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Book Reviews

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Book Reviews

Column Editor: **Barry Fast** (Academic Book Center)

If you have a title to review or one to submit for review, please send it to — Book Review Editor, Against the Grain, 11 Orlando Avenue, Ardsley, NY 10502. Thanks. — BF.

Two Tales of Courageous Life Choices;
a review of **Fifty Russian Winters:
An American Woman's Life**

in the Soviet Union
by **Margaret Wettlin**,
Pharos Books, NY, 1992
324 pp., 0886876540 (\$22.95)

and

**Gift Children: A Story of Race, Family
and Adoption in a Divided America**

by **J. Douglas Bates**,
Ticknor & Fields, NY, 1993
270 p. 0395633141 (\$21.95)

Reviewed by **Ellen Finnie Duranceau**
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I came to *Gift Children* and *Fifty Russian Winters* out of interest in their subjects, but there was definitely also a voyeuristic quality to my attraction to these two riveting personal narratives of lives so different from my own, so fascinating as studies of personality, culture, and social history. I was interested in how these people, who took such personal risks for what they believed in, and suffered so much as a result of their idealism, nevertheless emerged as people with integrity, purpose, and a set of core beliefs unshaken (if not unchanged) by their disillusionment.

I suppose there is something at once noble and base about a compulsion to read about other people's lives — the noble element is the desire to learn about other cultures, about history, in order to become more open-minded, educated, and understanding of others; the base element emerges from the dark side of the human psyche, the side that compels one to stare at a dead squirrel on the roadside when it would be so much nicer to look away, or to slow down when passing an accident, just in case one might see something shocking.

Whether it was the noble or the base side prompting me, or a combination of both, once I began reading these books, I simply could not look away, compelled to follow the lives of two families, one in the American Northwest from the '70s to the '90s, and the other in the Soviet Union from the '30s

through the mid '80s. I suppose it is this unique ability to truly share and experience someone else's life that draws me to nonfiction and to memoirs and autobiography in particular, more and more with each passing year. After all, someone out there, especially someone who has dared to live an unusual life and take unusual risks, may just have the answers I seek in living my own.

Gift Children

If you are interested at all in race relations in the US, in adoption, in parenting, or even only in the social culture that was the '70s, you'll find **J. Douglas Bates'** *Gift Children: A Story of Race, Family, and Adoption in a Divided America* a fascinating book. Bates has had a long career in

journalism, as a reporter and manager of papers in the Northwest, primarily in Eugene, Oregon, where he came of age as a newspaperman and parent. As a journalist, he is well-suited to the task of describing his life with two white biological sons and two adopted black daughters, Lynn and Liska, each of whom came into his family after several years in foster care in other homes. Bates is very honest about his and his wife Gloria's profound naiveté in adopting these children: neither had ever carried on a meaningful conversation with an African-American prior to the adoptions, and their motives were pure if simplistic: they wanted girls, since they had boys, they did not want to go through the diapers and bottles stage again, and race did not matter. Doug and Gloria were idealists, caught up in a dream of equality and justice for all, overflowing with hope for a new kind of society. In 1971, when they were adopting, race relations in the US

were improving, and they felt no qualms. As Bates writes, "Time casts a wonderful mellow amber tint over some of our memories, of course, but I can't help looking back at the seventies as a golden decade for our family. . . . Gloria and I were brimming then, almost to the point of arrogance, with faith in the future and confidence in our ability to breeze over any obstacles placed in our path. We were too young and idealistic to care about material things we did not have, and too naive to see the problems that awaited us." The problems were severe. Bates has the journalist's sense for a compelling narrative, and begins his story near its end: when he is purchasing a shotgun to protect his family from a violent, racist criminal en route from LA, who has threatened to kill his estranged girlfriend Liska's white parents.

From the opening pages of *Gift Children*, then, it is clear that raising black children in a white family is not going to be completely smooth sailing. Leaving the reader hanging as the would-be murderer apparently speeds his way towards the author, Bates returns to the past to fill in history and describe the experience of adopting and parenting Lynn and Liska, both of whom are actually

only part African-American, but who think of themselves as black and appear black. Bates struggles with racism in his predominantly white community, in the schools, where Lynn is teased mercilessly, and among his colleagues, who (despite a reputation for impartiality and broadmindedness associated with major journalists) prove themselves prone to racist jokes and discrimination against non-whites. Bates learns, painfully, what it means to be a minority in the US. He learns, painfully, what it is like to try to control teenagers who have been raised in a white middle-class family, but who do not immediately accept the values associated with that family.

Bates wonders, as his daughters make what he considers terrible life choices, choosing inappropriate mates, bearing illegitimate children they cannot support, tossing aside education for dead-end jobs and welfare,

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whether "both my daughters [were] somehow doomed to gravitate to the Other America of their biological parents? Were my grandchildren predestined to live lives of poverty in the nation's black underclass?" Bates never really, fully, answers this deeply troubling question, but his narrative does not end on this bleak note of doubt. He regains hope in his family's future by seeing how well his children parent his grandchildren. He sees that the three grandchildren born into poverty are nevertheless happy and well-adjusted. He finds it within himself to re-engage with his daughters' lives through his grandchildren, and determines to set up a family support program to fund education for his Lynn and Liska and financial support for their families so that they will not depend on government assistance. Bates, in the end, draws much comfort from his daughters' actions in their mid-twenties, as they reconsider college educations and find more appropriate mates.

On the way to this resolution, Bates is chastened, matured, perhaps even bowed, but not bitter or regretful. He is forced to confront parts of himself that he didn't know existed and would have preferred to have left unexplored. After his home is broken into, he is convinced that a black boyfriend of Liska's is responsible, even though it turns out to have been the one white friend she had; and as Liska's relationship with the violent ex-con in LA worsens, he begins to feel that "every young black male I encountered became, for one ugly split second, a potential ruiner of my daughters, a threat to my family, and enemy to society." He comes

to the awareness that racism lies in each of our hearts, even in those who have made Herculean efforts to combat it, even those who have based their own families on a belief in racial unity.

Whether you believe, along with many social work professionals, that black children should be adopted by black families, or whether you question this premise, Bates' final, hopeful, belief in his two daughters is a positive affirmation that we may yet have the chance to heal race relations in the US. He chooses to close his narrative in describing his older daughter Lynn's wedding, where blacks and whites mingled and enjoyed one another's company. The wedding for him, and for the reader, is a symbol of hope. Most importantly, Bates proves his own point, that the capacity for love is natural, and that love can grow easily between parents and children who are not biologically related and who do not share the same cultural or racial roots. So it is a hopeful, and positive Doug Bates who writes at the end of his book of his "reengagement" with his family after "disengaging" from the seemingly unending disappointment and conflict.

I have quibbles with the book — from a journalist, I would have preferred more information about how other transracial adoptive families have fared (was the Bates family typical or atypical?) and a fuller sense of how his wife felt. At times the narrative seemed choppy, and the writing works well but is not particularly inspiring. The story, however, is. Bates has written an important book about race in America, about parenting, and about coming to terms with the life choices one has made.

Fifty Russian Winters

Margaret Wettlin's life story, the more powerfully written of the two, covers such a broad sweep of history and experience that it is almost impossible to encapsulate in a review. Wettlin is clearly an idealist at the outset of her story, starry-eyed about the Soviet Union. Driven (like Bates) by a vision of a better world, she sets out during the Great Depression (when she is in her early 20s) for a two-month visit to the Soviet Union to learn as much as she can about socialism, a way of life that to her seems the answer to the cruelty and arbitrariness of the capitalist machine that left her father penniless, ashamed, and broken despite years of hard work as a pharmacist. Wettlin ends up staying the better part of a lifetime, long enough to learn that the Soviet Union's socialism is a scam, more cruel and more unjust than the society she'd left. And yet Wettlin, like Bates, does not seem embittered by her experience, harsh as it is. She finds her own peace with her life, finally resettling in the

U.S. after her husband's death.

Wettlin was nearing 30 when she first learned that she could not fully control her own destiny; her plans for living on two continents, lecturing in the U.S. during the summer on the merits of socialism and life in the Soviet Union, while living the rest of the year as writer, teacher, and translator in Moscow, fell to pieces when the Soviet Union forbade her from remaining if she did not become a citizen, and informed her that once a citizen she would not be allowed to leave the country. Married by this time to **Andre Effremoff**, a theater director who studied under Stanislavsky and founded the Moscow Art Theater, (also an idealist and devoted follower of the socialist experiment), Wettlin felt she had no choice but to become a Soviet citizen and renounce the life she had planned. It was the first of many rude awakenings about the true nature of the Soviet machine.

The war years followed, with endless physical and emotional deprivations as evacuation followed evacuation and she and Andre and their two children tried to keep their bodies and spirits alive. The realization that Stalin had created a repressive, cruel government had begun to dawn on them before the war, but Wettlin and her husband (and the Russian people as a whole) had high hopes that after the war things would be different. They were not; they worsened. The propaganda machine went into overdrive, artists were prevented from working except in certain prescribed forms, arbitrary arrests were made, and housing continued to be inadequate, with whole families living in just one room of a three-room apartment shared with strangers. The strain these living arrangements put on even the most loving families was only a small part of the personal and physical hardship Wettlin learned to accept during her life in the Soviet Union.

While she does describe a daring trip with Andre into outer Mongolia, which leaves her deathly ill, struggling with typhoid, Wettlin spends the largest portion of her narrative on the war years. Her moving descriptions of the lives the Russians led during the German army's endless siege is unforgettable. She is able to convey in her careful, direct, unadorned but expressive prose what it is like to live in the midst of war, what psychological and physical toll it takes, and the vast, incalculable personal losses of millions of people wrenched from their homes, orphaned, separated from loved ones, maimed, starved, lost. She allows us to see and feel the grand motives that inflamed the socialists of the time, and to understand how slowly, quietly, subtly, her vision shifted as she was forced to see what

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was really happening around her. It is Wettlin's great skill as a writer that she can convey both the drama of the personal narrative of her own life, and yet also give the reader such a strong impression of what life in Stalinist Russia was really like, what World War II meant to the Russians, what the siege of Leningrad did to its survivors, and what the continual disappointments in their government did to the Soviet people. It is a powerful, compelling study of a country that none of us is in a position to ignore, and an avenue into social history that affords a unique world view.

It is possible to wonder how anyone could close his or her eyes to injustice and downright carnage about them, if one has never been part of such a movement. But Wettlin, as the story unfolds and she focuses on what she thought at each stage (not later, with fuller knowledge) makes us understand how it is possible to believe so deeply that one does not see. Wettlin, for example, convinced herself that if her innocent friends were being arrested

and imprisoned, then an enemy of the people must have penetrated high command and was sabotaging the great socialist experiment by arresting the wrong people and making the state look bad.

Wettlin's strategy of reporting primarily what she felt at a given time, not what she has learned about the situation later, can lead to a sense in some portions of the book that she has not fully come to terms with her actions. Her straight reportage of her decision (when asked by the government) to spy on her own friends, for example, was at first

"[Wettlin] makes us understand how it is possible to believe so deeply that one does not see."

surprisingly devoid of the regret one might imagine she would harbor. But if you stick with her, Wettlin does come to tell how her view of her spying (and other aspects of the Soviet system) shift. She does come to admit to regret at having acted as a spy. But she does not seem to regret having given her life to a country that in the end she felt it better to leave; and this (among other things) makes her viewpoint worth hearing. How

has she come to terms with the disillusionment she experienced? How does a person make peace with such a derailment of dreams and hopes? Even her own two children, born in Russia and raised as Russians, saw that the Soviet government was corrupt, and fled Moscow with her, when they could. Her daughter was left behind for seven years, during which she was discriminated against as a refusenik and prevented from working, thus adding to the potential for bitterness. But Wettlin does not seem to fall into this trap.

It was then, not so much disillusionment as de-illusionment that Wettlin and Bates experienced. They had the courage to follow their beliefs into the unknown, to travel (whether physically or emotionally) to places family members and friends feared for them to go. And both learned with painful experience that their dreams had been founded, to a great extent, on illusion. Yet both of these unusual people are true heroes: they emerged from severe challenges to face their futures without bitterness, to teach us about personal values, about life and love and sacrifice. They have my admiration.

**Copyright and Development:
Inequality in the Information Age,**
edited by **Philip G. Altbach.**
Bellagio Studies in Publishing,
no. 4. Chestnut Hill, MA:
Bellagio Publishing Network
(Research and Development Center,
Campion Hill, Boston College,
Chestnut Hill, MA 02167), 1995.
Softcover, viii + 109 pages.
ISBN 0937033588 (\$15).

Reviewed by **Ian Montagnes**

Some years ago, an Indonesian publisher told me the following story. He had written to one of the American giants of international publishing, asking for the rights to publish, for the benefit of the students of his country, a local edition of a famous introductory college textbook. He planned to issue it first in English but eventually in the Indonesia language. He offered a royalty (generous by local standards, but Indonesia then was afloat on oil) of \$2 per copy sold. Indonesia is a country of some 200 million people with many universities. Nonetheless, the reply from New York was: "Any enquiries about sales should be addressed to our Singapore office."

He did nothing further. As a result everyone (with a single exception) lost. The American publisher lost potential revenue

from royalties, because sales of its own U.S. edition were minimal. (The price of the imported edition was the equivalent of half a year's tuition.) The Indonesian publisher lost an opportunity to strengthen its own list. The students lost easy access to a good textbook. The only people who benefited were the owners of the photocopiers, who did a brisk business in reproducing the few copies of the textbook available in university libraries.

This story illustrated several of the themes explored in the six papers of *Copyright and Development*. These are: inequality in the ownership and publication of knowledge between North and South (the so-called "developed" and "developing" worlds); indifference of Northern publishers to conditions in, and needs of, the South; evolving technology which, beginning with the photocopier, threatens the entire concept of copyright in print; and the need for practical solutions to an impasse that stands in the way of economic, social, and intellectual development in the countries of the South.

The inequality is a legacy of empire which robbed the former colonies of resources and established the dominance of metropolitan publishers — mainly British, French, or American. It is most clearly described in this volume by **Henry Chakava**, one of the best-known and most concerned publishers of Africa. Because his own firm

dominates book publishing in East Africa, his examples are all the more convincing. Unquestionably, African publishers do suffer in their negotiations with Northern counterparts, sometimes in unexpected ways. Major African writers of fiction are tied to contracts with Northern publishers, who are allowing, valuable African material to languish; and African oral tradition, under a quirk in copyright law, is automatically coming under Northern ownership as it is transcribed onto paper by Northern scholars.

Still, Chakava's examples suggest that African weakness lies in its publishing industry as much as in copyright law. It may be that no African publisher has been able to secure rights to an edition of Shakespeare, but presumably the Bard's own words are in the public domain. It would be interesting to see a new edition of plays edited and annotated by an African scholar for African high schools. The answer is not only to re-examine copyright. There is also a need for more training (frequently mentioned in this book) in all facets of publishing, coupled with more capital and greater entrepreneurship.

Urvashi Butalia, a feminist publisher from India, points out that the inequality among publishing nations is not fixed but is relative and constantly changing. Her own country, once a leader of the intellectual "have-not" nations and then widely viewed

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as a "pirate," has become a major publisher in its own right and accordingly protective of copyrights. Its neighbors are less so; despite international agreements, Pakistan specifically does not recognize Indian copyright, a heritage of their enmity, and in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh, Neel Khot market houses several hundred photocopying machines in instant "bookshops" copying, among others, Indian titles.

The brief history of copyright in China demonstrates that inequality and piracy can occur within, as well as between, nations, especially when enforcement is impeded by lack of effective courts and well-trained lawyers. This is described by **Janice Wickeri**, writing from Hong Kong. One of the several Chinese works she cites, published in an official edition of 700,000 copies, had to compete with pirated editions totaling some 2 million — numbers peculiar to that immense market — and a primary textbook published in Beijing was promptly pirated by three regional publishers.

What can be done about indifference, greed, and piracy? Several proposals are offered. Formal attempts that have already been made at improvement are outlined by **Dina Nath Malhotra**, an Indian publisher who was the first chairman of the joint UNESCO-WIPO (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization — World Intellectual Property Organization) committee appointed to improve the access of developing countries to copyrighted materials. That committee proved ineffective. Concurrently, U.S. and British publishers produced low-cost editions of many of their books for developing nations, but these, he argues, were in large measure a case of "dumping" to protect post-colonial markets and to kill growing local publishing industries. He concludes that personal connections and goodwill are the best antidotes.

One answer, discussed in several papers, is

compulsory licensing, legal under the 1971 revisions of both the Berne and Universal Copyright Conventions. Specific conditions must be met before a local publisher may obtain a license to reprint without agreement of the original publisher. A specified amount of time must have passed since original publication; reasonable efforts must be made to obtain normal permission; royalties must be paid, though they may not be high. This would seem to be one answer to the dilemma faced by my Indonesian colleague. But in fact there have been relatively few instances of compulsory

"Copyright law . . . is Kafkaesque."

licensing (outside of a handful of abusing countries) and it seems to have operated most effectively only as a threat to catch the attention of Northern publishers.

Lynette Owen provides a closing Northern perspective from 25 years in British-owned multinational educational and academic publishing houses. She notes in passing that virtually no compulsory license has been sought for a book still in its first edition. Applications are almost invariably for books that have passed through several editions and thus offer a local licensee a ready-

". . . [the] product of the mind is as valuable as the product of the hands."

made market established at the cost of the originating publisher.

What is needed most, as **Philip Altbach** argues in an introductory essay, is a greater sense of responsibility among the publishers of the North and, as others in the volume point out, a greater understanding of the nature of copyright among the people of the South.

Copyright law, Butalia properly says, is Kafkaesque, and while this book is not overly

technical, some understanding of the basic principles is essential. The discussion is not helped by Altbach's introduction, which is based on much current thought in the U.S. educational world unrelated to the realities of publishing. He argues, for instance, that copyright has always been a means "of limiting access to books and information in order to maintain discipline in the trade — of creating a monopoly over knowledge;" that copyright should not be seen in purely legal and economic terms; that textbooks, technical reports, and research volumes should be treated differently than novels and other intellectual creations. He complains that under the GATT (General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade) and the two major international copyright agreements, "products of the mind are considered as commercial property, to be bought and sold in the marketplace."

The other authors, all publishers, recognize that copyright is indeed all about property ownership and money. The world's first copyright act, passed in England in 1709, was equally clear about the intended beneficiaries — not the pocketbooks of publishers but "the encouragement of learned men to compose and write useful books" and to prevent unlawful reprinting of these books. Copyright simply recognizes that the product of the mind is as valuable as the product of the hands, and that theft of either is serious. Without some system of fair compensation and protection, we cannot expect either authors or publishers to continue producing new books. That includes works of educational and scientific value.

Which is not to say that the rights of readers, especially those of the South, can be ignored. Questions of ethics and responsibility, as well as of property, arise at every point. Butalia asks: "What argument can one offer, for example, to a relatively poor student in a developing country to whom the difference between buying and photocopying a book can often be as much as a month's rent?" This slim volume, uneven but provocative, introduces a complexity of issues that deserve more consideration than they normally receive in the North.

Ian Montagnes is a publishing consultant who has worked during the last ten years in Africa, Asia, and South America. Previously he was editor-in-chief of the University of Toronto Press and editor of *Scholarly Publishing*.

NB: Thanks are due **Paul Gleason** (International Monetary Fund) for arranging for **Ian Montagnes'** review. Thank you, Paul! — KS