

# The New Criterion

## Letter from Paris

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### Andreï Makine's poetics of nostalgia

by [Katherine Knorr](#)

French book prizes get more attention when there is a story attached. The book isn't the thing; the author must have a legend. Thus we had Marguerite Duras boasting that *L'Amant* was all a true story, or the prize winner who turned out to be a salesman in a newspaper kiosk.

The story was better than usual this time when both the Médicis and Goncourt prizes were won by Andreï Makine, an impecunious Russian living in a one-room apartment in the Eighteenth Arrondissement. He had been rejected by a number of publishing houses until he pretended that he wrote not in French but in Russian and that he was translated. He had applied for French citizenship and been turned down. He spoke with a heavy accent.

The journalists scrambled to deal with this one. Not everything said was kind. He was proud, and reticent about biographical details tying him too closely to his narrator. It was an eye ...

Katherine Knorr

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