

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

THE SIBERIAN CURSE:

How Communist Planners Left Russia Out in the Cold.

By Fiona Hill and Clifford G. Gaddy.

Brookings. 303 pp. \$46.95,

\$18.95 paper

Ever since the age of the tsars, Siberia has embodied the Russian paradox—a place of seemingly boundless abundance (oil and gas, timber and coal, gold and other precious metals) lying amid frozen wastelands. Today, Siberia has captured the Russian imagination. The vast lands east of the Urals represent, to the men at Russia's helm, a source of contention—seen alternately as Russia's destiny and its burden, either a sacred cornucopia of the motherland's treasures or an endless stretch of tundra and taiga where only survivalists could live and slave labor grow. Among Russian politicians, the debate over what to do with Siberia—invest in it, abandon it, defend it against Chinese annexation, sell it to the Japanese—dominates discussions about the country's future. Whatever the viewpoint, all sides seem to agree: Siberia remains the key to Russia's fate.

In *The Siberian Curse*, Fiona Hill and Clifford Gaddy, scholars at the Brookings Institution, offer a refreshing, well-documented addition to the literature on post-Soviet Russia. They recommend “downsizing Siberia” as the only way to reverse the colossal mistakes of Soviet economic planning and streamline Russia for a 21st-century game of catch-up. Much of their case rests on the hardships of the Siberian winter—and spring, summer, and fall. They also make the good point, rarely heard in this debate, that a chief obstacle to transforming Siberia, and the Russian economy more broadly, is the absence of employment migration. “We’re not Americans,” the head of Russia's privatization program once told me. “We don’t move for work. If Sergei loses his job in Tomsk, he still stays in Tomsk until he dies.” Siberia gave the Soviets, as the authors wryly note, plenty of “room for error,” and the lack of economic mobility is among the worst errors, one that remains a

hidden tax on Russia's economy.

Hill and Gaddy do have a plan. A force of migrant workers should labor in the regions rich in minerals and petrochemicals. (Gazprom, the natural gas giant, is in fact moving in this direction by rotating workers in remote areas in quarter-year shifts.) Above all, the authors argue, Moscow must lure the population from Siberia westward, to the region geographers call “European Russia,” the lands west of the Urals. But talk of such downsizing would bring bloodshed in the Duma, let alone in Siberia. And the World Bank's \$80 million pilot program to move pensioners and the unemployed from three cities in the Far North, a high-minded plan sketched here in favorable terms, has been a mitigated disaster. Those who live near the Arctic Circle are a tough lot; of the 25,000 residents targeted for resettlement, only a few hundred have taken up the offer. Some have even outsmarted the Western economists and social planners by accepting the financial incentives and staying put.

There are gaps in Hill and Gaddy's analysis—the role of the oligarchs in putting whole swaths of Siberia on life support is all but ignored, while the emphasis on geography slights demography, which is the greatest present danger. (Each year the country's population shrinks by nearly one million.) The authors concede that the odds that Vladimir Putin will elect to “shrink” Siberia are long. But they note that if neither Napoleon nor Hitler, not to mention the Soviet central planners, could conquer Russia's ice fields, then President Putin, if indeed he wishes his country to compete in the global market, has little choice but to downsize.

—ANDREW MEIER

LOVE ONLINE:

Emotions on the Internet.

By Aaron Ben-Ze'ev.

Cambridge Univ. Press. 289 pp. \$25

Most of the books published on love and the Internet fall into two categories: alarmist pseudoexposés (beware: people have cyber-

© 2004 Mort Gerberg from Cartoonbank.com. All rights reserved.



"That's it, Artie? Share a life with you online?"

sex!) and kitschy self-help manuals (listen up: here's how to meet your future husband online!). What makes Aaron Ben-Ze'ev's work unusual is that he approaches the topic from a scholarly mezzanine, seeking to explain the Internet's evolution from a cold fiber-optic knot to a strangely human place where emotions transmute into entirely new forms. Ben-Ze'ev, a professor of philosophy at the University of Haifa, wants to know what this means for the future of romance. Do we need to rewrite the rules?

Ben-Ze'ev has written perhaps the first truly thorough and thoughtful analysis of these topics. Defining cyberspace as "a psychological and social domain," he breaks down the processes of falling in love, cheating, flirting, and having (cyber)sex in this odd ether. He explains the seductiveness of a space where you can be at once connected and anonymous, and the nuanced ways in which this affects relationships, often allowing for purer emotional contact. "Netizens," as he calls them, may lie about their looks, professions, ages, and pasts, but they disclose deeper emotional truths online than when hanging out with friends, family, and spouses. That they may never meet in person, Ben-Ze'ev argues, doesn't necessarily diminish the exchange. Cyberspace, in other words, qualifies as a legitimate reality with its own emotional ebb and flow, a place where "superficial politeness is less common" and "emotional sincerity is more important."

Sadly, Ben-Ze'ev's approach to emotions is so devoid of, well, emotion, that you have to remind yourself that he's talking about the love lives of human beings and not the mat-

ing habits of plankton. The tone is relentlessly clinical, as when he describes falling in love: "The complex experience of romantic love involves two basic evaluative patterns referring to (a) attractiveness (or appealingness)—that is, an attraction to external appearance, and (b) praiseworthiness—that is, positively appraising personal characteristics."

What saves the book from collapsing under such lingual sludge are the tales from the frontlines. "I

have had cybersex once or twice," a gentleman reports, "and it's nice to have that instant feedback from the woman (God, I hope they're women)." A married woman says that having "a cybersexual affair was a real wake-up call in my life," one that "helped my marriage in the long run." These testimonials ground the book, and, more important, remind us of the perpetually unpredictable nature of love and sex.

Ben-Ze'ev concludes by arguing that we need the mental malleability to integrate the Internet into our relationships. Sure, it sounds a bit frightening, but we've always fallen for people who tempt our imaginations in one way or another. Now our princes and princesses are simply pixilated, too.

—DAVID AMSDEN

ONE NATION UNDER GOODS:
Malls and the Seductions of American Shopping.

By James J. Farrell. Smithsonian.
329 pp. \$24.95

People shop a lot but don't think about it much. They might discuss when they'll have time or money to buy something, but they rarely reflect on what they're buying and why. Perhaps we should all think a little more about these larger issues as we blow our disposable income on novelties and luxuries. James J. Farrell, a professor of history at St. Olaf College in Minnesota, convincingly argues that our incessant pursuit of more stuff, masterfully encouraged by malls, is eating away at the good life.

It all started innocently enough. After cars were invented and cities got congested, the