off for love interests or to earn fame.

This doesn't mean their present lives are all struggle and disappointment. To the contrary, when Andrei begins dating Yulia, he discovers a new Moscow, one full of affordable cafés, bookstores, critical theory, and romantic intimacy. "It was the Moscow I had once hoped existed but couldn't find," he remarks. "Now here it was." Gessen's achievement is to show, with warmth and humor, how a person's political awakening expands his entire world.

THE SAD YOUNG literary men (and women) in *A Terrible Country* don't study Marx, or deliver lectures on neoliberalism, simply to show off for love interests or to earn fame. (That said, impressing women, or men, is not a bad reason to start organizing—many an activist biography begins with a crush.) They demonstrate true political commitment: several of the characters go to prison for resisting Putin's regime. Gessen also understands how personal affection sustains and informs this commitment. He portrays the relationships within October as of a piece with the group's organizing, rather than as peripheral to it. The novel assumes that political solidarity is, at its base, simply caring deeply for other people, those you know intimately and those you don't.

And so, all at once, Andrei falls in love with a woman, a country, and a political cause. But Gessen, unlike Andrei, is no naïf. No political revolution has ever come about easily, or without great personal sacrifice. Andrei makes a miscalculation at a protest that has drastic consequences for his friends. Shortly afterward, a job at Columbia University and a subsidized apartment in New York magically materialize. (The novel's representation of academic life occasionally beggars belief.) Now benefiting from the same job market that nearly destroyed him, he writes op-eds on behalf of Russia's political dissidents and delivers public lectures while his friends suffer in labor colonies.

One can hardly fault Andrei for choosing a comfortable life in New York over a difficult life in Moscow. And yet, like Andrei himself, one is left with admiration for uncompromising activists who live their politics and suffer as they do so. *A Terrible Country* is not exactly a hopeful book about political protest, but neither it is a fatalistic one. Instead, it suggests what resistance might mean, not as a slogan, but as a life. ▽

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Chapter & Verse

Correspondence on not-so-famous lost words

Sarah Jaquay recalls her parents joking about a quip made during the lengthy negotiations in Paris to end the Vietnam War. The delegates quibbled about everything from the shape of the table to the refreshments, and a humorist suggested that if the talks were being held in Akron (or some other Ohio city), the war would end quickly. ("Perhaps a savvy diplomat remembered this quote," she adds, "because the Dayton Accords—negotiated at Wright-Patterson Air Force Base—ended the war in Bosnia much more expeditiously.") She asks if anyone can identify the humorist (possibly Art Buchwald), and specify what was said.

Ken Agran seeks the source of "She burned too bright [or "brightly"] for this world." Online searches suggest Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*—the sentence, he reports, is sometimes linked to another, "She was a wild, wicked slip of a girl…," from that novel's fifth chapter—but a keyword search fails to find the "burned too bright…" description anywhere in the full text.

Le Corbusier on "democracy" (May-June). Dan Rosenberg cites "Corbu," a Sky Line article by Brendan Gill in the May 9, 1988, *New Yorker,* that includes "an extremely (perhaps implausibly) long quotation" from the architect and occasional Corbusier collaborator Max Abramovitz ending: "In so many ways, Corbu was all but impossible to deal with, but at least he had a sense of humor. I remember his saying to me once, in French, 'Ah, yes, democracy is a fine thing as long as you have a dictator at the top!'" Rosenberg adds, "But we should keep in mind that in the segue from 'sense of humor,' Abramovitz was signaling that Corbusier might have said this at least partly tongue-in-cheek."

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