Episode 637: The Horrors of Stalinist Russia, Through a Child's Eyes

Guest: Eugene Yelchin

WOODS: I am really happy that you're here. I don't even remember how I came across this book, where I read about it. It's called *Breaking Stalin's Nose*; I just told people about it. And it's meant for I guess a younger audience, but I'll tell you, I'm 43 years old, and I'm going to be thinking about this book for a long time. It really haunts me. The way you, as I was telling you before we went on, I said it's so well executed, so to speak.

YELCHIN: Ha ha ha.

WOODS: But it really is, the main character begins with such, it would be sweet naiveté if it weren't in the service of such a wretched cause. But then as reality gradually settles in — well, anyway, I don't want to reveal too much, because I really do want people to read it. On the other hand, the book does refer to executions, so it's not really for a super young audience. What's the audience you have in mind for this book?

YELCHIN: Well, you know, that type of book, historical fiction can work on several levels. It is published by Macmillan, so it's a huge publishing house that publishes for adults as well as for children. And the book is intended for what they call middle grade novel, which is for kids who are in middle grade, but the path to the middle graders is usually through either their parents or their teachers or their librarians. And those people are usually, I don't want to generalize, but you know, they're about your age, a little younger, some a little older. So they're adults. So those are the people who read the book first. As a result, I think the novel can be read at many different levels: at the level of the plot, at the level of ideology, at the level of history. So there is a lot to chew on for any age, actually.

WOODS: Well, there's no question about it, and of course some of the younger readers might miss some of the subtleties, some of the sarcasm. I'm looking here just on page 8; I loved this. I'll just read the one paragraph on page 8. This is told from the point of view of the main character: "Stalin says that sharing our living space teaches us to think as communist 'we' instead of capitalist 'I.' We agree. In the morning we often sing patriotic songs together when we line up for the toilet." Beautiful (laughing).

YELCHIN: Well, you know, listen. This is a personal experience. I grew up in the Soviet Union. I came to the United States when I was 27 years old in 1983, so I came as an adult. I grew up in what was called Leningrad; now it's St. Petersburg again. We don't know for how long. But I grew up in a communal apartment. There were five of us, and we shared a very small room with several other families. And yes, you do line up for the toilet in the morning, because there is only one for everyone.

So part of this book is — listen. Frankly, I wrote the book for myself. It's a very personal document about — really about ideology and how ideology works. To survive, I guess — that's probably the right word — to survive the realities of the police state, one has to create a certain I guess walls within oneself, kind of a fortress that shuts down a lot of emotions, all kinds of things. And it makes you a bit less of a human being, less human. So I survived, and I learned certain things that prevented me from staying, and I left with some difficulty and started my life as an American. But after some years, 20 maybe years, I found that that fortress, so to speak, that emotional, psychological kind of defense mechanism that you build within yourself to survive the hardship was preventing me from essentially becoming an American, becoming a free person.

As a result, I had to work it out somehow, and so I decided to write a book. I did not think it would be published. I wrote it for myself just to work through that dilemma. And the fact the book went on to become — and I don't want to be falsely modest — to become extraordinarily popular — it's translated in 10 languages. It won the Newberry honor. It just did remarkably well. It had like 20 awards. Nobody expected it. I didn't expect it. And so what it tells me, it tells me that there is something in that book that can speak to — well, let's put it this way. My experience speaks to people who live in a democracy as well. Does that make sense?

WOODS: Yeah, it does make sense, and there's a lot — boy, there sure is a lot in there that I'd like to ask you about. As long as I've got the book open, though, I want to read one more quick passage. This is just from page 10. Now, I've read the whole thing, but I got to page 10, and I thought, all right, I love the tone of this. This is the last paragraph on page 10 of this chapter. "I take small bites of the carrot to make it last. The carrot is delicious. When hunger gnaws inside my belly, I tell myself that a future pioneer" — this is a reference to the Young Soviet Pioneers — "has to repress cravings for such unimportant matters as food. Communism is just over the horizon. Soon there will be plenty of food for everyone."

YELCHIN: That's right.

WOODS: "But still, it's good to have something tasty to eat now and then. I wonder what it's like in the capitalist countries. I wouldn't be surprised if children there had never even tasted a carrot." And you know what this reminds me of? I've mentioned this on the show several times. When *The Grapes of Wrath* movie was used as a propaganda film against the capitalist West, it backfired because the main family, the protagonists owned a car.

YELCHIN: That's right. They pulled it out. Yeah, it played for a little while; then they took it out. Yes, well, you know, it was, ideologically it touched people's lives on every level. I think that it's difficult to understand perhaps that the Revolution of the Bolsheviks, the Revolution of 1917 was not just the change of one regime to another. The program that the communists had the time and which they continued throughout keeping their power is the idea was to really create a new society, and they couldn't create the new society without creating a new man, a new human being. So as a result, everything that preceded them was annihilated by force, really. Every single institution, from the government to the police to you name it, to all the way down to the family. So the family as a unit as we understand it was profoundly affected. As a result, even though the communist regime fell in '91, I guess, the people who grew up under those conditions are still around, and they have children, and they have grandchildren.

And when my book came out, when *Breaking Stalin's Nose* came out in Russia, which it did two years ago, it created a huge controversy. It was the first book written about Stalin and Stalinist regime for a younger audience. So there was a public outcry, and there were all kinds of interesting discussions, because I think it hit too close to home, really. When I wrote the first draft of it, I sent the book to several friends of my brother's, actually — they were a little bit older than I am — just to make sure that the narrative is authentic. And after they read it, one of them in particular said something to me that — and I've known this person since I was born, since I was a child — told me that his grandmother was arrested and imprisoned in Gulag, and I had no idea. So people don't talk about the experiences out of fear. So over this 70 years of that regime, the fear that was installed in its populous is so extraordinarily strong that even to read a book like this was for many people very unpleasant.

WOODS: You note in the author's note — and this is building on something you just said — that they had to more or less invent crimes, accuse people of things that they obviously had not done as a way of keeping the entire population in a state of terror. If they simply went after people who were guilty of obvious sabotage, that'd be one thing. Most people know that they're not guilty of those things. But the idea that just about anybody could be targeted, and that's — what runs through this book is this theme that the world this kid is living in just doesn't make any sense. His father seems like practically the greatest of the Soviets after Stalin himself, and suddenly he's arrested and taken away and not seen again. These things happen, and the one thing that the kid can rely on is that Comrade Stalin will — you know, Stalin, our great leader, will put things right. He'll put things right. That's the only thing that's holding his world together, and wow, that's a very, very thin reed, depending on the good will of Stalin to make your world make sense.

YELCHIN: Right, well, that's sort of the construction of the novel is — just going back a little bit to when we were talking about different ages of readers. The construction of the novel is such that there is a gap there. It's written in the first person. We listen in to a boy telling us what is happening, and we see as readers that he doesn't get it, that he sees what he wants to see. And so that gap grows wider and wider and wider until at some point he catches on. He makes a pretty profound decision. If you

remember, his dream is to become a Communist like his father. My father was a Communist and was a true believer in communism and in the Communist Party, so I grew up with that sort of ideology at home. And the boy in the book makes a very profound decision not to follow the path of his father, yet he still loves his father.

And you know, when I talk about the book to kids, like, sometimes I visit schools — when some of the schools in the United States have the book in their curriculum, so they read it and then I come over and talk about it. And it's just fascinating to hear the kids talk about the book and how they react to it. Pretty much everyone is asking me how is it going to come out at the end, because it's an open-ended story, if you recall.

WOODS: That's right.

YELCHIN: There's really no end to it, because there can't be one, right? So the only thing that saves the boy in the end from that very terrible, terrible world that he lives in is just a small act of kindness from the stranger.

WOODS: That's right. That's right. That's a beautiful little moment in an otherwise very grim situation. I was actually wondering as I read, and then I got the answer to my question in your author's note at the end, whether there really was a group called Young Soviet Pioneers that young people would join. And in your note, you say, like my main character, I wanted to be a Young Pioneer. So there really was such a group.

YELCHIN: Oh, absolutely. No, it was — (laughing) yes. I think there's probably still now too, I'm not sure. Absolutely. When you turned 10 or 11, if your grades are decent and your behavior is passable, you become a member of the — there were three stages, really, at school. The first one is called Young Octobrist, named after the Bolshevik October revolution, and that's from first grade until I believe third grade. Then from that point on you joined the Young Pioneers group. Then in high school you joined the Young Communist group. And then you go on and if you want to continue along those lines, you become a Communist. So there would all three — at school from low grades through high school, there are three stages of ideological education through those all nation groups. Yeah, they were all over the country. It was part of our schooling.

WOODS: All right, so then let me ask you from your own experience. In the book, the main character at the beginning is extremely enthusiastic about the prospect of becoming a Young Pioneer. He just can't wait for that moment, and his father is going to be so proud and it'll be great. And incidentally, when we discover — we have a hint of what happened to his mother, but how chilling it is to really find out what happened to his mother. But anyway, his father's going to be so proud. In your experience, was there more cynicism among the young people about what it meant to be a Young Pioneer?

YELCHIN: I think it depends. It'd difficult for me to say. It was a while ago. I think that maybe passivity is the right word. I grew up, I was his age in 1960s, so it was crucial of what the Prime Minister — not the Prime Minister, the Secretary of the Communist

Party. Then it was Brezhnev, so things were — I'm lucky to grow up under Brezhnev, because at least he didn't kill that many — he probably killed some people, but he didn't kill at the level of Stalin of course. Millions and millions and millions of people were exterminated. So it's just something that you don't question. You just go along and just try to survive and try to make the best of everything on one hand.

On the other hand, and I think it's an important issue, is that also one can't forget that it was a closed country. There was no information, practically, coming from abroad, so your set of references is very narrow, and if your brother and your sister and everyone you know joins the Pioneers, that's how things are.

WOODS: I want to ask you about — because at the end, again in your author's note, you say that these crimes that we associate with the great terror under Stalin are crimes that were taking place in secret and people didn't discuss them and so on. There was of course — so in the 1960s you say a lot of people were not even aware that the crimes had occurred, yet there was the famous Khrushchev speech in 1956 that kicked off the so-called de-Stalinization process in which he did say that terrible, terrible things had occurred during that time. Were people aware of at least that, that it was now allowable to be somewhat critical of what had happened under Stalin? Or was it allowable to be critical?

YELCHIN: Well, that's why I think it's called a secret speech, because it wasn't published in the first pages of magazines and newspapers. I mean, it was delivered to the closed Party Congress. It was distributed to local governments. I think they shared it with some universities. I don't believe it — I don't know. I can't tell.

WOODS: Ah, okay, so the general public doesn't really know this is going on. So in other words, maybe the speech is so that the rest of the bureaucracy and administration knows that probably the chances that you have to worry about the knock on the door at one in the morning, those have been diminished.

YELCHIN: They were certainly diminished. I think what happened really is that — well, you know how, just imagine this. If in 1945, instead of having the Nuremberg Trial we would have all those people who ruled Nazi Germany and were responsible for the crimes against humanity were, instead of being punished, that they would be allowed to run the new democratic Germany. Well, the same thing happened in the Soviet Union, and it happened over and over again. When Stalin died and Khrushchev took power, the secret speech was really a strategic move to take control over the government, because the opposing group within the party was pro-Stalinist. So to overthrow them, he dared this thing that really caused only one — you know, I'm not a historian; I can't tell. But the only one positive things was, yes, there were no people killed, there were no people arrested on the scale that was before, but what happened was that it was forgotten, that the crimes against humanity that Stalin had committed were swept under the carpet. That happened under Khrushchev. That happened under Brezhnev, and it happened subsequently. And now as a result, it all is coming back in a much more positive light. Stalin now is a great manager who won

World War II and brought the country out of chaos into the world power. He's a good person.

WOODS: I'd like to talk now about your own personal decision to leave the Soviet Union and the circumstances that led up to that decision, but before we do that, let's hear a word from our sponsor.

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You said in the book that both you and the main character of this book both had a life changing decision that you made. I mean, the main character of course turns away from communism; he's not so excited about being a Young Pioneer anymore. And then you yourself had to make the decision to leave the country of your birth, and I'm curious to know what led up to that. First of all, what had you been doing for a living? I know you've been an illustrator and a painter and you've done some children's books and you've written this book. What had you been doing for work when you were there, first of all?

YELCHIN: I was working in a theater. I was a theater designer. I went to a very good school in St. Petersburg, where I grew up. My mother worked for a ballet school there, you know, Leningrad Ballet School, which is probably some claim the best in the world. I think it is. And I kind of grew up backstage, and as a result I went to theater school there and was designing — I designed about 40 shows while — no, 40's probably too many. A bunch of shows all over the country, in St. Petersburg, and then with friends of mine in the same year, graduates from our school, we went to Siberia to a city called Tomsk, and we started a theater company for children, and we worked there for a while. And I think if I didn't leave St. Petersburg and didn't go to Siberia, maybe the decision wouldn't be as easy one, but after I lived there for a couple years and I saw what the country really was and after I learned what I've learned through reading books that were banned and if you were caught with a book like that you would most certainly go to prison, I just couldn't, I felt that to stay there was to be part of that really terrible crime against humanity.

WOODS: That means that you were able to see through all of the propaganda, because I'm sure in school you were told that this was for your own good and for the good of Soviet society that these subversive ideas were being kept from you. Somehow I guess you didn't buy that.

YELCHIN: Well, no, I absolutely did buy that, and I bought it for a very long time. I think that the first kind of glimpse occurred when I was already a teenager. You know, I started reading books and I met people when I started working in a theater, it was just a little bit more kind of — they were more intellectuals, more creative people, they were a little bit more liberated. You know, it depends how open you are to these visions of something different, of something that's liberating and free, and you know, I was interested in Western culture; I was interested in music and movies. I don't know. A lot of good friends of mine, very creative, intelligent people are still there working. I couldn't imagine that.

WOODS: Did you come to the United States in — I'm trying to figure this out from the math that I've gleaned here. Is it the late '70s or early '80s, some time around then?

YELCHIN: '83.

WOODS: How easy was it to just up and leave the Soviet Union in '83?

YELCHIN: No, it was not easy. It was very hard. It took me a long time.

WOODS: Yeah, okay, so what are the obstacles? How were they keeping you in?

YELCHIN: Well, how did they keep us in? I don't think they let anybody — they were letting people of — they were letting Jews out.

WOODS: Yeah, I remember starting around '74 they did that.

YELCHIN: Yeah, there was like a big sort of move towards, you know, Reagan did a lot on that, and Carter's term, there was a lot of work done. Then they sort of stopped, and they started again. It was kind of touch and go. My father died in 1972, and he really opposed immigration.

WOODS: Yeah.

YELCHIN: Even though we were Jewish. But he was too adamant. He felt that it was wrong, that you can't leave your country. He was just, you know, it's interesting, because I think my dad was — and in a way, this book is dedicated to my father, so he is on my mind.

WOODS: Yeah.

YELCHIN: I think he was a very typical Soviet, so that new person, of which I spoke earlier, that they tried to create this new civilization. He was extremely intelligent, a great reader, a lover of poetry. He certainly saw the difference between what he was told and what the actual reality was, but I think he believed in the program. He believed in the party to a degree that the party could do no wrong, that he was working for the party, and if the party says you die, he would have died. And a great deal of people who were arrested and tortured and executed allowed — not escaped, not tried to escape, but allowed for it to happen and denounced each other, not because they were bad people or because they were terrified. They were of course terrified. But they also did it in the name of the party, in the name of Stalin, because they truly believed in that ideology.

WOODS: I hope you won't think this too personal, but it sure sounds to me like the relationship that the boy in the story has with his father, in which the boy eventually moves away from communism but never stops loving his father, sounds a bit like your relationship with your own father.

YELCHIN: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. That's the most difficult thing, is to — you know, and I think that every teenager goes through that period when he or she breaks away from her parents and becomes a human being and becomes whoever that person is going to be. So if it involves a break in ideology, the rift is so much more dramatic. It's very difficult, and the last several years of his life were very difficult for both of us, because obviously he loved me very much, obviously I admired him greatly. But we had a very different take on the question of truth, I guess.

WOODS: Tell me about when you came to the U.S. I'm really curious. I would find it just frightening beyond all measure to go to a brand new country and have to fit in and not have employment lined up and so on. But I'm just curious to know, what were your first impressions of the U.S. when you came here? Was there anything that surprised you?

YELCHIN: Oh, yes. Well, just to say that the first two weeks, two-three weeks in the United States were probably the happiest time in my life. The sense of kind of liberation, lightness of being, the sense of freedom, I don't think I can recapture, even if I wanted to. The difference was so dramatic, the contrast was enormous, it was like coming to a different planet in every way — in every way. And I was very open. I didn't know English, so it was kind of, you know, I didn't really understand anything. But I liked everything. And it was just fascinating. I went to Boston. I had a friend who lived there, and I had a place on the floor in the living room, and you know, I started doing this — and I had, just before I left, I had a pretty significant art exhibit at the museum with my theater designs, and then, you know, a month later I was in Cambridge Square in Boston giving away flyers for, like, a burger joint, you know, and smiling at everybody. I didn't care. I was happy and free.

WOODS: That's a beautiful story. That's really —

YELCHIN: (laughing) That's true; that's true. I say this to people and people don't believe me. When I came here and I saw, you know, I went to New York; I had a friend in New York, and I wanted to see Manhattan, and I went to all different kinds of places. And for the first time, I saw, really, homeless people. I saw people who lived in the streets. Because in Russia it wasn't — at the time, we had no homeless people. So the way those homeless people walked, their gait had more self confidence and pride in who they were than anybody I saw walking on the streets of Moscow and Leningrad.

WOODS: Wow, that's — have you ever been back?

YELCHIN: Oh, no. Oh, I'm not the type. No, I can't.

WOODS: That chapter of your life is closed.

YELCHIN: It's too painful. Pain is probably not the word. I'm angrier at them than I ever was, and I'll tell you why: because my access to information while I was living there was very limited. Only, as I said, only books that were underground books or

books that were smuggled into the country, and it was very scary, it was very dangerous, and if you get a book, you read it for a day and then you have to give it away. It was just tough. Of course, here I have enormous access to information, and after the fall of the Soviet Union, a great deal of information from the archives, for a couple of years it was allowed to be glimpsed by some of the historians from the West, and so many, many books came out. And as I'm reading and studying — and I've read a great deal for when I was writing the book and when I wrote my subsequent books, it's overwhelming that people still, people of conscience still choose to live there.

WOODS: What are you working on these days?

YELCHIN: Well, I have all kinds of things. After *Breaking Stalin's Nose* came out, it won a Newberry prize, and so it allowed me to continue writing. I wrote a book called *Arcady's Goal*, and it's a look at, again, it's in the Soviet Union right before World War II, 1941, and it's a story about a very different kind of boy who is an orphan, and he is in an orphanage for what they call the children of the enemies of the people, and then he's — it's really a soccer book. He's a soccer player, the boy. Then this June, my third novel is coming out. It's called *The Haunting of Falcon House*, and it takes place in St. Petersburg at the end of the 19th century, and it's sort of a ghost story on the surface, but underneath it, it's really, like all of my books, it's a story about freedom and slavery. It's a book about the impossibility of being free while slavery exists, because you inadvertently become part of enslaving someone. It's two boys; one is an aristocrat, a prince, and another boy is a serf, a peasant, a slave. But it's just thin between them. And now I'm finishing, kind of in the process of finishing a book about, it's a spy book, it's called *Spy Runner*, and it takes place during, it's 1953 in the United States during the kind of anti-communist campaign, McCarthy and Hoover, and it had to do with Russian spies and stuff like that. So that's where I'm at.

WOODS: Well, it sounds great. I was just at EugeneYelchin.com, and we're going to link —

YELCHIN: You know —

WOODS: Yeah, go ahead.

YELCHIN: It's EugeneYelchinBooks.com.

WOODS: You have two — you have EugeneYelchin.com, I saw some of your art —

YELCHIN: Yeah, that's just paintings, because I'm a painter and an artist, and I illustrate books, and I also work in the movies, so I have a bunch of different websites, but in terms of books it's EugeneYelchinBooks.com.

WOODS: Right, so I clicked on "Books," and I went over to EugeneYelchinBooks.com, so I'm going to link to both of those at TomWoods.com/637. So I just saw the cover of *The Haunting of Falcon House*, so it looks very good. I did not realize until this moment just how many books you'd written. You've been a busy guy.

YELCHIN: (laughing) Yes. Yes, well, they're books for kids. They're a little bit shorter than adult novels, so yes, certainly.

WOODS: Well, I'm just — look, I'm glad everything worked out for you (laughing). I'm glad you got out; I'm glad that you felt enriched when you got here, that you had that extraordinary feeling and experience, and that you wrote this book, because I just love it, and I'm trying to think of a way to — I have an almost 13-year-old, but she's very, very easily affected by violent themes or — not like there's a lot of violence in the book, but it's a little disturbing just how awful that regime was, and I'm wondering about having her read it or not.

YELCHIN: Yeah, but there's no violence in the book. There is —

WOODS: It's hinted at, but you're right, there is no violence.

YELCHIN: No, for kids, they don't really feel it. I mean, what they feel is I think that desire for the boy to reunite with his father.

WOODS: Yeah.

YELCHIN: I think that's where their hearts are.

WOODS: And I bet also they have this feeling of what would it be like to be sitting in that classroom and you knew that you're guilty of the crime —

YELCHIN: I know.

WOODS: — and you don't know who knows. (laughing) It's a tough situation.

YELCHIN: I know; I know. It's very dramatic, yeah.

WOODS: Anyway, great. Thanks so much for your time. I'm going to link to all of it on our show notes page and try and drive you some traffic. Best of luck with the new books when they come out.

YELCHIN: Thank you so much, Tom.