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Proof of art's power over life**CYNTHIA RAMSAY**

The characters that Marina Sonkina creates are vibrant despite the sombre, seemingly hopeless situations in which they find themselves. There is a sadness that permeates Sonkina's storytelling and yet there is humor, love and beauty that resists despair, and sometimes wins out, even if only temporarily.

Several of the stories in Sonkina's most recent collection, *Lucia's Eyes and Other Stories* (Guernica Editions, 2011), and her book, *Comrade Stalin's Baby Tooth* (MW Books, 2012), are set in Russia, from where Sonkina hails. Born in Moscow, Sonkina earned her doctorate from Tartu University – she told the *Independent* that she “was enormously fortunate to have worked under the tutelage of Uri Lotman, the world-known scholar and semiotician” – and then taught literature and linguistics at Moscow State University. She immigrated to Canada as a refugee with her two then young sons in 1987, eventually arriving in Vancouver.

Calling her coming to Canada “an accidental stroke of luck,” Sonkina began her Canadian professional life as a producer and broadcaster, documentary film researcher and translator at CBC Radio Canada International in Montreal, as well as being a teacher at the college level. She ended up in “Vancouver, well, when half of the CBC people were laid off, including me, and Montreal had nothing much to offer.... I have, call it an adventurous or reckless streak in me, but it suited me well that I knew nobody in Vancouver and had to start from scratch, that I didn't depend on anybody and could see things with a fresh eye.

“I've been teaching literature for the seniors program at SFU and UBC for more than 10 years now, another stroke of luck,” she continued. “I love my job, love it that people come to my lectures from as far away as Langley and Bowen Island. I have sort of a following, I would immodestly say, so I always have to reinvent myself, creating new courses, new ideas. My students talked me into taking them to Russia last September, which I did, and am going to do again next July.”

In addition to teaching, Sonkina has written the two aforementioned publications, as well as *Tractorina's Travels and Other Stories* and *Runic Alphabet and Other Stories*, and children's books *The Violin that Wanted to See the World* and *Snail Gail and the Stone Man*. In an interesting way, she explained how she has always been a writer.

“Thomas Mann once said that the writer is the person for whom writing is more difficult than for the rest of the people. In that sense, yes, I was definitely a writer early on, since it has always been difficult. And yes, I always wanted to write, not that I always could. I raised two sons as a single mother, probably the second most difficult life task after writing; then there was immigration. So, it wasn't consistent. But I've been always aware, even as a child, that I somehow needed to name things to make sense out of them and simply to be able to survive in this world.”

Sonkina writes convincingly from a variety of perspectives, male/female, Russian/Canadian, etc. When asked about this ability, she responded, “They say that when Flaubert ‘poisoned’ Madame Bovary at the end of his novel, he took to bed and was vomiting for three days. What can be better proof of art's power over life? You have to be vitally interested in people, to be able to get under their skin, to let their blood run through yours, so to speak, in order to write about them. And it's often more interesting for me to get under the skin of people who are totally unlike myself: ethnically, culturally, age- and gender-wise.

“Life is mysterious, and this is one way of lifting a veil off things concealed, things not given to you at birth,” she added. “On the one hand, the worlds any writer creates are imaginary worlds; they're not copies or mirrors of reality. But, at the same time, this kind of artistic simulacra has to be linked with the real world by an umbilical cord of truth; otherwise, it won't work. Some ‘higher,’ ‘absolute’ truth about the human condition. So, it's a tricky thing. How to achieve it? I wish somebody could tell me. Get up every morning, and write. And, in the days when you can't write, listen intently, in order to hear the music.”

Comrade Stalin's Baby Tooth is a unique publication. A satire of Stalin's Russia, its heroine is 11-year-old Natasha of the Village of Merry Limp. Lest readers think that it is a children's book, it is not. As the book's description makes clear: “Audaciously using grotesque as her method of description, Sonkina resurrects the fears, the cruelty and the absurdity of people's lives under Stalin.... The book, illustrated with color propaganda posters of the period, is presented in the manner of an official document from the KGB files.”

About the idea for the story, Sonkina explained, “You know, dictators have their way of interfering in the affairs of us mortals. I didn't think of writing about Stalin. Instead, I was working on a book about a scholar writing a biography of Petrarch. Then, one day, I took my blind father for dinner and, while I was feeding him, he told me how in his youth the railway workers stopped trains by throwing pieces of metal under the rolling wheels, which led them to losing their limbs. This image stuck with me and led to the book on Stalin.”

The idea of using real propaganda posters as images for the book came from Sonkina's friend Wlodzimierz Milewski (Zeev Gelbart), with whom she has worked on other publications and who the *Independent* featured last year in an article focusing on his publishing company.

“Well, this is my other stroke of good fortune,” said Sonkina. “The collaboration with Wlodzimierz

Milewski works extremely well. Milewski is as gifted as he is modest about his gifts. Not only is he a publisher but also an artist and a book designer, something that he often keeps under his hat. When I showed him the manuscript of *Comrade Stalin's Baby Tooth*, he had this idea of illustrating the book with the posters. It really brought the manuscript to life. The authentic posters of the '20s and '30s are a collector's item now and are quite expensive, but Milewski managed to buy some copies. I really love the cover that he created; I think it reflects and enhances the ideas of the book so wonderfully."

Two of those ideas are highlighted in the "Instead of a Preface" introduction to *Comrade Stalin's Baby Tooth*, both displaying concern for a history lesson that hasn't been learned. In the introduction, Sonkina mentions Stalin's image being featured on school notebooks as part of a Famous Russians series, and that the notebooks sold out. As well, she warns that Vladimir Putin "has extended his presidency from four to six years. If everything goes according to plan, he can be at Russia's helm for the next 12 years."

To a child who purchased one of the Stalin notebooks, Sonkina said she would say, "You know the expression, "blood on your hands"? You're holding in your hands the portrait of one of the worst mass murderers in world history. The drops of blood he spilled may get on your hands, they are invisible, but they are there. Return the book to the bookstore, and go and wash your hands!"

As to Putin's hold on power, she acknowledged that she is not an historian or a politician and that she has "no prophetic gifts. But I think that the colonel of the KGB as a head of the state, which Putin is, is not good news for the state. Russia has definitely changed for the better; it has lots of freedoms now: freedom of private enterprise, freedom of travel, etc. So, I don't think the country will return to the past. But the idea of a strongman who tells you what to do and how to live is still attractive to many people, and that is really dangerous."

Sonkina is working on a new series of short stories, some of which will take place in Vancouver. As a hint of what will come, she said, "The setting is modern, in our time. In one of the stories, rather, novellas, seemingly ordinary things happen in our city, things we see every day in Vancouver: a beautiful house is demolished, a spectacular tree is cut down without any mercy. But the results are most unexpected – totally different from just being an ecological disaster."

It is hard to believe, with how well Sonkina communicates in English, that it is her fifth language, after Russian, French, German and Italian. Are the stories she writes in English different than the ones she would tell if she were writing in her native tongue?

"Writing in English is very different from writing in Russian: English is a much more concise language," she said. "Literally, you have many more periods on a page. Which means you stop more frequently. Which means you breath differently, too. In another language, everything changes: your tone, your rhythm and the sense of humor, as well. It's harder to make people laugh in a foreign tongue.

"Writing in English also enhances the degree of uncertainty, which is a writer's lot in any case because you never know what will come out of your efforts. When you wash a window, if you did a good job, the result is immediate, you can see clearly, but with writing, you can never see clearly, and even less so when you are not writing in your mother tongue. That is to say that the difficulties grow exponentially, but then, as Brodsky said, who said we're monolingual creatures?"

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