
Mystery Fiction and the Spirits of Cities

Martin Cruz Smith: *Gorky Park*; Random House; New York.

Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy-Casares: *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi*; E. P. Dutton; New York.

by Mary Ellen Fox

Many famous sleuths in the detective fiction of our century have been associated with cities. Not only is a city the terrain in which they operate, but also the city itself is transformed from mere background to a vivid, integral part of the action. To envision Peter Wimsey without London, Sam Spade without San Francisco, Maigret without Paris, Nero Wolfe without New York or Martin Beck without Stockholm is to imagine novels with entirely different kinds of heroes, plots and flavor.

The hero of *Gorky Park* is nominally chief homicide inspector Arkady Renko, but the real protagonist is Moscow. Like Raymond Chandler's Los Angeles, the Russian capital itself occupies center stage and exerts a potent and sinister influence over characters and their fates. The aforementioned London, Paris, San Francisco, New York and Stockholm exist in either a benign or a neutral way. Maigret's Paris is a serene pond of eating, drinking and other bourgeois delights, occasionally invaded by a turbulent crime only to return to its former calm; Wolfe's New York—actually Archie Goodwin's city—is palpably present with its hard-bitten police and newspapermen and chic night spots, but it neither attracts nor repels.

Only Chandler and Martin Cruz Smith have created a place which doesn't know its place. The very cities of Los Angeles and Moscow undergo anthropomorphoses, not only acquiring per-

sonalities more memorable than those of the detectives, but ultimately transcending the sleuths' activities as primary focus. Philip Marlowe and Arkady Renko are similar in that they represent the remnants of decency in societies permeated by corruption and decay. Theirs are nightmare worlds of scoundrels, con men, hypocrisy and betrayal, differing only in that Marlowe's Los Angeles is a society with too much license, while Renko's Moscow has none at all. The lone hero—regarded as a foolish fanatic by his fellow citizens—

"'Gorky Park' winds down to a rather clichéd international shoot-em-up, complete with murky speculations on the difference between American and Soviet justice . . ."

—*New York Times*

holds his honor dear; it is the only thing that remains to humanize him and to differentiate him from his compatriots, all of whom have their price. As modern-day Don Quixotes tilting at windmills, Marlowe and Renko are dealt many blows, both physical and spiritual; they end up with their illusions in shreds, but still each clings to his own knightly code of decency, loyalty and professionalism. In societies which are "on the take," Marlowe never seems to have more than \$100 in the bank, and Renko rejects the notion of tailoring his activities to gratify the Soviet authorities, even though compromising his principles would bring him a promotion, a better apartment, more abundant provisions.

The plot of *Gorky Park*—which is as convoluted as most modern-day thrillers, with double, triple and quadruple agents—deals with the shady reasons why the Soviet government is protecting the machinations of an American capitalist in Russia. The latter (many may perceive in him the entrepreneurship of Mr. Armand Hammer, the notorious multimillionaire with friendship ties to Soviet leaders for the last half-century) forges a Soviet-

American friendship while lining his pockets and betraying his friends. When Renko discovers the perpetrator of three grisly murders, he simultaneously uncovers the venality and corruption of a system where ideology is twisted and subverted for materialistic, dehumanizing and ultimately murderous ends. In a reality where "... everyone informs right from the nursery. Everyone has dirty hands," Renko symbolizes the last vestige of integrity. He is both hero and everyman. So the Soviet system has succeeded in creating a "new man"

after all: "everyman" is a unique figure there. Values and virtues which mankind has cherished for millennia—such as honesty, loyalty, courage and even love—are either on the verge of extinction or distorted beyond recognition.

Thus the novel becomes valuable not so much as fiction, or even as a thriller, but as yet another exposé. The streets, buildings and the all-pervasive bleakness of the Soviet environment achieve a palpable literary presence. Moscow becomes more than just an exotic locale, it emerges as a way of life. On a day-to-day basis we can see what communism does to what we used to call the quality of life: alcoholism, the national sport, becomes an unalienable right and ultimate hedonism; conjugal, filial and parental relationships must be subordinated to the demands of the state; the accused is guilty a priori (otherwise he wouldn't be accused); and free expression of thought is as impossible to imagine as access to unlimited meat and produce. From the sublime to the ridiculous, Smith underlines his descriptions with biting irony. Some might say that 1984 was a metaphor (although we see how Orwell's surreal-

Dr. Fox is a frequent contributor to these pages.

istic vision of several decades past has become today's reality), but an average reader has no difficulty recognizing in *Gorky Park* the ring of truth, authenticity, reality. Even the ideologically indifferent can be converted when spirit becomes flesh. In *Notebooks of a Dilettante*, Leopold Tyrmand wrote:

If I have to explain what communism is to an average American, I deliberately use a technical metaphor to appeal to their pragmatic, engineerlike imagination. 'Communism,' I say, 'is like a damaged or broken engine or plumbing installation. No one knows how to repair it. But it runs and people are obliged to use it.'

'Oh!' sighs the American, 'it must be hell!'

In developing the simile, *Gorky Park* has succeeded better than any other fictional popularization of the evils of the U.S.S.R. When the banal intricacies of its plot fade from memory, what remains is an invaluable look into a universe best accessible through the unpretentious wisdom of a detective story.

* * *

In 1942, under the pseudonym of H. Bustos Domecq, Borges collaborated with Adolfo Bioy Casares to produce a work of detective fiction. As a serious writer of profound philosophical and spiritual insight, Borges is reminiscent of Chesterton, who also delved into the detective genre in his Father Brown stories. And no doubt the Chesterton parallel was deliberate, in Borges's mind, since among the many characters who populate these six stories appears one Father Brown. The latter, in the guise of a criminal, hints at the playfulness of Borges's imagination. The name of the detective himself, of course, reinforces the notion of parody. In fact, it would be altogether easy to dismiss the book as an instance of "the master" merely having a good time. Borges him-

self wrote, years later:

Max Carrados had attempted a blind detective; Bioy and I went one step further and confined our detective to a jail cell. The book was at the same time a satire of the Argentines. For many years, the dual identity of Bustos Domecq was never revealed. When it finally was, people thought that Bustos was a joke, his writing could hardly be taken seriously.

These stories are not a significant contribution to detective fiction, and Don Isidro is no rival to Holmes and his followers. What Borges succeeds in doing is satirizing the Argentine government and society and in brilliantly creating colloquial dialogue which differs according to character, reflecting each individual's region, class, psychology and prejudices. The corruption of the Argentine government is a recurrent theme: Parodi is in jail for a murder committed by someone else who luckily (for him) had the right government connections. Borges also ridicules Argentine snobbery, literary pretentiousness, provincialism, anti-Semitism and the country's prevalent xenophobia. The latter is counterpointed against the reality of Buenos Aires

as a melting pot. A society formed by many groups, among them Italians, Jews, Chinese, which nevertheless focuses on its "ethnic purity" and hostility to these various groups can only exist plagued by self-destructive tensions. Against the backdrop of what was happening in Europe at the time, Borges's satirization of these attitudes can be construed as poignant warning. The various racial factors which helped to create modern Argentina are celebrated here; each character expresses himself idiomatically and idiosyncratically, thus rendering the six detective stories a valid social profile. The recent publication of this fine translation by Norman Thomas di Giovanni, a long-time associate of Borges, should interest all aficionados of Borges's writing. Even a relatively minor work of one of our most important living writers, long overdue for a Nobel Prize, is significant in presenting a rounded portrait of a multifaceted talent.

Both *Gorky Park* and *Six Problems for Don Isidro Parodi* are formally detective stories. Both, however, transcend the genre and become trenchant social commentaries, or, more simply —literature. □

Supply-Side and All That Cuts

Bruce Bartlett: *Reaganomics: Supply-Side Economics in Action*; Arlington House Publishers; New Rochelle, New York.

by Harold C. Gordon

In 1977 supply-side economics did not exist. By 1981, it was the basis for the greatest single tax cut in our nation's history. In a breathtakingly short period of time, a daring idea precipitated an economic and political revolution.

Mr. Gordon is a legislative assistant to Senator John East of North Carolina.

For years it had been the Republicans who fretted about budget deficits while the Democrats shrugged off the whole national debt with the breezy rejoinder, "We owe it to ourselves." Then, almost overnight, it was the Republicans who were saying that deficits didn't matter, the important thing was cutting taxes, while the Democrats were donning the hair shirt of fiscal restraint. How did it all happen?

For those who came in late, Bruce Bartlett's supply-side primer is required reading. In *Reaganomics*, the young congressional staffer (who as an aide to Congressman Jack Kemp played a major