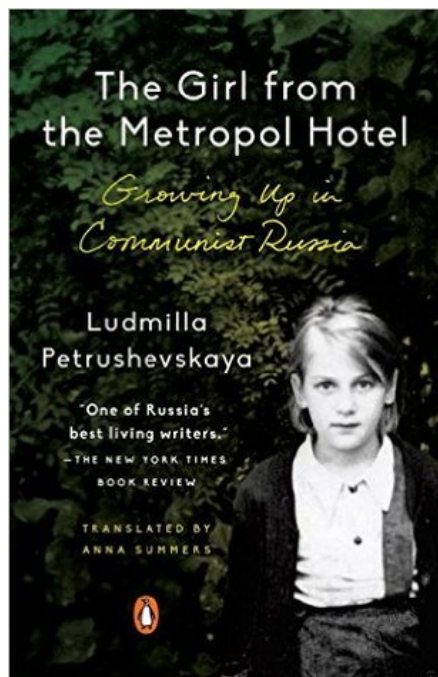




The Girl from the Metropol Hotel: Growing Up in Communist Russia

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya

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Born across the street from the Kremlin in the opulent Metropol Hotel—the setting of the New York Times bestselling novel *A Gentleman in Moscow* by Amor Towles—Ludmilla Petrushevskaya grew up in a family of Bolshevik intellectuals who were reduced in the wake of the Russian Revolution to waiting in bread lines. In *The Girl from the Metropol Hotel*, her prizewinning memoir, she recounts her childhood of extreme deprivation—of wandering the streets like a young Edith Piaf, singing for alms, and living by her wits like Oliver Twist, a diminutive figure far removed from the heights she would attain as an internationally celebrated writer. As she unravels the threads of her itinerant upbringing—of feigned orphandom, of sleeping in freight cars and beneath the dining tables of communal apartments, of the fugitive pleasures of scraps of food—we see, both in her remarkable lack of self-pity and in the two dozen photographs throughout the text, her feral instinct and the crucible in which her gift for giving voice to a nation of survivors was forged.

The Girl from the Metropol Hotel: Growing Up in Communist Russia Details

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From Reader Review The Girl from the Metropol Hotel: Growing Up in Communist Russia for online ebook

Nancy Brisson says

The Girl from the Metropol Hotel: Growing Up in Communal Russia by Ludmilla Petrushevskaya and translated by Anna Summers in 2017 caught my attention because I had read, not long ago, **A Gentleman in Moscow** by Amor Towles, which was also set in post-revolutionary Russia in the Metropol Hotel, located in the heart of Moscow. While I enjoyed the novel by Towles, I felt that the life Alexander, once a member of the aristocracy, lived in the Metropol Hotel might be a somewhat romanticized version of the fate a person would normally have suffered as an enemy of the people during those early days of the Communist (Bolshevik) Revolution. The new leaders were purging the nation of old bourgeois influences and the privileged classes. Petrushevskaya's story is quite different from Alexander's and conforms more nearly to my understanding of the complicated and unpredictable suspicions that often led to the arrests of Russians in the wake of the revolution.

Anna Summers offers a preface which provides some background. She begins by describing a May 9th parade that took place in every town and village since the end of WWII with rows of ragged and neglected veterans marching proudly, and then she has us picture the day of May 9th in 2015 (Petrushevskaya originally published her book in Russia in 2006) when there were no WWII vets left to parade through the towns and villages; there were only pictures carried by their grandchildren. She tells us, "Except sometimes the facts of a family's connection with the war weren't suited for proud retelling and were therefore often concealed from the little ones who would then be forced to hem and haw and finally come up with some lie. Sometimes our grandparents didn't just die gruesomely, buried alive in a tank, like mine or return disfigured or even return at all. Sometimes they were arrested and sent to the Gulag..." (Her father and her grandfather were killed in a mass execution in the late 1930's, even though her relations were prominent Bolsheviks elevated by the October Revolution, so she had no war stories to tell and this was a problem.) "The shared experiences of their childhoods – evacuation, hunger – were heightened in her case by the unbearable – and unshareable – extreme because of the social stigma that branded her an 'enemy of the people'"

Ludmilla's childhood with her aunt and her grandmother was hungrier and dirtier than that of most children because of the classification and execution of her grandfather and her father. The female survivors were ostracized and interned in a prison without walls. Ludmilla's story may begin when she was born in the Metropol Hotel but her life is lived far from Moscow for the most part. Whatever Russia was like after the Revolution for those who found favor with the Communists, Ludmilla's memoir of her childhood years shows what life was like for everyone in a family once a progenitor became an enemy of the people, even though the reasons were often obscure, petty, or even imagined.

Soon this famous Russian writer, Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, will join the ranks of those no longer living veterans of WWII. Thankfully she got to publish this memoir of her early hardscrabble existence and outcast state. We should not ever forget that the Russian Revolution was often an ideological quagmire with many victims, both guilty and innocent. Sounds grim, but is very readable.

Fergus says

At first an autobiographical slice-of-Soviet-life nightmare, but ultimately, a triumphant odyssey of a little girl

who, though she falls between the cracks of wartime Communist normalcy lives to tell the tale.

Now at page 67:

"By (the end of WWII)... I had become an unmanageable, wild child, a real Mowgli. Today they would have called me asocial. In Kuibyshev (my relatives and I) led the life of pariahs, untouchables. 'Enemies of the people' wasn't an empty phrase. We were enemies to everyone: to the police, to the janitors, to the passersby, to every resident of our courtyard, of any age... I didn't know what school or discipline was. I couldn't sit still; I read books at a fantastic speed crouching on the floor."

I love this one!

Terry Pearson says

I was pleased to receive an ARC from Penguin Books in exchange for my honest review. So, without further ado...

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya is the New York Times Bestselling author of *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor's Baby*. "One of Russia's Best living writers", she is the author of more than fifteen volumes of prose and is also a playwright. This is her memoir.

Ludmilla was born in 1938 inside the Metropol Hotel in Moscow, across the street from the Kremlin. It is the famed residential building that was the setting for "A Gentleman in Moscow." Today it is again a world class hotel. In 1941 her family fled Moscow in a cattle car for Kuibyshev. There they were treated less than unfavorable. Life was brutal. There was little food or clothing and malnutrition ravaging their waif thin bodies; swollen abdomens, dark and sunken eyes, stick thin limbs. Ludmilla's job was to forage through the trashcans of neighbors for morsels of tossed out food long after the neighbors had gone to sleep. I imagine how difficult it had to be for a young child to find scraps of fat and tossed leafs and peels of vegetables and fight her temptation to eat it right then, as her belly roars with hunger, not sharing with others. In the wintertime the family had literary nights and her granny would recite classics to them from memory. After the war the family returned to Moscow where Ludmilla was sent off to summer camp because she had become a "wild child." Camp tamed her and she graduated High School despite her poor grades. Later she attended college and majored in journalism.

Ms. Petrushevskaya's writing is nothing less than lyrical. Her use of words allowed me to see through her eyes and feel her emotions, attend her journey through relentless days of hunger, of feeling the least bit of cold. Throughout the entire book you will find no mention of pity. She dealt with her situation for what it was, uncontrollable. That is highly admirable given that she was a mere child.

I really enjoyed this memoir; it had heart and soul.

Dem says

This is an account of Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's personal life and experiences growing up in Stalin's Communist Russia. A slim volume of only 149 pages that is unsentimental, vivid and interesting and you

cant but help admiring Ludmilla Petrushevskaya and her feisty personality.

Born in 1938 in Moscow's Metropol Hotel, the city's most famed residential building(also called the house of Soviets because its rooms were occupied by the old Bolsheviks). Born into a family of Bolshevik intellectuals deemed enemies of the people therefore a lot of her early childhood was spent on the streets foraging in neighbours garbage and living a wild child existence. With great feisty and determination she survived the hardships to become one of Russia's best living writers.

The book is translated by Anna Summers and I especially liked her introduction and the following passage.
. The child in her book like all children has been endowed with gifts from two fairies, an evil one and a kind one. The evil fairy a definite heavyweight, took away the child's home, her mother, her father, her clothes, her toys, her food, and her civil rights, leaving her without shoes in Wintertime. The kind fairy, doing what she could gave the child excellent health, mental resilience a hunger for beauty and culture an unerring ethical compass and an array of talents..

A well written and interesting glimpse of the author's life told in simple prose and accompanied with numerous photos depicting landmarks in Moscow and images of the author and her family.

Trish says

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya was born in Moscow in 1938. The Girl from the Metropol Hotel is a short memoir of the time after her twenty-seven-year-old mother finished university and returned to her grandparents' house after four years away to bring Ludmilla back to Moscow. Ludmilla was on the streets by then, having 'escaped' the poverty of her grandparents' upbringing in Kuybyshev.

On the street in Kuybyshev, Petrushevskaya took cold-eyed account of what she could sell to earn enough money to eat. She sang, and recited poetry. After one particularly moving rendition of one of Gogol's short stories, a weeping woman in a large empty apartment offered her a green cardigan, which she took, a little perplexed, and not especially grateful. She wore it every day.

Petrushevskaya is said by some to be one of Russia's greatest living writers. I had never heard of her. I always have some confusion in my own head about a repressive regime and the awards it grants: do the things a regime praises have the same currency out of country? In this case, I believe so, as she has been living outside of Russia for decades. It is said that in Russia Petrushevskaya was blacklisted in the 70s, was published in the 80s, and awarded in the 90s.

I think the citizenry must make their decision, and whomever is read and praised among the citizenry is a good choice for longevity of reputation, particularly in Russia. Russians have a brilliant literary tradition, including important satiric writers who were long-suppressed. Russians know all about the importance of language and how it can move one.

The same way Petrushevskaya looked upon her chances as a child on the streets is the kind of voice she uses in this memoir. She is matter-of-fact and does not at all curry our sympathies for a cold and hungry childhood. Everyone she knew was the same. There was no feeling sorry, just being more clever, more lucky, more resilient. To live by one's wits requires keen attention, which must be how her writer's eye developed. Whatever had value in a certain scene is something worth remembering.

Petrushevskaya is also known as a playwright, and there is a bit of a playwright's multiplicity of voice in her memoir as well. She is able to see points of view and where they diverge, defining conflict. She has been

writing from Eastern Europe and America since the 1990's, though she recently began composing new lyrics for songs she likes and is singing on a cabaret circuit, that sometimes includes major venues like Moscow House of Music, around Russia.

Three books of stories have received wide acclaim, and *The New Yorker* published three. Her stories are said to be known for a fairytale quality, urban legend, or perhaps dark reports from a mystical, allegorical fantasy world. The books titles might give readers some idea of her grim realism: *There Once Lived a Girl Who Seduced Her Sister's Husband*, and *He Killed Himself: Love Stories*, and *There Once Lived a Woman Who Tried to Kill Her Neighbor's Baby*, and her latest to be translated, *There Once Lived a Mother Who Loved Her Children, Until They Moved Back In*.

Moments of real pathos in this memoir are written (and spoken in the audio version) with no pathos. Like anyone who has experienced the trauma of revolution or war, if one manages to survive, one often just gets on with it—with the business of living. Not another second will be spent wasted by looking back and stemming one's forward progress with regret.

The audio was narrated by Kate Mulgrew, produced by Penguin Random House. Anna Summers did the translation and has written an Introduction which gives readers some background, in case, like me, you'd never heard of Petrushevskaya. A short excerpt of the audio is posted on my blog.

Esil says

3.5 stars. *The Girl From the Metropol Hotel* was not quite what I expected, but by the end of this short memoir I came to appreciate it for what it was. Ludmilla Petrushevskaya, who was born in 1947 in the Soviet Union, recounts her life from birth up to her early 20s. She does so in the form of vignettes, focusing on different times and events in her life. What she describes is a ridiculously challenging childhood. The reasons for her difficulties are in large part due to the Soviet regime, but also due to her own family's circumstances. The end result is that Petrushevskaya lived in abject poverty, didn't go to school in her early years and had to fend for herself for much of her childhood. Despite these deprivations, Petrushevskaya went on to become a recognized author. What surprised me about this book was the tone. This is not told as a tale of woe, but in a very forthright manner sometimes veering into what feels like the adventures of a spirited imp. Petrushevskaya comes across as inherently unconventional, and always determined to survive and do things her own way. So while she describes really difficult circumstances, she does so with an air of defiance and triumphant. By the end, we learn that Petrushevskaya studied to become a journalist with a focus on humour, which helped me understand the tone of her memoir. In today's North American parlance, she is the poster child for resilience. This is a short entertaining memoir. I listened to the audio, and the narrator used just the right tone to convey Petrushevskaya's cheeky defiance.

J.A. says

RAPT.

Andrea Wahle says

This felt so very disjointed. The "chapters" felt like stories she wanted to tell about her life, but they didn't

seem connected to each other at all - and I usually like that style. Perhaps talking about herself in the first person in some chapters and using third person in others contributed to the feeling that they had little to do with another.

I was hoping for more about life in the Metropol Hotel itself (after reading A Gentleman in Moscow), but I did learn a lot about life in Russia during and after WW2. I can't imagine going through the trash of the other family in a communal apartment in order to make a soup from potato skins and fish bones.

I'm curious about her fairy tales and may hunt them down, but I'm not in a hurry to do so.
I received a free copy of this book in return for an honest review.

Jim says

What was it like to grow up in Stalin's Russia if your family was singled out for trial and execution during the infamous purges? Ludmilla Petrushevskaya looks at her life in a series of short chapters and photographs from her very first memories to the beginning of her writing career.

The Girl from the Metropol Hotel: Growing Up in Communist Russia is a collection of heart-wrenching and heart-warming stories of a childhood lived in poverty and persecution. The book consists of 32 short chapters, each detailing an incident or a person from young Ludmilla's life.

The courtyards of poor Russian apartment buildings were highly dangerous for young girls, with molestation or even rape being very common. The author frequently had to shout and run for dear life to avoid the leering boys:

The girls knew what had lain in store for me, somehow. Maybe they'd all shared a past in the caves, where their female ancestors were chased down and used. (How quickly can children regress to a primitive life, accept its simple truths! Common fire and women; collective meals shared equally; the leaders get more, the cweak get less or nothing. Sleep together on a filthy floor; grab food from a single pile; pass around a cigarette butt; not be digusted with others' fluids; dress in identical rags ...)

We also get a chance to see some of Ludmilla's favorite (and least favorite) teachers, especially Sanych, who was instrumental in turning her away from her formerly dismal academic habits.

Finally, we see the saucy young Ludmilla embarked on her career in journalism and writing. I could only hope that Ms. Petrushevskaya continues her autobiographical essays. The ones in this book are crisp and bright, and give clues to how to survive in a forbidding world.

Diane S ? says

Left with her grandmother while her mother went to Moscow to finish her education, a very young Ludmilla, was sent to go through neighbors garbage. Potato peels meant food, cabbage leaves maybe a soup. She and other feral children would climb in the bread man's wagon while he Was making a delivery and lick breadcrumbs from the wagon floor. She could not attend school as she had no shoes, and in summer she ran wild, sleeping where she could. She would not have her own bed, and this a cot, until she was seventeen.

This was life for her family in Stalin's Russia. Yet, this young woman, from this disadvantaged family would

become one of Russia's more successful authors. This is her story, how she lived, what she did. The prose is relatively simple, without sentiment, occasional references to fairytales, or quotes from them. It always amazes me how someone rises to success after woeful beginnings and how some sink instead under the weight. Dwells little on Soviet political policies, it is rather a view of how many ordinary Russians lived under his dictatorship.

A powerful story, one that cries to be heard, effective because of the narrow scope and poignant In the difficulties and hardships it presented. Photos are included. An admirable woman who not only survived but in later years thrived.

ARC from publisher.

Karyl says

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya is an award-winning writer in Russia, but this is the first piece of hers I've ever read. As a child of the 1980s, the USSR fascinated and frightened me both, and I've read lots of things pertaining to that time period and place. This was probably the most unique piece.

This isn't a true memoir; it only covers Petrushevskaya's childhood up to her early 20s, and it's really a collection of vignettes to illustrate the difficulty of her life under the Communist regime. Even though everyone was supposed to be equal under Communism, Petrushevskaya's family were enemies of the state, and as such they were not entitled to even the bare necessities of life. Living with her mother under her grandfather's desk was the closest thing they had to a home. When she lived with her mother and aunt as a young child, food was potato peelings and garbage scrounged from the neighbors' trash bins. Petrushevskaya ran wild through the streets, as feral as a cat, until she was finally taken home to Moscow with her mother and sent to various schools and camps.

From this unusual and feral childhood, Petrushevskaya manages to make something of herself and becomes an award-winning author. She pulls no punches in this memoir but speaks almost with detachment of all the woes she endured at such a young age. She was too busy surviving to bemoan her fate.

This is definitely an interesting memoir, but without knowing more about Petrushevskaya, I felt I never really connected with her. Perhaps a fan of her writing will enjoy this memoir more.

KWinks says

This was fascinating. Petrushevskaya turned what could be considered by some to be a nightmare of a childhood into a triumph, letting it shape her amazingly creative storytelling. She is an inspiration.

Paula says

This could have been a great book, but I found it went all over the place and did not flow smoothly. Don't know if this is an effect of the translation or if it is the author's style of writing. But the events and Russian history portrayed in this little memoir were fascinating. I would love to see each of them described in more detail, and in a better writing style.

Chrissie says

Impressive. So much is said in such a short book. The writing is strong, full of emotion and there is not a single wasted word.

This book is an autobiography, presented in the form of snapshots drawing important experiences in the author's life. Each "snapshot" is a short chapter. The telling moves forward chronologically. What is told of are those experiences that shaped Ludmilla. A pet, a circus performance, summer camp, a doll, as well as abodes, education (when it finally occurred), absence of parents and family deaths. All have importance. Important because they not only let us draw a picture of her life but also clearly reveal the author's personality. We start from her mother's impregnation on her 21st birthday followed by Ludmilla's birth in the Metropol Hotel nine months later (in 1938). We follow through to the fifties when she completed her five years of study in journalism, her travel to Kazakhstan and finally her first radio engagement.

Even from a young age her writing was recognized as being exceptional. It is her writing ability that makes this book shine. I will give one quote from the journey she made on the steppes of Kazakhstan:

There is nothing more beautiful than the steppe. Nothing. Even the ocean is smaller and ends sooner. For the rest of my days I will remember the sunrise over the steppe, a recently plowed purple earth and an orange sun trembling over the horizon like an enormous yolk.

Her career took off on the steppes at a socialist construction site. In her oral exam for journalism she stated that it is necessary to study life before writing about it. One chapter is about this exam. It is near the end and says so much about who she had become. The chapters before show vividly how her life experiences had shaped her.

Please read below, my comment at the halfway mark.

The audiobook is very well narrated by Anna Summers. The strength of the writing comes to the fore through the strength and clarity of the reading. In the beginning she reads too rapidly. Later she slows down.

Halfway through this very short book: I do **very** much like The Girl from the Metropol Hotel: Growing Up in Communist Russia. What is important to note is that word FROM in the title; she does NOT reside in the hotel very long. The book is not about the hotel. This doesn't bother me in the least. You get glimpses of a waif's existence. She is in reality an abandoned child surviving on her own during and after the Great Patriotic War. It is so very good because the author writes well. The author captures the essence of her childhood memories. No unnecessary words. What is there is gritty and real and grabs you.

Caren says

I read this because it is on the short list for the National Book Critics Circle Award (for autobiography). I suppose I was a little disappointed in it. Her descriptions of the deprivations of living in the old Soviet Union didn't feel unusual. They are her own particular deprivations, of course, but it was a miserable time and place for most people then, especially those who were at odds with the regime. The book felt so disjointed, as though no chapter attached to any other. They seemed to be random memories. It had a Dickensian feel in that she was so poor, but so plucky. She really had to live by her wits. I wouldn't recommend it for younger kids, even though it is about a childhood. There are quite a few cases in which she saves herself, by her own intuitive instincts, from rape. Mostly, these accounts are somewhat veiled, but they are still pretty grim. There is an aura of menace around her and she often seems to be feral. I guess you'd have to be a bit wild to survive what she did. Not a pleasant read, I'd recommend it for those interested in the history of the old Soviet Union during and after World War II. (She was born in 1938, so was a child during the war.)
