

city
Secrets


BOOKS

THE ESSENTIAL INSIDER'S GUIDE

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A Bad Boy's Diary

By Walter Gray (*Metta Victoria Victor*)

1880

Metta Victoria Victor was into multiples. She had more pseudonyms than Arthur Daley, gave birth to nine children, and wrote more than a hundred books. On top of that, she wrote the first full-length detective novel—*The Dead Letter*—and raised thousands of dollars for the antislavery cause with her novel *Maum Guinea*. If that wasn't enough to keep her busy, she and her husband also invented the American dime novel—the first paperbacks. Despite all these endeavors, she fell out of the public gaze and now seems ready for rediscovery.

My first encounter with *A Bad Boy's Diary* came when my mother read to me from it. She would cry with laughter, and so would I. She had inherited the book from her own mother, who had been given it by her parents, who had bought it in 1900 (fifteen years after Mrs. Victor's death) from a tinker's cart that came up the County Down mountains once a month with supplies such as sugar and flour. If you can imagine how many American novels the tinker carried among his groceries and vitals, you begin to get the picture of how popular Mrs. Victor once was.

Georgie Hackett is the titular bad boy, and he predates *Just William* and *Adrian Mole* by many years. However hard Georgie tries, he cannot stay out of trouble. He shoots the vicar, is involved in a kidnapping, and accidentally becomes a burglar.

All of his adventures are written in his own attempt at sophisticated spelling.

“Do you kepe dogs?” sez the visitor.

“Nary a dog,” sez Pa.

“I thought there mite be one under the table,” sez he.

“O no,” sez Pa.

“Will you have calfy o lay?” sez mama, “or calfy nowar?”

“Calfy nowar,” sez Prim. He's frightfully fashionable.

Just then I cot him by the caff of the leg with the pincers, an' I give 'em a good squeeze.

“Ouw, wow, wow!” sez he a-jumpin' up.

The cup went smash inter the glass pickle dish, the coughy spilt on to the tablecloth, the cup and sawcer as' dish wur broke—such a time! I know I turned pail.

A Bad Boy's Diary was the best-selling book of 1880, and Georgie Hackett successfully went on to his own series—including *A Bad Boy Abroad*, in which he arrives in Liverpool during a Fenian bomb attack and visits London and Paris, with inevitable results—but nothing is as good as this first book.

FIDELIS MORGAN

Fidelis Morgan is an actress and writer. Her books include biographies, dramatic collections, and the Countess Ashby de la Zouche series of novels, from Unnatural Fire to Fortune's Slave.

Bai Ganyo: Incredible Tales of a Modern Bulgarian

By Aleko Konstantinov

1895

A comic classic about the encounter between East and West in nineteenth-century Europe, this collection of vignettes about a Balkan Everyman named Ganyo Balkanski (“Bai” is a traditional term of intimate

respect) has had the distinction of being kept in print and assigned for reading in Bulgarian schools since its original publication, regardless of the regime in power. It has been translated into every national language of the Balkans and throughout most of Europe. Konstantinov, often known simply as Aleko, is a Bulgarian national hero whose portrait, along with a picture of the manuscript of the novel, has even appeared on Bulgarian banknotes.

At the time Aleko was writing, Bulgaria had only recently become an independent country, after five centuries as part of Ottoman Turkey, and the first half of the novel recounts Bai Ganyo's humorous encounters as he travels around "modern Europe" with his "old-fashioned Balkan" values, disrupting formality and always on the lookout for a free lunch. In the second half, Ganyo has returned to Bulgaria, and the tone of the humor becomes dark as he rigs elections, publishes a mudslinging newspaper, and bullies and bribes his way through Bulgarian society.

Bai Ganyo is a satire that is at times hilarious and at times bitter, and is always entertaining. While it is firmly grounded in a specific time and place, its critique of narrow-mindedness and corruption is universal enough to resonate strongly anywhere, anytime—whether ex-Communist Europe during its period of transition or the United States during its two contested elections. But, no matter when or where, Aleko's combination of ready wit, sharp perception, and deft technique makes for a very enjoyable read.

VICTOR A. FRIEDMAN

Victor A. Friedman is Andrew W. Mellon Professor in both the Slavic and linguistics departments at the University of Chicago. His research has been supported by Guggenheim, Fulbright-Hays,

NEH, and other fellowships, and has been recognized with academic awards and honors in Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Serbia.

Barney's Version

By Mordecai Richler

1997

The works of Bellow, Roth, and Malamud crowd the top twenty of Jewish-themed books of the twentieth century, and a novel like Roth's *American Pastoral* achieves a depth and resonance that Canadian writer Mordecai Richler's work never had. And yet Richler's *Barney's Version* is the novel I faithfully reread several times a year, not to mention whenever I feel my own writing starting to wilt. It's funny—oh, so damn funny—and its choice of targets is endless: the provincialism of Quebec separatists, the provincialism of Montreal Jews, of the left, of the right, of the supporters of Israel, of the supporters of the Palestinians. Come to think of it, provincialism is Richler's overall target, and the ache he feels for the world-class Montreal of his youth is genuinely touching. Whether you agree or disagree with him (and I tend to do both), this is the kind of courageous satire that is often missing from bookshelves these days. The Italians are already crazy for him (the term "Richleriano" is shorthand for "politically incorrect"). It's a shame he's not better known south of the Canadian border.

GARY SHTEYNGART

Gary Shteyngart is the author of the novels The Russian Debutante's Handbook, winner of the Stephen Crane Award for First Fiction and the National Jewish Book Award, and Absurdistan, which was selected as one of the ten best books of 2006 by The New York Times Book Review.