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## About the Author

Owen Matthews was born in London in 1971. He studied Modern History at Oxford University before beginning his career as a freelance journalist in Bosnia. His stories have appeared in a number of publications including the *Spectator*, *Private Eye*, *The Times* and the *Telegraph*. From 1995 to 1997 he worked at *The Moscow Times*, a daily English-language newspaper in Moscow, with forays into Lebanon and Afghanistan.

In 1997 Owen became a correspondent for *Newsweek* magazine, covering the second Chechen war as well as Russian politics and society. From 2001 to 2006 he was based in Istanbul, covering the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq and from 2006 – 14 he was *Newsweek's* Moscow bureau chief.

Matthews has lectured on Russian history and politics at Columbia University, Oxford University, and Moscow State University.

# *Black Sun* by Owen Matthews

## About the Book

It is the dawn of the 1960s. In order to investigate the gruesome death of a brilliant, young physicist, KGB officer Major Alexander Vasin must leave Moscow for Arzamas-16, a top-secret research city that does not appear on any map.

There he comes up against the brightest, most cut-throat brain-trust in Russia who, on the orders of Nikita Khrushchev himself, are building the largest nuclear bomb ever created. RDS-220 is a project of such vital national importance that, unlike everyone else in the Soviet Union, the scientists of Arzamas-16 are free to think and act, live and love as they wish... as long as they complete the project, and build the most powerful nuclear device ever known.

## Other books by the author

*Black Sun* is the author's first novel. He has also written the following memoirs, non-fiction and biographies:

*Stalin's Children: Three Generations of Love and War; Glorious Misadventures; Thinking with the Blood; and An Impeccable Spy: Richard Sorge, Stalin's Master Agent*

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## Discussion points

- How effectively do you think the author blends the vital scientific understanding with the story itself?
- Arzamas-16 is a secret city where residents had many privileges (access to books and literature, fully-stocked fridges and modern apartments) that the general population of the Soviet Union could not access. Why was this case? Discuss.
- This city of privilege is an alien world to Alexander Vasin. How do you think it would feel to suddenly see people living in a more luxurious way than yourself? Discuss how he navigates the city.
- Maria Adamova declares, "When you live with wolves, you howl like a wolf." What do you think this means? Do you think she still believes it in relation to her present life?
- The author has created a piece of fiction from a basis of historical fact. Do you think the story is believable? Which parts do you think are pure fiction?
- What are your thoughts on the book's structure? Could you guess the ending before it happened? Would you choose a different ending for any of the characters?

## Suggested further reading

*Gorky Park* by Martin Cruz Smith

*Red Sparrow* by Jason Matthews

*Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy* by John le Carré

*Witchfinder* by Andrew Williams

*March Violets* by Phillip Kerr

*The Hunt for Red October* by Tom Clancy

## Useful Links

Listen to Owen talk about his book *The Impeccable Spy*: [Travels Through Time podcast](#)

Guardian First Book Award: [An Interview with shortlisted author Owen Matthews](#)

The Strand Magazine: [Five things that foreign writers get wrong when they write about Russia](#)

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[The Wilbur & Niso Smith Foundation](#)

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