



THE STORY BEHIND THE BOOK

RUSSIAN WINTER

A Novel

by Daphne Kalotay

“Tender, passionate, and moving, Daphne Kalotay's debut novel about ballet, jewels, love and betrayal is also a delicious form of time travel. I loved it.”

—Jenna Blum, author of *Those Who Save Us*

Set in both contemporary Boston and post-World War II Moscow, *Russian Winter* tells the story of Bolshoi ballerina Nina Revskaya as she becomes a member of Stalin's cultural elite before escaping to the West following a terrible betrayal. Now an old woman crippled with arthritis, she has decided to auction off her famed jewelry collection—including the rare set of amber that a Boston professor, Grigori Solodin, translator of the works of Revskaya's late poet-husband, believes may hold the key to a long-kept secret. With the help of Drew Brooks, the woman coordinating the auction, Grigori sets out to solve a literary mystery that reaches much deeper: to the struggle and cost of making art and trying to live and love under circumstances of enormous repression. As the auction unleashes lush memories of Nina's greatest love, it also dredges up unwanted truths about passion, envy, and the slow erosion of Nina's closest friendships under the repression of the Stalinist regime.

The greatest challenge for me was plotting a story set in such a fiercely controlled environment as Stalin's Soviet Union, where terror and its repercussions prevented people from daring to say or do many things a writer might otherwise take for granted.

HOW DID THE IDEA FOR THE BOOK ORIGINATE?

On the most general, thematic, level, the book had as its inspiration my passion for dance, and how thoroughly the Soviet experience has marked my own family.

As for its more specific origins, in the summer of 2000, I wrote the first words of what was at first a short story, also called “Russian Winter,” about falling hopelessly in love with a fellow grad student during the winter that I was preparing for an exam in Russian literature. In my memory my Russian tutorials, the New England winter, and falling in love had become

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intertwined. But the story soon called up another, much older memory—of helping an elderly woman pack up her belongings in preparation for her move to an old age home. To connect her to the Russian literature idea, I decided to make the old woman Russian, and as I wrote she became a version of my Hungarian grandmother, who along with my father survived both the Holocaust and the early years of Russian occupation before escaping to Canada. Though they left Hungary in 1956, many of my relatives remained there, and I've seen up close how life under the weight of totalitarianism influenced both those relatives who left and those who stayed—from individual mentality to interpersonal relationships.

For the purposes of my story, I wanted there to be some sort of mysterious connection between the Russian professor and the old woman—to whom I allotted an extensive jewelry collection, and whom I decided to make a former Bolshoi ballerina. (My mother was a dancer and taught modern dance at Drew University in New Jersey, where I grew up. As for the jewelry idea, though I didn't consciously realize it at the time, I suppose I was recalling that in the midst of my winter romance my boyfriend had given me a tiny emerald.)

I soon had a long, complicated narrative that, no matter how many times I rewrote it, would not fit into the confines of a short story. After years of trying to make it work, I acknowledged that it needed to grow into something much larger. But I put the novel off for a few years, not only because I was working fulltime and couldn't imagine taking on such a big project, but also because I knew how much research I would have to do if I wanted to fully explore the Russian side of the story. (I chose not to set the novel in Hungary, because of the Russian-professor/Bolshoi Ballet component and because conditions in Soviet Hungary were not nearly as harsh as those in Russia in Stalin's final years.)

DID THE BOOK INVOLVE RESEARCH OR TRAVEL?

I spent years researching Soviet Russia, its history and culture, Moscow, the ballet, etc. It was my great fortune to be awarded the W. K. Rose Fellowship from Vassar College, which allowed me to spend much of 2005-6 reading: memoirs, historical studies, biographies... anything, really, that related to my topic. I knew that until I felt I had a good grasp of the place and time, I wouldn't be able to write with authority or creative freedom. I went almost daily to the Boston Athenaeum (which eventually ended up making a cameo appearance in the book), where I found old books on Soviet dancers and the ballet and—particularly helpful—travelogues by Westerners who were able to enter the Soviet Union during the last decade or so of Stalin's rule; it seems that since it was so difficult to go behind the Iron Curtain in those years anyone who did so wrote a book about it or published their diaries and letters home. Despite their quirks and subjectivity, these books were invaluable to me, because they pointed out the small details of Soviet life that the Russians often didn't bother mentioning in their own writings: descriptions of foods, fabrics, automobiles, streets, restaurants, shops, etc. So much changed from year to year

in those years after World War II; first there would be only certain foods or clothing available, the next year something else. I wanted to be as true to that reality as possible.

The greatest challenge for me was plotting a story set in such a fiercely controlled environment as Stalin's Soviet Union, where terror and its repercussions prevented people from daring to say or do many things a writer might otherwise take for granted.

I didn't allow myself to travel to Russia until after I'd finished writing the book, because I was worried that experiencing contemporary Moscow might blow apart the post-war version I'd created, via books and photographs, in my imagination. Indeed, my first day in Moscow left me pretty confused; much of it looked nothing like it had in my 1947-52 version. And yet by the second day I was able to find the old streets from my research, where older buildings had once been, and to get a better sense of the size and feel of the city. Unfortunately, the Bolshoi was still under renovation at the time of my visit, so I've never been inside and had to rely on an old video I lucked upon of a 1950s performance that showed the audience, lobby, stairway, orchestra pit, dressing rooms, etc.

Other research necessary for the book included backstage ballet life and the inner workings of an auction house, plus information about gems and jewelry. Concerning the ballet, I've always loved reading dancers' memoirs and biographies, so I dove more deeply into those. I interviewed dancers and asked for help when I wasn't sure about things. For whatever reason, I found myself less concerned about the accuracy of the auction house sections; I knew that for dramatic effect I'd have to squeeze the time frame down to a less realistic length and give Drew more diverse responsibilities than someone in her position might actually have—but I still wanted my version of an auction house to seem real. So I attended auctions here in Boston and when I had questions was fortunate to be able to ask professionals for their input.

HOW LONG DID IT TAKE FOR YOU TO WRITE THE BOOK?

In a focused, conscious way: 6 years.

WHAT MAKES THE BOOK RELEVANT TO MODERN READERS?

After immersing myself in the world of Stalinist Russia for six years, one thing that has made a strong impression on me is the Soviet government's clear appreciation of the power of the arts, and its corresponding manipulation of artists and their work. Yet as much as the artistic world of my characters interests me, I feel very strongly that the more over-arching story—of a world in which no aspect of culture or family is unaffected by political realities—is one that can never be told enough. Portraying through the dramatically vivid and artfully choreographed world of a novel how history persists into the present despite the passage of time is one of the most powerful ways to communicate what may otherwise be dismissed as evident or even ignored.

I'm struck by how thoroughly every strata of society is affected by every new government policy, and my personal goal is to describe the truth of my characters' experience in a way that is compelling and lasting and does justice to the lives of so many real people and real families. On the broadest level, I'd say my novel is an attempt to examine through fictionalization the ways that the political and personal intersect.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daphne Kalotay attended Boston University's Creative Writing Program, where her stories won the school's Florence Engel Randall Fiction Prize and a Transatlantic Review Award from The Henfield Foundation. Author of the acclaimed fiction collection *Calamity and Other Stories*, she has received fellowships from the Christopher Isherwood Foundation, the La Napoule Foundation, Yaddo, and the MacDowell Colony, and is a recipient of the W. K. Rose Fellowship in the Creative Arts from Vassar College. She has taught creative writing at Boston University, Middlebury College, and Skidmore College, and lives in the Boston area.