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Sonkina, Marina

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LITERARY LANDMARKS: 17 Arbat Street, Moscow

Marina Sonkina grew up in Moscow, about two kilometres from the Kremlin on a famous street called Arbat, which is more than 500 years old. Pushkin's house was located next door to her school and another famous Russian poet named Bely lived half a block away. Her house still stands near the famous Praga Restaurant at Arbat 2/1 and the Gruerman hospital.



Sonkina has described life on Arbat Street in a short story called 'A Room between The Two Gogols' in her fiction collection, *Expulsion and Other Stories*. Rybakov's anti-Stalinist trilogy "The Children of Arbat" describes the destinies of "Arbatians." The celebrated Russian singer Okudzhava has rhapsodized the whimsical soul of Arbat in his songs and poems. At the feet of his monument on Arbat young poets have staged literary bashes under the increasingly malevolent shadow of Putin.

If any writer in B.C. can match the verve and intelligence of Moscow-educated Marina Sonkina, we haven't met them yet.

Should we also mention that she has a 6'6" son named Yuri Kolokolnikov who plays Stryr in Game of Thrones?

Sonkina's latest collection of stories from a small literary press, *Expulsion & Other Stories* (Guernica \$20), is nothing short of brilliant. Two-thirds of *Expulsion* consists of Chekhovian tales of survival set in the Soviet Union, but the longest and first story, 'Face', is a 65-page novella about Vancouver and its apocalyptic ruin.

In 'Face' a wealthy industrialist buys his 24-year-old son an old bungalow next to the University Endowment Lands in Point Grey. The actor/narrator Matthew welcomes his freedom as a property owner and vows not to be tempted by the "madness" of the real estate game.

Matthew's parents have already sold their home in Shaughnessy and paid seventeen million for one of the penthouses atop the 62-floor Living Shangri-La tower but he would rather sleep under a bridge than live in that sealed fish tank.

"With nouveau-riche Chinese gobbling up the city's real estate and its old Victorian-era houses regularly becoming bulldozer bait," Matthew dreams instead of opening a splendid new venue for local theatre.

To make ends meet as an out-of-work actor, he decides to rent a tiny basement suite in his bungalow. The first person to respond to his ad is a young woman clothed head to foot "in a hijab or chador or whatever they call it."

The completely mysterious new lodger, Erin, is seemingly a Moslem. She loves the garden. She wears retro sunglasses. She has a nice figure. Hoping to have a relationship between equals, Matthew pretends to be a fellow renter rather than her landlord.

They have beguiling and often loopy conversations. Maybe she likes him. Erin never has visitors. He knows she has taken a job in a Thrift store. How does a guy get to know a girl when he can never see her face? He follows her. She enters a synagogue. Eventually his fascination with the bizarre lodger leads to a deeply disturbing revelation. Afterwards, Erin confesses she is a sibyl of the Erythian line in the 30th generation,

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someone who is an oracle who can foretell the future, "but when misfortune strikes, people blame us."

Viewing Erin as a damsel in deep distress, Matthew dedicates himself to saving her. To do so, he needs money. Matthew hatches a scheme. He will secretly sell the house. But he will only sell it if the offshore buyer promises to let them continue to live there. She need never know. A foreign buyer is found who agrees to let them stay. But the madness of the real estate game has taken hold...

Several of Sonkina's Soviet-era stories are more impressive and even more memorable, but the audaciousness of 'Face' and its completely unpredictable ending makes for a potent artistic response to the feeding frenzy of mini-Trump speculators who have made housing costs in tucked-away, provincial Vancouver on a par with Paris, Hong Kong and London.

Marina Sonkina left her career as a professor at Moscow University to immigrate to Canada as a single mother with two boys, convinced they would be forced into military service for Russia. She found work in the Russian section of Radio Canada International at CBC, in Montreal. One son became a tenured professor of mathematics in Halifax; the other returned to Moscow as a Canadian citizen and has achieved success as an actor.

Sonkina's first two collections of stories in English, *Tractorina's Travel and Runic Alphabet*, were published by MW Books of Garden Bay, B.C. Locales for her stories include the Bahamas, Moscow, Mexico and California. The stories in her third collection, *Lucia's Eyes and Other Stories* (Guernica 2011), also draw upon her experiences as a Russian expatriate. With the exception of *Lucia's Eyes and Angels, Ascending Descending*, most of these stories are drawn from her two preceding volumes. This third volume includes the story called *Tractorina's Travels*, about a twice-married Russian who is uneasy about Perestroika, and the longest story called *Carmelita*, about a volatile, Bohemian painter who has a poignant, sensual and ultimately lethal relationship with a much older narrator, Joseph, in Mexico.

Illustrated by colourful propaganda posters from the Stalinist era that glorify Socialism and the Russian people, *Comrade Stalin's Baby Tooth* (MW Books, 2012) is a hardcover, satirical novella that opens with an acerbic but alluring character portrait of Joseph Stalin. This unusual introductory essay describes Stalin's horrific reign with a purposeful glibness, punctuated by a few personal asides about the author's relatives. The grotesqueness and madness of life in the USSR under Stalin is then described through the eyes of eleven-year-old Natasha trying to make sense of the fears and cruelty that encompass everyday life. The story is packaged by designer Włodzimierz Milewski in the manner of an official document from KGB files and yet it's clearly a personal protest against the absurdity of the totalitarian regime from which Sonkina has fled.

There is a misleading and somewhat ridiculous comparison on Marina Sonkina's book jacket for *Expulsion & Other Stories* that references Mavis Gallant. Sonkina's ebullient, quick-to-laugh spirit is entirely at odds with the pinched, cold shrewdness of Gallant.

When Marina Sonkina is not teaching literature courses at both UBC and Simon Fraser University, she leads culture trips to Russia and dances the tango. She has no regrets about her move to Canada.

BOOKS:

Runic Alphabet (MW Books)

Tractorina's Travels and Other Stories (MW Books)

Lucia's Eyes and Other Stories (Guernica, 2011) \$20 978-1-55071-334-3

The Violin That Wanted To See The World (MW Books, 2011). Children's book.

Comrade Stalin's Baby Tooth (MW Books, 2012) \$29.95 978-0-9868776-2-9

Expulsion & Other Stories (Guernica Editions, 2015) Short stories. \$20 978-1-55071-945-1

[BCBW 2016]

ESSAY

Putin's Potemkin village...

With all its glamour, Moscow, of course, is no more Russia than New York is America. Marina Sonkina reveals contemporary Russia beneath its facade.

Every two years, Russian-born fiction writer Marina Sonkina of Vancouver takes her SFU and UBC students from Continuing Studies for a field trip to Russia to enhance their appreciation of the literature, art and cultural history they have been studying—and it keeps getting easier.

Travel agencies in Russia are now private and have to compete for customers, they provide first-rate service when it comes to organization: comfortable buses run on time; guides show up as planned; hotels provide excellent and friendly service; restaurants serve high quality meals. The number of first-rate classical music concerts, palaces (in St. Petersburg especially), museums and exhibitions exceed expectations.

And each time she visits, Sonkina is surprised by the changes.

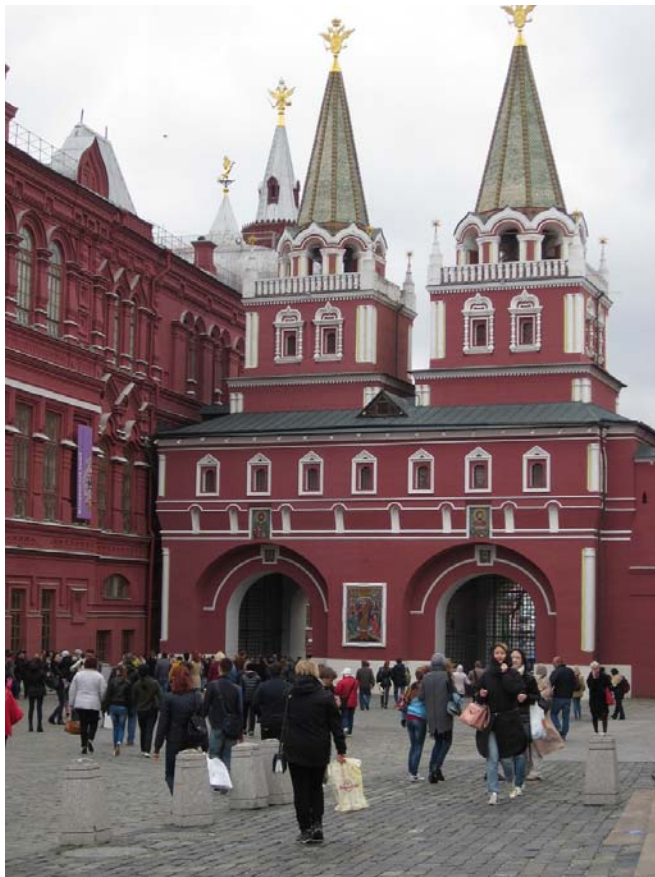
"I was told," she says, "that if you take the whole budget of the country as 100 per cent, Moscow gets 80 per cent, St. Petersburg gets 5; the rest of the country...well, it gets the rest. Even if this estimate is a conjecture, it accurately reflects what people feel about the distribution of wealth in their country."

Here Marina Sonkina elaborates.

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Moscow, my own city, now of more than 20 million, I found most extraordinary and unrecognizable: never mind that all the streets have been renamed—back to their pre-Revolutionary nomenclature—but I couldn't decide if what I was seeing was Disneyland, theatrical sets or a Potemkin village.

Every old manor is repaired and repainted (and there are hundreds of them), with all the ornaments highlighted in pink, pastel yellow, bright blue or white. The streets are spotless, not a scrap of paper; the most elegant cafés and restaurants competing in beauty and elaborateness of their décor and cuisine are full. Gingerbread, toy-like, gaudy, wedding-pie churches have mushroomed on every corner, the bells chiming every hour.



(<http://bcbooklook.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Entrance-to-the-Red-Square-e1477610364462.jpg>)

Entrance to Red Square

There are around 200 stationary theatres in Moscow with repertoire ranging from Ancient Greeks to Stoppard to Russian underground playwrights. And they are packed with very enthusiastic audiences.

Bookstores catering to both low and high-brow tastes are abundant and carry books in all genres: from pulp fiction to American best sellers, quickly translated into Russian, to philosophical and religious tractates to poetry to reprints of the old editions. The traditional respect for hard copy is still honoured: few books are published as paperbacks. Russia had a long-standing tradition of excellence in translation. Any voice of importance in world literature gets noticed and translated—no matter in which language it expresses itself. An extra suitcase for books that I carry on my travels to Russia is quickly filled up.

At the time of our visit, Moscow mounted several major exhibitions: I managed to get to Raphael brought from Uffizzi, Urbino and Melan (nine portraits and several sketches). People think nothing of lining up for six hours. I was lucky to be able to buy two tickets for myself and my friend "on the side" for a slightly higher price.

"To get to Moscow! To get to Moscow!" pined the three sisters from Chekhov's play of the same name. A century later, the capital, like a remote super nova, is still luring provincial dreamers, artists, savvy entrepreneurs, financial moguls, and jobless and impoverished migrants from former Asian republics content to sleep on seedy mattresses in shacks and do the manual jobs shunned by Moscovites.

I say 'remote' because technically at least you still need to have a registration mark in your passport allowing you to live in this city. That hasn't changed since the Soviet times. There was still another visible change. In the Nineties, the time of the greatest economic and political turmoil, Moscow was inundated with "unbeggary" looking beggars: middle-aged and mostly female teachers, doctors, secretaries, who instantly lost their jobs, savings and any mooring in the society that overnight tried to move to a market economy.

There are no beggars in sight anymore. The few that I saw look much younger and expose frightening maimed limbs. Are these the scars of wars that Russia led in Chechnya, Georgia, and now Ukraine?

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With all its glamour, Moscow, of course, is no more Russia than New York is America.

I was told that if you take the whole budget of the country as 100 per cent, Moscow gets 80 per cent, St. Petersburg gets 5; the rest of the country...well, it gets the rest. Even if this estimate is a conjecture, it accurately reflects what people feel about the distribution of wealth in their country.

And yet, with all its festive glitz, in Moscow, the proud capital of the largest country on earth, there is a feeling of one hand directing the show (and you can't get rid of the feeling that it is a show), one central ideology willing the demonstration of opulence into being: that of inflated patriotism at the expense of 'the other'; of blatant nationalism based on the myth of Slavic superiority.



(<http://bcbooklook.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Street-scene-e1477610285491.jpg>)

Street scene, Moscow

It was scary to discover how rank-and-file admire Putin. Scary to hear (taxi-drivers being my random source of information) what people think of Ukraine, Crimea and European sanctions.

Crimea was taken back because Russians there were abused by the Ukrainians and asked Russia for protection (much like Hungarians did in '56, or Czechs in '68, I suppose). Many Russians now believe Ukrainians are worthless and confused people swayed away by Americans who stirred up waters there. They elected a fascist government that is threatening Russia the way Hitler did (this reflects the statements many times repeated on Russian TV).

The only reason Europe hates Russia is because "they" envy "us"; because we're big and powerful and they want to destroy "us" in cohort with the Americans. Putin is good for Russia because he is strong and knows what he's doing. The implications being (I assume) that he knows what's best for the country, relieving people of the necessity to figure that out by themselves.

In Moscow, I witnessed 'elections' to Duma, the Russian parliament. People voted "with their legs" as the saying in Russia goes, that is they walk away from the polls on the day of the elections. Apathy, disinterest, a sense that nothing ever depends on them, is pervasive.

As for American elections, according to the polls cited by the Newspaper *Vestnik*, the majority of Russians favour Donald Trump. Is it because Trump is fond of Putin and people hope for a better relationship between Russia and the USA? I asked a friend of mine. No, if anything, he said, Trump may destroy the USA, the idea appealing to many Russians.

In my previous visits to Russia I watched poetry bashes in the street, where young people competed as to who could recite more of the classic and contemporary poetry by heart. One girl carried on uninterruptedly for forty minutes before agreeing to step down. I asked a friend of mine if I could still find poetry bashes in the streets. No. There are new laws prohibiting gatherings.

An artist and a book designer with whom I've worked with met me in his spacious, centrally located, two-bedroom studio which he rents from the Government at a discounted price as a member of the Artists' Union. In the Soviet times, he would have this studio for free. I cautiously asked him about politics in Russia.

Victor (not his real name) expressed dismay at the Kremlin's secrecy. "People know nothing of what's going on there. Nothing of their intentions, or the way they think," he said. It was my turn to be surprised: "Was there any time in the history of the Soviet Union when the Kremlin demonstrated transparency?"

Having spent the years after the collapse of the USSR out of Russia, I see today's Kremlin as a carbon copy of the Soviet one. But Victor obviously didn't want to give up a taste of freedom he had experienced during *perestroika* and *glasnost*. and so his expectations were different from mine.

What he minded most about the people in Kremlin was their shameless ostentatiousness. He asks, "Why does Medvedev (former President of Russia, current Prime Minister) need a *dacha* (summer country cottage) on the property of 90 hectares surrounded by a seven-meter high impenetrable wall? How come the head of the Anti-Corruption Committee was found stashing 120 million dollars cash and three million euros in his Moscow apartment?"

As for Putin himself, Victor was cautiously evasive. What he most minded about Putin was the way the ruler was imposing his tastes on the whole nation. "Putin is big on sports and military and all you see on television is the promotion of sport and the weapons. Where is art? Who us supporting art?"

The Russian army is now the fourth largest in the world. Percentage-wise, Russia spends on defence more than the US: 4.5 percent of its GDP while America spends 3.5 per cent.

I remember the anti-western propaganda of the '50, '60s and '70s, the constant fodder that rank-and-file Russians had to chew. The vehemence of Putin's propaganda machine matches that of Stalin's in the grotesqueness of its claims. And it does work!

Many Russians believe unequivocally that the US has a hand in every Russian problem: from ousting Yanukovich in 2014 (the Ukrainian thuggish President who fled the country as a result of popular protests) to shooting down Malaysia Flight 17 with 283 people on board. The proof of the latter? The bodies collected after the crash of the plane were decomposed cadavers! The Americans had staged the shooting, having filled the plane with corpses. (Canada, by the way, is exempt as Russians do not consider it to be an active player on the world arena.)

Nobody could accuse the KGB or Putin (its former Director) of squeamishness. There is a whole department at KGB (many times renamed – but no matter) training ‘specialists’ in deformation, sabotage and disinformation technique. Just as during the Stalin’s era, the ‘specialists’ work hard at concocting scenarios ranging from the phantasmagorical to the macabre and ludicrous. It is people’s gullibility that I found so puzzling.

Decades ago, a post-doctorate student and a KGB informer posing as my friend tried to enlighten me: “You don’t understand! The more improbable, the more bizarre, the more the mob will take it as bait! Understand that the mob is bored! Conspiracy theories entertain them! They are low-life, they hate themselves, but creating an external enemy gives them some modicum of respect.”

It is this attitude of rulers’ unabashed cynicism, and spite for their own nation, that was not accepted by people in 2012 when thousands poured into the streets protesting against the mock elections in Russia. Putin then swapped places with Medvedev to become a President for the third time.

But back to my friend’s studio...

“What do people say about sanctions?” I ask.

“We’ve endured a war, and we’ll endure their sanctions. It will kill the West, not us! Putin promised to set up local production of groceries and he will. That’s how general thinking goes.”

An outsider now, I saw clearly that my blaming Putin alone, holding him alone responsible for the path the country is now taking was simplistic. A strong, dictatorial fist must, after all, appeal to the hearts of Russians (as well as to the hearts of many other peoples, if we are to count the number of dictators around the world horizontally (that is now) and vertically (that is, historically).

To a traveler, many customs seem surprising. Many Moscovites have personal drivers even if it costs them the lion’s share of their income. Why? Moscow is huge; traffic is heavy; you can be stuck in jams for hours. But what about an ever-expanding subway, Stalin’s underground palaces, Communist utopia carved in stone? With its 200 stations and trains coming up every 30 seconds, for sure, Moscow got the most efficient way of negotiating the urban sprawl! However, given the chance, Moscovites would avoid the crowded metro at all costs. It’s on a Moscow subway that you see those weary, drained, apathetic faces representing such a contrast with the garnished streets over their heads.

Every Muscovite—and especially drivers—rant against the present mayor’s decision to pave all the streets of central Moscow with tiles. (Paving done by hand by hundreds of *gastarbeiters* from Central Asia). What’s wrong with that? Everything is wrong! I’m told. Prams get stuck in the cracks as do the stilettos proudly worn by most young women in Moscow. (I didn’t see one person with a walker or a cane, never mind a wheel-chair, so obviously, this is not a concern.) With winter frosts, cracks between the tiles are inevitable. They’ve removed the tiles three times already and will have to do it again, I’m told. Where does the money come from? Mayor’s wife owns the tile production industry, so she gets all the contracts.

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Onto St. Petersburg

St. Petersburg, the city that has changed its name three times, is vastly different from Moscow in its feel and history. People there are softer spoken. They move at a slower pace, seemingly less under pressure.

There is something aristocratic in the stately and reserved beauty of this very European city. It was the Tsar who has conceived of it; the emperors who held court in it, with magnificent palaces mostly built by European architects.

St. Petersburg is largely immune to the religious fervour of Moscow and so the gaudy décor of Moscow churches and manors would be totally out of place in the graceful ensemble of its streets. And yet, in spite of its physical beauty, the city has a certain aura of provincialism, a sense of second-rated-ness.

As a friend of mine, a well-known scholar and professor of linguistics noted: “When you look at the faces of people who live in St. Petersburg, you have a feeling they’ve dropped off the moon. They don’t know what to do with the city to which they don’t belong.”



(<http://bcbooklook.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Memorial-for-GULAG-victims-e1477610348580.jpg>)

Memorial for Gulag victims.

I wouldn't be so harsh in my judgment, but what she was referring to is the sad reality of the city's history. Soviet rulers, Stalin in particular, did their best to suppress the proud and free spirit of Leningrad by purging it of its cultural and scientific elite. Krushchev continued the trend: he would send the 'indigenous' inhabitants away to suburbia and replace them with the dwellers of near-by villages and remote provincial towns.

After *perestroika*, the numerous communal apartments where the intelligentsia lived were bought by oligarchs and turned into lucrative boutique hotels. Some of the communal apartments are open for viewing as a tourist attraction. We visited a lady in her sixties, who owned a spacious room, part of the kitchen and bathroom shared with three other tenants. Our guide was indignant about my decision to make this visit—it was viewed as unpatriotic to include these communal apartments into the program.

The lady in question, on the contrary, was happy to talk to foreigners and earn some cash to boot. She was happy also by her choice: between moving to suburbia and living in the core of St. Petersburg, there was no question in her mind what to choose. For my students, this visit was one of the trip highlights as it gave them a glimpse of real people's lives.

The visit created a counterbalance to numerous palaces that are hard to skip in St. Petersburg. The famous Usupov Palace (second best to Winter Palace, housing a famous collection of art, and a private theatre, to say nothing of recreating the scene of Rasputin's murder in the basement suite of the palace) usually would be as packed with tourists as the Winter Palace, but we lucked out. We were among the last people to be admitted; the director of some bank has been given permission to take it over for his daughter's birthday celebration. (Imagine Palazzo Ducale closing for a day for a similar reason!)

Ancient Pskov

As in many controlled societies, on a personal level, people in Russia are warm, hospitable, and will go out of their way to circumvent bureaucratic mire to help you out, especially if you're a foreigner. Official anti-Western propaganda is counteracted by a reverence—if not admiration—for foreigners. This is an old dichotomy going back to the 18th century. Russians are truly proud of their culture and eager to share what they know and love with those who show interest.



(<http://bcbooklook.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/The-city-of-PSKOV-e1477610301797.jpg>)

City of Pskov

This pride was most obvious in St. Petersburg and in the ancient, thousand-year-old city of Pskov, 30 km. away from the Estonian border where a slow river rolls peacefully along the plain, creating the lyrical charm associated with rural central and northern Russia. (The last Tsar of Russia, Nicholas the Second, abdicated in Pskov, but it didn't spare him and his family from Lenin's bullets a year later.)

Owing to its northern position, Pskov was never conquered by the Tatar-Mongolians who ruled Russia for nearly 300 years in the Middle Ages. Pskov has therefore preserved some very early icons and churches, most notably the Pskovo-Pechersky monastery, the most beautiful and prestigious of them all.

The Pskov-Pechersky monastery is different from other monasteries: it has never closed. It has a solid reputation for its rich library, learned monks and the tradition of *staretz*—holy fathers offering spiritual guidance. (Think of *staretz* Zosima in Dostoyevsky's *Brothers Karamazov*.)

During the Soviet times, with the official doctrine of militant atheism, only a handful of churches and monasteries survived looting and total destructions, just as very few priests managed to escape the Gulag and execution. Now there are more than a thousand active monasteries and convents in Putin's Russia, their number growing as the Church is trying to replace the failed Communist promise of an earthy paradise with a celestial one.

I would be leery of calling the resurrection of church-going as a spiritual revival. It is rather a restoration of a centuries-old alliance between the State and the Church wherein they mutually reinforce each other, sharing the same world view: a cult of authority, fierce nationalism and obscurantism.

Putin, just like tsars before him, found it useful to embrace the institution, but the Church plays no independent role in his schemes. Meanwhile it partakes in the wealth of his cronies through profit sharing and rich donations imparted on churches and their leaders personally. No oligarch would strike a deal before getting a blessing from a church boss. And if you buy a new car, you ask a priest to sanctify it.



(<http://bcbooklook.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/PSKOV-PECHERY-Monastery-e1477610333835.jpg>)

Pskov Pechersky monastery

It has not always been like that. In Soviet times, many members of the Russian intelligentsia clandestinely turned to the church as a form of dissent. Among them were many secretly baptized Jews. Now this generation feels that the carpet was pulled from under their feet. What once was a form of spiritual refuge and a proclamation of personal independence feels to many like a form of prostitution.

At the Pskov-Pechersky monastery, colourful lapis-lazuli and golden domes climb up a slope in one graceful, light-hearted file, separated from the external world by a graded wall. Their joyful procession gives you no hint as to what is lying beneath: an underground acropolis stretching for more than 200 km. and housing hundreds of burials going back to the 15th century.

There is nothing unusual about burying Christians in caves (think of the catacombs in Rome) but the tourist guide tells us: "The antique or pagan word necropolis cannot be applied to the Caves Made by God. Indeed, it is the city of all the living in the hope of resurrection for the eternal life... With no regard to the earthly rank, the dead bodies—numbering more than ten thousand—remain in tact. Or as the Pskovian Bishop Gennady avowed at the end of the 16th century, "Those who have the honour to be buried in the Caves Made by God will not only escape rot but will also get absolution!"

Covering our heads and putting on skirts (mandatory for women) we were ready to enter the City of the...Living. But a monk with the face of a bouncer, guarding the entrance, blocked our way. He looked at his I-phone and realized he knew nothing of our visit. He was prepared to say "Nyet!" except that we were all foreigners.

"We came from afar to look at your wonderful caves," I said. "All the way from Vancouver."

"Are you an Orthodox Christian?" asked the monk in the intimidating voice of the Soviet style bureaucrats.

"Of course," I said.

"How many times you pray?"

"Every waking hour."

"What is the name of the Church in Vancouver you go to?"

"St. Nicholas."

We were finally let in. He was not concerned with the religious habits of my "flock." As foreigners, they couldn't be expected to know the true faith. But my unaccented Russian has betrayed me.

The medieval history of the Pskovo-Pechersky monastery is emphasized in the guidebook. We are not told that during WWII, the monastery (as well as the city of Pskov) was occupied by Germans. When it was occupied by Germans, this monastery also welcomed Andrey Vlasov, formerly Stalin's favourite, who created a 130,000-strong army that fought against Stalin on Hitler's side. One theory has it that he wanted to fight against Stalin and Hitler alike. Vlasov was hanged after the war, and thousands of his soldiers were executed without trial.

Among other noted people associated with Pskovo-Pechersky Monastery is the famous Russian-American painter, stage designer, sculptor and publisher, Michael Chemyakin. Before being expelled from the Soviet Union for his nonconformist art, he spent two years as a novice in this monastery. His whimsical composition "Children as Victims of Adults' Vices" is now one of Moscow's landmarks.

In the centre of the composition we see a boy and a girl walking with their eyes blindfolded. Under their feet is a book of fairy-tales but all around them are the figures symbolizing adult vices: Ignorance, Avarice, Cruelty, Violence, War, etc. The work was criticized by the religious establishment who considered it harmful for the psyche of children.

In the words of the artist: "I conceived and then realized this composition as a symbol and as a call out to save today's and future generations. As an artist, I'm asking by this composition to look around, to hear and see what's going on. And while it's not too late, the people of consciousness should stop and give it a thought."

These thoughts ran through my mind as the sounds of the monastery's bells sailed over my head. There is an ancient belief: if you stand under the bells of the Pskovo-Pechersky monastery while they are tolling, and make a wish, it will come true.

I made a wish for Russia. The land where I was born.

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Marina Sonkina's novella 'Face' reflects the craziness of the Vancouver real estate market. (<http://bcbooklook.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Sonkina-Marina-WEB.jpg>)

Marina Sonkina

Armenia

By Marina Sonkina (2019)

Tiny Armenia (one-tenth of what it used to be in the past) is landlocked, resource impoverished and surrounded by Muslim countries (Turkey, Azerbaijan and Iran), the fact that still gives its people – at least those whom I spoke to – certain unease.

Such apprehension is understandable when one considers Armenia's tragic history replete with foreign invasions, loss of territory, genocide at the turn of the 20th century and, finally, the recent war in Nagorny-Karabakh (an Armenian populated enclave of Azerbaijan),

Armenians don't forget. A sense of history is deeply embedded in every Armenian (be it a house wife or a taxi driver), reinforced visually by numerous monuments to writers, poets, composers, diplomats dotting the streets of their cities. What country can pull out of the abyss of time the name of its alphabet inventor and call a street after him or her?

Mesrop Mashtots, a learned monk who single-handedly created the Armenian alphabet in the 4th century CE, is immortalized in one of the major streets of Yerevan, the city whose original architecture was almost totally destroyed in the 1930s by the onslaught of Stalinist megalomaniac granite fantasies.

The art of compromise and negotiation is in Armenian blood. That's how Armenians have survived as a people. In 1991, Armenia declared its independence from the USSR. But unlike Georgians, they are not in the position to repudiate their former masters. Russian soldiers guard Armenian borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan. During the conflict in Nagorny Karabach in 1988, the Soviets sided with Armenians. Russian is the mandatory language in school curriculum. Unlike Georgians, every Armenian - young

and old - speaks Russian; Russian tourists provide a good source of income and are welcome (whereas in Georgia, I felt it was prudent to switch over from Russian to English).

I asked: Do you see Russia as a reliable ally when it comes to defense? The taxi driver, Karen, a diminutive middle-aged man with soulful wistful eyes, and a former KGB lieutenant, was hesitant. "Depends where the wind blows from. If it serves the Russian purposes, they will. If it doesn't, they won't," he finally said, turning the wheel located on the right side of his rented Toyota (a surprise given that Armenians drive on the same side of the road as continental Europeans, and not like the British). I found Karen through a receptionist in our hotel. "She happens to be my daughter," he informed me confidentially. "She helps me out a little. But don't tell anybody."

On the way to Khor Virap, the ancient monastery built on top of an almost inaccessible cliff, Karen immersed me in the private history of his life: his youthful engagement to a 16-year-old Russian girl, disrupted by his Armenian mother keen on having a brood of *pur lain* Armenian grandchildren; his consequent long and happy marriage to his present Armenian wife; his great love for his children, grandchildren and the apricot orchard that he invited me to visit next time promising his wife would prepare a real Armenian meal for me.

The KGB days were happy days for Karen, I gathered. He still remembered with nostalgia the apartment in downtown Moscow and the dacha given to the family for free, then sold by him. His life as a taxi driver is not easy now. He is not young and has to work long hours. He tries to skip Sundays though, for Sunday is his church time. That's where he finds real peace. As the first country in Europe to adopt Christianity, Armenia strongly upholds the tradition: according to a recent survey, 80 per cent of the population firmly believe in God.

The valley covered with vineyards opened a view to Mountain Ararat. There it was, this majestic giant, eternally clad in snow from top to bottom, so close and yet so inaccessible to the people who still had it on their banknotes and coat-of-arms, with a tiny Noah Ark sitting on its top having landed there in Biblical times once the waters of the Flood have receded. In the 20s, Lenin gave Mount Ararat as a gift to Atatürk. The Turks argued that since the mountain became theirs, its depiction had to be removed from the Armenian coat-of-arms. The story goes that Checherin, Lenin's savvy Foreign Minister, objected: Turkey doesn't own the moon, yet uses the crescent on its flag. In two years time the agreement on Ararat expires. Do Armenians hope that the Mountain will 'return' to them? Only if Americans will take a stand on it, Karen said.

There is a Russian military base in Armenia. (Georgians quickly got rid of Russian military presence). What's the attitude of local population to the soldiers? - I asked another acquaintance. "We don't mind, and they are no trouble. They live among us, their children go to school with our children, they marry here; then go back home to collect their fat pensions for service abroad," was the answer.

Russia provides Armenia with natural gas. (Many Armenian cars run on gas). The pipe lines running alongside rural roads is the most astonishing thing I've seen. Elevated about half a meter from the ground, they are in no way protected. (I imagined a goat stepping over them while crossing to another field). For sure, it would have been hard to drill through the rocks (which is what most of Armenian land is), but what about a car accident? A drunk driver hitting the pipeline? - I got cocked eyebrows in response: Armenians, great lovers of wine, with a history of its cultivation going back 8000 years, do not get drunk. "It's the Iranians who come here for drinking binges." What about... well, terrorist attacks? - Raised eyebrows again.

Crime rate is very low in Armenia; streets are safe. Children play outside unsupervised. Armenians love and pamper their children. Education is of paramount importance. 80 percent of population is university-educated. Huge wooden chess pieces is not something you'd expect to see in the playground. Yet, chess is part of school curriculum for young children; the pieces are there for the kids to practice outside school.

In 2018 thousands of Armenians took to the streets in peaceful demonstration against the corrupt government. Who initiated the protests? "Young mothers with babies in their strollers, they came out, they were at the front line and they made our revolution." Festivities with fire works and school children in brilliant costumes performing national dances filled squares and streets on the first anniversary of a new official holiday, the Citizen Day. Celebrations continued till midnight. Each participant was holding a rose distributed for free.

Has life changed for the better in a year since then? The mood was cautiously optimistic. And though answers to my question varied, everybody agreed on one point: life hasn't become worse and the corruption was vanquished.

Given how pervasive bribery was in Armenia (the rulers' fortune exceeded that of the GDP of the whole country!) and how ingrained it is in many human societies, to be able to get rid of it in a year seemed nothing short of miracle. How exactly did it happen? Nobody could really explain, but I got a feeling that it was more like a social contract collectively reached and then acted upon.

These bits and pieces of observation, however, don't go to the core of what makes Armenia so special to me: it is the extraordinary warmth of its people. Western individualism, underpinned by Emersonian doctrine of self-reliance, will get short shrift in Armenia. Not only a friend of your friend is "my friend", but a friend of your friend of your friend of your friend is also "my friend" and will be welcomed into home, fed, helped, entertained and given gifts to. The magnanimity of spirit, the sacred ties of friendship and kinship felt both antiquated and wonderfully fresh.

What in the Western societies is now a rare exception, here, in Armenia (and in Georgia) is the norm: several generations live under the same roof. My urban sophisticated friend, an art historian, and a divorcee, happily shares an apartment with her parents, her father acting as a surrogate father to her own children. Another professional woman after the divorce shares the house with her 3 brothers and their wives and children. She doesn't wish to live separately from her family, but she would like to find another man and her brothers are not against it (an important issue for her), but with work and commuting it is not easy. Until recently, internet dating was alien to gregarious, out-going, community oriented Armenians, but now it takes root even among the young.

Nairi, a sculptor and a painter, has returned to Yerevan after 30 years of successful career in Paris in order to look after his widowed mother. A healthy 73 year-old was full of piss and vinegar accompanying her son to his vernissages and frequenting the art cafe that he has just opened. It wasn't the question of financial support (that could have been administered from France) but the only son, with no siblings, simply couldn't have left his mother to a life of lonely meals in her lonely apartment.

Mothers and women in general are respected and revered in this still macho and in many ways traditional society. Hovering over the city is a huge statue of a woman wielding a sword. "Mother Armenia" has replaced in the 60s the gigantic statute of Stalin. Whether she pulls her sword out of sheath or puts it in, is not as clear as the message her image conveys: Mother Armenia will protect its people.

There were so many more things I wanted to ask Nairi, but with all the hugs and kisses he was collecting from umpteen men and women of different ages along our short stroll from my hotel to his studio I simply didn't have a chance. How did he get to know so many people in the 3 months since his relocation from Paris is a mystery to me.

There are 7 million Armenians expats against 3 million Armenians living in Armenia proper. Many in diaspora are well-off and lend generous support to their brethren. Philanthropist Cafesjian has devoted more than \$128 million to various Armenian projects. His center for Modern art in the Cascade complex in the center of Yerevan is a tourist attraction: lip-shaped armchair; a Sedan, painted solid silver - doors, windows and all; a huge pink bunny, all these artifacts of American pop-culture of the 60s sitting on both sides of enormous staircase felt naively anachronistic and out of place in this ancient land.

In the upheavals of 90s, when Armenia became independent, the dire economic situation forced many Armenians to leave their country. Now people are coming back. Two artists, Gevorg and his sister Myriam, have recently relocated from Prague. Gevorg is a creator of dreamlike, whimsical paintings with a surreal streak, his smooth delicate brushwork reminiscent of both Persian miniature and early Renaissance paintings. His sister Myriam, a costume designer, devotes herself to reviving the old art of embroidery she deems to be on the point of extinction. Using her own funds, she trains several women in the school she's created for the purpose. How did she learn this art in the first place, I was curious to know. Archival photographs do not always help, explained Myriam. The distinctive feature of the ancient tradition was the smoothness of stitches: you couldn't tell the face side of the cloth from the inside. She needed hands-on experience, which she gained by trial and error hiring herself to restore costumes for the museums.

Armenia has called her back. She is now home. She has a goal in life.

But not everybody wants to return to Armenia, some are still leaving.

Older people, whose professional life was spent under Soviets, find it much harder to adjust to a new economic order where no jobs or salaries are guaranteed. At an open sky market a middle-aged, modestly dressed woman, was selling table cloths, runners and napkins with traditional Armenian designs of pomegranates and grapes interlaced with crosses. A hydrologist who has worked in a research Institute during the Soviet times, was now happy to get ten dollars a day on napkin sales. "The research Institutes created by Russians are dismantled. There is no way we can make a living here at our age. Luckily, our children are in California. And we're packing."

When God was distributing land between different peoples, Armenians got arid highlands and mountain ridges, whereas Georgians got black-soil valleys and the access to the sea. "How come you gave us such beautiful land?" - asked Georgians, obviously in disbelief at their own luck. "When I was handing out land," said flattery-thirsty God, rubbing his white disheveled beard, "you were not there to argue with me; instead you were drinking to my health."

What were Armenians doing at that very time?

Working their bare highlands? Tending goats on high peaks with wandering flocks of clouds over their heads? Mounting on vertical cliffs austere churches and monasteries of perfect proportions where tall, lean, aquiline-featured monks for centuries were producing illuminated manuscripts of rare beauty? Or were they carving khachkars (cross-stones) just as their descendants are still carving them to this day treating stone as if it was Venician lace?

Yes, Armenians haven't inherited fertile land; they've inherited stone. They have been writing their history in stone, the strongest of known materials to preserve human memory and deeds.

Articles: **3 Articles for this author**

Author Statement

My first initiation into the world of Academia happened at the age of 18, when I was a freshman at the Moscow State University - enjoying an important seminar presented by the famous scholar, Uri Lotman. Professor Lotman was teaching a course on Russian 18th century Cultural History, writing a detailed bibliography on the class blackboard in French, German, English and, I think, Italian.

We, the newly-fanged scholars and researches, looked at each other in dismay, but didn't dare to raise any objections.

Accepted into the Great Temple of Philology, we were treated as his equals. And, if we, for some reason, didn't have the reading knowledge of a given European language, we still had a week until the next seminar to acquire that knowledge! For the next 30 years of my teaching experience, I have been trying to bring this high standard of scholarship into my classrooms.

As a Ph.D student of this professor, I made yet another major discovery: that all aspects of human culture are deeply interconnected - in spite of a seeming fragmentation of the disciplines of those who study culture. In the coming years, I studied philosophy, psychology, film, theatre, folklore and visual arts. Together with my students, I am always fascinated to discover the hidden threads that connect all of our human activities across languages and borders.

In 1987, I emigrated to Canada from the USSR, with my two then small sons, two suitcases, and one hundred dollars - all the Soviet government - a proponent of Marxist materialism in theory but a defender of extreme non-materialism in practice - allowed me to take with me.

I became a producer and broadcaster at CBC Radio - a job I loved. However, subsequent downsizing of CBC took into account my nostalgia for a podium and returned me to teach at Dawson College in Montreal, followed by UBC and Simon Fraser University in Vancouver.

When I don't teach (or study), I write. Somehow I got to believe since my early childhood that I had to name things in order to understand them. But ultimately, it is my curiosity about human condition that brings me to my desk. As a person, I can only live one life, my horizons inevitably defined by my biography. As a writer, all I need is a magic carpet of fiction to experience infinite lives and circumstances in any part of the globe. Two collections of my novellas and short stories -- Tractorina's Travels and Runic Alphabet -- were recently published by MW Books. Both books are available on Amazon.com, other online resellers, at Duthie Books and other local stores.

In order to have this proverbial balance in life (but mainly to get away from my computer) I teach yoga and dance tango (with an often unjustified fervor).

In the meantime, my two sons have grown up. One became Professor of Mathematics of Dalhousie University at Halifax, the other a film star in Moscow with 28 eight films in which he acted. When you don't find me teaching or writing, it means I'm traveling to catch up on the life of my three grandchildren, growing up far away from Vancouver.

-- from her website
website

Lucia's Eyes and Other Stories (Guernica \$20)

Article

Marina Sonkina still recalls being 18 at Moscow University when her cultural history professor Uri Lotman wrote a detailed bibliography on the blackboard in French, German, English and Italian:

"We, the newly-fanged scholars and researchers looked at each other in dismay,;" she

recalls, "but didn't dare to raise any objections. Accepted into the Great Temple of Philology, we were treated as his equals. And, if we, for some reason, didn't have the reading knowledge of a given European language, we still had a week until the next seminar to acquire that knowledge!";

As a Ph.D student of Lotman, Sonkina learned that a variety of disciplines must be explored to study culture, so she studied philosophy, psychology, film, theatre, folklore and visual arts. In 1987, she immigrated to Canada with her small sons, two suitcases, and one hundred dollars, leaving her job teaching at Moscow University. "It was all the Soviet government-a proponent of Marxist materialism in theory, but a defender of extreme non-materialism in practice-allowed me to take with me."; Convinced her sons would eventually be forced into military service for Russia, Sonkina has no regrets about her exodus. One son is now a tenured professor of mathematics at Dalhousie in Halifax; the other returned to Moscow as a Canadian citizen and has achieved success as an actor in 28 films.

In Montreal, Sonkina initially found work in the Russian section of Radio Canada International at CBC. Now teaching literature at UBC and SFU, Sonkina has published a diverse, third collection of stories, Lucia's Eyes and Other Stories (Guernica \$20). The longer stories include 'Tractorina's Travels,' about a twice-married Russian who is uneasy about Perestroika, and 'Carmelita,' about a volatile, Bohemian painter who has a poignant, sensual and lethal relationship with a much older narrator, Joseph, in Mexico. Sonkina's new children's book is The Violin That Wanted To See The World (MW Books).

When not writing and teaching, Marina Sonkina teaches yoga and dances the tango ("with an often unjustified fervor";).
978-1-55071-334-3

[BCBW 2012]

Expulsion & Other Stories

Article (2016)

Expulsion & Other Stories by Marina Sonkina (Guernica \$20)

If any writer in b.c. can match the verve and intelligence of Moscow-educated Marina Sonkina, we haven't met them yet.

Should we also mention that she has a 6'6"; son named Yuri Kolokolnikov who plays Stryr in Game of Thrones to boot?

Sonkina's latest collection of stories, Expulsion & Other Stories, is nothing short of brilliant. Two-thirds of Expulsion consists of Chekhovian tales of survival set in the Soviet Union, but the longest and first story, 'Face', is a 65-page novella about Vancouver-and its apocalyptic ruin.

In 'Face' a wealthy industrialist buys his 24-year-old son an old bungalow next to the University Endowment Lands in Point Grey. The actor/narrator Matthew welcomes his freedom as a property owner and vows not to be tempted by the "madness"; of the real estate game.

Matthew's parents have already sold their home in Shaughnessy and paid seventeen million for one of the penthouses atop the 62-floor Living Shangri-La tower but he would rather sleep under a bridge than live in that sealed fish tank.

"With nouveau-riche Chinese gobbling up the city's real estate and its old Victorian-era houses regularly becoming bulldozer bait,"; Matthew dreams instead of opening a splendid new venue for local theatre.

To make ends meet as an out-of-work actor, he decides to rent out a tiny basement suite in his bungalow. The first person to respond to his ad is a young woman clothed head to foot "in a hijab or chador or whatever they call it.";

The completely mysterious new lodger, Erin, is seemingly a Moslem. She loves the garden. She wears retro sunglasses. She has a nice figure. Hoping to have a relationship between equals, Matthew pretends to be a fellow renter rather than her landlord.

They have beguiling and often loopy conversations. Maybe she likes him. Erin never has visitors. She has taken a job in a thrift store. How does a guy get to know a girl when he can never see her face? He follows her.

Bizarrely she enters a synagogue. His fascination with the lodger leads to a deeply disturbing revelation. Afterwards, Erin confesses she is a sibyl of the Erythian line in the 30th generation, someone who is an oracle who can foretell the future, "but when misfortune strikes, people blame us.";

Viewing Erin as a damsel in deep distress, Matthew dedicates himself to saving her. To

do so, he needs money. Matthew hatches a scheme. He will secretly sell the house. But he will only sell it if the offshore buyer promises to let them continue to live there. She need never know. A foreign buyer is found who agrees to let them stay. But the madness of the real estate game has taken hold...

Several of Sonkina's Soviet-era stories are more impressive and even more memorable, but the audaciousness of 'Face' and its completely unpredictable ending makes for a potent artistic response to the feeding frenzy of mini-Trump speculators who have made housing costs in tucked-away, provincial Vancouver on a par with Paris, Hong Kong and London.

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