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## Book review: "Zift: Socialist Noir" By Vladislav Todorov

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### Zift

### Socialist Noir

By Vladislav Todorov, translated from the Bulgarian by Joseph Benatov

Paul Dry Books: 185 pp., \$14.95 paper

Of all the places to set a story of intrigue, Bulgaria has served as a choice exotic location for many writers, among them George Bernard Shaw ("Arms and the Man"), Eric Ambler ("Judgment on Deltchev") and Vladislav Todorov, a young Bulgarian writer who, in "Zift," has taken the recent history of his country and wrestled it into a compelling thriller about vague characters with questionable motives. This translation comes on the heels of the surprising success of a movie based on the book, which won plenty of accolades when it was released in 2008.

The message of the novel (which comes with the ironic subtitle "socialist noir") is clearly announced by an epigram:

*"Death solves all problems — no man, no problem." Stalin.*

Taking place on one day in December 1963, the novel is told by Lev Zhelyazkov, who is released from the central prison in Sofia after serving 20 years for murder. He's harassed and chased all over the city, and fears he will be dead within 24 hours. Known by his nickname "Moth," Lev faces a desperate situation that deliberately echoes actor Edmond O'Brien's in the memorably haunting 1950 movie "D.O.A." — not to mention the many other noirs similarly composed around strange objects that everyone is after. In the case of this novel, the objects in question couldn't be stranger: a glass eye and a piece of "zift," a ball of gummy black material which Lev likes to chew on.

Todorov has created a perverse crash course in the constancy of irony: for instance, Lev endures 20 years in jail for a murder he didn't commit during a botched robbery; the robbery results in a missing diamond that everyone seems to want, and former fascists are all now communists. As all noir tales require, there must also be a femme fatale, and Lev unfortunately encounters one here. When he leaves the prison, in fact, he has among his possessions a picture of insects that kept him company and grimly hints at what is to come: It is a picture of "a diabolically rapacious female chewing up a male who had fallen..."

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Entering prison during a time of monarcho-fascism, exiting it in one of the most rigid communist systems in Eastern Europe, Lev is a constant victim: "And when dusk falls again, a black widow with a bony face will silently flit across a fresh grave that will read, 'Moth, who lived fortuitously and died accordingly.' "

Here's another Bulgarian corpse that has been eloquently heard from.

*McGonigle is the author of "The Corpse Dream of N. Petkov" (Northwestern University Press) which has been translated into Bulgarian.*

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