

Air To Breathe - Marina Sonkina's writing journey

BY JANET NICOL

"I came here as a refugee," says Marina Sonkina. "You need air to breathe and when it's lead instead of air, you come to a point where you just cannot take it."

Author of two recently published short story collections, *Tractorinas Travels and Runic Alphabet*, Sonkina has covered much ground since leaving the "suffocating" Moscow she describes. An attractive blonde and now a grandmother of three, she gathers her embroidered shawl of gold and burgundy design about her shoulders, as this interview begins over coffee in a Kitsilano cafe.

"Friends of mine split into two groups," she says of the tumultuous days of *perestroika* in Russia. "Some looked at this as resignation and weakness of character because if you want to help your country you have to do something to change it. I didn't have the courage of people who walked in Red Square in 1968 for example, when Russia conquered Czechoslovakia. I wasn't a dissident. Nor could I accept the regime."

"I had two small boys and I knew when Russia invaded Afghanistan in 1980, my sons would have to go into the army. They would simply be cannon meat. My goal was to save them because they would have no choice."

Sonkina was a single mother when she packed two suitcases and left her career as a professor at the Moscow University to emigrate with her children to Montreal. She was the sole breadwinner while raising her children in a new land.

"It explains the fact that I couldn't start writing as soon as I'd like to," she says.

"I lucked out and worked for the CBC. I had English and French and I worked for RCI (Radio Canada International), a Russian section of the radio station. I hosted a program every day, as well as writing features and news."

Sonkina believes she made the right decision to leave Russia.

"It seemed that this crazy act of mine became irrelevant because after *perestroika* it appeared Russia was stepping toward democracy. But twenty years later—I don't think so. So I have no regrets."

"I think I did well in that my eldest son is a tenured professor of mathematics in Halifax. My other son went back to Moscow to train as an actor. He is a well-known actor in Russia but he is still a Canadian and is free to travel and live wherever he wants."

More changes came when the CBC cutbacks left Sonkina abruptly unemployed. In 1997 she decided to move to Vancouver. That's when she let loose her writing talent—in English.



Photo by Janet Nicol

"I have been writing all my life. I had short stories published in various magazines in Russia. But the whole business of immigration put writing on hold."

"The interesting thing was in Montreal, because of the French language I felt myself in between three chairs—Russian, English and French—and somehow I wasn't able to write in any of the languages. The switch to English came when I moved to British Columbia because English is the predominant language."

"I think I'm a crazy adventuress because I like unknown places. I like places where I don't know anybody. If you feel a certain distance from yourself, it can facilitate writing, so the fact that I didn't know anybody seemed to help me make the transition to write."

Sonkina's compelling story, *Tractorinas Travels*, a novella within her short story collection, is a layered account of a mature

woman's life under Gorbachev's post-Communist regime. Tractorina's unusual name reflects a former zest to glorify the workers' paradise of the Communist regime. But Tractorina's life after retirement as a crane operator is anything but a paradise as she finds herself alone and reaching out to family and community, deluded and careening toward an abyss.

"Everyone likes *"Tractorina's Travels,"* Sonkina acknowledges.

So how did this riveting novella come about?

"I have an image and I want to do something with it," Sonkina explains. "I don't know what I'll do. But I know I have to put it in some context.

"I talked to my father about his job and he told me that as a young man he worked in a factory and a

woman worked as a crane operator. When she needed to pee, the whole job stopped because she had a little bucket and everybody down on the floor—male workers—were waiting while she did what she had to do.

"I just couldn't get rid of this image because I visualised—I know Russia—I just imagined these labourers knowing what is going on but having to wait until she finishes."

Sonkina also read a news item in a Russian newspaper that struck her imagination.

"This was the 1990s and apparently many old women were ousted from their apartments for nothing. Somehow these two ideas came together."

Sonkina's most powerful stories may come from her life experiences in Russia.

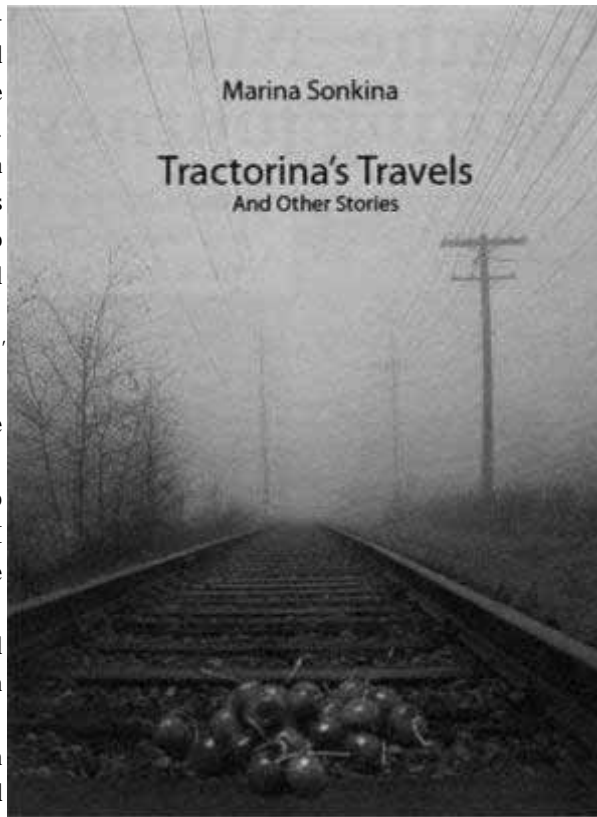
"It has something to do with the writer's identity, if there is such a thing," she believes. "Living in Russia, I tended to write about places that were not Russian. I guess there is nostalgia for the place where you no longer live. Now being here I look back, because the distance allows for a different perspective."

But Sonkina doesn't limit herself to writing about her homeland.

"Carmalita", for instance, takes the reader to a small Mexican town where a Canadian expatriate becomes a victim of his newly-acquired wealth.

"The bizarre interests me and that can happen anywhere," she says. "Wherever I find it, in any landscape, I just try to grab it. I was in Mexico and I went to a museum of modern art. The ceiling was painted blue and the clouds were lungs of sheep. I thought it was bizarre but I also thought I wanted to write a story around it. This is how I came to write the story "Carmalita."

Other locales for her stories include the Pacific Northwest, the Bahamas and Montreal, and her characters range from a California



flower child to a Belgian tapestry weaver. Sonkina's fusion of setting, character, linguistic skills and astute perceptions combine to create unique tales with an international flavour.

When Sonkina isn't writing, she teaches literature through the continuing education program at the University of British Columbia and Simon Fraser University.

"My teaching and writing are very different activities. I would like to bring them together," she says.

"Teaching is important to me because writing is a very lonely activity. I need to see people. I need to talk to people. Teaching helps in that respect."

Writing at a mature age has its benefits too, she believes.

"I am more interested in other people. I am not as interested in myself anymore."

Sonkina has accomplished so much before and after leaving Russia, but she is

driven to do more.

"I am insatiable," she admits. "I want to live many lives and yet I only have one. I want to see all the places in the world. I want to speak all the languages. And I want to know what every person feels. The only way to do that is through writing."

"It's a mad affliction," she confesses with a smile. "It depends on the day. Sometimes you think 'When will I be free of that?' but then when I don't write, I get depressed. Mind you I get depressed when I write too," she admits, laughing.

"Of all the activities I've done in life, this is the one that breeds the most uncertainty because you never know where you are and what will be the outcome, so it's an exercise in uncertainty. Some days you have satisfaction but many days you don't.

"But I think it becomes a way of life and you start looking at life as a mould for writing. You become a thief.

"I've always had an urge to write and I was a terribly frustrated teenage and young woman because I had to live life and I didn't know how to do both—and I am still not very successful. Still I think life interferes.

"So there's this inner tension that never goes away when you spend a whole day in front of a computer and you think 'Why am I doing this? I'm really missing a life. I should not waste my time.' But when I'm on the beach I think, 'What am I doing here? I should be writing.' I hope something comes out of this tension. I visualise this perfectly harmonious existence. That's my fantasy. But the reality is different."

Sonkina has read her short stories at libraries, book clubs and community centre events around Vancouver.

"I never know how the readers perceive the story and I can only know if I have contact with the reader," she says. "Every person likes something different."

"I have one story about a birth—men say they simply don't get it. Women say they know what it's about. "The Scream" was written in a metaphorical way about the horrors of birth—the way it is done in Russia in terms of medical help."

Getting to the finish line of her story is a race Sonkina continues to find challenging.

"Some writers find it very hard to begin," she says. "I have no problem beginning. It's joyful and wonderful and you start running. It's always a problem at the end. It's like getting out of breath. So when the beginning is done, and there is something in the middle, I often write the end because I know I may be out of breath. I may not have enough stamina to finish."

"I may change the end, but want to make sure I finish the piece—particularly because I write in another language."

"For every piece that I finish, I have five or six that are not finished."

All these battles are waged by Sonkina alone at the computer. She does not seek out writing classes.

"We have all the literature we need to learn how to write. I don't necessarily think sitting around a table criticizing each other's writing is useful. I think it is between you and God and the piece of paper."

Sonkina remembers literature playing a major role in people's lives when she lived in Moscow.

"It connected people to social and political ideas," she says. "If something comes out, everybody talks about it. People really lived for

literature. People were really interested in literature. Under the totalitarian regime it was also a very dangerous profession. You could lose your life. People still wrote. Somehow it played a much more important role in Russia.

"Having said that, it was a much more elitist profession, which prevents a writer like me from venturing forward. It's even encoded in the language. The word 'writer' means a very different thing in Russian."

Sonkina has many favourite Canadian authors, from Alice Munro to MG Vassanji.

"Canada is open enough to embrace everything. People feel free to do whatever they want with their art and it's accepted," she observes.

Sonkina is now working on two novels. "One of the novels starts in Canada, moves to Russia and spans 70 years of Russian history, from the 1920s to the 21st century," she says. "It deals with critical moments in Russian history and the role of art, politics and love. The other novel takes place in Italy."

After a long hibernation, Sonkina's unique perspective has been unleashed and now she is unstoppable.

"I am curious about the human condition and the mystery of human nature. It intrigues me," she says. "And I am reaching some other level of understanding for myself."

Marina Sonkina's two collections of short stories, Tractorina's Travels and Runic Alphabet, are published by MW Books, Garden Bay, BC and are available through the publisher and at local book stores in BC.