

**Book Review: My Dark Brother. The Story of the Wins, a Russian-  
Aboriginal Family. By Elena Govor. Sydney: University of New South  
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**My Doric Brother: The Story of the Illins, a Russian-Aboriginal Family. By Elena Govor. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2000. Pp. xxiii + 385. \$34.95 doth.**

**Regina Ganter, Griffith University**

This is easily the most gripping history to cross my desk: like a skilful novel it does not bear putting down. While reading it, the family at its centre entered into my thoughts and together we experienced the hardships and joys of the Atherton scrub, St Petersburg salons, the pampas, cyclones, floods, revolutions, and starting again and again from scratch in the harbour of a close-knit and many-faceted family.

Blending the best of the Russian literary tradition with painstaking research, Govor has created a family saga. It starts with a cutting psychological portrait of Nikolai Illin, who cannot bear responsibility yet seeks to carry the world on his shoulders. A man who is able to blame his school for not awakening in him an inclination for any particular field of study, and his mother for setting him on the wrong path, lets himself and his family down over and over as he drags them across the world, and always it is the fault of others that he must burn his bridges. Through Turkistan, St Petersburg, Patagonia and north Queensland, Govor depicts the pathos of this man who, driven by the need to create the legend of himself, becomes a prolific writer. Arche-typal bohemian, for whom ideals are always more real than the practical distractions of life, he would seem a most unlikely candidate for the Argentinian pampas and the Atherton scrub, where a small Russian colony of selectors gath-ers, had we not his perfect equivalent in William Lane. Approaching seventy, he uproots his family again to start another Russian colony in Honduras, and as always Govor portrays him with skilful restraint: 'A hundred, a thousand, no, ten thousand Russian refugee families would make a home there and he, with his knowledge of the languages and the local conditions, would organise this project. He knew that it would be hard but his moral choices were always at the extreme edge, beyond the limits of Philis-tine commonsense.' (208) Amazingly, by the time he dies, we feel sorry for his parting.

The tragedy of their diaspora properly begins to unfold with this final move, as Nikolai's son Leandro and his Aboriginal family are forced to stay behind in the tablelands. Caught in the web of Aboriginal protection, we see Leandro battle the overpowering bureau-cracy to keep his family together. From the incompetent father, who has always asked too much of his children, emerges a steadfast and stoic son, a true family man who becomes aggressive only to defend his children. Govor teases out the inter-generational dynamics and all the ways in which preoccupations, characteristics, names and dates come 'full circle', are repeated and refractured. Leandro becomes a 'defender of the

people', not the anonymous mass of oppressed of the 'narodniks', but of the named and known people around him, his 'dark brothers' and recent immigrants. We understand through this. family what a burden of racism was shouldered by those who tried to make their mixed marriages work. Leandro could neither move overseas nor move from one district to another without having his family split by depart-mental interference. We see, too, how difficult it was for these migrants with 'faintly Asiatic' features to find wives in Australia, and how the back-breaking battle with the scrub was dwarfed by the spirit-breaking battle for acceptance. And through it all runs a sense of the deep attachment between the members of this family, fleshed out through their living descendants.

- Some treasured family myths fall victim to meticulous research, but a little structuralist analysis of these .myths yields surprising insights. The book dis-obeyes all rules of genre and, though voluminous, is never tiresome. Occasion-ally Govor exaggerates the uniqueness of her material. The reports by Illin and Vladimiroff on the Northern Territory in 1911 were not its first comprehensive description but were preceded by several accounts of exploratory parties including Stuart's 1863 journals. Civil disobed-ience by mixed-race descendants was not rare in the 1920s but was the cause of Queensland legislation in 1934 intended to control such people. The claim that one of the Illins was among the first Indigenous unionists should be tempered by recognising that many members of the North Australian Workers Union in the early thirties were of mixed descent. Illin was not one of the first Europeans to prove that it was possible to love an Aboriginal woman; the Home Secretary's files in Queensland are sprinkled with similar cases, though no-one has brought these hidden histo-ries as alive as Govor has. This is a charming book and all who have read it talk about it warmly.