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# Tolstoy Influence Felt In U.S. Chechen Book

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Anthony Marra's novel "A Constellation of Vital Phenomena," which made The New York Times' bestseller list, is based in Chechnya and follows a series of characters in an often bloody and brutal book.

Q: The New York Times' review calls your book a "21st-century 'War and Peace.'" Was Tolstoy an influence?

A: Tolstoy was certainly an influence. He can write about Napoleon or he can write about a peasant in the provinces and he treats both subjects with the same seriousness and the same emotional and intellectual rigor. When I went to Chechnya, I would ask people who their favorite author was, and Tolstoy was the answer nine times out of 10. It struck me as peculiar that among these people whose one defining national characteristic historically has been defiance of Russia that the quintessential Russian novelist would so often pop up among their favorite writers.

A response that I heard repeatedly was that Tolstoy treated everyone like people. In "Hadji Murad," he wrote about Chechens and he treated them like human beings. I think that being able to treat a character like a human being is something I really admire in Tolstoy's work and tried to embody in my own.

Q: There are points in the book where I had to kind of read with one eye, like closing your eyes during a violent movie. What was it like to write about such difficult subjects?

A: I was sitting at my desk in a comfortable middle-class life in America, whereas real people did suffer these indignities. I feel like as a writer you can never ever correlate the experience of writing about something with the experience of enduring it, especially when it comes to atrocity. Maybe this is on my mind a little bit more because on Saturday night I spent the night talking with a Chechen. His brother worked for Reuters and he was involved with helping his brother smuggle footage out. He was eventually captured and was put in a pit for six weeks. He was brutally tortured and was later shot alongside his brother. His brother died and he survived and now he lives in America, but the idea that the experience of writing anything, or reading anything, will ever match the experience of actually enduring it just isn't the case.

Q: Would you say your book is political?

A: As soon as you start writing fiction with the idea that you are trying to convince a reader of a particular political viewpoint, in most cases, the fiction begins to fail. As readers we are all highly attuned and sensitive to any sort of propaganda. As soon as literature gears in that direction, it stops being about the people on the page and starts being about political ideas in a way that may be unconstructive in creating a work of art. I think it is probably pretty clear where my sympathies lie when reading the novel, but I thought it was really important to write the book without laying any sort of judgment. I think if you simply tell the story of what life was like there, it is pretty hard not to jump to the conclusion that life for a civilian in Chechnya was terrible because of these wars. These wars were acts of genocide and the level of depravity and horror that everyday people were subjected to on a daily basis was reprehensible. I feel like that as a citizen or as a person. But as a writer of fiction I felt like it was my job to simply stick to these characters' stories and let readers make up their own mind.

Q: You credit Anna Politkovskaya's "A Small Corner of Hell" as a source for your book. In what way?

A: She was an incredibly courageous journalist and writer and she would repeatedly put herself in grave risk to report. While she went after big fish, again and again you would see in her work that she was telling the stories of lives that were too small, the dramas that are too intimate to ever make the front-page headlines. Often in these sorts of wars we see it as a bunch of rebels and a bunch of soldiers shooting at one another when, in fact, there is this broad mid-section of the population that is struggling to survive between these equally brutal factions. She was a remarkable person and someone whose work will long outlive her.

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