

THIS WEEK IN FICTION

KEITH GESSEN ON FAMILY HISTORY AND A CHANGING RUSSIA

By David Wallace April 9, 2018

In this week's story, "How Did We Come to Know You?," the narrator, Andrei, has a lapse in attention that leads to his grandmother having an accident. Family ties can be something that we acknowledge the importance of in the abstract, but that's not the same thing as actively spending time with those ties. Would you characterize Andrei's movement through the story as a certain kind of learning of attention? Is it possible, or even desirable, to always be paying attention to family?

That's the question: How much attention is it possible to pay to another person? How much is desirable? Andrei starts his trip to Russia wanting to pay his grandmother a particular kind of attention: he wants to listen to her stories of Stalinist Russia, because he thinks it will be good for his career. He quickly

realizes that this is not going to happen, and that she doesn't remember. And he ends up figuring out that this was not the sort of attention that she needed or desired. But, in the end, of course, he is going to let her down. There's only so much we can do for other people. We can't save them from death, and we probably can't even save them from very much suffering. But we can show up. Showing up is a start.

This story comes from your forthcoming novel, "A Terrible Country." When you were working on the book, did you ever feel like you experienced difficulties in writing Baba Seva? In an essay on The New Yorker's Web site about old age and literature, Ceridwen Dovey quotes Frank Kermode: "The young know nothing directly about old age and their inquiries into the topic must be done blind." Andrei is very conscious of the fact that there's a lot he doesn't know about his grandmother.

One of the seeds for the book came from conversations I had with my own grandmother when I lived with her in Moscow under circumstances a little bit like those in the book. We had these repetitive exchanges, over and over, and there was a kind of literary quality to them. It felt like some kind of modernist theatre: the same dialogue every time, but in a slightly different context or in a different register, along with, of course, a certain amount of my own irritation. But they were also heartbreaking conversations because they reflected her loss of hearing and memory. When I initially wrote the book, it contained some sections from her perspective, which ended up not making it in. I think the biggest challenge for me was to express my love and affection for this person without lying about the difficulties she was having and the state she was in.

Much of your recent work has revolved around hybrid forms of the "nonfictional," from your translation of Svetlana Alexievich's oral histories, to your work bringing the poet Kirill Medvedev into English, to the hedge-funder interviews of "Diary of a Very Bad Year." Granting that the distinctions between fiction and nonfiction are less solid than we sometimes think, what inspired your turn back to fiction?

I love nonfiction, and I really love oral history. I like fiction that is made up, but I really love fiction that is thinly veiled autobiography. Each form has its rules, not even so much in terms of truth and falsity (although nonfiction should certainly be true) but, rather, in its pacing, its tolerance for coincidence (sometimes greater in nonfiction than in fiction, paradoxically), and even its tone. I think if I'd had enough material for a memoir, I'd have written a memoir. But I didn't—my life in Russia was even less interesting than Andrei's. But I did want it to sound like a memoir. My ultimate model while writing the book was Tolstoy's novel "The Cossacks," but the books I most enjoyed reading while writing this one were memoirs of people's sojourns in a foreign place for a certain period of time. One of the most useful books to me was "From Behind the Red Line," a memoir by an American hockey player named Tod Hartje, who came to the U.S.S.R., in 1990, to play for Kiev Sokol. That's a good book. He later went on to play for the Fort Wayne Komets and the Minnesota Moose—I would read his books about that, too, if he would write them.

At the beginning of the book, Andrei is struck by how much everything in Moscow has changed in the intervening years since he last visited, especially the affluence he sees around town. The story takes place in 2008. What do you think that particular moment can say about Russia now, especially with the strange role that Russia has taken in our political discourse?

In retrospect, that period very much looks like a golden age. It didn't seem that way at the time; Russia had just fought its short war with Georgia, and the oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky had been imprisoned and was writing letters to various literary figures. But now it looks like a moment of relative calm and prosperity in between the Beslan school siege and the crisis in Crimea—a time when even Putin felt like things were well enough in hand that he could hand over the Presidency to a guy who mostly just played with his iPhone [Dmitry Medvedev].

Putin, Russia, and Trump

But Andrei's feeling of shock at Russia's new prosperity, even as he eventually finds out what's beneath the surface, is still very much a feeling that a traveller to Moscow can have. In the past few years, Moscow has done tremendous things for its infrastructure—something like twenty (!) new subway stations have opened since 2010. How many have opened in the same time in New York? Three? The number of cafés and little restaurants in the center has quintupled. They knocked down the old kiosks, so, although it's a little tricky to find a Snickers bar or a lighter, you can see where you're going, and the place looks great. At the same time, of course, the political culture of the country, post-Crimea, has really descended into a kind of hell—nationalism, xenophobia, militarism, self-isolation. Perhaps it's a more advanced stage of what we're experiencing over here. This combination is always a shock: How can prosperity and political violence exist in the same time and place? But, in fact, it turns out they go together very nicely, and always have.

David Wallace is a member of The New Yorker's editorial staff. [Read more »](#)

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