

# In ‘Monkey,’ writer Agnes Bushell meditates on the Russian novel

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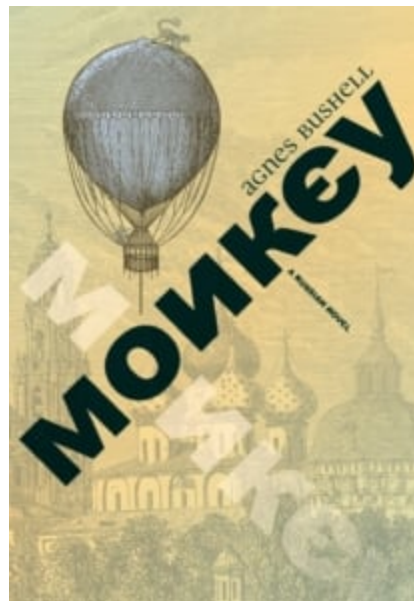
By Tobias Carroll

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What inspired a contemporary writer to hearken back to an earlier era of fiction, creating a work that’s at once an homage to and meditation of a bygone literary era? Thomas Pynchon has done something like this with his novels “Against the Day” and “Mason & Dixon,” as has André Alexis in the five books described as his “quincunx cycle.”

If you’re looking for reference points for two-time Maine Literary Award winner Agnes Bushell’s new book “Monkey,” those two authors will do nicely. Bushell’s novel is subtitled “A Russian Novel,” and it reads like a meditation on both specific Russian novels and the idea of the “Russian Novel” that summons to mind philosophical doorstoppers full of richly drawn characters.

## Local Review



### “Monkey: A Russian Novel”

By Agnes Bushell

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That “Monkey” opens with a family tree is a good indication of where things are headed. And soon enough, Bushell introduces us to paterfamilias Vasily Yakovlevich, a once idealistic man inclined toward utopia. As he’s aged, he’s become less and less interested in changing

the world. As Bushell writes: “He was learning the hardest lesson a man can learn: that he could not at the same time be an honest man and feed and protect his family. Instead, to raise them, to keep them safe, he had to become complicit in a system he detested.”

Vasily isn't one of the novel's major characters, but his collapsing ideals and overwhelming regrets set the mood for what follows. The novel is set in the mid-19th century, as the emancipation of the nation's serfs is discussed. The novel's narrator, a writer known as Marko Volchek is summoned to the Vasily's home to help persuade Anastasia Barakova, Vasily's wife and a poet of some renown, to finish a long-delayed book. It's hoped that Marko will be able to figure out why Anastasia hasn't been able to finish the poetry collection.

Marko soon encounters another mystery at the family's estate at Oak Hills – the whereabouts of one of Vasily and Anastasia's children, Nikolai, along with a manuscript of his that shares its name with Bushell's novel. (Bushell is the author of 13 other books, including the novels “Local Deities” and “The House on Perry Street.” She is a co-founders of [Littoral Press](#), as well as of the Maine Writers & Publishers Alliance.)

Marko is about as close to a central character as this novel gets. Mild spoilers ahead: Marko is also a woman who prefers men's clothing and has little interest in the limited opportunities open to women at the time. At one point, one character refers to her as “this George Sand of Russia,” and she seems to have been inspired by the real-life writer Marko Vovchok. Marko's life also puts her at risk from the more moralizing aspects of law enforcement, one of several threats she and her valet face over the course of the novel.

That isn't the only reason Marko is targeted by the police. As she observes, “They like to keep an eye on writers in this country. They do more than keep an eye on us. They falsely accuse us, try us in secret, lock us up in prisons, destroy our presses, harass our families, burn our manuscripts, destroy our reputations, starve us, persecute us, drive us to suicide.” And the aristocratic idyll of the first hundred or so pages gives way to a more morally grey landscape of revolutionaries, nationalists, spies and political agitators.

Running mostly parallel to Marko's story is another thread of the plot, which opens with medium Elena Petrovna Blavatskaya and philosopher Fyodor Fyodorovich Fyodorov also searching for the lost Nikolai. Their encounter with a woman named Margarita, who speaks of a writer named Bulgakov, adds another layer to the proceedings – a metafictional one. Readers of “The Master and Margarita” will notice a few homages to it – though they're arguably less homages and more evidence that Nikolai's book possesses some uncanny qualities.

Things get weirder from there, and a comment made by Fyodorov as he attempts to ascertain how much of what he experienced was real is telling: “The unchangeability of the past and the obscurity of the future are mental concepts, whereas time itself is mysterious and might better be understood as a fabric or a fluid.”

The scope of the novel, which runs to 608 pages, gets even grander from there. Even so, “Monkey” (the novel within the novel) ends up becoming as much of a symbol as anything. At one point, Marko describes the search for Monkey by saying, “another part of me still believed in it, the way one imagines knights once believed in the Holy Grail, as something that must be sought although it can never be found.” That allusion resonates deeply, especially given the transcendental aspects of Monkey-the-novel.

At times, the more metafictional aspects of “Monkey” can feel a little too overt, as when for instance, late in the novel Marko muses that “a Russian would make up some sort of ending even if he had to kill off all his characters or have them taken up on a magic carpet and flown into the land of the Firebird.”

But Bushell understands well that the literary allusions and structural ambition on display here can only go so far, and roots much of the novel in the emotional connections among its characters. There’s cleverness aplenty within “Monkey” – but there’s also an abundance of heart.

*New York City resident Tobias Carroll is the author of three books: “Political Sign,” “Reel” and “Transitory.” He has reviewed books for the New York Times, Bookforum, the Star Tribune and elsewhere.*

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