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ESCAPE TO RUSSIA, WITH MARINA SONKINA

Submitted by erin on March 14, 2011 - 5:10pm

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If March seems to be the cruelest month, you may be turning to books for your escape — and Open Book wants to help you find the titles that will spirit you away. With Marina Sonkina's short story collection *Lucia's Eyes and Other Stories* (Guernica Editions), you'll experience Russia in various time periods, visit Mexico and Montreal. Marina tells Open Book about the role setting can play in sparking a story and recommends a selection of excellent contemporary Russian writers.

Open Book:

Tell us about your book *Lucia's Eyes and Other Stories*.

Marina Sonkina:

The title story of *Lucia's Eyes* came to me in Washington, in the National Gallery of Art, while I was looking at Zurbaran's painting of Saint Lucia holding her own eyes on a platter. The painting is exquisite but the story is gruesome: a Christian girl gives away her dowry to the poor and refuses to marry a pagan. Her would-be-husband denounces her to the authorities who tear her eyes out before executing her. According to one version of the legend, Lucia herself gave her eyes to her would-be-husband, who so-o-o admired them! In any case, she regained her vision before her death, getting the spare parts that you see on the platter.

So I'm looking at this painting, while I'm waiting for my son Uri to arrive to Washington from Moscow, and I am very anxious, all raw indeed, would be a better word, because I haven't seen him in several years since he returned to Russia to pursue his acting career. Uri went on to become a well-known actor and producer in Moscow, but then, in the nineties, he was a 6'6 kid invited by a Russian Embassy in Washington to perform as Santa Claus at an annual Christmas party. The party was unusual: it welcomed American parents who had adopted Russian orphans during Perestroika. And something suddenly snapped during that jolly show running around the 10-metre Christmas tree: whether the kids were intimidated by Uri's height or by the witch that jumped out onto stage, all of a sudden, all these well-groomed, newly-fanged American citizens began to howl and scream in a chain reaction of fright and misery. And no amount of gentle cajoling on the part of their well-dressed, middle-class new American parents could calm them down: the veneer separating the children from the trauma of their recent past must have been too thin.

And so the hidden pain of these former orphans, my yearning for my son whom I knew I would see for two days only, and this Zurbaran painting all interlaced into a story about a Russian boy, a gifted artist, growing up in Russia in the forties and becoming an orphan. The other stories of the collection come from equally deep sources. There must be some strong impetus, some focal point, viscerally important to the author, for the story to begin. Even if that focus would be later totally camouflaged by the unexpected turns and twists that stories are so prone to.

OB:

The stories in *Lucia's Eyes* take place in diverse settings, from Russia to Mexico to Montreal. What role does the setting of a story play in your writing process? Does a story arise from a setting, or does the appropriate setting make itself known after you've been working on other aspects of the story?

MS:

The setting is very important, of course. The story may arise from one element of the setting, one image only: a sound, a smell, a certain tree shape. What I'm looking for (mostly unconsciously) are "small drops of poetic essence," as Sanson said. Once I find these "drops," the characters start to materialize, slowly, in fits and starts, as I release them out of the lump of marble chopping off layer after layer, till, finally, my protagonists, in their mercy, agree to breathe.

OB:

Do you feel that it's important for a writer to experience the setting of a story, or do you have other strategies for bringing a place to life in your mind?

MS:

Pasternak said once that God is in detail. Indeed, art has to be precise. I remember, in my youth, you could see painters with their easels out there in plain air drawing and painting from life. But nowadays, painters mostly use photographs. Well, I don't have a photographic memory, so I still prefer to "draw" from "nature."

OB:

You were born in Moscow and escaped the Soviet Union to come to Canada with your two young sons. How difficult was it for you to make the transition to writing in English?

MS:

It has been and will remain difficult. English is a marvelous language in its laconism, elegance and precision, but I think that Russian allows for more metaphors. Emotionality is built into its more complex morphological structure. I can describe the blueness of the sky and inform the reader that it is a child and not an adult looking at the sky simply by changing one suffix



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within the word "bleu." Russian lends itself to an abundance of wordplay-double entendre, puns that I can not even dream of reaching in English.

And how to make each character speak in their own unique tongue, in order to bring them truly to life? Some generic, common denominator ESL version can't replace the nuanced, multi-layered linguistic awareness you're born into. So, it's tricky. I often feel like an eye surgeon picking in the eye of his patient with an axe instead of a laser. Of course, even writing in your mother tongue is an exercise in uncertainty because you don't know, and nobody will ever tell you, which is the best "scenic" route for you to take in order to get where you (or rather your characters) want to get to.

Writing in a foreign language triples that uncertainty. When I attempt to bend grammar a bit, to use the word "incorrectly" but still plausibly for a native speaker, then I'm really getting onto a mine field with no hope of getting out alive. But as Nabokov said, this is solely a problem of a writer that should be of no concern to his reader. Perhaps, something good can come out of this self-imposed straight-jacketing one day; after all, it forces me to a greater simplicity and economy of means, and isn't that a goal of any art?

OB:

Have you been back to Moscow since you departed for Canada? How has the city changed for you?

MS:

Yes, new churches on every street corner, like gaudy, trumpery toy-things. Give them a hundred years to grow some patina and they'll look every bit as beautiful as the ones destroyed by Lenin and Stalin. Shop windows decked with Gucci, Valentino, Prada — you might as well be in New York or Milan, only the prices are much higher. A bowl of borsht can cost a hundred bucks in a restaurant and there are people who eagerly pay that price. Yes, the city has changed in the most dramatic way after Perestroika. But I've changed too, so we play draw.

OB:

Many Canadian readers know and love the classic Russian novels. Do you have any favourite contemporary Russian writers whose work has been translated into English that you could recommend to us?

MS:

If we're talking of the 21st century, the great historical shift (the collapse of Communism) is too recent for the writers to grasp in all its consequences. I believe that distance (physical or temporarily) is conducive to better art.

That is not to say that literature in Russia is dead. Culture and literature don't die. It was the same after the revolution of 1917, when it seemed that the golden flower of Russian classical literature had withered. But on the ruins of the past, out of this horrible newspeak — a mixture of new Soviet bureaucratese and illiterate peasant and working class idiom — grew Babel's brilliant short stories; Bulgakov's masterpiece *Master and Margarita* published; Platonov's amazing novels. And then Chinghiz Aitmatov's novel *More Than an Age, a Day Lasts*, written in the 1980s.

Moving to more recent times, a wonderful read is Sergei Dovlatov with his light, humorous touch. As he wrote in one his stories: "Solzhenitsyn was a prisoner; I was a jailer. According to Solzhenitsyn, the labour camp is hell. But I think that hell is us, it's inside." Then there are three uniquely powerful women writers working in Russia now; Tatyana Tolstaya, Ludmila Ulitskaya and Ludmila Petrushevskaya. All three are easily available in the English translation.

OB:

If you could travel anywhere for the purposes of writing about that place, where would you go?

MS:

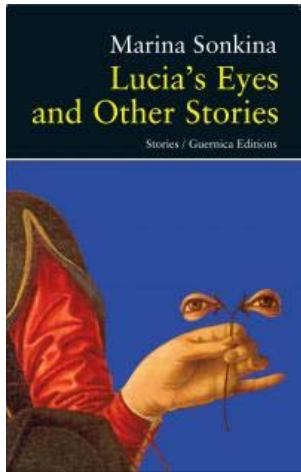
Oh many places! But I would go to Buenos Aires first. I'm strongly attracted to Latin American literature (Borges, Cortázar, Márquez) and also tango — that highly complicated art form — that I've been practicing for many years. But where will I find the old Buenos Aires, the real, not touristy Boca barrio, where tango was born more than a hundred years ago? I have this funny problem with travelling: beyond the present, I am always seeking out the past: I want to know everything about people who lived there before, in the buildings that are no more... That seems to be the only way for me to connect with the soul of the place. Well, this hunting for ghosts is not without its pleasures; it sometimes brings exotic fruit.

OB:

What are you working on now?

MS:

I'm finishing a novel that takes place in Venice, with an American poet attempting to write a full biography of Petrarch. What comes out of this endeavour is totally unexpected for the poet, as well as, I hope, for the reader. I'm also working on my next collection of short stories, some of which take place in Vancouver where I live now.



Marina Sonkina was born in Moscow, Russia. She taught literature and linguistics at Moscow State University until she escaped — with two then small sons and two suitcases — the Soviet Union. It took her more than a decade to settle into English before she dared to brave its waters with pen in hand. She lived in Toronto and Montreal where she worked as a CBC producer and broadcaster, documentary film researcher and translator. She taught Humanities at Dawson and Vanier College in Montreal and now shares her time between teaching at Simon Fraser University and the University of British Columbia as well as writing. She has published two collections of short stories and two children's books. Marina lives in Vancouver.

For more information about *Lucia's Eyes and Other Stories* please visit the [Guernica Editions website](#).

Buy this book at [your local independent bookstore](#) or online at [Chapters/Indigo](#) or [Amazon](#).

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Step three: writing your drafts

First draft (punctuation optional).

"Have you ever rolled down your windows to smell the aroma of an organic orange plantation on a summer night? Dreaming the ecstasy of citric acid delight rolling down your throat as samba rhythms pulsate to you soul. Spit seeds in muddy favelas; hoping they mature. Waiting for orchards to grow."

That's my poem. For the record, the next step is not to go to a writer's group and ask for help (We'll discuss writers' groups in another section).

Questions I now ask: What is the rhythm of my poem and does a particular line structure encourage it? Are punctuations necessary? Is formal, colloquial, patois or any other dialect appropriate for this work? Should I correct my misspellings?

My answers? Second draft:

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