



Red Weather

Pauls Toutonghi

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The setting is Milwaukee, Wisconsin—if not America’s heart, then at least its liver—home to an array of breweries and abandoned factories and down-on-their-luck Eastern European immigrants. The year is 1989.

Revolutions are sweeping through the nations of the Eastern Bloc. Communism is unraveling. And nobody feels this unraveling more piquantly than Yuri Balodis—a fifteen-year-old first-generation American living with his Latvian-immigrant parents in Milwaukee’s Third Ward.

It’s a turbulent time. And when Yuri falls in love with Hannah Graham—the daring daughter of a prominent local socialist—chaos ensues. Within weeks, Yuri is ensnared by both Hannah and socialism. He joins the staff of the *Socialist Worker*. He starts quoting Lenin and Marx indiscriminately.

His parents, of course, are horrified and deeply saddened. They try to educate him, to show him why, in their opinion, communism has ruined so many lives. But Yuri is stubborn. And his ideological betrayal will have more serious consequences than breaking his parents’ hearts.

Red Weather is by turns funny and bittersweet, tinged with a rueful comic sense that will instantly remind you of the absurd complications of love. Pauls Toutonghi’s stunning debut novel is at once reminiscent of Michael Chabon’s *The Mysteries of Pittsburgh* and Khaled Hosseini’s *The Kite Runner*.

From the Hardcover edition.

Red Weather Details

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From Reader Review Red Weather for online ebook

Kathie says

This book went into my to-read list because of its Milwaukee setting. But I enjoyed the story of Latvian immigrants struggling to grab the American dream, interwoven with their son's angst-ridden coming-of-age. Yuri, the son, gets mixed up with home-grown Communist wannabes, which of course is anathema to his parents. And naturally a female is at the center of all that. There is satire, there is sadness, but at the end of it all there is family.

I'd love to read more about Yuri. He's an endearing character. Any teenage boy who loves the library as much as Yuri does HAS to have a bright future.

It's problematic to live in the area where a book is set. The author captures a lot of the feel of late 1980s Milwaukee but there are errors that jumped out at this Milwaukee-area resident. For one thing, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel did not exist until 1995, for another, a single town in Wisconsin (or anywhere?) would not have its own District Attorney. And paper mills in Milwaukee? There are none within about 100 miles. There always have been industrial smells particular to Milwaukee, but paper milling is not one of them.

If it weren't for the sloppy research, I'd give this book five stars.

Zinta says

We Latvians are a small nation, beaten and battered by many wars over thousands of years, but our culture and life sense still thrive: the Latvian language is one of the oldest in existence today. Perhaps that is our greatest source of pride, then: we are survivors.

When Pauls Toutonghi's new novel came upon the literary scene, I was pleased. I'm an avid reader in both languages - Latvian and English - but however many good books I read about the war and later experiences of Latvians immigrating to other countries and cultures, it is rare to come across a worthy tome in English, a good attention-grabbing novel that I could proudly share with non-Latvian friends.

Now, here's Pauls. With one Latvian parent, it is my understanding he has grown up in the Milwaukee area, active in the Latvian community and, having visited Latvia, is well-acquainted, one would suppose, with the culture and something of the nation's history. For these reasons, I read the novel with high expectation.

Pauls' writing abilities do not disappoint. He has accrued an impressive publishing history, has won the Pushcart Prize. His descriptions are lively, his storyline pulls us along, his sense of humor is intact.

And yet. The further I read, the more I realized, no, this was not going to be the book that I would pass on to Latvians I know, or to non-Latvians I'd like to invite into my multi-cultural world. The novel works as an entertaining read for non-Latvians, perhaps, but for those who do know the history and culture, well, not so much. I think my sense of humor is healthy, but I can't help feeling that describing Latvians visiting the

United States as being so dense as to put ketchup on every possible food, even bananas, craving to taste the American life, is taking the joke into the much less fun realm of ridicule. Or the Latvian mother as so lacking in self-awareness as to walk Milwaukee streets wearing a Pabst hardhat with a beer can on it as if wearing a Parisian fashion statement. Humor is often built on slapstick and exaggeration, but would those who have no other knowledge of Latvians, perhaps never will have any other exposure than this novel, think this is what it means to be a Latvian? Bumbling fools?

Worthy of remark are some historic inaccuracies. Although this is a fictional work, even fiction must be rooted on factually solid ground. One such example is the allusion to Latvia's president, Karlis Ulmanis, and his attempt to escape to Finland during the Soviet invasion of World War II. In fact, President Ulmanis held his place, broadcasting over the radio waves to the nation even as the Soviet tanks crossed the Russian border, requesting all to remain in their places, saving many Latvian lives. He was taken by force from his office by the occupying army, and was never seen alive again. Educated guesses are that he was deported to Siberia, where he died in a Gulag.

If by 1989, when this story is set, most Latvian immigrants had established themselves in relative financial security (the fictional Balodis family still lived in squalor), had attained some measure of their new country's education and achieved something of their own immigrant American dream, then the Balodis family was certainly the exception to the rule. Nor could I imagine a Latvian father being so easygoing about the political lines the young man in this novel, Yuri (Juris), crossed in his lovelorn relationship with a socialist girl (the typical Latvian father would have gone through the roof).

As a reality check, I shared *Red Weather* with my parents, who shared it with several of their friends. They expressed admiration for the author's skill, but expressed a pained disappointment in the skewed image of Latvian immigrants. The image the book leaves is of a people who are gullible, not particularly industrious, and rather dim-witted.

An opportunity lost. My subjective opinion, but I'm sure shared by more than a few of my countrymen and women.

Book Concierge says

Yuri Balodis is 15 and attending Alexander Hamilton High School in 1989 Milwaukee. His parents came to Wisconsin from Latvia, where his father had once dreamed of becoming a country and western star, but now works as a night janitor at a car dealership, and drowns his disappointments in bourbon.

Yuri is a gangly teen and unsure of his life's path, but he is a good student and reads widely, partly because his mother brings home a variety of books from her job at the Milwaukee Public Library. He slips out of their apartment one early morning when he can't sleep and comes across a curious group of "protesters" who are trying to sell a newspaper titled *Socialist Worker* to the employees of a produce company. One of these is a very pretty girl Yuri recognizes from high school, and he is instantly smitten. But how can he love a Socialist, when he parents sacrificed so much to escape Communism? More importantly, how can he love a Socialist, and still love his father?

This dilemma forms the central conflict of this coming-of-age novel. It is in turns poignant, and hilariously funny, full of the angst of teen love and the missteps of youth. Yuri, like all teens, is embarrassed by his parents, while simultaneously feeling guilty about this. He longs for the perfect suburban life he imagines his

classmates enjoy, and yet finds a certain beauty and comfort in his own family life.

Toutonghi does a fine job of writing this story – I found it entertaining and enjoyable. But ... The city is practically a character in the book; the setting is that important to what is happening. I live in Milwaukee and the geography he writes is completely wrong. Streets he mentions run the wrong direction; sounds of the ball games at the stadium cannot carry the 5 miles to Yuri's apartment (and wouldn't be heard over the noise of the freeway that borders the area on two sides); there are no large supermarkets or strip malls in the neighborhood in which the author sets the story. Would it have taken all that much effort to get the geography right, or to give the city a fictitious name?

Jenny says

This book tells the story of a teenager, Yuri, and his immigrant parents who live in Milwaukee, WI. Yuri's life changes as he falls for Hannah, a girl who is involved with the socialist movement--a movement whose core concepts directly contradict the beliefs of Yuri's parents (who emigrated from Soviet-controlled Latvia). Two key events cause great changes in Yuri's life: a late-night car accident and the arrival of some of his Latvian relatives.

A key element of this book is Yuri's relationship with his father. Another is his struggle to figure out who he really is and what he really believes and values.

I enjoyed reading a book set in Milwaukee because it was easy for me to picture the many places that are mentioned. I also enjoyed seeing the development of Yuri's character and how he came to view his family.

hcelvis says

Yuri Balodis ist Sohn lettischer Einwanderer in den USA. Sein Vater, Reinigungskraft in einem Autohaus, sitzt Abend für Abend auf dem Balkon, trinkt Bourbon und erzählt Yuri immer und immer wieder dieselben haarsträubenden Geschichten aus Lettland und schwärmt von Amerika, dem einzig wahren freien Land. Als Yuri sich in eine engagierte Sozialistin verliebt, entstehen folgenreiche Spannungen zwischen Vater und Sohn. Und dann fällt auch noch die Berliner Mauer und die lettischen Verwandten kündigen sich an; das Chaos nimmt seinen Lauf.

So erlebt Yuri seine Pubertät zwischen Liebe und Loyalität, idealistischen sozialistischen Ideen seiner Angebeteten und den Erinnerungen seines Vaters an kommunistische Unterdrückung, der väterlichen Liebe eines Alkoholikers und den Träumen und Bangen um das Mädchen, das ihm den Kopf verdreht.

"Die Geschichte von Yuri Balodis und seinem Vater, der eigentlich Country-Star war" ist gepflastert von dramatischen Ereignissen, Verletzungen, Enttäuschungen, aber auch von viel Liebe, Zueinanderhalten, Freundschaft, und vor allem einem großartigen stillen Humor, unaufdringlich und glaubwürdig. Allein durch die tolle Umsetzung des Einwandererdialekts, die einen immer wieder schmunzeln lässt, muss man Yuris Eltern einfach lieben. Überhaupt, die Charaktere sind so fein ausgearbeitet, dass man sie zu kennen glaubt, man sieht die Familie vor sich: der Vater mit seinen manchmal naiven Vorstellungen vom freien Amerika, der aber auch in einigen Momenten durchblicken lässt, dass er sehr wohl weiß, dass nicht alles Gold ist im vielgepriesenen Land der Freiheit; die Mutter, die sich den Gegebenheiten immer anpasst und für die ihr

Sohn ihr Ein und Alles ist; und Yuri, der ständig hin- und hergerissen ist zwischen seiner Liebe zu einer überzeugten Jungsozialistin und dem Respekt seinen Eltern gegenüber.

Trotz vieler skurriler Geschehnisse wirkt an "Die Geschichte von Yuri Balodis und seinem Vater, der eigentlich Country-Star war" nichts aufgesetzt und es liest sich von Anfang an wunderbar flüssig.

Ein schöner und unterhaltsamer Blick in verschiedene Welten, in eine Zeit, in der sich vieles änderte, aus dem Blick eines Jungen, in dessen Leben sich zu dieser Zeit ebenfalls vieles änderte.

Samuel Crowfoot says

The review on-line says it is "honest and unflinching." I disagree, if anything I found it humorous and awkward. Awkward in the sense that he recounts teenage moments and feelings that we all would like to forget, and humorous because these things actually happened. I can only imagine that if this were ever made into a movie it would be akin to "My Big Fat Greek Wedding." I am just over 50% of the books and I really enjoy it. I think an added plus is the fact that the story happens in Wisconsin, a place where I am currently living so I have the benefit of seeing (or having seen) where the story takes place. This bit of personalization makes it that much sweeter. Regardless of where you live there are aspects that anyone can relate to and appreciate.

So far: 8/10

I have now finished the book. I stand by my grade of 8/10. It was a great read and in the end, a surprise to my original diagnosis.

Glenn says

"Red Weather" takes a simple idea--the working and actions of an adolescent--and stretches it in wonderful and engrossing directions. In lesser hands, Yuri's story could easily have slipped into cliché--a typical coming of age story. But Pauls Toutonghi does not take the easy way out. Because his protagonist is essentially more acted upon than pro-active, his lurches toward decisiveness draw us in that much more; although a lot of the time, we are watching him through the fingers on the hands clamped over our eyes, waiting for the crash, literal and figurative.

And Pauls surrounds Yuri with a distinctive cast who grow on us as people as our main character grows during the course of the novel. Pauls plays with standard immigrant scenes--yes, we visit a supermarket--but over the course of the book, deepens the shades slowly and imperceptibly, surprising us, making us know and care about the whole clan, as well as the other non-Latvia characters in "Red Weather."

There are several brilliant set pieces: In particular amongst them, one involving a furtive car ride gone awry, and another an attempted day of tourism, can easily stand alone and merit repeated readings. There are huge surprises, shocks really, that utterly alter our view of the now-familiar characters, and our protagonists' understanding of them, and his own life.

This is a book whose character's experience reminds us to actually be in the moment, to reckon and recognize that which is around us, those intimate to us, which we sometimes take for granted. To try and see things for what they actually are now, so that later, when that which could've deepened our experience and

brought us closer to those near to us is gone, we do not regret things undone, words unsaid. "Red Weather" is a beautiful novel of discovery, frustration and regret, whose themes and unforced emotion burrow down deep with in the reader, page by magical page.

Marianne Hart says

Really enjoyed the view through the eyes of a young man coming of age as the son of immigrant parents in Milwaukee.

Connie says

This slim novel, set in 1980's Milwaukee, explores the life of 16 year old Yuri Balodis and his parents, immigrants from Latvia and escapees from the Stalinist Soviet Union. Yuri's infatuation with a classmate, daughter of a Socialist professor, unleashes a torrent of emotions in the family, capped by the unexpected arrival of relatives from Latvia. Set against the backdrop of Milwaukee's Third Ward, the novel explores the complexity of emotions first generation Americans and their immigrant parent face, particularly because Yuri's parents never spoke of their past. This is one novel that, for me, was enhanced by surprising revelations in the epilogue.

Beverly says

This book was the first I put on my Goodreads 'to read' list in 2009. I've ben trying to tackle that long list lately and I'm so glad I finally got around to reading this one. This is the coming of age story of a first-generation American teenager in Milwaukee, living with his Latvian immigrant parents when the Berlin wall came down on Nov. 9, 1989. The story is warm and sensitive, but saved from sentimentality by its humor, alternately slapstick and sly. There is a straw dog in it, though - a socialist-leaning American professor who loves all things Soviet. The narrator and reader know better.

Ron Strege says

One of the best books I read last year,

Anne says

It took me a while to get into this book...but then suddenly I really was. Reviews have compared the author to David Sedaris (and I guess there were moments...) and the book to The Kite Runner (I did not see that at all), but I thought there were some Dave-Eggers like moments in it. I would recommend it enough--I could see a lot of people "liking" this book but not a lot of people "loving" it. Mostly, I gave it 4 stars because of the portrayal of Yuri's father starting in the middle of the book--I thought the description of that character in particular really brought him to life. And also because of Hammond. I liked Hammond.

Chi Dubinski says

A coming of age story about a Latvian immigrant, Yuri, in 1989 Milwaukee. I read this because I'm from Milwaukee, although two generations removed from Yuri. I'm still undecided about how I felt about this book--it was well written, certainly, but I did not think Yuri was a very sympathetic character.

Alexandra says

Da bin ich beim Lebensmitteleinkauf zufällig auf ein sehr gutes Wühltischschmankerl gestossen. Diese Geschichte mit dem ungewöhnlich langen Titel ist ein wunderschöner humorvoller Roman über das Erwachsenwerden in den USA, wenn man lettischen Migrationshintergrund besitzt. Alle Klischees und auch innovative Wahrheiten werden sehr liebevoll bedient: Erste Liebe, erste sexuelle Erfahrungen mit beiderlei Geschlecht, kriminelle Handlungen im jugendlichen Überschwang begangen, Alkoholismus, Grossfamilie, grausame lettisch-gastronomische Entgleisungen, Zerplatzen des amerikanischen Traums und zuallerletzt auch noch eine sehr humorvolle politische Rebellion gegen die kapitalistischen Werte der Eltern, eigentlich nur um ein Mädchen zu beeindrucken.

Das einzige, was mich ein bisschen gestört hat, ist wieder mal die Sprache. Der Wortwitz im Roman hält nicht, was deutsche Klappentext, mit spitzer brillianter Feder konstruiert, verspricht. Dies ist aber sicher wieder mal auf die deutsche Übersetzung zurückzuführen, denn der lettisch/amerikanische Sprachwitz, auf den auch mehrmals hingewiesen wird, kommt einfach nicht rüber. Das ist schon das zweite Buch mit baltisch/amerikanischen Hintergrund das ich unbedingt nochmals in Originalsprache lesen muss.

Fazit lesenswert!

Uli Vogel says

I liked the characters - with all their faults and dents they were all loveable.
