

that Pushkin was “the Russian man in his ultimate development, as he, perhaps, will be in 200 years.” This isn’t necessarily a fate to be wished upon anyone, though, for as T. J. Binyon’s magnificent biography makes plain, the apparently manic-depressive, womanizing, jealous, attention-deficient Pushkin chose, or had forced upon him, the perfection of his work over the perfection of his life. The familiar story—youthful rebelliousness, exile, negotiations with tsarist power, marriage to Russia’s greatest beauty, growing financial and emotional pressures, and the fatal duel with a young man who had tried to woo his wife—is presented here with such verve and careful interlacing of the narrative strands that we seem to be hearing it for the first time.

Binyon, a writer and critic of crime novels as well as a Slavic scholar, uses his investigative skills to sift and synthesize a huge amount of material. The result is a glorious and entertaining tour through the history and culture of Russia’s golden age, a balanced and detailed description of Pushkin and his times, a reliable Who’s Who of his friends and foes, and a psychologically convincing portrayal of the man himself. In all these respects, this is the best biography of the poet yet published in any language.

Unfortunately, though, it neglects the poetry. Setting out “to free the complex and interesting figure of Pushkin the man from the heroic simplicity of Pushkin the myth,” Binyon largely avoids literary analysis, which he deems the business of critics rather than biographers. This decision seems a mistake. The art could illuminate some of the dark corners of the life, given Pushkin’s habit of encoding or masking his own experiences in his works. And simply on their own terms, those works, especially the verse novel *Eugene Onegin* (1823–31)—which one critic has termed an “encyclopedia of Russia”—deserve more detailed analysis than they receive here.

Pushkin himself cautioned against letting the artist’s life eclipse the art. In a letter to a friend and fellow poet in 1825, he wrote: “Why do you regret the loss of Byron’s notes? Thank God they are lost. . . . We know Byron well enough. We have

seen him on the throne of glory; we have seen him in the torments of his great soul. . . . Why should you want to see him on a chamber pot? The crowd greedily reads confessions, memoirs, etc., because in its baseness it rejoices at the abasement of the high, at the weaknesses of the strong. It is in rapture at the disclosure of anything loathsome. ‘He is small like us; he is loathsome like us!’ You are lying, you scoundrels: He’s small and he’s loathsome, but not the way you are—differently.”

Despite its shortcomings, this thickly descriptive and beautifully written book is one of the outstanding literary biographies of recent years. It comes trailing clouds of glorious reviews from Britain, where it won the Samuel Johnson Whitbread Award for the best nonfiction book of 2002. And—perhaps the greatest praise one can offer—it richly deserves to be translated into Russian.

—ANDREW REYNOLDS

AN OPEN BOOK:

Coming of Age in the Heartland.

By Michael Dirda. Norton. 335 pp.
\$24.95

**SO MANY BOOKS,
SO LITTLE TIME:**

A Year of Passionate Reading.

By Sara Nelson. Putnam.
242 pp. \$22.95

One person’s obsessive-compulsive disorder is another’s badge of honor. The pleasures of list making surely account in part for the perennial “best of” magazine features: best movies, books, restaurants, and, in an effort to jazz up the phenomenon, more obscure categories such as best public place to have sex and best use of tripe. These lists are popular, perhaps because they require no engagement—they’re meant to be skimmed. So what to make of books that build narratives around lists?

In *An Open Book*, Michael Dirda, Pulitzer Prize-winning critic of *The Washington Post*, remembers the books of his childhood in Lorain, Ohio, in the 1950s and ’60s. We follow him from his primary-school readers to *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, *The*

Current Books

Secret of Skeleton Island, Henry Huggins, *The Insidious Dr. Fu Manchu*, *Crime and Punishment*, and *Candy*. The last, a racy 1960s take on *Candide*, he hid in a bathroom vent.

Dirda's subtitle, *Coming of Age in the Heartland*, suggests that his experience is, at least in part, representative of the Midwest of that era. His father works at a steel mill, his mother is a homemaker, and he bikes around a town where the different races have little interaction. The one anomaly is young Dirda's reading, which seems to feed his out-sized adolescent ego as much as his intellect. An appendix lists some 50 of "the more ambitious works" he read by age 16, ranging from *The Iliad* to *The Catcher in the Rye*. The list, he admits, "does seem at least a little pretentious."

In *So Many Books, So Little Time*, Sara Nelson, a book reviewer and columnist for *The New York Observer*, sets out to read a book a week during 2002 while keeping a diary about the experience. Most of her

choices have some immediate connection to her own life and family. She mines Katharine Graham's *Personal History* for insights into her mother's generation, ponders *Anna Karenina* from the vantage point of a stable marriage, and seeks solace for her son's disastrous Little League record in *The Way Home*, Henry Dunow's account of coaching his son's ball team. Nelson concludes with three lists: what she planned to read during the year, what she did read, and what she now intends to read.

Why would readers want to consult lists of the sort Nelson and Dirda provide? Knowing what Charles Dickens read between installments of his serials or what William Faulkner read as a boy might tell us something, but book reviewers' tastes are, by definition, revealed in their reviews. The effect of Dirda's and Nelson's commentaries may simply be to encourage people to reflect on their own reading histories. The trouble with that, of course, is the likelihood of more list books.

—ANGELA STARITA

CONTEMPORARY AFFAIRS

BLACK EARTH: *A Journey through Russia after the Fall.*

By Andrew Meier. Norton.
511 pp. \$28.95

"Can a country survive without a conscience?" asks the father of a Russian conscript killed in Chechnya after corrupt Russian commanders let Chechen rebels pass through their lines. That question drives journalist Andrew Meier's dark travelogue through post-Soviet Russia. Like some latter-day Diogenes transplanted to the steppes, Meier journeys through Russia and finds little cause for hope. "In Moscow I was afraid every day," he writes. St. Petersburg was awash in crime, drug addiction, and HIV/AIDS. Vladivostok was "the corrupt heart of the far eastern frontier." Norilsk was "one of Russia's most contaminated cities." And in northern Sakhalin, "life was not only more remote but darkened, as if the clouds had blocked the sun, by the pall of decay and uncertainty."

At the heart of this search for Russia's conscience is an examination of Moscow's brutal, decade-long effort to crush resistance in the breakaway republic of Chechnya. Meier focuses in harrowing detail on a massacre in the village of Aldy on February 5, 2000, when Russian soldiers murdered 60 civilians, and then tracks the failure to punish the killers despite ample evidence. Try as he might to come up with a reason for the killings, Meier admits that "a year later no answer seemed more credible than any other." But his obstinate reporting still serves a larger purpose. Though many observers—not least the U.S. government—now prefer to see Russia's harsh measures in Chechnya through the prism of the war on terror, Meier reminds us of the barbarism and its corrosive impact even on Russians far from the carnage.

Vivid prose snapshots of Russians are the greatest strength of *Black Earth*. Among the most notorious figures Meier encounters are Norilsk's mineral magnate (whose aggressive