The Translator

By John Crowley
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Introduction In 1961, the Russia haunting America's imagination was impenetrable and dark, so dark that it was "a dark star absorbing its own light." This is the global backdrop of John Crowley's *The Translator*, a novel that, folding poetry and the memory of Russia's great poets into its narrative, is at its core a meditation on the power of language. Each language is a world unto itself; captured within every word is a sea of memories and subtle connotations that tug at the heart and soul of its native speaker. It's the nudge of the elbow, the wink of the eye between two individuals that says, "I understand you. I know you. We speak the same language." This becomes a translator's eternal dilemma: Is there any such thing as an authentic translation? Innokenti Falin, an exiled Russian poet teaching at a Midwestern university, thinks not. He says, "Words cannot be changed like money." In spite of this, he enlists Kit Malone, his student, in a formidable task -- translating the poems, which he has committed to memory, that he was forced to leave behind in his homeland. Toiling away on the sofa in Falin's rented farmhouse through a long hot summer, the two literally sweat over each Russian word, grappling for the closest English equivalent. As the poems evolve, so too does Falin and Kit's relationship. Cocooned in their project, they reveal themselves to each other. Kit is not what she seems. Her youth conceals a depth of experience: the stillbirth of her infant, the mysterious death of her brother in the army, and even her own attempted suicide. Once a prolific poet, she has given up writing. Falin is not the son of an engineer, as he once told the poetry class Kit attended. The product of an underground population of Russian orphans, he's not sure from where, or from whom, he came. Falin and Kit, we find, are like the words they study -- prisms, streaming out different meanings depending on which angle is held sunward. The landscape surrounding Falin and Kit is surreal -- expansive moon-like prairies, sudden storms, grain silos and missile silos on the horizon. The civil unrest and international crisis that defined that era is to Kit a distant bell. But Russia's aggressive posturing toward the West via Cuba is becoming more ominous, as is President Kennedy's attempts to calm a nation petrified by the threat of a nuclear war. At the same time, troops (including Kit's brother) are quietly being sent to Southeast Asia, to a murky conflict-ridden land that hasn't yet sharpened into the consciousness of America as Vietnam.On the eve of the Cuban missile crisis, with nuclear war at hand, Falin disappears on a mysterious trip; the university president calls upon Kit to meet with a government agent who wants to know everything about the exiled Russian poet; and Kit finds that poetry and the fate of nations do not run parallel courses. They intersect; they affect each other. At this intersection stands Kit -- overwhelmed, in love with Falin, waiting for the bomb to drop, grieving the loss of her brother and her baby, but with poetry awakened once again in her soul. Never again will any word bear one meaning alone. Years later Kit publishes the poems that she and Falin worked on together that summer. She calls them "Translations without originals." What else could she call them? They were "neither his nor hers, or both his or hers; poems written in a language she couldn't read, and surviving in a language he couldn't write." **Questions for Discussion**

1. Why did Falin demand that as part of his poetry class, the students memorize each poem they studied? How does this relate to the theme of memory in the novel? Do you think that memorizing a poem deepens one's understanding of it? What experiences might have caused Falin to place such on emphasis on memorization?

2. "That's what poetry is, the saying of nothing. The Nothing that can't be said." (pg. 13) Refer back to this passage. What does Falin mean by this and how does it relate to Kit's self-imposed exile from poetry?

3. "How can you know anything true about someone when your memories stop just as you are becoming a person yourself?" (pg. 27) Try to answer this question. Do you believe that you can ever truly "know" someone? What does it mean to know someone you have lost? After finishing the novel, how do you think the adult Kit would answer that question?

4. Continuing from the previous question, how does language fit into the equation of "knowing" a person? What would Falin say about that?

5. Consider Kit's relationship with her brother Ben. Did you find it to be especially intense? Why or why not? What could have caused these two siblings to forge such a bond?

6. Gavriil and Kit translated together the last poem Falin had sent to Kit. It was about the "angels of the nations." (pg. 137) Discuss the concept of the two angels -- one greater and one lesser -- that watch over each nation. How do Kit and Falin fit into this paradigm?

7. What do you think happened between Kit and Falin the last night they spent together? Where do you think Falin went, and what became of him? Can the answer be found in the book?

8. Who do you think Jackie was, and what were his motives for befriending Kit?

9. In Russia, Kit comes upon a street-kid who seems to recognize her, and she feels sure that Falin -- the "lesser angel" -- somehow persists. Do you think that the angels of this book are more than metaphors?

10. What was the significance of Kit winding up, in the last passages of the novel, at the Vietnam memorial in Washington? Were you satisfied with the ending, or did you crave more knowledge of how Kit's life unfolded after Falin's disappearance?

About the Author: John Crowley is the author of the novels *Dæmonomania; Love & Sleep; Ægypt; Little, Big; The Deep; Beasts;* and *Engine Summer*, as well as a collection of stories titled *Novelty*. A recipient of the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters Award in Literature, he teaches writing at Yale University. He lives with his family in northern Massachusetts.