

FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

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PROPOSAL FOR CREATIVE THESIS

SOLOVETSKY LABYRINTH

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Solovetsky Labyrinth, a murder mystery set in the Russia of 1926, is the story of Tolya Bogomolov, a young man who, after a short career as a mathematics student at the University of St. Petersburg, has been imprisoned in a Soviet penal camp on the Solovetsky Archipelago. Located in the White Sea, the Solovetsky Camp is the first site in the network of prisons that will come to be known as the Gulag. The story opens at the start of winter, with Tolya at work cutting timber. Suffering malnutrition and unused to physical labor, he knows he must be assigned a new job if he is to survive until spring. He hopes that Gennady Antonov, a fellow prisoner who works at the camp's museum, will be able to provide him one, but that hope is dashed when he's summoned one morning to identify Antonov's body. At first an object of suspicion, Tolya soon becomes one of the investigators of Antonov's murder, assisting the elderly ex-detective in charge, Yakov Petrovitch. Petrovich, also a prisoner, not only needs the help of a younger man in moving around the island and examining evidence, but also pities Tolya's miserable position.

As their investigation progresses, the two men come to focus their inquiry on Antonov's work as a restorer and cataloguer of icons. With the camp occupying the site of a former monastery, its prisoner-run museum houses six-hundred-years' worth of church treasures, and Antonov had close contact with many of them. Gradually the detectives uncover a plot that involves an illicit trade in the priceless objects of the museum's collection, the sexual trafficking of female inmates, and a cunning deception designed to take advantage of the administration's willingness to execute its prisoners. When their investigation permit is revoked by the camp authorities, Tolya must protect himself from the killer's revenge with Petrovich's help. Although they ultimately succeed in proving the culprit's guilt, at the end of the novel both men must deal with the consequences of having defied an unforgiving totalitarian regime.

The novel is told in the first person, from Tolya's perspective as he looks back on his experiences thirty years later. As he struggles to tell his story, he meditates on the meaning or potential meaninglessness of his

experience, as well as on his guilt over his own survival. Things encountered during his imprisonment and earlier – the icons Antonov worked on, the imaginary geometry discovered by the mathematician Lobachevsky in the 19th century, a series of pre-historic labyrinths found in places around the islands – come to symbolize his feeling that every choice he's made during his lifetime, and especially those he made during his time as a detective, have been the results of a kind of inescapable and permanent confinement.

As a mystery with a literary tone, *Solovetsky Labyrinth* offers readers a glimpse of a historical period when ruthless, senseless cruelty came into crushing contact with the flowers of Russian culture. Models for this book include Umberto Eco's *The Name Of The Rose* and Martin Cruz-Smith's *Gorky Park*, both of which use the expansive form of the detective novel to depict the social and political complexities of a particular time and place, while also posing broad questions about human experience.