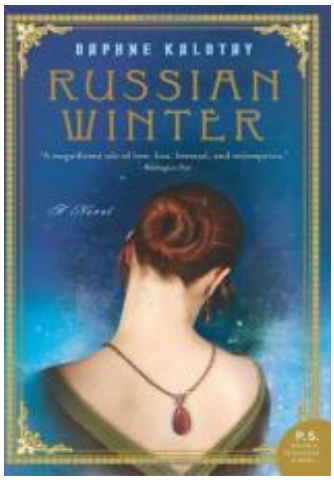
Russian Winter

by Daphne Kalotay



About the Book

A mysterious jewel holds the key to a life-changing secret, in this breathtaking tale of love and art, betrayal and redemption.

When she decides to auction her remarkable jewelry collection, Nina Revskaya, once a great star of the Bolshoi Ballet, believes she has finally drawn a curtain on her past. Instead, the former ballerina finds herself overwhelmed by memories of her homeland and of the events, both glorious and heartbreaking, that changed the course of her life half a century ago.

It was in Russia that she discovered the magic of the theater; that she fell in love with the poet Viktor Elsin; that she and her dearest companions --- Gersh, a brilliant composer, and the exquisite Vera, Nina?s closest friend --- became victims of Stalinist aggression. And it was in Russia that a terrible discovery incited a deadly act of betrayal --- and an ingenious escape that led Nina to the West and eventually to Boston.

Nina has kept her secrets for half a lifetime. But two people will not let the past rest: Drew Brooks, an inquisitive young associate at a Boston auction house, and Grigori Solodin, a professor of Russian who believes that a unique set of jewels may hold the key to his own ambiguous past. Together these unlikely partners begin to unravel a mystery surrounding a love letter, a poem, and a necklace of unknown provenance, setting in motion a series of revelations that will have life-altering consequences for them all.

Interweaving past and present, Moscow and New England, the backstage tumult of the dance world and the transformative power of art, Daphne Kalotay?s luminous first novel --- a literary page-turner of the highest order --- captures the uncertainty and terror of individuals powerless to withstand the forces of history, while affirming that even in times of great strife, the human spirit reaches for beauty and grace, forgiveness and transcendence.

Discussion Guide

1. How would you describe Nina Revskaya? What kind a person was she? Do you sympathize with the way events shaped the woman she became? And how would you compare her with Vera Borodina? What exactly was the nature of their friendship? What held them back from sharing their deepest secrets?

2. How does living in a repressive society like Stalin's Soviet Union affect human relationships? Can real trust ever be formed between friends, spouses, colleagues? What risks do people face in revealing their true nature?

3. Each piece of Nina's jewelry denotes a particular memory. Why do you think she waited so long to finally part with her jewels? Are there memories we have that are too painful to face, yet too dear to let go of? Do any of your possessions hold a special memory for you?

4. In your opinion, did Viktor Elsin truly love Nina? Did she love him? What about Gersh and Vera? What sacrifices were each willing to make for love?

5. After she defected, Nina believed she had shed the first third of her life. To what extent was this true? Can we ever truly rid ourselves of parts of our lives --- or ourselves --- that we don't like? What is the price of forgetting?

6. Nina cherished the solitude of her later years. "She relished the very texture of her privacy, its depth of space and freedom, much of an entire day hers alone. Her early life of always sharing, never a private moment or corner or closet shelf of her own, had left her hungry for this." Was her solitude a release, or was it a fortress she used to keep others --- and the past --- away?

7. Was Nina a victim of the society in which she was raised --- or a perpetrator of its worst abuses? Would her ambitions have eventually led her to behave the way her jealousy ultimately caused her to act? Was Nina's jealousy justified? Did Viktor, Gershstein, and Vera have a hand in their own demise? Are the choices Nina made forgivable?

8. Themes of art, politics, and love are intertwined throughout the novel. How do art and politics influence each other? Can art be a release from political oppression? In what ways can it be oppression's tool?

9. Can art flourish in a repressive state? How does repression influence the creation and expression of art? In a repressive state like the Soviet Union, must artistic success be accompanied by compromise? Compare the choices that Viktor, Nina, Gersh, and Vera made.

10. Were Gersh, Viktor and Vera radicals? What makes someone a dissident? Why do nations like the former Soviet Union insist on silencing all criticism?

11. What did art --- the ballet --- mean to Nina? Did she have to make a choice between dance and love? Could she have balanced both? What about women today? Have choices become easier or more difficult as opportunities for women have expanded?

12. Zoltan, also a refugee from the Iron Curtain, tells Grigori, "I remember before I left Hungary understanding completely that literature could save me as much as it could get me killed. Of course it's not like that here. But isn't it

funny, that in some ways the price one pays for freedom of speech is?a kind of indifference." What does he mean by this? What do you think of his viewpoint? Must an artist suffer in some way to produce art?

13. After Nina defected to the West, she found she could not enjoy all of its freedoms. "Even when she tried to will it open, Nina's heart would not budge." Why couldn't she open herself up to new love and new friends? What held her back --- habit, or guilt?

14. What do you think of Drew Brooks? Do you see similarities between her and Nina? What are your impressions of Grigori Solodin? How are he and Nina alike?

15. What did Drew and Grigori offer each other that others could not? Do you think their personalities and experiences made them more attuned to Nina's unconscious longings and regrets?

16. Why did Nina refuse to see Grigori on the occasions he tried to contact her? How were their assumptions about each other wrong?

17. On their third anniversary, Viktor tells Nina, "love is all we have." But for Nina, it is dance and love. And years later, Grigori's colleague and friend Zoltan remarks, "There are only two things that really matter in life. Literature and love." Can art change the world --- change who we are? Can love? Has love or a passion transformed you or someone you know?

18. Have you ever met anyone who has lived under repressive circumstances? How did discovering their story affect you or your outlook?

19. Did Grigori ultimately have a better life --- though it was fraught with uncertainty --- because of Nina's selfishness? How might his experience have been different if he'd grown up in the Soviet Union rather than Europe and eventually America?

Author Bio

Daphne Kalotay grew up in New Jersey, where her parents had relocated from Ontario; her mother is Canadian, her father is Hungarian. She attended Vassar College, majoring in psychology, before moving to Boston to attend Boston University's graduate program in fiction writing. She stayed on at BU to study with Saul Bellow as part of the University Professors program, where she earned a PhD in Modern and Contemporary literature, writing her dissertation on one of her favorite writers, Mavis Gallant. Her interview with Mavis Gallant can be found in the *Paris Review*'s Writers-at-work series.

At Boston University, Daphne's stories won the school's Florence Engell Randall Fiction Prize and a Henfield Foundation Award. Her first book, the fiction collection CALAMITY AND OTHER STORIES, includes work first published in *Agni*, *Good Housekeeping*, *The Literary Review*, *Missouri Review*, *Michigan Quarterly Review* and *Prairie Schooner*, and was short-listed for the Story Prize.

Daphne has taught literature and creative writing at Boston University, Skidmore College and Middlebury College. She lives in the Boston area.

Critical Praise

"Daphne Kalotay captivates in a soaring debut novel. An elegant, compelling puzzle of family, memory and solitude that brings to life modern-day Boston and postwar Russia through a profound love story. Graceful, moving, and unexpected."

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