

***The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov recommended by Sharon Leiter**

A program of the Center for the Book at the Virginia Foundation for the Humanities, the "VABooks!" column suggests books for Virginians to read in common. This month, Sharon Leiter, author of the poetry collection *The Lady and the Bailiff of Time* and a literary study of Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, recommends *The Master and Margarita* by Mikhail Bulgakov. We hope that individuals, book groups, families and neighbors will read and discuss VABooks! selections.



Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, a classic of Soviet underground literature written during the worst years of the Stalinist Terror, is an attack on hypocrisy and cowardice in any age and a paean to the power of love and art. While the Soviet Union has passed into "the dustbin of history," the issues raised in this extraordinary novel are more relevant than ever. Hilariously funny, worldly-wise, and packed with subtle, surprising moral discriminations, it offers an antidote to the simplistic definitions of morality that are the common currency of public discourse today.

Bulgakov, a doctor-turned-playwright, began writing his masterpiece in 1928, when his plays were banned by an increasingly repressive society, and finished it just before his death in 1940. Its existence remained a secret to all but a small group of people until the short-lived "Thaw" of the 1960s, when a Soviet magazine published a heavily censored version. Today the uncut novel has been translated into many languages and adapted for the stage and screen.

At the novel's fantastic core is a memorable visit of the Devil and his retinue to Moscow in the 1930s. Urbane, multi-lingual, with one blue eye and one green, the Devil has come to the capital of Stalin's evil empire, to demonstrate his distinctive brand of justice. Actually, the Devil himself—or Woland, as he is called in the novel—despite the havoc he wreaks and his occasional Stalinesque executions, doesn't much believe in evil with a capital E. When Muscovites

behave with astounding greed, he remarks, "They're no worse than other people everywhere. They've just been soured by the housing shortage." No saint himself, this Devil takes an indulgent view of human nature: "I always think," he remarks, "that there's something unpleasant lurking in people who avoid drinking, gambling, table talk, and pretty women. People like that are either sick or secretly hate their fellow men."

Woland gets some of the best lines in the novel. At one point, he asks, "what would your good do if evil did not exist, and what would the earth look like if shadows disappeared from it?" Like Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*, he is "part of that power which eternally / wills evil and eternally works good." During his Moscow jaunt, he reunites the Master, a great writer, whose career has been destroyed by literary hacks, with his married lover, Margarita, while finding time to torment the Judas-critic who betrayed the Master.

Issues of conscience and betrayal link the antics of Woland in Moscow, the Master's romance with Margarita, and yet a third story—the meeting of Yeshua (Jesus) with a Pontius Pilate who is tormented by migraines and capable of loving only his dog. One of the miracles of the book is the way that Bulgakov's moral vision unifies these disparate layers into a seamless work of art. Another is the very fact that a work of such humor and lyricism could be written about, and in the midst of, such grim times.