

# Gorky Park Short Guide

## Gorky Park by Martin Cruz Smith

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# Characters

Arkady Renko, Gorky Park's protagonist, is the alienated citizen of a culture that prides itself upon its elimination of capitalism's exploitative alienation of workers from the fruits of their labor. In a sense, Renko is a model of proletarian consciousness: He performs his police duties conscientiously and well, even though he is poorly paid and has been passed over for promotion despite an excellent record of solving cases. It is precisely his high professional competence, however, which has kept him from being better rewarded by his society, since he has failed to conform to the covert ethos of materialistic selfishness that really governs life in the U.S.S.R.

Renko is certainly aware of the kind of conformist behavior which would earn him a larger slice of the communal pie, but he is also cognizant of the spiritual impoverishment which would result from surrendering to social pressures.

If this makes Arkady Renko seem like some sort of intolerably self-righteous saint, it should be emphasized that Smith offers a much more complex portrait of his protagonist. Renko smokes and drinks, as well as thinks, far too much, and his desire to remain independent leads him to reject genuinely helpful suggestions as well as advice that contains ulterior motives.

His integrity regarding larger matters often leads him into priggishness in small ones, and his ability to grasp the meaning of tiny physical clues is matched by an inability to correctly interpret major psychological outbursts. Although Renko is a basically good man in a deeply flawed society, Smith takes care to endow him with the kinds of quirkily idiosyncratic traits that make for a compelling "warts and all" characterization.

Renko is the center of attention for almost all of Gorky Park, and as a consequence the other dramatis personae are much less fully sketched. The man responsible for the triple murder, John Osborne, is a shadowy figure whose motives are not well-articulated, and the characters of Renko's wife, mistress, and colleagues are made up of predictable and at times even stereotyped elements. It is a tribute to Smith's narrative skills that the impetus of his plot is more than sufficient to maintain interest in Gorky Park, a book in which one well-developed character holds the stage while a host of lesser entities make their alarms and excursions at an ever-accelerating, and almost always exhilarating, pace.



## Social Concerns/Themes

Gorky Park is such an exciting and entertaining story that on a first reading one is seldom conscious of anything other than the events of its fastpaced narrative. But a more reflective consideration of the book reveals that it does possess a few abstract aspects which, although generally muted by the color and energy of their surrounding context, periodically indicate some of the author's broader concerns.

The primary social question in Gorky Park is the quality of life in the Soviet Union. Smith has structured the novel in a way that reveals ever-widening circles of corruption within the Soviet social and political systems, and the plot turns upon the efforts by members of the elite to frustrate, block and finally kill Arkady Renko, the police investigator charged with solving a bizarre triple murder. This emphasis upon the widespread rottenness of Soviet society as a whole is reinforced by frequent criticisms of the material quality of Soviet life, as everything from cigarettes to clothing to large appliances is denigrated as the inferior product of a barely functioning economy. Although the final section of Gorky Park (about one-fifth of the book) takes place in New York City, where Smith exhibits an equally keen eye for the shabbier aspects of American life, it is the novel's vivid portrayal of the Soviet Union's general social decay that makes the greater impression upon the reader.

Thematically, Gorky Park bears some similarity to the "down these mean streets a man must go" tradition exemplified by Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe. Smith's Arkady Renko is also a lone wolf in a dog-eat-dog world, and like Marlowe it is only his exceptional personal integrity that keeps him going when most people either ignore him or attempt to kill him. For Renko, however, there is an ironic twist to this situation. His society is supposedly dedicated to the abolition of the individual selfishness that causes crime and to the creation of an internalized concern for the general social welfare; thus Renko's attempts to pursue truth are to this extent subversive, since they challenge the established order, rather than being merely ill-judged, as in Marlowe's case. The contrast between the not very powerful, but nonetheless brave individual, and the omnipotent but ethically barren state is a source of moral as well as dramatic tension for Gorky Park; and if this is an essentially romantic and probably quite unrealistic myth, it is also one of the most appealing conceits remaining to contemporary sensibilities.



## Techniques/Literary Precedents

Although critics have often assumed that *Gorky Park* is simply a thriller or adventure novel, a good case can also be made for including it in the police procedural tradition. This increasingly popular genre, whose major exponents have been the American writers Ed McBain and Hilary Waugh and their English counterpart J. J. Marric, typically provides a nuts-and-bolts account of a police force's standard operating procedures along with the usual components of a mystery story. The sociological material that results can, if effectively utilized, add a firmly realistic foundation to what might otherwise be just another cops-and -robbers story; and while *Gorky Park* is certainly not one of the latter, its descriptions of Arkady Renko's methods of work are both intrinsically fascinating and exotically unfamiliar to Western readers.

The second half of the book introduces a New York City detective into the middle of Renko's investigation, which gives Smith additional opportunities to contrast American and Soviet versions of proper police procedure. *Gorky Park* does contain elements not commonly found in the police procedural — the extensive criticisms of Soviet society and the action-packed plot are both atypical — but it is, in essence, the story of a dedicated policeman's methodical pursuit of a criminal, and thus should be considered in the context of a genre that has appealed to a number of contemporary writers.

## Adaptations

The film version of *Gorky Park* was released in 1983. Directed by Michael Apted, produced by Gene Kirkwood and Howard W. Koch, Jr. and with a screenplay written by Dennis Potter, it featured William Hurt in the role of Arkady Renko and Lee Marvin as the villainous John Osborne. Among the supporting cast were Joanna Pakula, Brian Dennehy, and Ian Bannen. Most reviewers found it an entertaining and enjoyably fast-paced movie, although several also commented upon its failure to fill in the flavorful Soviet social context that constituted one of the book's major strengths. Despite a strong performance by star attraction Hurt — who was widely praised for the subtlety of his characterization of Arkady Renko — the film enjoyed only moderate success at the box office.



# Key Questions

From its first publication, *Gorky Park* was controversial for its portrayal of Soviet society. Although Smith developed the story out of an interest in the Soviet technique of reconstructing faces of dead victims, he includes many details of supposedly everyday Soviet life. Now that the Soviet Union no longer exists, Smith's portrayal of Soviet society may seem to be primarily of historical interest, and discussion group may find that a good way for starting a discussion would be to ask whether Smith's criticisms of Soviet society still have any meaning for modern readers. In addition, Renko's investigation takes place in a society without the Bill of Rights; a comparison of what he is allowed to do, restricted as he is by the social elite, and what an American police detective can do, restricted as he is by the Constitution, could generate a heated discussion about how innocent citizens, criminals, and investigators are treated in a totalitarian, versus open, society.

1. *Gorky Park* includes criticisms of Soviet society. Is it fair for an author in one culture to criticize another culture?

Would it be fair if it were a Soviet author criticizing American society?

2. Why does Renko not give in to social pressure and do what it takes to acquire a better life for himself? Are there other literary characters who make the choices he makes? What is the point of the self-sacrifice?

3. What techniques does Smith use to flesh out Renko's characterization?

Why would it be important that Renko have flaws?

4. What investigative techniques does Renko use that American police would not use? What does this suggest about differences between the two societies? It might be illuminating to have a police officer critique Renko's techniques, suggesting what is effective as well as what is ineffective.

5. *Gorky Park* was adapted into a motion picture. What changes were made in the story and characterization?

To what extent are the changes necessitated by the differences between novels and motion pictures?

6. What aspect of *Gorky Park* would be the most appealing to popular audiences? Would it be the locale's exotic flavor? Would be the exciting plot?

Would it be the characterization of Renko? Would it be the social criticism?

7. To what extent does *Gorky Park* present stereotypes? Is it necessary to present the stereotypes?



8. The Soviet Union collapsed several years after the publication of *Gorky Park*. To what degree does *Gorky Park* correctly identify those traits of Soviet society that led to its demise?

9. Soviet citizens showed much courage during the attempted coup of 1989, when the Stalinist communists tried to seize power. To what extent does Smith's portrayal of Renko show how people could retain their integrity enough to stand up to their oppressors when the time came?

10. Is Smith's depiction of Soviet society now of only historical interest, or does it still have meaning for us?

11. Are there any aspects of Soviet law that would be good to use in Western societies? Are there any laws in Western societies that resemble Soviet laws, for good or ill?



## Related Titles

Please see the separate analysis of Red Square.



# Copyright Information

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