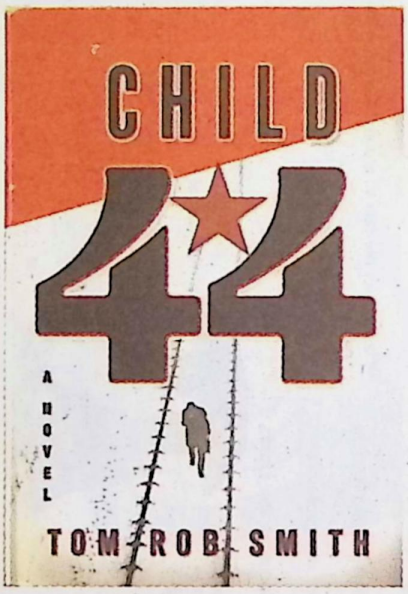
Bleak Midwinter

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There is no crime in Stalinist Russia. It's also, in 1953, a paradise of free education, healthcare and security. All this in return for hard work, loyalty and blind faith in a system that closes its eyes to crime, and yet demands hawkish surveillance of loved ones, giving few options but betrayal when their inevitable guilt is proved.

The gulags await those who don't think this is a fair trade. Survival there is near impossible. Hard work is easier than that. Watching is easier than that. Even betrayal is easier than that.

Officer Leo Demidov, a celebrated war hero, has no doubts. His dedication to the Ministry is exemplary. He "understood its necessity, the necessity of guarding their revolution from enemies both foreign and domestic, from those who sought to undermine it and those determined to see it fail. To this end Leo would lay down his life. To this end he'd lay down the lives of others." Leo is the poster boy of the Stalinist Soviet Union ideal. But even his faith is fragile.

After a young boy's body is found on a railway line in Moscow, the family's whisperings of murder are detected, and Leo is sent to "quash any unfounded speculation, to guide them back from the brink". The father is a friend and colleague of his. Despite towing the party line, Leo knows that this little boy's death was more than the "terrible accident" the family have grudgingly conceded to.

Set-up, ordered to spy on his own wife, Leo obeys. He rips up his floorboards and checks the mattress he sleeps on. "He was searching his apartment because it had to be done. He mustn't over-think." But Raisa Demidov's guilt has already been decided and, refusing to betray her, Leo is exiled with his wife to the Ural Mountains. "His faith in the State had been unquestioning. Did he miss that feeling complete, unswerving confidence? Yes, he did." In the trials of 1937 Stalin had briefed the accused that they had "lost faith". Now it had happened to him.

And it is here that this astounding debut novel really takes flight. Discovering that other children have been murdered in the same way as the young boy back in Moscow, Leo and Raisa are compelled to act. Risking everything, they set out in search of the ruthless killer.

Smith does not just describe life under a dictator. He engulfs you in it. "(Raisa) was an unsettled sleeper", Leo worries. "Was that enough reason to denounce her? He knew how it would be written up: Unable to rest easy, troubled by her dreams: my wife is clearly tormented by some secret." The horror of bone-numbing cold, of hunger so severe that skeletal cats are hunted for meat, even of children being murdered in the snow all wither in comparison with the terror of being judged while sleeping. Anti-Stalinist dreaming the ultimate ideological crime.

There is an absolutely credible bleakness about this novel, a sense of futility that cannot be shaken off. Hospitals, farms and orphanages are simply numbered rather than named; the local factory is "the new church, the people's cathedral"; men die of "hopelessness, uninterested in surviving if this is all there (is) to survive for".

The phrase "master storyteller" is horribly over-used. In the case of young, first-time novelist Tom Rob Smith, it simply cannot do him justice. Child 44 is not only a thriller of the highest quality addictive, pacey, frighteningly unpredictable but also a magnificently written novel with far more to offer than carefully managed tension and twists.

In Moscow, Leo and Raisa have grown apart. On their way out of Moscow, exiled together, Leo asks if she has ever loved him: "A moment passed in silence, the question lingering like a bad smell, the two of them rocking with the motion of the train. Finally, instead of answering, Raisa knelt down and tied her shoelace."

That moment hangs in the air, suspended in time. The awkwardness and pain is unbearable. We shouldn't be there, watching. And yet, like everyone under the regime, we are.

Whether this one man achieves his ambitions becomes almost inconsequential under the weight of human tragedy. We care about Leo's fate. Smith has made us care. But what difference can this one man really make in amongst the death and despair? Can he ever escape the evil with which he was such a willing bedfellow for so long?

Visionary filmmaker Ridley Scott is scheduled to direct an adaptation of this harrowing debut and I cannot wait to see the result. But there's no Hollywood ending here. Finding peace is one thing. Finding redemption is another. There is no redemption in Stalinist Russia.

This review first appeared in The Scotsman.