

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

philanthropy recently won him an appointment to the board of New York's Guggenheim Museum), the chamomile-tea drinking leader of St. Petersburg's biggest crime syndicate, and the cosmonaut who was sitting at the controls of the *Mir* space station when a docking accident almost caused it to blow up. More telling, perhaps, are those figures who otherwise would remain anonymous: the military doctor who helped Russian families identify soldiers killed in Chechnya, the "gentle cop with a passion for history" in Sakhalin, the former labor camp prisoners and workers at Norilsk's giant metals complex who refuse to leave a dying city and landscape. For all the sadness of some of the stories, Meier's fresh prose, his eye for history, and his obvious affection for the country keep the reader from sinking into a slough of despond.

Where Meier falls down is in his attempt to answer the plaintive question about a nation without a conscience. Russians gained remarkable freedoms during the 1990s, but the collapse of the state also meant that they became largely "free" of such public goods as law, order, regulation, and basic civic services. Into the vacuum stepped corrupt politicians, criminals, would-be oligarchs, foreign carpetbaggers, and homegrown hucksters. Why were they able to ride roughshod over a people liberated at last from totalitarianism? Meier's answer: because contemporary Russia has yet to develop any sense of accountability. "In Russia," he writes, "no attempt on a social scale has been made to examine the totalitarian past, to learn not simply how the Soviet state functioned but how Russians themselves formed that state, to concede the crimes of the past."

But Meier never really explains why no such attempt has been made, other than to comment that a nation "economically, socially, and ideologically adrift" has other priorities. This circular reasoning—Russia is adrift because it lacks accountability, and it lacks accountability because it is adrift—might appeal to a people with such a strong fatalistic streak. But it does little to explain when and how Russians may finally be delivered from their suffering.

—JAMES GIBNEY

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