

Rick Campbell

What We Seek

Bob Kunzinger. *The Iron Scar: A Father and Son in Siberia*. Madville Publishing, 2022.

“Everybody loves the sound of a train in the distance,” according to Paul Simon. I think it’s certainly true in *The Iron Scar*. In this fine travel narrative, we have almost unimaginable distance, and one great train rolling down the track.

The West knows this long journey as the Trans-Siberian Railway. Russia calls it the Great Siberian Railway. At the 1900 Paris World Fair it was billed as the Ride of the Czars. An obscure and perhaps grumpy critic called it “this eyesore, the iron scar across the empire.” You can’t please everyone.

This train of dissidents, exiles, prisoners, workers, and a few tourists runs from the Baltic Sea at Saint Petersburg to Vladivostok on the Pacific Ocean. 8000 kilometers. Historically it spans the Russian Empire, the Czarist reign and fall, the Soviet Union’s communism, and current day Russia. It crosses the Steppes, the Taiga, the tundra, and great rivers and lakes. Kunzinger notes that very few people ride from beginning to end.

“We have little idea of what to expect,” writes Kunzinger. *The Iron Scar* tells us what it’s like to ride this great train through a vast land, but that’s not the sole or even main purpose of the book. This is a literary travel narrative, and like most work in this genre, it’s far more than a travel guide. The full title of the book includes “A Father and Son in Siberia.” We should expect, in the tradition of many great travel narratives, to read a memoir. We do. The father, Bob, is traveling with his twenty-year-old son, Michael. Bob is looking to answer some large questions—what it means to be a father, a writer, and an American in a distant, and what he was raised to think of as a hostile, land. He learns that these Russians he’s traveling with are mostly people a lot like him and not the evil empire he was supposed to fear. He finds that he can talk to his traveling companions despite the almost complete language barrier. They talk with their eyes, their smiles, their hands, with vodka and a chess board.

The Kunzingers’ first cabin mate is Alexander Ivanovich, who the author writes is the “personification of Boris from . . . *Rocky and Bullwinkle*.” It’s where people of his generation first learned about Russian people. When they meet, all Ivan can say in English is “Wodka, Bob, Wodka.” Soon they become friends. Ivan learns some

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English and Bob some Russian. This example encapsulates the cultural exchange of this long journey.

Bob and his son spend a lot of time standing in the space between rail cars. It's a place for them to talk, to get some fresh air. Michael plays folk tunes on his harmonica, mostly it seems, "This Land is Your Land." By the time the train rolls into Asia it's a land they share with their Russian comrades. They spend much time in the dining car playing chess, drinking vodka, and eating Russian train food. Michael is a pretty good chess player and wins the respect and friendship of the Russian men who are, mostly, fathers like Bob.

During a quiet moment in the car, Bob decides that it's time for the father/son talk he's imagined he should have. He wants to know what his son wants to do with his life. As he tries to figure out how to pop the question, his son is staring out the window at the strange landscape rolling by. Michael turns to his father and says this reminds him of *Out of Africa*—his favorite line, "I don't want to wake up one day at the end of someone else's life." Bob realizes he does not have to have this talk.

Near the end of the journey, Bob writes a letter to his son that he knows he may never mail. He notes the irony of their situation: "Most fathers of twenty-year-olds only go to the train station to wave goodbye, not to embark on a month-long adventure." Most young men would rather travel with friends their age. Bob knows how much this trip means to him. He writes to Michael, consider this "your gift to me; my heart is full."

The travel part of the travel memoir describes, often beautifully, the Russian landscape. The Taiga, Lake Baikal, the Amir River and its deadly tigers. We learn about the last days of the Czar, the Siege of Leningrad, and the old city of Yekaterinburg that marks a boundary between Europe and Asia and is where Czar Nicholas and his family were murdered. It's perhaps the line between a Russian history few westerners know and the Communist narrative we grew up on.

What does the author discover about himself on this journey? It's not a singular epiphany; in fact, it's something that he's long suspected. After they reach Vladivostok station, journey's end, he asks a tourist couple to take a picture of Michael and him. As he poses, he finds that he's slightly disappointed; he wishes that he could have "slowed the whole thing down." It's, as usual, not the destination, but the ride he seeks.

