

BC Booklook



'Face' mystery unveils property values

Few writers in B.C. can match the verve and intelligence of Moscow-educated Marina Sonkina.

February 15th, 2016

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

Marina 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* consist 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.



Marina Sonkina's novella 'Face' reflects the craziness of the Vancouver real estate market.

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,

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.



Marina Sonkina currently lectures on a wide range of topics for UBC.

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 Wlodzimierz 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

[ALL PHOTOS BY LAURA SAWCHUK]



Marina Sonkina in Russia, student days

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3 Responses to "Face' mystery unveils property values"



1. *Lisa* says:

March 11, 2016 at 9:35 pm

Love her style of story telling. Very talented lady.

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2. *Anne Miles* says:

February 19, 2016 at 11:44 am

Didn't I read this review in the last issue. What gives?

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• *Alan Twigg* says:

February 25, 2016 at 11:47 am

No. It has not been printed as a hard copy review. It will appear in the forthcoming Spring/March issue.

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