100 years of memory and imagination in Bulgaria

By Perrin Ireland

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One can only hope the world has taken a step forward when an author residing in India, after living in England, France, the United States, and Malaysia, sets a novel in Bulgaria. “Solo,’’ previously published in Britain and winner of the 2010 Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for Best Book, is Rana Dasgupta’s second work of fiction, after the critically acclaimed “Tokyo Cancelled,’’ a collection of modernist folk tales. While Dasgupta’s robust imagination and technical mastery are on full display in “Tokyo Cancelled,’’ “Solo’’ advances depth and characterization.

The novel opens unremarkably in the cramped apartment of a 100-year-old Bulgarian man, Ulrich, now blind and left in the company of his memories and imagination. But it’s not long before we run across a signature passage: “The blind man sits by the window when the rain is heavy, and he can hear . . . the silky spray in the trees, the heavy drumming on plastic water tanks, the hard scatter of roads and pavements, the different metallic pitches of car roofs and drain covers, the baritone trilling of tarpaulin, the sticky overflow of mud, the concentrated gushing of drainpipes.’’ Music plays a prominent role in “Solo,’’ which is divided into two “movements’’: “Life’’ and “Daydreams.’’ The first movement recounts the story of Ulrich’s life, his hopes and disappointments, beginning in 1901. “As the Ottoman Empire’s tide retreated, Sofia found itself beached in Europe.’’ Young Ulrich develops a passion for music, but his father forbids its pursuit. Later Ulrich develops a passion for chemistry, which he sees as “the revisitation of his entombed love for music,’’ and moves to Berlin to study.

After his father emerges from World War I a broken man, Ulrich returns home to assist with the family’s reduced economic circumstances, renewing his relationship with his best friend, Boris, once a musician himself, who now speaks only of revolution, Russian-style. Ulrich accompanies Boris to a bar, and Dasgupta delivers a breathtaking scene that includes a card-playing table where men roar “with victory and defeat,’’ tobacco smoke mingling with the smoke from paraffin lamps, an out-of-tune piano, the table “soaked with spilt drink,’’ a poet waving dog-eared pages, a woman behind the bar “who used it to rest her breasts on,’’ a toothless folksinger, coins tossed among glasses, a red-faced man unspooling a lengthy, amusing tale concluding with a description of his brother’s murder by the king’s henchman.

Shortly thereafter, Boris is executed for his political activities. Ulrich marries Boris’s sister, who eventually abandons him, taking their young son with her; Ulrich never sees them again. “[H]e read in a book of a Japanese word that described the unique pleasure of sleeping next to a young child. It spoke of a sensuality that was not erotic, but indecent nevertheless, in its fervor.’’

Ulrich clings to the daily schedule of his factory job “as if it were a raft,’’ as history marches through his homeland: a fascist coup in 1934; the king allying himself with Chancellor Hitler; Bulgaria finding itself at war with America, Britain, and the Soviet Union; the Soviets invading and redesigning the country and its music. Eventually communism gives way to capitalism. “Murderers and thieves took over and called themselves businessmen.’’

The aging Ulrich grows more and more inward, giving birth to the “Daydreams’’ of the book’s second “movement,’’ in which he imagines the lives of three “children’’ of his new world — Boris, a musician in Bulgaria, and Khatuna and her brother Irakli, a poet, in Tbilisi, Georgia, another failed Soviet state and showcase for violence. The three eventually end up in New York, where the unsympathetic but survivalist Khatuna becomes a

security specialist, and we're treated to a critique of the music industry as we follow Boris's rise to fame. Irakli's artistic fate, alas, takes a bitter turn. While parts of the first half of this haunting book read like nonfiction, albeit more poetically rendered, the second intercuts lyricism with characters and plots that occasionally seem to have stepped out of pulp fiction; Ulrich listens to a lot of TV.

Yet some of the most poignant passages in the novel appear in this section, where Ulrich imagines he meets up with the woman he'd loved during his student days in Berlin. "You know this is all a dream,'' Clara says. "You must know I died long ago. A Jewish woman in Berlin . . . In your heart you know that, yes?''

The second movement is replete with echoes of images that appear in the first (pigs, young men attached to umbrellas, dogs with tails tied together, mothers who drink too much, violins set on fire, marbles, plastic) and while the novel can be demanding to decode (chapter headings are chemicals in the first half, sea creatures in the second, tenses shift), it may be best to succumb to the notion of dream, and let it wash over.

Although Ulrich's daydreams don't always end happily, he clings to a splinter of hope, which he invests, unsurprisingly, in those who respond to creative impulses. Dasgupta consistently provides flashes of brilliance and masterful descriptions (sometimes outshining dialogue) in this bold, stimulating, unclassifiable epic, and fans of quality fiction will want to note and follow this author. Dense with details, events, and ideas, "Solo'' is not a seamless book, which would seem a small price to pay for its effusion of energy and originality.

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