

BOOKS

Briefly



Spark

Two novelists to read works in Blytheville

That Bookstore in Blytheville will sponsor a reading for novelist Debra Spark of Boston Tuesday at noon and again at 1:45. She will read and sign copies of her new book, "Concoits for the Saint," published by Faber and Faber. Spark teaches at Tufts University and Colby College.

Spark's fiction has appeared in *Esquire* and *The North American Review*.

Liz Newall will be at the bookstore Saturday from 12:30 to 2 p.m. to read from her novel "Why

Moving the dust around between world's big isms

"The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia 1917-1991," by Martin Malia, Free Press, 575 pages, \$24.95.

Review

BY PHILLIP H. MCMATH
Special to the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette

If this reviewer could recommend one book for an understanding of Lenin's revolution, it would be Martin Malia's "The Soviet Tragedy: A History of Socialism in Russia 1917-1991." Malia, by intertwining ideology with events, has woven a thread sufficient to lead us through the Soviet historical labyrinth from 1917 to 1991. In a sense, this is a history of the 20th century. If, as some maintain, the 19th was the "long" century beginning in 1789 with the French and ending in 1914 with the Germans, then, by the same logic, our century is the "short" one, marked by the birth and death of communism — America and Russia — tragedy and farce.

Malia, a former professor of history at Berkeley, begins by taking Lenin at his word. That is, by examining the Revolution's ideological justification, socialism, the intellectual first son of the Enlightenment.

He quickly addresses the central question of its failure. That is, it was not whether Stalinism was a deviation of Leninism, or that Russia was an isolated and backward country in which the Revolution became stillborn, or that this leader or other made this or that mistake, but that the fault was far more fundamental. Malia puts it this way: "What went wrong? When did it go wrong? How might it be set right? This histori-

ography ignored the possibility that these might be false questions: that nothing went wrong with the Revolution, but rather that the whole enterprise, quite simply, was wrong from the start." Given the regime's brutality, why has it been so difficult to develop a consensus on this point? The Russian Revolution, quite simply, was never just a Russian Revolution at all, but a world revolution that just happened to have begun there. Socialism was perceived by many as historically inevitable and desirable, however painful. It would, in a word, fulfill the dream of equality and liberation that had arisen in place of the ancien regime.

dream, set in opposition to whatever system exists in reality. Put another way, socialism is a thought and capitalism a development.

But socialism must, at a minimum, as Marx did say, mean the elimination of private property. That is, socialism requires common ownership of the means of production. Otherwise, class divisions arise and the egalitarian dream is dashed. Herein lies the rub. It is now obvious that common ownership is a failed economic model and, therefore, the alleged modern duality of equality and economic progress are not in harmony but in contradiction.

This contradiction set up what Malia calls a "two-act" tragedy that trapped the Soviet experiment and doomed it to failure. That is, the Bolsheviks were caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of their dream's ideology of common ownership in a classless society and the reality of the market mechanism and inequality. The pursuit of the former required the imposition of totalitarian politics and bureaucratic planning that, in turn, led to tyranny and economic stagnation. Contrariwise, reform via political relaxation and market concessions led to a loss of control. One path led to liberalism, the other to Stalinism. One threatened the regime, the other the country. So Soviet history was the futile search for a resting point between the two — a going back and forth, that is, from crack-down to thaw and back to crackdown, etc., one to the other, looking for a way out, until the final attempt at reform (perestroika) spun out of control and brought the entire ramshackle edifice down into one confusing, disappointing heap of bitterness and heartbreak.

Malia sums up the entire tragedy by pointing out that "the failure of integral socialism stems not from its having been tried out first in the wrong place, Russia, but from the socialist idea per se. And the reason for this failure is that socialism as full non-capitalism is intrinsically impossible. For the suppression of private property, profit and the market is tantamount to a suppression of civil society and all individual autonomy. And although this can be approximated for a time, it requires as inordinate application of force that cannot be sustained indefinitely." Therefore the market reality negates the dream of equality — the tragedy of the Left. And the reality of.



Courtesy of the Free Press

the bookstore Saturday from 12:30 to 2 p.m. to read from her novel "Sarah Ran Away With the Veterinarian." Newall is a native of South Carolina.

Paul Greenberg, editorial page editor of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*, will speak at Henderson State in Arkadelphia on Feb. 2 at 2 p.m. to an advanced composition class and at Henderson House at 7:30 p.m.

The Writers' Workshop at Asheville, N.C., is sponsoring its third annual Florida Writers' Retreat with Peter Matthiessen and Randy White. It will be held from Feb. 16 through 19 at Port of the Islands, near Naples. Rates are available by calling (704) 254-8111.

Miller Williams, poet, scholar and translator, will read from his work at Hendrix College Feb. 2 in Reves Recital Hall.

Williams is founding director of the University of Arkansas Press.

Williams' published work comprises 26 books, including "Living on the Surface: New and Selected Poetry," which won the 1990 National Poets' Prize; critical works on poets and poetry; and a history of American railroads. Among his honors are the Prix de Rome, a recent Charity Randall Citation for Contribution to Poetry as a Spoken Art and the Corrington Award for Literary Excellence.



Williams

painful. "It would, in a word, fulfill the dream of equality and liberation that had arisen in place of the *ancien regime*."

Malia explains that socialism, as advanced by Marxism, purported to possess the inner logic of modernity. That is, it manifested the dual goals of equality and economic progress. Therefore, the Soviet Union, as the historical embodiment of this duality, was the vanguard of history in its inexorable march toward ever increasing prosperity and freedom from exploitation. In short, Lenin fought not for Russia but for everyone, and a great deal of intellectual and moral capital, not to mention blood, was invested in the legitimacy of his handiwork.

But what is socialism? In 1991 this reviewer asked Roy Medvedev, the Russian neo-Marxist dissenter ("Let History Judge") about the future of socialism in Russia. He answered with that question. What is it? He then explained that Marx was of little help — that his primary focus had been on the nature of capitalism rather than socialism.

Malia points out that other models such as "feudalism," "absolutism," "Old Regime," "liberalism" and "capitalism" all emerged first and were defined later, but socialism is unique in that it emerged first as an idea, however vague, a century before the 1917 attempt to impose it. He concludes that "... socialism does not designate in the first instance an actual social formation; it designates rather an ideal alternative to all existing social formations, which are labeled for this purpose capitalism ..." In a word, socialism is a utopia, or a

plication of force that cannot be sustained indefinitely."

Therefore the market reality negates the dream of equality — the tragedy of the Left. And the reality of inequality negates the dream of social harmony — the tragedy of the Right. We can see, therefore, that the polemic between Left and Right is insoluble. Malia calls this the struggle between the unicorn (Left) and the lion (Right). One advocates interference in the name of fairness and the other freedom in the name of efficiency.

Malia concludes: "So long as inequality exists, society will continue to be divided into a Left and a Right, a 'party of movement' and a 'party of resistance,' the camp of politics as morality and the camp of politics as the ethic of prudence and pragmatism. This syndrome, moreover, will continue to be surrounded with the same emotional charge and parareligious aura as before. And the former camp will continue to be called 'socialism,' for the discredit cast upon that magical word in the immediate wake of the Soviet disaster will not last beyond the next crisis of 'capitalism' — that is, of the real world. So in one form or another, the lion of 'capitalism' and the unicorn of 'socialism' will no doubt contend inconclusively until the end of modernity."

This is where we are now, as we lion-and-unicorn our way into the 21st century. Does anyone really know where we are bound? And are the politicians doing anything much but moving the dust around?

Phillip H. McMath is a lawyer in Little Rock with The McMath Firm. He has traveled extensively in Russia.

What they're reading

Today's "What they're reading" subjects belong to a book club that alternates between reading personal selections one month and selections from the Great Books Reading and Discussion Program of Chicago the next month.

"They have a very scholarly approach to it that our particular group follows loosely, shall we say," said member Gary Jones. "We usually bring a certain measure of anarchy to the readings."

Jones, who owns a video production company, said lawyers comprise the group for the most part.

"I overlook that weakness," he said.

Randy Wilbourn: Vice president, public affairs Alltel Corp.

Unless he's traveling and needs a good novel to take his mind off the drudgery of getting from one place to another, Wilbourn usually chooses nonfiction to read.

He's reading Pierre Salinger's "America Held Hostage," which examines the shah of Iran's interactions with the United States government. He met Robert Armao, a lawyer featured in the book, last summer and Armao sent him a copy of the book.



"It's very interesting, especially in light of the period of time that has gone by since then," Wilbourn said, noting such passages as the Iran-Contra controversy.

On the lighter side, Wilbourn is reading "Fridays With Red," by National Public Radio's "Morning Edition" host Bob Edwards, who used to interview baseball broadcaster Red Barber on Fridays.

"There was a little more Bob Edwards than there was Red Barber," Wilbourn said of the book, but he's still enjoying it.

Wilbourn also is forging his way through Stephen E. Ambrose's 688-page "D-Day."

"I'm trying to do two chapters a week in it," Wilbourn said.

When he finally finishes it, Wilbourn would like to get to "Widow's Web," by Arkansas author Gene Lyons.

Tom Fennell, Fennell Purifoy Architects:

Unlike Wilbourn, fellow reading club member Fennell chooses fiction over nonfiction.

"I look at it more as an art form," Fennell said of fiction. He likes to alternate between classic and contemporary works.

Right now, Fennell is reading two contemporary books by two of his favorite authors, Peter Taylor and Jim Harrison.

Fennell appreciates Taylor's "In the Ten-



nessee Country" for sons he admired himself. He said the de books is the ability

"I don't think ('I try') is as good as 'A but I enjoy reading

He especially lik which explores a ma

As for the book (a way to read things your own. Especially

Greek plays and p selections for Fenne the ones he has read

"There's a few bo our heads and don about," he said. Fr David Hume's obscu but then, Fennell n when he studied phi

What Fennell pa Russian literature. E selection of Tolstoy's hard-to-find letters a

"They avoided a everybody has," Fenn find a collection like

Gary Jones, Jones

The book club give ty "to read more good can't tell that by his ("It has toned up my but then offered what