

STYLE & CULTURE

BOOK REVIEW

A mystery populated by whales, red herrings

By ANNE BOLES LEVY Special to The Times

In the first round of murders in "Murder on the Leviathan," nine of the victims are seated serenely around the kitchen table. The 10th, a collector of Indian artifacts, is found bludgeoned and clutching a whale-shaped gold pin. A shattered display case is missing two items: an invaluable statue and a shawl presumably to wrap it. The year is 1878, and the pin leads to a luxury steamer, the Leviathan, about to embark on its maiden voyage to Calcutta. Pity poor Gustav Gauche, the Parisian police's Inspector for Especially Important Cases, who has waited for just such a sordid

Murder on the Leviathan

A Novel

Boris Akunin Translated from the Russian by Andrew Bromfield

Random House: 240 pp., \$21.95

spectacle to boost his career and, he hopes, his pension. He immediately gets down to business, intent on scrutinizing five passengers missing their souvenir gold whales.

Unfortunately for Gauche, but luckily for the reader, one of

those suspects is a sharp-eyed Russian diplomat and sometime sleuth named Erast Fandorin, who'd be the epitome of suave if not for a nagging stutter. The impediment doesn't stop him from charming the remaining suspects and stealing the investigation out from under the clueless inspector.

Boris Akunin, the pen name for Grigory Chkhartishvili, so far has written 10 Erast Fandorin novels, which have achieved bestseller status in Russia. "Murder on the Leviathan" is the second to make it to American shores ("The Winter Queen" was first), and with its fast pace, hair-pin turns and cunning protagonist it is a promising indicator of what's still to come.

The story leaps between voices, from Gauche to the other suspects. Each drops enough

hints to create four plausible murder scenarios. Some of those leads turn down blind alleys, of course, making the pursuit all the more enjoyable for its meanderings. Gauche assigns his clients, as he calls them, to the same dining salon for every meal along with several others who pique his interest, with no other company and only one topic of conversation — the gruesome slayings that bind them so miserably to one another and to the hated French inspector. Some of their speeches yield vital tidbits; others, maddeningly, do not.

Then the bodies start to pile up on the Leviathan, just in time to prevent the story from bogging down in windy monologues. By unraveling the mystery from viewpoints other than Fandorin's, however, Akunin robs readers of anything but secondhand

glimpses of the hero's personality. Fandorin, like any quintessential brooding Russian, has his demons and his doubts, but we never get inside his head to see them.

Akunin's intent is to keep the sleuth's suspicions and discoveries a secret from the reader until the author is ready to spring his traps, but those "aha" moments fall flat after much of the solution becomes guessable about two-thirds of the way through. Even those who do piece together the probable ending — a disappointing flaw in an otherwise charmingly crafted story — will likely find themselves racing ahead to see if their suppositions were correct. The novel moves briskly yet doesn't spare us a rich trove of historical details that are both fun to read and illuminating. Not since the filming of "Titanic" has this much attention been lavished on describing a ship.

Akunin pays particular homage to the Victorians' mannerisms and obsession with propriety, and he's at his best when he lets Fandorin loose to unmask their prejudices and myopic worldviews. One of the suspects is a Japanese man, for example,

who describes his European shipmates as "red-haired barbarians." The epithets they reserve for him are likewise uncharitable and bigoted, until fingers start pointing in all the wrong directions for all the wrong reasons.

Only Fandorin manages to rise above the fray, owing to the "semi-Asiatic character of his homeland," a country that straddles East and West in geography and temperament. This puts the diplomat cum detective in a unique position to connect dots between cultures and ignore assumptions of class, race and sex as he scrambles to solve the case before the next passenger or crew member must disembark in a pine box.

Akunin is an obvious patriot, and it's easy to see why the sensible but self-conscious Fandorin has built a following in Russia. But there's no grand statement about the Russian character to be made in "Murder on the Leviathan"; this isn't Tolstoy. It's a quick and simple read with a plot that tests an analytical reader's ability to sift the clues from the red herrings, just as a thoughtful mystery should.

Garfield the Movie advertisement featuring Roger Ebert's quote: "CHARMING. THUMBS UP! 'IRRESISTIBLE!' 'CLEVER!' 'FUN!' 'MARVELOUSLY VOICED BY BILL MURRAY.'" Includes showtimes for Century City, Santa Monica, Beverly Hills, and other theaters.

GOING ON VACATION! Call 1-800-252-9141 to donate your newspaper for use in local classrooms. Or log on to www.myschool.latimes.com

the bridge advertisement with a photo of a woman in a spider suit. Includes showtimes for Spider-Man 2 (PG-13), The Chronicles of Riddick (PG-13), The Stepford Wives (PG-13), Garfield (PG), The Day After Tomorrow (PG-13), Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban (PG), White Chicks (PG-13), The Terminal (PG-13), Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story (PG-13), Fahrenheit 9/11 (R), and The Notebook (PG-13).

The Secret is Out! advertisement for The Stepford Wives. Features a quote from Roger Ebert: "The Stepford Wives' is a horror picture that will have you SCREAMING-WITH LAUGHTER. It's wickedly funny. GENE SHALIT, TODAY 'THUMBS UP!' ROGER EBERT, Ebert@Roeper 'PERFECT SUMMER FARE!' USA TODAY"

"CONSISTENTLY FUNNY!" advertisement for DodgeBall. Features a quote from Stephen Holden of The New York Times: "Vince Vaughn BEN STILLER DodgeBall a TRUE underdog story"

Westwood, Century City, Santa Monica, Hollywood, Beverly Hills, and other theater listings with showtimes for various movies.

Westwood, Century City, Santa Monica, Hollywood, Beverly Hills, and other theater listings with showtimes for various movies.

Calendar Weekend WITH THE KIDS advertisement. Ideas for family fun and entertainment, and reviews of kids' CDs, videos, video games, DVDs and more. more Los Angeles Times

CENTURY THEATRES advertisement. Bargain Shows in N. Hollywood \$4.75. Includes showtimes for Spider-Man 2, The Chronicles of Riddick, The Stepford Wives, Garfield, The Day After Tomorrow, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, White Chicks, The Terminal, Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story, Fahrenheit 9/11, The Notebook, and Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story.

THEATERS advertisement. Includes showtimes for Spider-Man 2, The Chronicles of Riddick, The Stepford Wives, Garfield, The Day After Tomorrow, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban, White Chicks, The Terminal, Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story, Fahrenheit 9/11, The Notebook, and Dodgeball: A True Underdog Story.