



# The Tsar of Love and Techno

*Anthony Marra*

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## **The Tsar of Love and Techno** Anthony Marra

From the New York Times bestselling author of *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*—dazzling, poignant, and lyrical interwoven stories about family, sacrifice, the legacy of war, and the redemptive power of art.

This stunning, exquisitely written collection introduces a cast of remarkable characters whose lives intersect in ways both life-affirming and heartbreaking. A 1930s Soviet censor painstakingly corrects offending photographs, deep underneath Leningrad, bewitched by the image of a disgraced prima ballerina. A chorus of women recount their stories and those of their grandmothers, former gulag prisoners who settled their Siberian mining town. Two pairs of brothers share a fierce, protective love. Young men across the former USSR face violence at home and in the military. And great sacrifices are made in the name of an oil landscape unremarkable except for the almost incomprehensibly peaceful past it depicts. In stunning prose, with rich character portraits and a sense of history reverberating into the present, *The Tsar of Love and Techno* is a captivating work from one of our greatest new talents.

## **The Tsar of Love and Techno Details**

Date : Published October 6th 2015 by Hogarth

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Author : Anthony Marra

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Genre : Short Stories, Fiction, Historical, Historical Fiction, Cultural, Russia, Literary Fiction

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## From Reader Review The Tsar of Love and Techno for online ebook

### LeAnne says

Phenomenal. Just hand Mr. Marra the Pulitzer right now. 5 stars and an entire constellation to boot.

His earlier work, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena* absolutely blew my doors off, so I had this one paid for in a pre-order. When I noticed that this would be a collection of short stories, the groan grinding out of me was painful. Regardless the author, I never have time to connect with the characters in little stories.

WRONG! WRONGWRONG. Very wrong. A friend recently suggested that the structure of *The Tsar of Love and Techno* might be called a "composite novel" where all the stories interlock in some way. And while that is true - sort of like 7 degrees of Kevin Bacon between the chapters' inhabitants - it is way more.

Imagine grabbing slabs of Swiss cheese that have been randomly dealt out onto a holiday platter. Reassemble the deconstructed block they came from, and incredibly, you find that the open holes do not just tie to one another but that they are a tunnel or perhaps a worm hole through time that has meaning and a destination. If you have read his earlier book, you will even find a skinny little slice that nods to another precious life in this tale of familial betrayal and forgiveness and love.

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### Debbie says

I loved it, I loved it not. I know I'm sounding all dramatic, but I'm pretty weirded out that I could hate picking up a book that I loved so much when I opened it. Oh, so much to love! The intriguing and complex characters, the perfectly rendered scenes, the vivid landscapes, the rich metaphors. I think the best part is the way the stories are linked: each new story zeros in on some character in the previous story, and a whole new world opens up. The author set himself up for an ambitious task, and he succeeded in spades. I think it's a book that will be on professors' syllabi for years to come—it's that monumental.

The book is super intense and profound. It wouldn't let me ignore the devastating truth of war. I was forced to witness the emotional, and in many cases, physical, destruction of people who in peaceful times would have led peaceful lives. To survive, typically moral people often had to rat out family members who in fact were innocent of crimes against the government—and they had to live with the haunting consequences of their actions. But although the stories are so very bleak, they reveal the hope, resilience, and perseverance of the human spirit, which is very inspiring.

One thing I loved was how art was a theme that pulled people together across generations. In most, if not all, stories, some piece of art sets the characters on a journey to uncover the sad history of their family. The book starts with a man who's a "correction artist." His bizarre job is to go around deleting traitors' faces from art. At the beginning of the book (which takes place in 1937), he has to erase the face of his brother. That bleak and super heavy story is my favorite. The book reminds me a little of *The Small Backs of Children*, which also covers the theme of art and war (but throws sex into the mix). *The Tsar of Love and Techno* is way more epic though.

So let me look at the "I loved it not" part. What's with not wanting to pick this sucker up? Feeling dumb, I of course blamed my inadequate brain. But then I realized, no, the problem is that there's too much history and war for me. This is not my genre, folks. And though the book wasn't ever lecture-y, often the style was sort of non-fiction-y. Yes, there were plenty of rich metaphors and good storytelling to make it scrumptious

fiction, but there still was this political reporter vibe to it, and the language was so very dense. Plus, it was like a camera slowly moving left to right to take in a wide panoramic view, whereas I prefer close-ups of people's thoughts. The hard-to-pronounce Russian names didn't help either. It was a sloooooooow read. The last story about outer space did not work at all for me. I think the author was trying too hard to be profound, or else I'm just not deep enough to get it.

And I think I might have read this book all wrong, seriously. Usually when I read a collection of stories (and I love short stories), I stop after each story and analyze it. With this collection, I didn't put on the breaks after finishing a story. I just hurried on to the next story, as if I had just finished a chapter. And I think by reading it all wrong, I missed something. I missed that great feeling you get after reading a perfect short story. It was there to be had, but I passed over it. Plus, because the book was so non-linear, with people from previous stories suddenly showing up, it sometimes was hard to figure out who was who and which time period we were in. I had to do some looking back through earlier pages to get my bearings.

So I'm not a Russian-war-story kind of gal, but I was super impressed by this exquisite book. I just wished it hadn't been drudgery to pick the damn thing up. Actually, I read *City of Thieves*, another Russian war story, a few years ago. My contemporary-fiction self was surprised I loved it. I found it more accessible than *Tsar of Love and Techno*, because the plot moved along faster and there were only two main characters to focus on. Maybe the fact that *City of Thieves* was a short, linear novel instead of a collection of non-linear stories also had something to do with it.

I've plucked all the petals off the daisy, and when I end my *I Loved It, I Loved It Not* chant, the petal that I'm left with is *I Love It*. That's because it's easy, in hindsight, to remember all the glorious stories and to forget that the act of reading it wasn't good. But I'm also convinced that one of the reasons that "*I Loved It*" wins is because when I pick up the book now and randomly read a paragraph or two, I get totally jazzed and drawn in, happily recalling the story. I loved it more than I loved it not, so I'm happy to give it a 4.

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## Jen says

Magnifico! This had me shaking my head in awe. Anyone who knows me knows I dislike the short stories - they usually leave me only wanting more, hence, I rarely pick them up. This one, having been purchased after I read the beloved, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomena*, I knew I had to get to as this author has talent.

Ah such raw talent. This is a collection of stories that weaves into it people depicted from a painting. It begins in the 1930's, in communist Russia, with a failed artist who now censors art but instead of erasing those dissidents one of whom is his brother, he adds him into every picture he touches leaving it as his signature.

The stories are interconnected with this painting. We become witnesses to the atrocities of war, death, poverty, what one has to do in order to survive. The tragedies and violence suffered in an oppressed country during times of war and times of communist rule. The stories span decades and into the next century.

Such descriptive and atmospheric writing. From the shocking scenes of death and destruction to joyous moments of gratitude "like a sunny day swim in a chemical waste." The language extraordinary.

Beautifully crafted -Marra remains a force of the written word in a world that we have so few stories attached to. 4.25??

## Diane S ? says

I loved his first novel and though this is a book of short stories, I loved this one too. It is not often that one can read a book of shorts, connected thought they are and feel like one has indeed read a whole novel. This one starts with a censor in the 1930's, under Stalin and continues back and forth until the present. The stories are connected through people, photographs, places and a painting. The images and descriptions are powerful, the prose amazing, at times there is even humor of the ironic sort. Through these wonderful stories we get a glimpse of the people in the former USSR, the dissidents, the babushkas, the soldiers in the military and the regular people trying to make a home and family. Particularly loved how he tied the elements together so tidily, this author is a true talent.

ARC from publisher.

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## Kelli says

Dear Anthony Marra,

I'm sure you are very busy but I was wondering: is there any way you might be available to write this review for me? I cannot possibly articulate the raw beauty and abject pain that lies between the covers of this transformative book. The writing is masterful, magical, mesmerizing. I need that writing to *describe* your powerful, beautiful, lyrical book. There were so many lines I would have highlighted that had the book not belonged to our library, the pages would have been more yellow than white. Some of those lines were standalone masterpieces: "**You wouldn't understand, but someone I once loved died in this field.**" That is a Pulitzer Prize-winning line. The way the stories interconnect is brilliant.

I began studying Russian in eighth grade. As a university student, I lived in Leningrad in 1990. Arguably one of the most beautiful cities in the world, Leningrad was wrought with poverty, crime, and food shortages. I would've sold my soul to stay there. I will likely never return, as the Russia I loved exists only in my memories but I thank you sincerely for bringing to life in this collection so vividly the magic of that place. Magic amidst mayhem. You have created a cast of characters so authentic, so Russian, so human that it is impossible not to weep for them. They are real and their stories took my breath away.

C ????????? ? ??????????,

Kelli

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## Iris P says

The Tsar of Love and Techno

**Anthony Marra - The Author**

"A half-century had passed—and with it the Soviet Union, Marxism-Leninism, the infallible tenets of communism that had undergirded her faith—and now she found herself the citizen of a nation politically enfeebled and spiritually desolated enough to permit prayer to an authority more omnipotent than its government. But how do you trade your gods so late in life? Six decades of Soviet-speak had left her vocabulary crowded with slogans. She had little practice articulating the complexities of individual desire."

### From The Tsar Of Love And Techno - Wolf Of White Forest

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*"I received an ARC of this book from the publishers via NetGalley in exchange for an honest review, thank you!"*

There's a certain point when human behavior is so absurd it just becomes compulsively funny. That is part of what I found delightful about Anthony Marra's ingenious collection of short stories. The other aspect I very much enjoyed, was the feeling of putting together a puzzle, with each story providing some of the missing pieces until it was finally complete.

The best description I read of this book came from Jason Sheehan, food editor for the Philadelphia magazine, he described them as **"... a novel, really, because it is one story...it's a story passed like a baton from one teller to another; a hundred-year relay made up of dreams crushed and lives cut short"**.

Marra who, as an undergraduate lived in St. Petersburg for a few years, had the opportunity to interact with Russian soldiers that were at the time, involved in the ongoing Russian war in Chechnya.

The stories on The Tsar of Love and Techno, are cleverly structured, bizarre, almost surreal. They encompass decades of Soviet history, from the Cold War to the dissolution of the USSR right up to modern-day Putin's Russia.

The geographical settings include Siberia and St. Petersburg, but its Chechnya and its capital, Grozny that are at the center of most of them.

Marra drops enough cultural and political landmarks to help the reader recognize the historical context, but I personally appreciated The Tsar of Love and Techno more for its ability to recreate the Russian pathos than for giving me History lessons.

So here's a brief summary of the stories that most stood out for me:

#### *FROM SIDE A*

##### **The Leopard**

Tells the story of Roman who as a "correction artist" working for the "Department of Party Propaganda and Agitation", air brushes photographic images removing political figures that are undesirable to the government.

It shows the ridiculous extremes totalitarian states would go to in trying to control and in this case literally *re-write* history.

##### **The Grozny Tourist Bureau**

The narrator of this story is asked to become the director of his city's freshly launched Tourism Bureau. His first mission is to design a brochure that would lure tourists to Grozny, a city named by the United Nations as "the most devastated city on Earth". His efforts to re-brand it are preposterous but utterly hilarious.

*FROM SIDE B*

**Wolf of White Forest**

Tells the story of Vera, a 63 year-old woman whose childhood was derailed when an innocent comment she made about her mother's pie baking, lead to her arrest and ultimately to her execution.

**A Temporary Exhibition**

A con artist convinces gullible Americans to provide their social securities, birth dates and all sort of personal information in order to run his very "successful" phishing business. Explaining to his father how and why the scam works, Sergei uses an analogy, **"You remember how Mom had that embroidered pillow? When she got upset, she'd shout into it and no one would hear her. That's Facebook."** This story was a riot!

**The End- Outer Space**

A veritable literary opera, a nostalgic story that pays tribute to an era of cosmonautic Russian ambitions and frustrated aspirations.

**"We were patriots, victory was simple, declares Kolya, "the last living member of the species would be a Soviet citizen".**

You can almost hear The Nutcracker March in the background, Bum Ba-Da-Da Dum Bum, Dum Dum Dum!

**Soviet Soyuz Capsule landing in harsh conditions - Memorial Museum of Cosmonautics, Moscow**

I felt in love with Marra's imagination, his disparate characters with their tongue-in-cheek banter and the vulnerabilities he gives even to those alpha-male soldiers living under the most deplorable conditions in war-ridden regions.

The Tsar of Love and Techno is a beautiful contemplation on the good/evil nature in all of us, the transcendent power of art and the horrific, perhaps irreversible consequences of polluting the environment on the only planet we have.

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I absolutely love the retro, ultra psychedelic cover of The Tsar of Love and Techno. I was recently telling a friend that as someone who grew up in the 70's and 80's, I spent plenty of hours mixing tapes for my friends and family, so this brings sweet memories!

Marra, who as part of the Millennial generation probably grew up using a different type of audio format, created a Spotify techno playlist which he says **"mirrors the overall movement of the book"**.

You can listen to the mix here

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**Elyse says**

"I never imagined that something as solemn and final as death could be this idiotic. It was the keyhole through which I first glimpsed life's madness: the institutions we believe in will pervert us, our loved ones will fail us, and death is

a falling piano."

Siberia, Chechnya, and Leningrad...Saint Petersburg....from 1937 to 2013....,

A collection of stories woven together ....

Horrific hardships, betrayal, censorship, loss, and love.

These stories are as powerful, (heartbreaking ...but there is humor too). The writing is brilliant. At first look -  
-simplistic and straight forward storytelling...but then the rug is swept under you...you're not sure what just  
happened - then the puzzle pieces begin to fit together ...

I was left with a numb feeling I get at times..."this is life, the world we all share"..... ( crazy, & lovely all at  
the same time)!

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## **Perry says**

### **The Nutcracker's Cosmonautic March**

I rarely complete a short story collection although I've put my hands on at least several dozen. I'll read one or two but eventually return to the novel and the common and traditional Freytag's Pyramid, forgetting about the remainder of the nice, but less than compelling, stories that offer me the author's \*wit and wisdom\* in the form of a meditative slice of life after which I respond with a blank stare or at best an "oh, hmmm...." The rare exception occurs when the stories intertwine by characters and events and give me the exhilarating vivacity I get from a provocative novel or film.

The Tsar of Love and Techno is among 2015's astonishing terzetto of brilliantly dexterous compendia of literary shorts, the others being Adam Johnson's *Fortune Smiles* and Colum McCann's *Thirteen Ways of Looking*.

I quickly became enthralled by the lofty *Tsar of Love and Techno*. The stories are interlacing threads that make you want to watch the magic unfold in the completed whole. The first story takes one's breath away, following the anti-hero Soviet censor of art in 1937 during the Stalin purge. Of his calling, he proclaims, "[i]n order to become the chisel that breaks the marble inside us, the artist must first become the hammer," before being consumed by the pit of vipers.

The reader learns through each story which characters are primary, and discovers that a character has returned in a later story in some other context. The stories so complement the others that, aside from three of the stories, I'm doubt the others would have had nearly the impact standing on its own, outside the collection.

These stirring stories center on an uncle and nephews, a pair of brothers, a couple, a mother (and daughter), a girl (and grandmother) and a painting. They occur variously at three locales in the former Soviet Union (Leningrad/St. Petersburg, Kirovsk [in Siberia to the east of China] and within Chechnya). In addition to the opening chiller, the remaining tales occur primarily between the mid-1990s and 2013. They hit on a wide array of subjects like censorship, Russian art, the Soviet Union's breakup, Tchaikovsky, Tolstoy, Russians in Chechnya, mine fields, the nuclear age and outer space, and art. IMAGES include mix tapes, leopard bikini

bottoms, a ballerina, a painting of an empty Chechen field in the afternoon, a lone wolf in the woods for an execution-style murder.

This magnificent collection of connected stories revealed how circumstances can change us so that basically good people have the capacity for evil, while at the same time, in all but the most aberrant consists a reservoir of basic goodness in the face of evil. It made me contemplate the fleeting nature of life, what is the impression we really, truly make on a planet we visit so shortly, how small each of us is in relation to time and space, and how Art, above almost all else, can transcend life.

Anthony Marra is a master at evoking sympathy for characters so foreign to a reader in the the Americas, and in his ability to create simultaneous sympathy and contempt for a character. Even in short stories, knots of complexity surround the six major characters, making them so human, their sentiments so real.

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## Erika says

Like everyone else on GRs, I've read a lot of books. Because of that, I can't read a novel without simultaneously appraising the author's work. Part of my of brain is engrossed in the plot, and another part is looking at metaphors and larger themes.

I have an ambivalent relationship with that inner critic. On the one hand, I truly enjoy thinking about writing while I'm reading it, but on the other hand, I sometimes miss being able to surrender my entire self to a good book.

Not so with *The Tsar of Love and Techno*.

Here, my reader-self was riveted to every word, and my critic-self was so blown away by Marra's skill that I actually read the whole book a second time just for the sheer pleasure of looking more closely at its beautiful little gears.

Technically, this is a collection of short stories set in Russia and Chechnya over 75 years, but each piece is so connected to the others that really it's a novel.

Marra has given us characters that often act in a kind of code. They hit each other and mean, "I love you" they force someone to ruin a beloved photo and mean, "I'm sorry," they curse a nature preserve and mean "My life has been more painful than I can bear."

The places and objects serve as a kind of code as well. There's a valuable painting that turns up again and again, sometimes given, sometimes sold, sometimes stolen. The painting forms an important part of the book's structure, and while seeing what happens to it was one of my favorite parts of the novel, there are smaller connections that are almost equally rewarding.

For instance, in the 1930s a government censor airbrushes photographs in an underground office where the Leningrad subway is being built. "Someday trains will carry the grateful citizens of a socialist paradise through this netherworld," he thinks. "All the work we have done here in their name will then be justified." Generations later, we see his descendent riding that same subway and the scenes are filled with a subtle, heartbreaking irony. Again and again Marra connects objects, scenes and ideas in this way as if saying that not only are we bound together by our humanity, but the very things in our lives are intertwined as well. This is an incredible book, and I can't even come close to doing it justice here.

## Angela M says

Every time I read a collection of short stories, I say the same thing in my review - that I'm not a lover of short stories, but I always have a good reason why I decided to read that particular collection . In this case , the very good reason is how much I loved Anthony Marra's , A Constellation of Vital Phenomena. I am so very glad that I didn't miss out because I prefer longer fiction . I don't know how I can possibly do justice in this review to the brilliant story telling and beautiful writing here .

The opening story "The Leopard", is about an art censor - who airbrushes a ballerina out of a photograph , fixes photographs to make Stalin look better. He even obliterates his brother's face from a family photo because his brother's religious beliefs made him a traitor in the harsh environment of the communist regime in 1937 USSR. Yet he paints his brother's face in the background of every painting he is charged with altering .

Fast forward to Siberia in 2013 to the "Granddaughters " the story of the ballerina's granddaughter ( yes the ballerina from the first story ) and her friends. This one is told in the first person plural which is a mechanism that works beautifully. My favorite story until I read the next and the next .

These stories depict the political and social landscape of Russia from 1937 to the more recent chaotic aftermath after the break up of the USSR in the details of the lives of these characters with beautifully rendered connections between the stories through the characters and a painting. Just when you think you'll never see a character again, they come alive once more in another story . I marveled at the connections from one to another - characters, images , themes - it becomes not quite a novel but one long story about loss and relationships and love and family and art and freedom. I won't be any more specific here on the linkages because this is one of the best things about this book and should be discovered by the reader who might like me think - omg - as some things come full circle . I cannot recommend this enough to anyone who appreciates writing that is both genius and beautiful . I especially recommend it to those who loved Marra's novel . I can't give it less than 5 stars .

Thanks to Crown Publishing and NetGalley

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## Kevin Ansbro says

***"We have art in order not to die of the truth."***

-Nietzsche

?????, everyone!

In Anthony Marra's ambitious novel, we find his incarnation of a Russian *matryoshka* doll, crammed with interlocking stories, each component fashioned to reveal something new.

Through his expository prose we see how the butterfly effect of one simple photograph (that of a disgraced ballerina) echoes through decades of Soviet rule.

Although tantalised by friends' reviews of this book, I was somewhat dubious to begin with. There is initially more grimness here than there are bare-chested pictures of Vladimir Putin!

But then, in the the time it takes to sing a chorus of "Ra-Ra-Rasputin," there exploded a grenade of colour from the grey: "*The poor child had inherited his father's forehead. His future lay under a hat.*"  
Da! And da! *Now* you haf my attention, Comrade Marrah!

The author hands us a Rubik's cube of metaphor-laden vignettes that tread the suspicious corridors of pre-Glasnost Russia all the way to the future emptiness of outer space. While dissidents are airbrushed from existence by Communist party propaganda artists, men's lungs turn to rust in the tin mines of joyless industrial towns. In this poisoned, post-apocalyptic hellscape, statues of Lenin are toupéed in pigeon shit and *schadenfreude* soon replaces the enchantment of vicarious success.

I'm pleased to report that Marrah can definitely write; of that there is no doubt. His precision prose is meticulous, and almost at odds with the frequent nuggets of whimsy.

It seems churlish to pinpoint a negative (but I am going to, anyway):  
The novel does require a sharpened level of concentration (not always my forté, I freely admit). Because the scenarios aren't sequential, I found myself flicking backwards through previous chapters just to get my bearings, not remembering who was whom.

Nevertheless, *this*, in my humble opinion, is a modern novel of rare literary excellence.

Thank you, Matthew Quann, Elyse, Angela M and anyone else whose enthusiastic reviews propelled me to read this book.

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## Julie Christine says

Yesterday in a bookstore, I saw a customer holding Jess Walter's remarkable 2013 short story collection, *We Live in Water*. We got to chatting about this favorite author and I waxed enthusiastic about the book. The man flipped through its pages and said, "Oh. No. These are short stories. I want a **book**." He set it aside and wandered away. I died a little inside.

Imagine missing astonishing writing and gripping narrative simply because a world is contained ten or twenty pages instead of three hundred. I get that short form is not everyone's cuppa. But when I find an author who rocks my literary world, I want to devour everything s/he produces; their words are a gift, a revelation. And short stories demand something entirely different from writers and readers. A great short story is like the perfect pop song that stays with you through the decades, compared to the symphony of which you can remember only the highlights.

Anthony Marra, who blew my mind in 2013 with *A Constellation of Vital Phenomenon*, has produced the ideal mixtape of a short story collection with *The Tsar of Love and Techno*. These are stories that stand on their own, like lone pine in the tundra, yet each references back to the dense forest from which it came, a forest of history, personal and political. The dual settings of Kirovsk, a Siberian mining city that is propped up by its own industrial waste, and a verdant mine-laced field in rural Chechnya, are characters in themselves, more than backdrops to these interrelated stories of choice, chance, history, and fate.

Marra returns us to the claustrophobic terror of Soviet Russia and Stalin's purges, where a child's careless words can send a mother to prison, an uncle to his death, where an art restorer must eliminate evidence of subversion from paintings yet manages to score some subversion of his own. We meet the children and grandchildren of those who survived (or not) Siberia's labor camps and prisons, young people born into

glasnost and a Russia where the rich measure their wealth in billions, fueled by corruption, drugs and guns. Many of those guns end up in Chechnya, where the sons of Kirovsk become contract soldiers, but terror still reigns at home, and careless words can still kill.

The author connects these stories not only through characters, but with objects—a painting, an unplayed mixtape, a redacted photograph of a ballerina, a movie that made a one-hit wonder of a former Miss Siberia—and place—an artificial forest on the edge of Kirovsk, where wolves prowl between aluminum trees shedding plastic leaves; an idyllic field made deadly with land mines. If this all sounds grim, it is. These circumstances and the lives forced to live them are brutal. Yet Marra's characters are luminous, his language transcendent, his pacing taut. I was propelled from one page to the next, shocked, saddened, laughing, gasping. Hoping.

Just as in his tour-de-force debut novel about the wars in Chechnya, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomenon*, Marra draws us into largely unfamiliar, complex worlds, but his presentation is so deft that I was never bewildered by what I didn't know. Only awed and delighted by this writer's ambition and skill. A **book**, indeed.

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## **Melissa ♥ Dog/Wolf Lover ♥ Martin says**

**How do I even begin to review this wonderful book. I'm going to try my best without giving too many spoilers**

This book moved me, touched my heart and made me sad on so many levels. The tales the author weaves of these people and their lives, how they all inter-connect is just beautiful. Beautifully sad....

### **SIDE A**

#### **FIRST STORY: THE LEOPARD**

This is where the story begins. Roman Markin - Department of Party Propaganda and Agitation - Censors Paintings.

Roman wanted to be an artist, not an artist who censored art, but life is what it is...

He had a brother Vaska, who went to prison for religious radicalism. Roman visited Vaska's wife and son to tell the wife to get rid of anything with Vaska's picture etc. He also told the son, Vladimir his father is painted into the background. And if you can't figure that out, Roman painted little pictures of his brother at different ages into the paintings he had to censor.

Unfortunately, Roman was charged for being involved with a dancer in connection with a polish spy ring. None of this was true and it was horrible to read how they made him accept this charge and the things they did to him.

#### **SECOND STORY: GRANDDAUGHTERS**

This is the story of the granddaughters who are related to the..supposed.. Polish Spy. Galina takes after her grandmother and becomes a dancer and later an actress.

Galina falls in love with a boy named Kolya, they were to be married and have a child. Things didn't happen the way they were intended. Kolya went to war and never made it home.

### **THIRD STORY: THE GROZNY TOURIST BUREAU**

Ruslan is a limo driver turned head of The Grozny Tourist Bureau. He takes people on a tour of the little museum of old paintings that survived a bombing. Nadya is his girlfriend and she is blind. He is trying to find a way to get a large amount of money to pay for her surgery to see again. It seems like an impossible thing.

Galina and her rich husband make an appearance at the little museum and Galina wants one of the paintings. It's so very important to her, but I can't tell you why. I just have to say when you do find out, it makes you cry... at least it made me cry.

Ruslan didn't want to sell the painting, but with someone other persons sorrow, comes another persons happiness.....

### **FOUR STORY: A PRISONER OF THE CAUCASUS**

This story tells of what happened to Kolya and his partner when they were in the military. It was so sad and so bittersweet. It is filled with connections to everyone else.

### **INTERMISSION: THE TSAR OF LOVE AND TECHNO**

This tells the story of Alexi, who was Kolya's brother. He visits with Galina for a bit and then it takes us back to when the boys were young. Alexi tells of his father and how he had a science museum of strange things. I will leave that to the imagination. It is a wonderful story as well.

### **SIDE B**

#### **FIRST STORY: WOLF OF WHITE FOREST**

This is the story of Vera. She tries to get her daughter in a marriage with Kolya, but it just didn't happen. There were some shady things going on that led to a death or so and Kolya leaving for war.

#### **SECOND STORY: PALACE OF THE PEOPLE**

This story is about Vladimir, remember him? He was the little boy his uncle came to see in the first story. This is about his life growing up.

#### **THIRD STORY: A TEMPORARY EXHIBITION**

This tells the story of Nadya's surgery. Also Ruslan has become a deputy minister. Nadya has a gallery she takes Vladimir and his son through. He gets to see something so heartfelt and wonderful in his old age. This really brought tears to my eyes!

#### **THE END: OUTER SPACE**

I have my own opinion on this one, but I'm not sure it's correct. I will leave that up others to decide and maybe tell me :)

This book is so wonderfully told, I really wanted to tell you everything about all of the stories, the way they connected, what happened to the people, the horrible atrocities, but you need to read the book for yourself if this is the kind of book you think you would like. I loved it.

\*I would like to thank BLOGGING FOR BOOKS for giving me a print copy of this book.\*

MY BLOG: Melissa Martin's Reading List

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## Matthew Quann says

**This is a fairly long review, so, the tl;dr: run to your local shop/library and check out Marra's excellent sophomore novel. I loved it!**

The mixtape is as sacred a token as you are likely to find among music fans.

Being handed a disc with artists and songs you've never heard is akin to being introduced to a new world. Part of the fun in crafting and receiving music in an increasingly obsolete reflective disc is that you never really know what to expect. A bass-booming hip-hop banger could just as easily give way to a serene jazz number as an experimental rock track. A properly crafted mixtape takes the listener on a ride through a diverse soundscape but on reflection and repeat listens, you can hear the through-line that ties the project together.

Anthony Marra's latest novel, *The Tsar of Love and Techno*, is an appropriately similar experience to that of a first spin of a new disc. Billed as a short story collection, this is really a series of stories that vary in tone, character, and plot, but contain enough connective tissue to rightly be called a novel. Some stories end softly, others with a resounding crash, and I was never quite sure what to expect from the next story. There was a section that felt like punk rock, another that seemed like it should be backed by sorrowful orchestral arrangements, and —of course—techno.

For those of you on GR who've recommended this book to me: send on more like this, please!

I went into this novel having only read Marra's previous effort, *A Constellation of Vital Phenomenon*, which I found to be quite good. This short story collection/novel shares its setting with its predecessor with some notable exceptions (*Constellation* was entirely set in Chechnya, while *Tsar* is a tour throughout Russia and beyond). My recommendation with this book is to experience it like a mixtape: go in with as little knowledge as possible and enjoy the ride.

Marra's vivid writing conjured the dreary settings of this novel in my mind's eye. Location and time play a key roles here in both story and theme, and Marra is able to draw forth 1937's Russia just as well as modern-day. This is firmly literary fiction, and is laden with metaphor and rock-solid prose. I read this book at a slower pace than I normally would. It wasn't because of the difficulty of the novel or a busy personal schedule; rather, it was that I wanted to give myself some time to digest each story and dig in to Marra's writing. I thought that the variety of styles and storylines that Marra employed are all executed with only the smallest blips (the middle does sag a bit, but only slightly, and only for a short time).

In fact, Marra's skill and structure reminded me of another of my favorite authors.

*The Tsar of Love & Techno*'s structure bears a familial resemblance to some of David Mitchell's writing. We have the interlocking stories, the varied perspectives, and multiplicity of writing styles. Mitchell's famed *Cloud Atlas*' disparate stories seem tenuously linked at the novel's onset only to reassemble like a matryoshka doll by the novel's end: each piece fitting nicely into the other. By comparison, Marra's *The Tsar of Love and Techno* is like unfolding a complex origami. While the stories all have their own identity, they are all identifiably part of a single work—a single sheet, if you will—and identifying those connections, however minor, excited me.

Marra also handles a diverse cast: in both personality and gender. I was somewhat taken aback at how well Marra was able to get into the heads of both male and female characters, leaving neither sex underserved or unbelievable. While it isn't a prerequisite for a good novel to have an equal representation of the sexes, I believe it helps to expand the readership. One of the reasons I like to read is to appreciate perspectives that are not my own, and this book is highly recommendable in that sense alone! I don't put much stock in the whole "chick lit/guy lit" classification. What I do believe is that there are certain novels that have almost universal appeal and this is one of them.

Also, **THAT COVER**. The font, cassette tape, colouring, and unspooling tape, reminded me of an album cover.

I'm pretty astonished that Marra didn't manage to snag the 2016 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction with this book (I've yet to touch *The Sympathizer*, so I'll reserve judgement until then). However, Marra just seems to get better with each subsequent collection, so it is almost inevitable that he'll take home some heavy duty rewards in the future. Regardless of its award-status, it is one of the best books I've read this year and has jumped Marra up to my personal "buy-on-site" shortlist.

Of course, like any good mixtape, this is a book that deserves to be experienced all over again.

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## **Katie says**

A Constellation of Vital Phenomena might be my favourite read of the year. Unfortunately I didn't love this as much. Because at a certain point I found myself comparing it unfavourably to David Mitchell and especially *Cloud Atlas*. Like *Cloud Atlas* it's a novel of connected short stories and like *Cloud Atlas* employs a number of narrative voices. For me Mitchell had full command of all the distinctive voices in *Cloud Atlas* which I didn't find to be the case here. All the components of *Cloud Atlas* for me were equally as compelling; here I found the stories uneven.

The entire book takes place in Kirovsk, a former Siberian labour camp that has become a toxic wasteland. It's a place whose history has largely been erased or falsified—small objects are often the sole carriers of true memory. And it's these objects—a painting, a mix tape, a photograph—which connect the characters and stories. All this I loved. What I didn't love was the increasingly whimsical black humoured tone.

The first story was brilliant and I was still utterly engrossed until I arrived at the title story, the longest story in the collection. In this story Marra even begins copying a familiar Mitchell voice. The offhand social commentator intent on coining aphorisms. He has a penchant for turning nouns into verbs, a familiar Mitchell trick—pigeon shit "touples" the head of statues. And he begins shovelling in black humour by the bucketload. His writing began to become very hit and miss. Here's an example. "Behind the ticket counter stood a man as skinny as a soaked poodle." That's great. As skinny as a soaked poodle, love that. But then—"He sported a shirt of swatch-sized plaid and a blond ponytail that, unless destined for a chemotherapy patient, should have been immediately chopped off, buried in an unmarked grave, and never spoken of

again.” That to me is someone trying too hard to be funny. And this was a problem throughout this story.

Unfortunately this story jarred me out of the narrative and I was never quite able to find my way back in with the same heightened concentration. There’s much that is brave and brilliant and it’s a fabulous feat of both imagination and political indignation but it was missing the tenderness of A Constellation of Vital Phenomena which offset the black humour and absurdity. The black humour and absurdity here was just a bit too rampant and unrestrained for my liking. Almost everything was tuned into a joke. The last story, Outer Space, attempts to restore pathos and philosophical gravitas to the narrative but by then it was too late for me. This is though largely perhaps a question of personal taste. The black humour was up a notch too high for me.

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