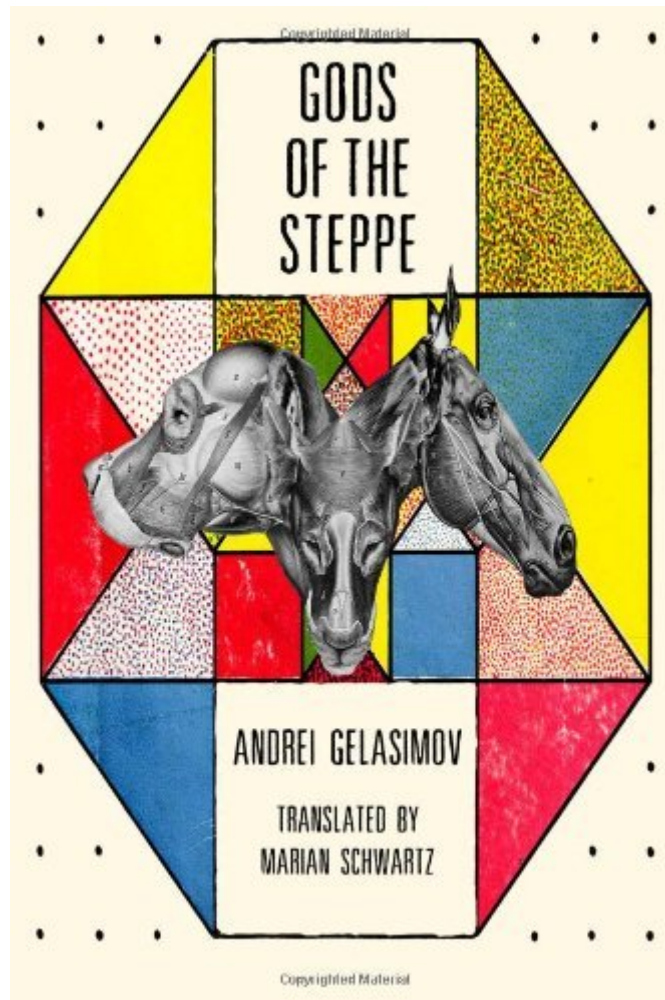


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Gods Of The Steppe



Synopsis

It is the summer of 1945. Germany has been defeated, Hitler has disappeared, and tensions are mounting ever higher along the Russian-Chinese border where the threat of Japanese invasion haunts. For Petka, no life could be more thrilling and glorious than marching into battle alongside the Red Army. But he is only twelve, the bastard child of a fractured family, trapped in a village too tiny for his bursting spirit. So he must make his own adventure wherever he can find it. And if that means passing off a wolf cub as a puppy under the nose of his ferocious grandma, stealing bootleg alcohol for the bivouacked troops he worships, smuggling himself in a barrel across the border and into the line of fire, fighting for his life when his own aimless peers turn inexplicably vicious, or befriending an enigmatic Japanese POW who transcends Petka's provincial world, then so be it. By turns comical, harrowing, poignant, and exhilarating, Petka reveals the soul of a boy who knows only to take from life all that he can—not merely what his circumstances allow. Nominated for the 2014 Rossica Translation Prize.

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Customer Reviews

Russian literature in my opinion has always been a bit dark and harrowing. This book is no

exception written by Andrei Gelasimov it is about a boy in the eastern part of the USSR during the last part of World War II and the rough life he leads. The boy is an illegitimate son of a man, he is being raised by his grandparents in a small village and he befriends a Japanese Soldier who is a POW. It is a bleak story, where the boy has to have a vivid imagination to survive and he also raises a wolf cub. Not much going on after that. It is a typical bleak look of life that is a cornerstone theme throughout Russian literature. If you are into Russian literature, then you will enjoy this book.

Andrei Gelasimov's "Gods of the Steppe" is a thinly-plotted tale of life on the Sino-Soviet border during the last months of World War Two. It's a slice-of-life story that brings to the non-Russian reader a glimpse into what life was like on the edge of the Soviet empire while the Red Army shifted its forces from Europe to Asia in order to defeat the Japanese. This world is seen through the eyes of Petka, an impoverished 12-year old boy from the little town of Razgulyaevka. He is poor only in worldly goods; his spirit, optimism and zest for life are an immeasurable wealth that others around him do not share. Petka dreams of being a soldier and lives in a near-perpetual fantasy land of constantly battling Hitler's minions or the hated Kwantung Army of the Japanese. Petka's heart is too big for the town he lives in, and that is the main idea behind the story. He loves his friends and his mama, and he deals with those who wrong him fairly and effectively. Throughout the ups and downs of village life during wartime Petka's optimism remains unshakeable, and it carries him and the ones he loves "all the way to the horizon." This is another of Gelasimov's subtle but powerful works: only when you take the bird's eye view do you see the whole picture.

Military novels are a dime a dozen. Culling out the unique perspective is what's difficult. In that endeavor, I believe Andrei Gelasimov has succeeded. War delivered through the eyes of a child - more aggressive but similar in ways to J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun* - *Gods of Steppe* tells the story of a Russian boy named Petka living during WWII, who wishes he could aid his countrymen in the Red Army by fighting along the Russian-Chinese border. Given that unreality, instead he gets into all sorts of mischief and eventually comes to the realization everything is not what he once believed. What I enjoyed about the novel was the realistic portrayal and description of war, as well as Petka's transformation. His transformation is two-fold. First, he's "the bastard" to everyone. His mother had him at an early age, and his family life is disheveled in ways that include war, despair, and substance abuse. But his interactions with the troops and camp guards is reinvigorating. Similarly, after initially being naïve and capricious, some harsh experiences altered his war-time perceptions. Enemies and allies sometimes swap. Family isn't always trustworthy. Safety and

danger are often illusions. His interactions with the Japanese POW reminded me initial stages of the tragic friendship formed in Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*. The negative of this novel is the delivery. At times it feels disjointed. It's not terribly difficult to follow, particularly for someone engrossed in the tale, but I could see it causing issues for some readers.

It's 1945. The protagonist, Petya, would be called a street urchin except that he's growing up in a village on the eastern Siberian steppe. He gets into fights, tries to raise a wolf cub, endures beatings by his grandmother and idolizes the bored soldiers who guard an isolated Japanese POW camp down the road. Meanwhile one of the prisoners had his own uniquely Japanese story to tell. There's no romanticism here, but this is an odd book that grows on you.

Gelasimov continues to evince a range of material and narrative style in his third novel to be translated into English. Set in a remote Russian village in the Asian steppe during WWII, following VE day and prior to VJ day, *"Gods of the Steppe"* paints a picture of life during the war not typically considered by Western audiences. Petka is staunchly pro-Soviet (the certainty without understanding of a child), fantasizes about being a soldier, but is an outcast among the other boys due to his status as a bastard. Hirotaro is an introspective, thoughtful Japanese prisoner of war, outcast not only among his captors, but also among his fellow countrymen in the POW camp, even though as a doctor he provides a valuable service to both. The two serve as interesting counterpoints, both in their similar interactions within their own groups and in their differing interactions with the camp guards. When they cross paths with each other, they end up challenging each others' beliefs, but not in a stereotypical feel-good story way. Some readers may struggle with the inner narrative of the characters that wanders freely from events in the present to seemingly unrelated events in the past, but overall it succeeds at conveying a realistic thought process without resorting to a more Joycean stream of consciousness. It is especially effective for Petka, as a young boy with little structure in his life whose attention can never remain focused in one place for too long. Some aspects of *"Gods of the Steppe"* do feel more ragged than Gelasimov's previously translated novels, *"Thirst"* and *"The Lying Year"*, such as the storyline involving Petka's pet wolf, and the epilogue which ties things together almost too neatly, but these are small detractions from an otherwise enjoyable story.

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