

# BC

## BOOKWORLD

VOL. 30 • NO. 1 • SPRING 2016

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

**I**F 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.

**Staff  
Pick**

**Marina  
Sonkina**

**Tales of survival in the  
old Soviet Union and  
the new Vancouver.**

**THE MYSTERY  
TENANT**

LAURA SAWCHUCK PHOTO