

*Sevastopol* is paradoxical at heart. Supposedly, representation is one of its major themes, yet how does this correlate with two of the three stories being told by female narrators brought to life by a male author? I asked Fraia what his thoughts were on this process, and he says, ‘Well, I was interested in the relationship between the two women and the man. It’s a triangle. I am a male author, and they are the narrators, and there is another man in these stories. And I try to examine this triangle, and I try to avoid all the clichés about female narrators. I think this is also one of the themes of these stories, the man’s glance, the way he sees the woman. And, for example, in the first one, Gino stole her story, or does he? That depends on how we are reading it: is it Gino’s perspective, or is it Lena telling her story?’ Certainly, the book seems to be fully aware of what it is doing. For example, in *December*, we are initially told, in what might be Lena’s version, or might be Gino’s words, that she came four times when Gino touched her, which Lena herself later takes issue with, when she is watching Gino’s video of her story, saying, ‘And the whole story about our encounter in the snow didn’t happen like that, and neither did my mother’s illness, or the night of sex— I didn’t come four times, I can guarantee that.’ This twisting narrative technique – the play on the experience of the past as something which is wholly, and recurringly, constructed and de-constructed; most often, misunderstood or rationalised to pieces or simply halfway forgotten; in the end, smeared out, rough in the edges, leaving a puzzling pattern, like the inkblots of a Rorschach test – thus manages to shape a little space inside of the story. A window existing between the lines, wherein the author can talk more directly to the reader – although still indirectly, almost as if by semaphore – and acknowledge one’s own advantages and limitations as well as its consequences and, thus, embrace the moment

rather than avoid it. 'Yeah, it's very interesting,' Fraia says. 'Because, nowadays, I think we have much more a consciousness of the fact that we are male writers telling a story with female characters. And I think this had to be in the book also. Not in a silly way of course. But I had to find a way to discuss this in the book. And it is difficult to find a sophisticated and good way to do that. A true way to do that. So that's the challenge, I think.'

*Sevastopol* is paradoxical at heart. Mostly, it is a book that, whenever you start to believe that you might know where it is going, inevitably resists, takes a turn, and tries to metamorphose into something different, something stranger. It is explorative, daring, and sophisticated; it rebels against every act of labelling; it is inquisitive by nature, though, naturally, nothing ever gets truly resolved in the oceanic depth of its pages. Abandoned people reappear just as abruptly as they initially vanished. A play is written, performed, and fails; then it crumbles to nothingness again. There is a tangible progression, though I doubt no one could point out in which direction. Like the Russian painter uninterested in painting the pictures of war in times of battle, the book seems to constantly pick up its camera and go to another place, with no patience whatsoever for familiar structures, nor easy solutions, but interested, rather, in seeking something hidden and nameless, something that transcends the question-and-response format. And, perhaps more than anything, it is a work and author not interested in the things that they already know, but the things that remain opaque to them, the things that only the very process of writing about them can possibly bring them closer to experience for

themselves. 'I try to go to the limit,' Fraia tells me at the end of our talk. 'And I think it's a book that invites you to read it again and to then like it more. It is a book for a reader who is open to do that.'