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"Deleted Scenes" Publisher Weekly review

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Also find it on BookLife by Publisher WeeklyIn a stream of consciousness, debut novelist Bagaev (author of *The Debut Project and Other Stories*) catalogs the dreams, attitudes, and absurdities of citizens living in a totalitarian dystopia. The vignettes are presented as samizdat errata, material that an “Editorial Committee” has deleted from a government-sanctioned utopian best-seller to preserve the book’s “narrative integrity” and avoid a “descent” into ”literary anarchy.” In these excerpts, readers discover the frozen island nation of Novo Tsarstvo, where the ruthless Tsar rules with violence and doublespeak: “one needs not lay a stone to build utopia; one can convince the rest they live in one already.” Police wear balaclavas and beat citizens indiscriminately, and the military detonates the lethal “Peace Bringer” bomb on the neighboring enemy island in the name of defense.

The collective inhabitants of Novo Tsarstvo attempt to make sense of their dehumanizing existence by imagining fanciful scenarios of how this fascist world came to be and how they can change it. Their fantasies include a professor creating the sadistic police as a race of pig-faced demons, Homo demonicus; a parallel dimension where leaders and newspapers don’t lie and benevolent rulers promote art and science; “television reality” that feeds alternate truths so pervasive that it takes on

anthropomorphic form; and the shriveled and feeble Tsar as a marionette manipulated by his officials. Most scenarios are either alarmist or optimistic, but a couple are comical, like one centering on a stalwart woman who ignores the law against owning a cat.

Bagaev's metaphysical observations strike with chilling accuracy, while the prose, despite the heady invention, is brisk and pointed, the storytelling as fleet as it is wild. A welcome fabulistic playfulness leavens the dehumanizing themes, even as Bagaev explores how a civilization evolves to practice sadism and genocide, the capacity for diverse perceptions of reality, and the steps, however small, it that must be taken to right the world's wrongs. Readers who love outraged play and literary daring will appreciate Bagaev's pained, vivid vision.

Takeaway: Clever, outraged novel of storytelling in a totalitarian state.

Comparable Titles: Ken Kalfus, Bruno Schulz.

Production grades Cover: A- Design and typography: A Illustrations: N/A Editing: A Marketing copy: A

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