



The Commissariat of Enlightenment

By Ken Kalfus
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Introduction

"Gribshin realized with a jolt that it was not true, as it was said, that nothing lasted forever; everything did, in the papers and now the moving pictures...."

During the first decades of the twentieth century both technology and social movements radically transformed the world and the people in it. Ken Kalfus's provocative novel looks at those changes and their startling implications through the compelling life of an opportunistic young man, Nikolai Gribshin, and the deaths of two great men, Leo Tolstoy and Vladimir Ilich Lenin. When we first meet Gribshin in 1910, he has begun a journey of personal and professional enlightenment. His destination is a railway station, Astapovo; his job is to transport movie equipment to the rural train stop where a poignant domestic drama is unfolding around the dying novelist, Leo Tolstoy. With reporters from around the globe, Gribshin is quickly swept into the one of the world's first media freedom frenzies and makes a startling intellectual discovery: with a camera, even a novice filmmaker can create history as well as

record it. Whether it is quintessentially criminal or simply brilliant, this idea will set the direction of his career and catapult him into the center of a revolution. But other people, and other strange doings, are occurring in the surreal, Fellini-esque setting of Astapovo. The mysterious Professor Vorobev wants to preserve Tolstoy's body with an amazing scientific advance. A shadowy British expatriate named Khaitover hopes to obtain exclusive rights to Tolstoy's image in a grand marketing scheme. Lenin, his wife Krupskaya, and the sinister "Caucasian," Stalin, are lurking in the background. A raped, traumatized girl (who may also symbolize a raped, traumatized nation) is about to give birth in a peasant's roadhouse. And in one visually rich scene after another, author Kalfus presents ideas that make the reader stop, think, and come to some illuminating conclusions. In the second half of the novel, set after the Revolution, Gribshin, now calling himself Astapov, has become a political functionary in *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, the Bolshevik's grandly named ministry of propaganda. He is zealously immersed in the tough business of quelling unrest and creating a new nation. His tool is the camera, and film has become a powerful political means of education -- or brainwashing. Personally, he's had one messy affair and entered into an arranged, political marriage. And while living conditions are harsh, the times are exciting. Quash religious beliefs? He's up to the task. Promote revolutionary principles? He's a master. But Astapov soon faces ethical dilemmas as intellectual freedom and political stability make uncomfortable bedfellows; as the images of the old society are replaced by the icons of the new one; as ideals give way to expediency. At this juncture, Astapov's vision for the new order once again leads him into the orbit of Professor Vorobev, Lenin, Stalin, and a chilling plan for the triumph of the State...all it takes is a massive deceit, betrayal, and murder. Innovative and darkly humorous, Ken Kalfus's novel not only brilliantly portrays Russian history, it suggests the birth of our own image-dominated culture. In *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, the power of the image uses a nascent film industry to become a force that shapes the world -- but whether that world will be dominated by Golden Arches or an enlightened humanity, readers must decide for themselves. **Questions for Discussion**

1. Beginnings and endings in literary works are significant. Let's look at how this book begins. Three men on a train get jolted. Look at each element. Why a train? Why three men? How does each one react? What does this first paragraph reveal about the rest of the novel?
2. Some of the events in this novel actually happened. Some events could have happened. Some could happen only in the realm of the imagination. Which events are real history? Which are fantastical?
3. If a photo, film, or videotape is represented as being of a real event, we tend to believe what we see. But Gribshin says, "Deceit was ingrained in cinematographic reporting, as it was in every kind of storytelling." How does Gribshin, who works for a newsreel company, falsify reporting with his camera? What famous photo, film, or TV broadcast has shaped your own "eyewitness" to history? Are contemporary television news images free of deceit? Have you ever felt yourself being manipulated by a TV news program, yet unable to shake off its enduring images? What are the differences between propaganda in dictatorship and propaganda in a free country?
4. Shakespeare said, "What's in a name?" For Russian revolutionaries (and actors, of course) evidently a great deal. Many Russian leaders, i.e., Stalin and Lenin, changed their names, as did the novel's protagonist Gribshin. Why do you think Gribshin chose Astapov? What are some motives to change one's name? Think of celebrities with one-word names -- what kind of effect does this have on their image?
5. Discuss Gribshin. What is his background? What are his ideals? Is he a good person? What are his moral failings? What kind of relationships does he have? Does he change over the course of the novel?
6. The sketch of Tolstoy that Khaitover wants to put on a tea tin, the religious icons in the Russian home and church, and Lenin's body on display -- what do these things have in common? What images, or symbols, are immediately recognizable throughout the world today and what do they reveal about our values? We learn of Khaitover's eventual triumph toward the end of the novel. What image does he finally succeed in making a worldwide commodity?
7. In the novel, when Astapov stops Levin's play, he thinks: "For a revolution to be victorious, to change the manner of human thought, it would have to make sense out of history's disorder. Enlightenment's principal task was to create the story, this monument to the future. A steady hand would carve it from the misshapen, stupid stone of Russian culture, specifically its myth, religion, and folk wisdom." Do you believe that culture shapes our icons, or that icons shape our culture? As *The Commissariat of Enlightenment*, Astapov's answer would be the latter. Are there Commissariats of Enlightenment in today's world? What kind of society are they trying to shape?
8. Why do you think Yelena made her film "for women's education"? What does Astapov consider so dangerous or wrong about her film? How is it in opposition to the films he makes? Whose kind of films are made by Hollywood today? Where might you see a Yelena-like film?
9. Dr. Vorobev and his embalming discovery are perhaps the most macabre and fantastical elements in the novel. Or are they? Lenin was preserved and displayed in real life. What was the purpose of doing so?
10. The final pages of the novel are told from Lenin's point of view -- after he's pronounced dead. Did the embalming process make his death incomplete? If he appears alive, is he in some respects living? If we can see someone sing, dance, or talk on film after they are dead, does the film blur the distinction between life and death? What is the impact of this psychologically?
11. This novel can be called "a novel of ideas." If you had to pick just one major idea, what you think is the most important "point" of the novel, what would it be?

About the Author: Ken Kalfus was born in New York and has lived in Paris, Dublin, Belgrade, and Moscow. He is the author of the story collections *Thirst* and *Pu-239* and *Other Russian Fantasies*, both of which were *New York Times* Notable Books. A finalist for the PEN/Faulkner Award and a winner of the Salon Book Award, his fiction has appeared in *Harper's*, *Bomb*, the *North American Review*, and the *Voice Literary Supplement*. He lives in Philadelphia with his wife and daughter.