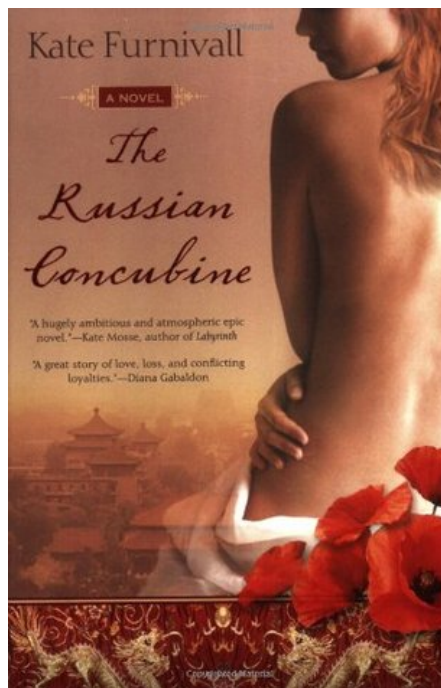




The Russian Concubine

Kate Furnivall

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A sweeping novel set in war-torn 1928 China, with a star-crossed love story at its center.

In a city full of thieves and Communists, danger and death, spirited young Lydia Ivanova has lived a hard life. Always looking over her shoulder, the sixteen-year-old must steal to feed herself and her mother, Valentina, who numbered among the Russian elite until Bolsheviks murdered most of them, including her husband. As exiles, Lydia and Valentina have learned to survive in a foreign land.

Often, Lydia steals away to meet with the handsome young freedom fighter Chang An Lo. But they face danger: Chiang Kai Shek's troops are headed toward Junchow to kill Reds like Chang, who has in his possession the jewels of a tsarina, meant as a gift for the despot's wife. The young pair's all-consuming love can only bring shame and peril upon them, from both sides. Those in power will do anything to quell it. But Lydia and Chang are powerless to end it.

The Russian Concubine Details

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From Reader Review The Russian Concubine for online ebook

Sarka says

This is actually Book two in a current trilogy that I am reading. Wow.... What I love about this story is that the author is not sugar coating anything. If blood is to be spilled, it is and big time. It opens your mind to the true Russian and Chinese history in the early part of the last century. The Bolshevik and Communist history. and in between it has the forbidden love stories first of the mother and then her daughter too. If you only read book 1 "The Jewel of St Petersburg" you will end up with a different ending to the full story and what you think happened doesn't really. It is a very clever way for the author to end one book in one way in case a reader only reads the one but if you choose to go the distance, you are shocked and cannot put the story down because you don't want to miss anything. The Author actually wrote book two and three first and then did a prequel to it but if you haven't read the story yet, I suggest you start with book 1. What an amazing trilogy.

1. The Jewel of St Petersburg - Jen's and Valentina's Story in Russia - The Parents
 2. The Russian Concubine - Lydia's and Chang's Story China - The Daughter
 3. The Concubine's Secret - Lydia's and Chang's Story Russia. Rescuing Dad
-

Zeek says

The Russian Concubine starts in the time of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia. Lydia Ivanova's parents, part of the educated and elite in Russia, are shipped out like cattle. At the end of their journey her father is shot in front of her.

Move forward to 1928 China, where the winds of communism are fanning the flames of revolution once again. Exiles in a foreign land, Lydia and her mother are barely surviving, no thanks to her otherwise beautiful mother's drinking and fragility. Both know how to survive though- Lydia by lying and thieving, her mother by manipulating men with her beauty.

Lydia is only 15 but she knows what she wants- and that's to get out of China. If she can keep her mother alive- and from spending as much as Lydia can steal- she's gonna make it.

One day a freedom fighter rescues her from the evil triad and her life changes forever. Love and passion never meant to be draws Lydia and her freedom fighter together time and time again... a love that may not survive their war torn country, his ideals, nor her duty to her mother.

I love historical novels. Especially romance couched in war settings. (What can I say, I'm a product of the overwrought melodramas of the 80's.) Still, it takes awhile to gain traction in this novel. But once I did- the pages flew. I would've possibly 5 starred TRC, but for the age of the heroine. Oy vey. WHY do author's insist on making the heroines teenagers in this day and age? Despite her age, this book is definitely not YA. It was graphic at times- actually I think *gritty* is more accurate. Why 15?? 17 even 16 I coulda handled better!

And yet. I seriously really enjoyed Lydia. She's brave and not stupid. I loved her interactions with her Chang, especially when they *finally* have time together. But I had to dismiss her age or I would have never made it. (Well, at least she wasn't 13. There is that.) It helped that she was in fact more wise and mature than her mother- a pitiable character, to be sure. sigh.

The novel itself started tedious despite a setting I love- but by the end I was all in. Lydia and Chang's passion was right up there with one of my other favorite historical war torn novels- The Bronze Horseman. TRC suffered from keeping them apart for too long, imo. But then, romance delayed always makes me impatient.

I probably wont read the prequel, Lydia's parents story, but I am definitely reading the next!

Ps my other bugaboo I just remembered was the title. At no time did I get that Lydia was a concubine... But then maybe my idea of what one is, is wrong? Either way, sorta misleading imo

Sue says

This is the first book in the Russian Concubine series. I happened to read the third one first which was a prequel to this one (The Jewel of St. Petersburg). I liked "The Jewel" so much better than the "Russian Concubine." The characters you meet in the "Concubine" seem so flawed and almost not the same people I read about in "The Jewel." I loved and admired Valentina in "The Jewel", but did not like her at all in the "Concubine." The experience of fleeing for her life during the Bolshevik Revolution and losing her husband and trying to survive in China must have shattered her to the point of changing her forever. Otherwise I would not think the Valentina character was the same person in both books. Strange. Maybe the author just got better and refined her story more as she wrote. By the third one, she had it down. I would recommend reading the third book first, then the first book, and the second book, in that order. I am planning to read the second book to finish up the series. I would recommend this series.

Jori Richardson says

Set in 1928 Jungchow, China, this book follows Lydia, a Russian young woman who immigrated there as a child with her mother. Lydia spends her days going to a school that her mother cannot afford, pickpocketing on the Chinese streets, and struggling to get by in her poor community. Her life changes drastically when she meets Chang An Lo, a brave young Communist code-breaker. Lydia becomes caught up in Chang's idea of freedom and equality, and despite their differences in culture, feels increasingly drawn to him.

Kate Furnivall's chick-lit writing hovers around mediocre to bad.

Amongst the positive sides of her book, she admittedly describes the rich, exotic setting of China realistically and lushly, down to the sounds, smells, and feel of the culture. I loved the way that this book brought China to life. However, there is a negative side. Instead of relying on her writing, she constantly describes China itself in the same words, popular examples being "exotic," "dangerous" or "strange," as if reassuring herself or the reader that this is what her descriptions are suggesting.

There are countless times in the book where any given character (almost every single one, in fact) somehow all have the same thought, something along the lines of "....but this was China, a dangerous and exotic country...." or "China was a world that was exotic and strange, and dangerous underneath..."

It was as if Furnivall was saying to herself "They got that, didn't they? Hmm... Maybe I better write it in outright terms - again." It got old and extremely annoying.

Lydia's relationship with her love interest, Chang An Lo, was a mess. It simply did not work. Calling this a love story is laughable.

Lydia never even has any romantic feelings for Chang until hundreds and hundreds of pages into the book (well over halfway through). Before that, she simply feels "responsible" for him and they go around stalking each other, one watching the other from the bushes or from afar on the streets. By the way, apparently having

a creepy stalker crush is remarkably convenient and will save your life and ward off rapist thugs. Trust me - it saves both Chang and Lydia, though mainly Lydia, in this book about half a dozen times.

No great love story translates into this story. The romance is incredibly superficial and cliché, without any believability whatsoever. When Lydia wants to run away with Chang, I found myself hoping that it wouldn't work out, because I just saw them as a casual fling, and besides that strongly disliked him.

Though Lydia's relationship with Chang falls utterly flat, the other relationships in the book are better. The way that Lydia and her mother are so close, and yet so far apart, seemed very realistic to me, and was probably one of the stronger aspects of the novel. Lydia's distrust and subsequent dislike of her new stepfather, which of course gradually turns to friendship and loyalty, is also well drawn, if not predictable.

Despite all this below average writing, I wasn't prepared for just how horrendous the ending was. I was expecting a conveniently finished, poorly written ending in which everything turns out well for the characters, probably via a love interest being suspiciously and conveniently stowed away in the nearest bush. However, the author used the ending to advertise her next piece of not-worth-your-time book and concluded in a cliffhanger. All of sudden, a character was abruptly done away with (and not in any sort of likely or believable way), a mysterious letter appeared out of nowhere (apparently that had been "hidden" for years and now the other characters just so happen to find it, and a great secret is uncovered! Wow, just in time for book two! I feel that ending any book this way is a cheap, tacky trick, and Furnivall is now forever blocked from my shelves or reading lists for it.

Sarah says

The writing is mediocre. Ala 50 Shades of Grey style- adult concepts in young adultish writing.

There's no transition between scenes. No buffer. It just switches from one scene or dialogue to another. I found that annoying also. Maybe works well on TV but sounds confusing and abrupt on paper. Especially in this case where there are so many plots which brings me to my next point.

Too many things going on and there was no direction. Is this a political thriller? A love story? Chinese gangs, drug trafficking, interracial love affairs, adultery, world domination?- what exactly is going on? Author strings us along on a bunch of little side plots that sound like she just winged this entire book and made up stuff as she went along to add extra pages of drama. It made the book super long. I was in too deep to give up but I couldn't wait for it to just be over already.

When the author introduces us to Chang, Chang talks about Lydia as if she's not even human. As if she's some mystical creature from another planet. I see what the author is trying to convey by doing that, but the wording just came across as lame. I didn't expect a book that uses the ancient and historical word "concubine" in the title to read like a YA novel.

"Mama tells me you are a newspaperman, Mr. Parker. That must be very interesting." Mr. Parker is actually a journalist. Do 16 year olds really talk like that? Lydia is supposed to be 16 but the author makes her sound like she's 8. Everyone has a pet name for her.. "Little sparrow", "little one", "red fox"... It's annoying. Her best friend is named Polly. I couldn't help but picture a little 8 year old super hero everytime Lydia is on the run. Then all of a sudden, Lydia is in love and the author makes her sound 35. She takes on this awkward mature persona inconsistent of the badass juvenile, calling Chang "my sweet love" as if they were starcrossed lovers in Romeo and Juliet. Major eye roll.

I was about to rate this book with 2 stars until I got to the end, which was actually the best part. I still think

there were too many side plots that made this unnecessarily long but the author did a pretty good job tying it all up.

Amy says

First of all I give this book two big thumbs up. I LOVED IT. I would rate it a harsh pg-13. Very little language, but a couple of steamy love making, and a couple of nasty violent scenes (all of which had to be there to make the book so great).

I'm going to start with a quote straight from the book. This sums up the books meaning.

"...now she knew tht you didn't survive on your own. Everyone who touched your life sent a ripple effect through you, and all the ripples interconnected. She could sense them inside her, surging and flowing, doubling back and overlapping."

I am big on British history. All the gallant men and proper women. This book took my preconceptions and flipped them upside down. Some times gallantry isn't about opening doors and being polite. Sometimes it's doing the right thing, because it's the right thing. Sometimes gallantry is knowing when to stay away. The biggest thing this book taught me, is that it's not just the British who can be knights in shining armour.

This book covers the chinese, russian and english people, customs and how they can clash and compliment each other. It made me see how love can see past color and country, even language. We learn from everyone we come in contact with and they from us. Once we meet nothing will every be the same again.

Louisa says

I REALLY tried to like this book. I forced myself to keep reading, thinking and hoping that I would get hooked by the characters at some point. But, I have officially given up. Considering this is a period romance set in China during the 1920s, you'd think this was right up my alley. I certainly did. However, I was never interested in the characters that much. (And as a high school teacher a love story about 16-year-olds is disturbing on many levels.) Also, I felt that some passages read like a history textbook. Ho hum.

★Ruth★ says

Very enjoyable tale, and although I may have skimmed a little bit, it was only cause it was a tad long winded in spots, but overall I really got lost in this story.

I believe I have done this the wrong way around and read The Jewel of St. Petersburg first which was apparently released after this one as a prequel but going by peoples reviews it's all probably worked out for the best as I knew all the background to the story and people in it :)

Jen says

[possible spoiler/s ahead:]

A deftly woven tale of political intrigue, betrayal and lies in a turbulent historical point in China, but at its heart a touching love story between two people—born worlds apart—who ultimately find love and communion in each other.

The Russian Concubine is very well researched and the authenticity of the setting and characters portrayed by Furnivall is spot-on. I can see why people would hate this book, judging from some reviews on the site here, thinking it a melodramatic and laughable epic, but that would mean they've unfortunately missed the point, and don't understand, or at least empathise with, the sensibilities of Chinese culture and in particular, the Chinese language, which is often so much more beautiful, philosophical and poignant than coarse (and inferior) English words could ever convey. So I think Furnivall's attempt to capture this rich but weathered landscape is executed very well.

Lydia and Chang An Lo's road to romance is bittersweet. I would also draw parallels with Theo and Li Mei. And that's the way love in a war-torn climate has always been—laden with suffering, but ultimately without suffering how can one appreciate happiness? When one's life can be snuffed in an instant? In this historical context in 1930s/40s China lovemaking and displays of affection are considered extremely private (hugs or pats on backs are even considered too intimate), so it's refreshing to see that notion being respected, but also unveiled, so to speak, in exquisite prose through the narrative voice. Not corny at all.

It's a cruel irony to witness Lydia's naive optimism for a Communist China, knowing the events that will occur to overturn a great, ancient empire into a wasted and broken nation, in the not too far future. I wonder what Furnivall is inferring by positioning Lydia as a pro-Communist, also given her Russian background. It seems that this is also a subtle critique on Western dominance in China, and the sheer arrogance of the Europeans to impose their values and currency on the Chinese. Think the Opium War of the late 19th century, for instance, introduced by the British to Chinese soil, which is briefly touched on in the novel. Furnivall seems to tell it as it is, and doesn't come to any sort of resolution. Yet. Perhaps we'll get questions answered in the next novel, *The Concubine's Secret*.

This is similar in tone to Jade Lee's Tigress series, so if you're a fan of that, I think you'll like this novel. Perhaps more so. This isn't for the faint of heart (but then, given the subject, it shouldn't be otherwise); it's a quietly violent but nonetheless bittersweet story of resilience and faith.

Jessi says

I chose this book from the book store mainly because of the front cover. The picture is very beautiful, and the title is intriguing. Although, after reading through the book, I don't really understand why it's called The Russian Concubine. Yes, Lydia and Chang are lovers, but concubine just gives a different connotation. Chang wouldn't be able to afford a concubine.

The book has such a wonderful array of rich and overlapping characters. If you meet a character once, you can be sure to meet them again in a different context. I do have to say that knowing the intimate details of the headmaster's love affair with Li Mei was a bit weird. I placed myself in Lydia's shoes, and knowing your teacher's sexual goings on is just not really something I want to know.

About half way through the book I thought I knew the characters and what would happen at the end of the

book. I was so wrong. I was never so happy I was wrong. I hated to think that this beautiful novel would be a predictable love story. This story is well written with several different converging story lines. Although, sometimes the relationships between people made the story flow a little too easily. Too many happy coincidences. Then again, without the happy coincidences, this book would be all dark, and that's not a good alternative.

The only bad thing I will say is that the author set up for a sequel, but hasn't made one yet. I would love a sequel to this novel.

KED says

First, something that keeps coming up - **the title**. My best guess is that it's called *Russian Concubine* because there are hints of Valentina being a slave to money from men - letting men have her to keep her family fed, clothed, her daughter in school etc. While she was not a concubine she essentially sold herself and used her sexuality to gain what she wanted or needed. It started in the first scene where she virtually offers herself up to save her child's life and towards the end she marries a man she does not love to allow for a better life for her daughter. Also – possibly because when Chang originally saved Lydia she was going to be taken to be a sex slave if she had been successfully kidnapped. Thoughts?

Though that may be reading too much into this pretty poorly written book. I would have put it down was it not chosen for a book club. I only managed to marginally gain interest in the weakly developed characters. The best thing was the detail of the setting, but otherwise it was trying too hard. The writing for the most part was painful in its over-descriptions that didn't work to create a palpable scene or character, but rather drivel trying to sound artistic or something: "*As translucent as dragon's breath. As fragile as the heart of a lotus flower. The bowl fitted into the curve of his hand as if it belonged there*" It honestly reminded me of when a high-schooler writes and uses a thesaurus to try to make his or her writing "better".

The plot was pretty poorly constructed – the love story completely unbelievable. The odd assortment of sub-plots that didn't mean anything. Then the 18 twists at the end as if it were sweeps week on a day-time soap opera... AND Valentina Blew up... AND your father is alive...AND Alexei is your brother... AND now we're going to go find our dad together! That was all after Lydia was kidnapped, tortured, Chang sacrificed his principals for his "love", Lydia murdered the gang leader, etc... Way too much plot for one book...with too little of character development.

I think the story actually had potential if the love story had been left out and it was just a more developed, tighter story about a mother and daughter surviving in China in that time period. The only two characters I really felt anything for were Theo and Liev... not even sure why, just seemed more interesting to me than most others. If you like romance novel type stories... this may be for you. I just appreciate good writing and good, believable character development to keep me entertained - not so much reliance on plot twists and turns and "quivering thighs".

Suzanne says

This was an ambitious first novel by Kate Furnivall, turning her mother's experiences as a White Russian refugee in China into an amazing, page-turner of a book.

The story revolves around Lydia Ivanova, a teenage girl living in Junchow, China in 1928. Her father has presumably been killed during the Russian revolution and her mother is struggling to make a living giving piano concerts.

China is a land in turmoil. Chiang Kai-shek and the Koumintang army are in a power struggle against the Communists, and somewhere in the middle are strong Chinese warlords, getting rich off of the opium trade. It's a dangerous place to be for young Lydia, and she soon finds herself in serious trouble.

I was impressed with the largess of the story Furnivall created. As the story wound itself into the Chinese underworld, I found I could not put it down. Her gift of detail and historical storytelling, found me appreciating this newcomer to my world of historical fiction. Loved it!

Kristina V. Ramos says

The only thing I didn't like was how choppy her writing was. Towards the end chapters were very short and there's no transition.

*spoiler: I think she went overboard by chopping Chang's fingers off and making him skin and bones; I don't think anybody would be attracted to that....

Ali says

Blech. This sounded exactly like a book I would love. It's historical fiction, lots of drama, a hint of romance in the storyline, but I couldn't have cared less what happened to these people. The first chapter was harsh, but it kind of grabbed you. Then, it was all downhill from there. The mother, whom you thought was going to be this big champion for her daughter, all of a sudden is horrible and doesn't care a fig about anyone in chapter two. I understand the need to make characters complex and multi-faceted, but this book just made me feel apathetic.

Liliflaj says

Fantasticna knjiga! Ima svega - napetosti, uzbuđenja, straha, bola, sreće, ljubavi, prolivene krvi, smrti, ali opet ... ljubavi, prave ljubavi ... Ovo je priča o jednoj mladoj devojci iz Rusije koja je prinudjena da se u mnogonacionalnoj kineskoj provinciji bori da prezivi. Ona sreće svoju ljubav, mladog kineza, koji postaje njen glavni razlog za prezivljavanje. Preziveće oboje - saznajte kako!

Lorileinart says

The Russian Concubine started out like Cool Whip: light & fluffy. But I thought to myself, "Sometimes Cool Whip is good!" Unfortunately, midway through, I began to feel as if I'd eaten an entire tub of that crap. Then came page 331, and I knew I couldn't read another line and still respect myself in the morning:

"...Enjoy this breath, Po Chu, because it will be your last if you call my beloved a whore again..."

"She begged. Ah, Tiyo Willbee, how she begged..."

"Begged? For what?"

"For our honorable father to release you from the deal with that monkey brain Mason...Of course the great Feng Tu Hong...was not moved by her street girl ways."

"I warned you, scum of the gutter."

SCUM OF THE GUTTER??? MONKEY BRAIN??? Really?

I checked real quick to make sure Fabio wasn't on the cover, but no, he isn't...I will count on my friends to tell me how it all works out. I'm done.

Victoria says

I finished reading this last night, and it was interestingly far-fetched to say the least, and sometimes shockingly so. It felt like the story was just dragging for a while and then nearing the end, the author just sped things up and it finished quickly, with some events that were so bad I think I actually liked seeing where they went next. It could have been better, but it wasn't. And I didn't like how some things just felt untied and on the "left-hanging" side of things at the end. The writing style helped make it worth the read though. It was vivid and imaginative, and at times it even felt poetic, which I very much loved.

It did have some interesting little twists, and there was one character I truly liked: Liev Popkov, even though he didn't play a huge part in the story, he was very likeable. I'm not sure I quite understood Lydia and Chang An Lo's relationship, but it did have some sweet moments. Lydia's relationship with her mother (Valentina) was interesting to me as well, on the point that I could never imagine having to go through what they'd gone through together and how they struggled so.

That's pretty much all I have to say about this book.

Lyd's Archive (7/'15 to 6/'18) says

DNF at page 109

I'm three quarters Cantonese and though I can't do kung fu to save my life, but I can rip this book apart.

First of all, I dnf-ed this book because it was 517 pages and I was not into it. I have a good number of reasons why.

Basically, this book is Tsarina and Tiger's Curse, only without the crappy fantasy element of the former and a bit less of the latter's unintended potential racism. It starts with an intense but cheesy prologue where they introduce our MC as a supposedly "Strong female" and all alongside a bunch of shallow supporting characters. Then we meet our MC again and the first thing we see her do is steal a pocket watch from a random guy and then our "strong female" gets beat up and is only saved by an "exotic" Chinese guy, Chang An Lo, who should be called either Chang An or An Lo depending on if his surname is Chang or Lo, but they call him Chang. And guess what? He does kung -fu! It's alright so far besides that, though. Our main character is unsympathetic, the setting is good, but a bit tedious....
and then the Chinese characters talk.

"It not wise to tweak tail of tiger, my love." (32)

"I sorry, mistress. So sorry. No be angry." (85)

"There no need to kill mosquito with cannon." (86)

"Thank you missy. Xie xie. You kind." (97)

And then the French guy.

"Allo, Ma Cherie is your Maman up yet?"

Pretty soon, the MC has decided she loves her exotic rescuer guy and starts thinking in purple prose. meanwhile, we start realizing that she actually isn't a strong female.

"Why would a Chinese hawk want to rescue a fanqui sparrow?"

Not to mention the weird "excotic" poetic voice used for Chang/ An Lo/ whatever he's supposed to be called.

"He stepped forward onto the road, inhaled deeply, drawing forth the elements of fire and water, and launched himself at the wall. A leap, fingers finding an uneven stone for half a second, then a twist in the air and legs flying high up above his head to the top of the wall. A silent drop to the ground on the other side."

Pretty. I should be enjoying this, but "the elements of fire and water?" Really? I mean, I don't think the author had any intent to be racist, but she's just trying too hard to make it period and it can rub the wrong way. And, no matter what time period this is, instalove and destiny crap have enough cheese to provide *Hetalia's* Italy with a lifetime supply of ricotta gnocchi.

National stereotypes, exactly. Not only do the French and Chinese characters talk the way they do, the British characters are basically all one-dimensional snobs who spend all their time calling Chang a 'yellow piece of sh**' and a 'thieving Chink' except Theo, and Mrs. Yeoman, the stereotypical nice old lady.

And it all gets worse from there.

"Leave? It was not possible. His soul was tied to hers.... To leave would be to die."

Let me inform you that he's stalking her and they've just met. Not to mention they constantly mention her red hair that, of course, makes her a fiery redhead and a "strong female" again.

"the girl looked frail and pale except for the rich color that glowed in her hair."

Meanwhile, our MC "was longing to talk about her Chinese protector," and "The barriers between his world and her were so high and yet somehow they vanished when she was with him."

[Cringes]

How do you know he's your protector? You just met him once in the street! They just met and yet "His fingertips longed to touch her creamy European skin." and "She had robbed his tongue of words." The last straw for me was this passage.

"Greetings to you Tan Wah," He murmured softly.

"May the river snakes seize your miserable tongue," came the sharp reply. "You have stolen away my soft maidens, skin sweet as honey on my lips. Whoever you are, I curse you."

"Open your eyes, Tan Wah, leave your dreams. Join me in the world where the taste of honey is a rich man's pleasure and a maiden's smile a million li away from this dung heap."

"Chang An Lo, you son of a wolf. My friend, forgive the poison of my words. I ask the gods to

life my curse and I invite you to enter my fine palace."

We left that kind of dialogue behind in the fifties with poodle skirts and big-budget politically inaccurate Hollywood movie musicals, right??

I am done with this book. Hetalia parody to come.

thewanderingjew says

In 1917, a family caught in the midst of the Russian Revolution, is literally ripped apart when Russian revolutionary soldiers assault the train taking the exiles out of the country. Valentina Ivanova tries to barter for the lives of her husband and daughter. Lydia is saved, but her husband is beaten and dragged off with the rest of the men and children who have been forced from the train by the soldiers. The book was very loosely based on the life of the author's mother.

At first glance, I realized that the cover would not have drawn me to the book, and although I found the first 350 pages hard to read, I soldiered on, because it was the selection for my book group. Finally, I gave up and skimmed the rest of the pages so that I could get to the end and find out the conclusion. I hoped it would get better and draw me back into the story, but for me, the book continued to descend more and more into the realm of the ridiculous. Instead of concentrating on the historic fiction of the time in the early 20th century, which was rich with information, the author chose to make it a silly love story, complete with erotic scenes, about a Russian teenage girl and a young Chinese Communist sympathizer, set in the International Settlement area of China in 1928.

Valentina and Lydia are without papers or money. They are in a hopeless situation, dependent on the favors of others or their own cunning for their survival. Lydia has grown up to be a thief and a liar, but also a survivor, at all costs. She is completely willful and unrealistic in her approach to life and the fact that she survives defies the imagination. Simply put, she gets away with the most ridiculous encounters with danger. The book requires the suspension of disbelief, as it often puts Lydia into the position of someone from the landed gentry, when she is really living in poverty, dressed in threadbare clothes and attending school on scholarship. It is odd that she knows how to behave appropriately in all situations. Her speech and attitude is often equal to that of someone raised as an aristocrat, rather than in an attic room by a mother often drunk from too much vodka. From moment to moment, confusingly, she slips from child to adult.

Her decisions are dangerous, naïve and foolish. She gives no thought to the consequences of her actions and shows little understanding or remorse for what her actions have wrought, even in the conclusion. Although she is bright and resourceful, she is thoughtless and shows little concern for how her impetuous, irrational behavior will affect others. It was hard to find any redemptive lesson or any healthy resolution to any of the issues raised in this story. Lydia experiences, first hand, the horrific brutality of the conflict between the Kuomintang and the Communists but the situations and outcomes are difficult to believe.

The story felt more like a flight of the imagination, than a novel reminiscent of the Russian past of the author's mother and grandmother. One scene in particular was simply inappropriate and completely lacked credibility for me. The young Lydia is making love to Chang, in her own room, while her mother is honeymooning, although he is only days from being lice and maggot infested, mutilated and feverish, unconscious and barely alive. In addition, she is sixteen, but apparently is endowed with healing skills and sexual prowess and desire, under these dreadful circumstances. What message was the author intending for her readers?

Tory says

"The train growled to a halt. Gray steam belched from its heaving engine into the white sky, and the twenty-four freight carriages behind bucked and rattled as they lurched shrieking to a standstill."

I should have stopped when I read the first two sentences over and over because I couldn't get past how ridiculous they were. Growled? Belched? Heaving? Bucked and rattled? Lurched shrieking? REALLY?! Because I'm pretty sure this is what we call overkill.

The entire book carried on this way. Everything was described in painful detail, but nothing was ever said. Drove me insane.
