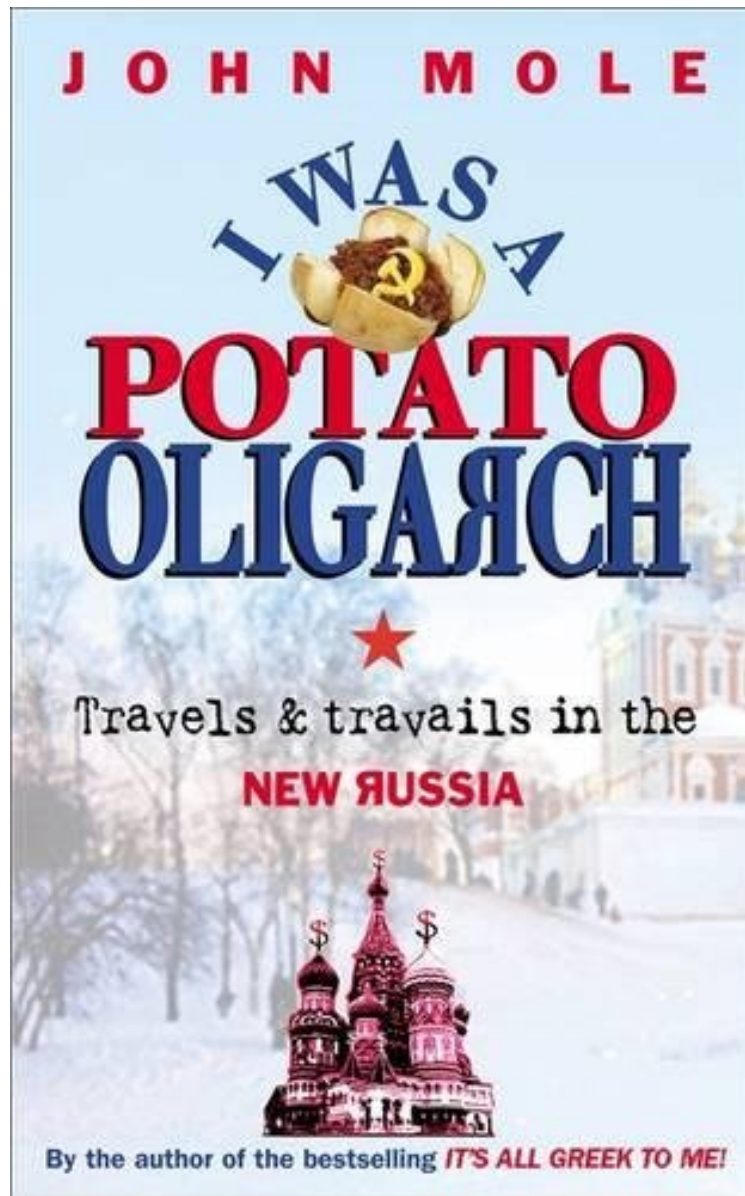


[Library ebook] I Was a Potato Oligarch: Travels and Travails in the New Russia

# I Was a Potato Oligarch: Travels and Travails in the New Russia

John Mole

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**John Mole : I Was a Potato Oligarch: Travels and Travails in the New Russia** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised I Was a Potato Oligarch: Travels and Travails in the New Russia:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Travel anecdotes both funny and culturally-revealing By JannaI bought this book for a German friend who had been to Kazakhstan on business (quite the culturally unique

experience!), and he could relate to it! Of course I read it first before I sent it to him and found myself laughing out loud. 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Three Stars By Niko Alexandrou Funny 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Being at Home By The Lucid Librarian One learns more about John Mole in this book rather than about new Russia. His venture (adventures) in international business deals are fraught, funny and fragile with a little something of the old and new Russia revealed on the way. Mole has a keen eye for the ridiculous, and he uses the particular to emphasise the general, mostly to send it up, but also for ironic purposes. At the time there was a proposal to impeach President Yeltsin and there was protest from various political factions in Red Square; Mole wanders around in the action. Incidentally he notices and reveals to the reader that the temporary toilets in the Square permit a good view of the users in their toilet. Mole stops to observe and takes mental note of the homogenous nature of the underwear and the dramatic licence taken in international news reporting. "That was not the first or the last time that I found it hard to match media stories with what actually goes on in Russia. The only incontrovertible fact I can report is that the knickers on both sides were the same shades of pink and beige." (p117) Gladly he includes himself in this mix, otherwise these tales would be entirely patronising. The self-deprecation takes the edge off it - just. The theme of 'home': not feeling at home, being reminded of home, yet wanting to be 'at home', and noticing the homeless and being invited into people's homes are points of personal reference. "Yefrem's work gave him an extensive vocabulary that he practised on me. He lay in wait, and when he saw me beetling across the courtyard in the morning and trudging back in the evening, he popped up to greet me. 'Can't by me love.' 'Hello, Yefrem.' 'Fook Livairpool.' 'Good thinking, Yefrem.' 'Make lyorve and vore.' 'I'll do my best.' He was a graffiti audiobook for the visually impaired. Why did he recite his phrases to me? Partly to improve his pronunciation. I gave up correcting him because he only repeated the same mistakes over and over again. Partly out of hospitality, to make me feel at home. Partly because he was drunk or crackers or both. At a rough estimate there are about 50,000 bomzhi in Moscow and 4 million in Russia. Bomzhi is an acronym for "without fixed place of residence." (p75) Waxing lyrical on mushrooms, or 'greebi' (Russian), Mole is at his best, and reveals wonderful tidbits of Russian culture and history, and his musing brings his experience living there alive: "Greebi are a way of life... When Pushkin or Tolstoy wanted to show a character was a true Russian he had them prefer mushrooms to fancy foreign food. ... Mushrooms signify nature and vitality and hope for the future. For the exiled Nabokov, mushrooming is a symbol of his lost Motherland. Lenin is reputed to have been a keen mushroomer. ... When I got excited about some hare-brained idea, Misha shut me up with 'If mushrooms grew in your mouth, it wouldn't be a mouth but a kitchen garden.' My favourite, when we had to arselick some apparatchik for a favour, was 'You can't pick a mushroom without bowing.'" (p145) His comedic talents and retellings make this book a laugh-out-loud read. One wonders that no matter where John Mole went, something funny would happen. He seems to just be that kind of bloke, open to experience and luckily has the precious quality of being able to laugh at himself at the same time as kicking himself or pondering the benevolence of serendipity and people's goodwill. After having spent hours trying to find a fur hat to keep out the cold and fit in (and re-experiencing the angst of having a large head as a young boy), Mole gets his Russian fur hat in the least likely circumstances, at a film archive, having drunk plenty of vodka and struck a deal to help the archive make money. "Marta came back. In her arms she cradled what looked like an obese cat. ... It wasn't new, but there were no unpleasant sweat marks on the band inside or hair-oil stains on the lining. It was heavy. With two hands, like Napoleon crowning himself, I put it on. It was a perfect fit. I had never worn such a hat. A hat that doesn't sit on your head but envelopes it. A hat that you do not wear, it wears you. Heavy and solid. There was no forgetting you had it on. I stood bolt upright because it threw me off balance if I stooped. I looked like the minotaur with a man's body and a gigantic woolly head. 'Where did it come from?' 'Andrei Konchalovsky. When he goes to Gollivud [Hollywood] for 'Tango and Cash' he gives it to archive. Big head.' 'Can I have it?' 'Of course,' said Marta, 'Fifty dollars.' A bargain. The cap fitted. And next Saturday the cinematheque was full of foreigners paying five bucks to see subtitled Russian classics, as advertised in the Moscow Times." (p109)

From the bestselling author of *It's All Greek to Me!* and a traveler who likes to get his hands-as well as his boots-dirty, comes a comedic look at madcap entrepreneurial adventures in Mother Russia. *I Was a Potato Oligarch: Travels and Travails in the New Russia* is the eye-wateringly funny true story of John Mole's travels and travails in Russia. Sometimes sinister, often hilarious and always entertaining, *I Was a Potato Oligarch* is a Russian feast-from caviar to samovar! The Soviet Union has disappeared along with nationality, currency, jobs, salaries, pensions and politics. Oligarchs pillage the nation. It looks as if Russia might become a liberal democracy. It also looks as if it might plunge into chaos. These are fascinating times and John Mole wants to be a part of them. But what can he do? An MBA, fifteen years of international banking and a handful of novels have left him with few useful skills. Then, inspiration strikes-British fast food! Nobody is doing baked potatoes in Russia. This is where Mole takes the stage. From breakfast with the mafia to a week in a sanatorium to being mistaken for the victim of a vampire attack, Mole's potato scheme becomes more than a business venture; it turns into a rollicking journey under the skin of the New Russia.

From Publishers Weekly In this funny travel memoir, entrepreneur Mole (*It's All Greek to Me!*) recounts his adventures as an "international development consultant" in post-Soviet Russia. Ever chasing the next "Big One," Mole

finds himself hawking a stuffed baked potato fast food franchising scheme in the midst of an economic meltdown. Along with Russian pals Misha and Oleg, Mole learns that finding a decent potato in Russia is nearly as hard as securing financing there. Mole drinks, bluffs and bribes his way across missile bases, spud farms, and the business lecture circuit. While often witty, Mole, it becomes apparent, does sympathize with the various average Russians he meets struggling to make a living: one older woman from Yekaterinburg trying to sell a single possession-a left shoe; a biochemist dedicates his life "to one little bug" while working on a "couple of wooden tables, a few test tubes and other bits and pieces out of a decent chemistry set." Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. "[C]harming witty and utterly hilarious... Bearing comparison easily with the likes of David Sedaris, Moles's story makes for a wonderful read." -- Sunday Business Post (UK)From the Publisher"Funny and perceptive, it gives a vivid and sympathetic picture of what Russians are really like, and how they manage to survive and enjoy themselves in their often chaotic country." Sir Rodric Braithwaite GCMG, British ambassador to Moscow 1988-1992