

# A Moscow Mystery

by Ken Follett



**Gorky Park**  
by Martin Cruz Smith  
Random House  
384 pp., \$13.95

The publisher is calling *Gorky Park* a suspense thriller, but in fact it is a mystery. I know how this kind of mislabeling happens. The editor says: "This is a really good, unusual mystery and I want to print 100,000 copies." To which the marketing director responds: "Jeez, nobody buys mysteries, we better call it a thriller."

He has my sympathy but not my assent. Mysteries are about *understanding*; thrillers are about *winning*. In a mystery you are never really sure who the villain is or what he is up to until the end of the book (and sometimes not even then if you have not read carefully). In a thriller you usually know what the villain wants and how he plans to get it. Often you know perfectly well how the story will end—Germany will lose World War II, de Gaulle will not be assassinated, New York will not be destroyed by the nuclear device in the closet in the Pan Am Building. The tension comes from trying to figure out how the hero will avert disaster and survive. The task of the mystery-writer is to make you share a detective's curiosity, whereas the thriller-writer must make you share a hero's fear.

Of course many stories weave back and forth across the borderline. A common formula is the story that begins as a mystery, with someone wondering "What the hell is going on around here?" then half way through turns into a thriller when he finds out exactly what is going on and subsequently does his damndest to put a

stop to it.

*Gorky Park* stays firmly on the mystery side of the line. The detective—Chief Investigator Arkady Renko—plays his cards so close to his chest that you are never sure what he is after. You never see the story from the point of view of the bad guys, and you never know in advance what they will do.

It has many other standard elements: a disillusioned, brilliant detective with a ruined marriage; a rich, perfectly groomed protagonist; a corrupt and obstructive bureaucracy; and a girl who is by turns suspect, hostile witness, and loving collaborator.

Nevertheless it is a highly distinctive mystery, miles ahead of the pack, and given some promotion it should reach and please the wider readership which that marketing director is after. There are two reasons for this. One is simply that Martin Cruz Smith is a most enjoyable writer. The other is that *Gorky Park*, like all the best mysteries, works as a novel.

Smith has a delightful turn of phrase. He says of a frightened Jewish surgeon in Moscow: "He held his emotions like gold in a fist." He renders gruesome police-procedural detail with just the right humanizing, comic touches. Here is detective Arkady in the mortuary with the pathologist Levin:

Beauty lay on the autopsy table.  
"Andreev will want the neck, too,"  
Levin said.

The pathologist put a wood block under the neck, making it bow up, and pulled back the hair. With a rotary saw he sliced through the bones. The smell of burning calcium spread. Arkady had no cigarettes; he held his breath.

Levin cut under the seventh cervical vertebra along the angle of the vertebra's spur. As bone separated, head and neck rolled off the table. Arkady reflexively caught the head, and as quickly put it

back. Levin switched off the saw.

"No, Investigator, she's all yours now."

Arkady wiped his hands. The head was thawed. "I'll need a box."

Change the names to Carella and Kling and this scene might be taken from an 87th Precinct mystery by Ed McBain. It would be harsh to call Smith an imitative writer, but it must be admitted that he is cheerfully derivative. (His last novel, *Nightwing*, was a



foray into Stephen King territory.) In my opinion there is nothing wrong with that. Still, Smith is up to much more than mystery-writing here. He has ripped all of these unidentified corpses, pathologists, reluctant witnesses, tough cops, and smooth villains out of their usual urban-American context and transplanted them into the USSR. Central Park becomes Gorky Park, dope dealers become icon smugglers, FBI interference becomes KGB interference, subway advertisements become revolutionary mosaics, and a cop who knows too much is fired for revisionism instead of incompetence.

The book really hits its stride when investigator Arkady discovers that one of his suspects is a New York homicide detective. Here is the American, Kirwill, sparring with Arkady:

"Maybe I ought to defect. I could be a f----- superman around here," Kirwill said.

"That was a good idea, those other bloodstains," Arkady tried to concede graciously.

"How did you get that cut over your eye? Where did you go last night after we left the bar?"

"I went back for a piss and fell down the hole."

"I can kick the answer out of you."

"What if you broke a toe? You'd be kept in a Soviet hospital until it was healed—six weeks at least. At no cost, of course."

It is the way Smith plays with the differences and similarities between East and West that gives the book its distinction. Now, if you sat down to write a straight novel "about" life in the Soviet Union you would be in grave danger of producing something didactic and boring that nobody would read, because a novel must be first and foremost "about" a person. Smith places in center-stage a human being struggling with a concrete problem, and

then he is able, as if incidentally, to light up all aspects of life under the dictatorship of the proletariat.

When this realization dawns on you as you read *Gorky Park* you understand why he has used so many regular mystery-story devices. The mystery, like the western, is part of our standard-issue cultural equipment, familiar to almost everyone, along with the rhyming couplet and the 12-bar blues. We know that the suntanned WASP in the cashmere topcoat will turn out to have blood on his hands; we know the inscrutable chief prosecutor must be playing a game of his own; we know that sooner or later the detective will get to punch his wife's lover in the nose.

This predictable framework throws into sharp relief what is unexpected and unfamiliar, those aspects of life that are intriguingly different in the USSR: just how Communist Party control works; what it is like to get a divorce in Moscow; whether an innocent man accused of a crime has any real chance of getting socialist justice; how an honest Joe can make a buck.

These descriptions are more than merely diverting. After all, we're told that global politics is basically a contest between Our Way of Life and Theirs, but most of us do not really understand Their Way of Life. A nonfiction book like Hedrick Smith's *The Russians* gives us a lot of information but we need the sympathetic imagination of a novelist to tell us what it feels like to be a human being in the Soviet Union. Sadly, popular novelists have so far done little to enlighten us, preferring, out of intellectual laziness, to take their picture of Russia and the Russians straight out of George Orwell's *1984*.

Martin Cruz Smith is certainly not lazy. *Gorky Park* is good entertainment and has intelligent and illuminating things to say about a subject of importance. I should like to think that this is what popular literature is all about. ■

Ken Follett is the best-selling author of *Eye of the Needle*, *Triple*, and *The Key to Rebecca*.

**Martin Cruz Smith's *Gorky Park* works as a novel, like all the best mysteries. It is miles ahead of the pack.**



BOB ADELMAN

# Visions in the Wilderness

by Jan Morris



**Sand Rivers**  
by Peter Matthiessen  
The Viking Press  
240 pp., \$19.95

In Tanzania, south of the railway the Chinese have built from Dar-es-Salaam to the Zambian frontier, north of the Mbungu country, there lies the Selous Game Reserve, named for the great hunter Frederick Selous, established by the British during their mandatory rule of Tanganyika, and now the biggest, wildest, and least-known animal sanctuary of all Africa. The Selous is larger than Maryland, nearly four times as large as the Serengeti, and most of it remains to this day virtually unknown to human beings.

Into this remarkable geographical anachronism, this epitome of the organic ideal, there went in August 1979, as a member of a small safari, one of the human race's most meticulously processed representatives, the writer Peter Matthiessen, whose every word is refined, whose ideas have been sieved through countless layers of dialectic, and whose very emotions (or so it seems from his writing) are subject to stringent moral and intellectual analysis.

With him too went Brian Nicholson, self-nicknamed Mister Meat, a former game warden of the Selous and *homo sapiens* of a very different kind, who smoked too much, who clacked his false teeth, who had shot 1,300 elephants in his time, who made naughty racist jokes and perpetuated discredited colonialist attitudes.

The confrontation between these three doughty imponderables—Nature in the Raw, Award-Winning Author, Old Meat Man—provides the

theme of *Sand Rivers*, a book that looks at first like just another ecological travel-tract, but is actually a cunningly planned, and movingly resolved, sort of allegory.

The book starts appallingly, after a first paragraph that might have been composed by Johnboy to conclude an episode of *The Waltons*. Improbably inspired by a young British Member of Parliament, Tom Arnold, Matthiessen and the celebrated wild-life photographer Hugo van Lawick join a small expedition into the Selous under the leadership of Nicholson, who left Tanzania after independence and now flies airplanes in Kenya. It would be, said Arnold, who is also a theatrical producer, "the last safari into the last wilderness." That dread phrase sets the tone of the book's beginning, and will send the *aficionado* of these texts stumbling dispiritedly along the long, long trail of Last Safaris, across the successive borders of Last Wildernesses, all the way back to Alan Moorehead's original zoological exploration of East Africa, *No Room in the Ark*, which first pricked the ecological conscience 30 years ago.

It is almost *déjà vu* at first. There waits the statutory Baron (no East African animal book is complete without its European nobleman). There stalks the compulsory eccentric (Nicholson was not only direct successor to the unspeakable snake-man C.J.P. Ionides, the real creator of the Selous, but also his frank disciple). The photographs are, as usual, marvelous. The obligatory references to the Leakey family are properly in place. The porters perform their *ngoma* dance as they have in every East African book since *How I Found Livingstone*.

What is worse, Matthiessen takes an age to assemble this dire *mise-en-scène*.

Before we even light the campfires we have to learn all about Tom, Ken, Rick, Maria, and Philip—how Brian met Melva in the first place, why David has not arrived yet, what happened to the previous owner of Karen's car (eaten by lion), where the Nicholsons' married daughter is living now (Bangkok).

Matthiessen is not one for elisions, still less for snap judgments. He may be able to sum up young Philip, summer-camp style, as "a likeable blond boy and fanatical fisherman," but it takes him a long, long time to decide what he feels about Brian Nicholson.

Here the allegory creeps in. Nicholson is a bitter man, it appears, cynical about all forms of progress. He carries a rifle at all times in case some bloody animal jumps him, views Tanzanian independence with mordant skepticism, would decidedly not vote in favor of ERA, and seems to take conscious pleasure in offending people of more tender sensibilities.

Matthiessen, on the other hand, might have been bred by Sierra Club out of Friends of the Earth, with mid-wifely encouragement from *Roots*. He is firmly on the side of everything good, like wildernesses, women, and black Africans. He is horrified at the idea of taking a gun to go *bird-watching*, and wants only to think the best of everyone, beast or man, black or white.

But oh, what problems of morality and interpretation beset the kindly ecologist in incorrigible old Africa! The very nature of innocence is at risk! When is a tourist not a tourist? When is a poacher not a hunter? Is the culling of thousands of elephants in the interests of conservation morally more justifiable than the murder of thousands of rhinos in the pursuit of aphrodisiacs? Is an animal of an Endangered Species more precious in the sight of God than a