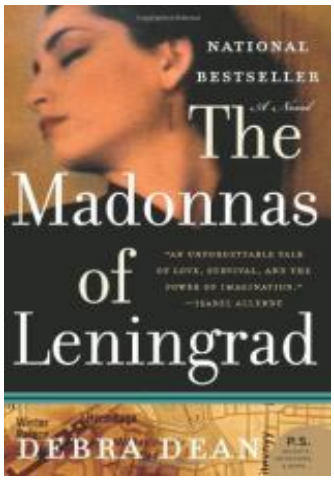
The Madonnas of Leningrad

by Debra Dean



About the Book

One of the most talked about books of the year . . . Bit by bit, the ravages of age are eroding Marina's grip on the everyday. And while the elderly Russian woman cannot hold on to fresh memories?the details of her grown children's lives, the approaching wedding of her grandchild?her distant past is preserved: vivid images that rise unbidden of her youth in war-torn Leningrad.

In the fall of 1941, the German army approached the outskirts of Leningrad, signaling the beginning of what would become a long and torturous siege. During the ensuing months, the city's inhabitants would brave starvation and the bitter cold, all while fending off the constant German onslaught. Marina, then a tour guide at the Hermitage Museum, along with other staff members, was instructed to take down the museum's priceless masterpieces for safekeeping, yet leave the frames hanging empty on the walls?a symbol of the artworks' eventual return. To hold on to sanity when the Luftwaffe's bombs began to fall, she burned to memory, brushstroke by brushstroke, these exquisite artworks: the nude figures of women, the angels, the serene Madonnas that had so shortly before gazed down upon her. She used them to furnish a "memory palace," a personal Hermitage in her mind to which she retreated to escape terror, hunger, and encroaching death. A refuge that would stay buried deep within her, until she needed it once more. . . .

Seamlessly moving back and forth in time between the Soviet Union and contemporary America, **The Madonnas of Leningrad** is a searing portrait of war and remembrance, of the power of love, memory, and art to offer beauty, grace, and hope in the face of overwhelming despair. Gripping, touching, and heartbreaking, it marks the debut of Debra Dean, a bold new voice in American fiction.

Discussion Guide

1. The working of memory is a key theme of this novel. As a young woman, remembering the missing paintings is a deliberate act of survival and homage for Marina. In old age, however, she can no longer control what she remembers or

forgets. "More distressing than the loss of words is the way that time contracts and fractures and drops her in unexpected places." How has Dean used the vagaries of Marina's memory to structure the novel? How does the narrative itself mimic the ways in which memory functions?

2. Sometimes, Marina finds consolations within the loss of her short-term memory. "One of the effects of this deterioration seems to be that as the scope of her attention narrows, it also focuses like a magnifying glass on smaller pleasures that have escaped her notice for years." Is aging merely an accumulation of deficits or are there gifts as well?

3. The narrative is interspersed with single-page chapters describing a room or a painting in the Hermitage Museum. Who is describing these paintings and what is the significance of the paintings chosen? How is each interlude connected to the chapter that follows?

4. The historical period of **The Madonnas of Leningrad** begins with the outbreak of war. How is war portrayed in this novel? How is this view of World War II different from or similar to other accounts you have come across?

5. Even though she says of herself that she is not a "believer," in what ways is Marina spiritual? Discuss Marina's faith: how does her spirituality compare with conventional religious belief? How do religion and miracles figure in this novel? What are the miracles that occur in **The Madonnas of Leningrad**?

6. A central mystery revolves around Andre's conception. Marina describes a remarkable incident on the roof of the Hermitage when one of the statues from the roof of the Winter Palace, "a naked god," came to life, though she later discounts this as a hallucination. In her dotage, she tells her daughter-in-law that Andre's father is Zeus. Dmitri offers other explanations: she may have been raped by a soldier or it's possible that their only coupling before he went off to the front resulted in a son. What do you think actually happened? Is it a flaw or a strength of the novel that the author doesn't resolve this question?

7. At the end of Marina's life, Helen admits that "once she had thought that she might discover some key to her mother if only she could get her likeness right, but she has since learned that the mysteries of another person only deepen, the longer one looks." How well do we ever know our parents? Are there things you've learned about your parents' past that helped you feel you knew them better?

8. In much the same way that Marina is struggling with getting old, her daughter, Helen, is struggling with disappointments and regrets often associated with middle-age: her marriage has failed, her son is moving away, she may never get any recognition as an artist, and last but not least, she is losing a life-long battle with her weight. Are her feelings of failure the result of poor choices and a bad attitude or are such feelings an inevitable part of the human condition?

9. In a sense, the novel has two separate but parallel endings: the young Marina giving the cadets a tour of the museum, and the elderly Marina giving the carpenter a tour of an unfinished house. What is the function of this coda? How would the novel be different if it ended with the cadets' tour?

10. What adjectives would you use to describe **The Madonnas of Leningrad**? Given the often bleak subject matter - war, starvation, dementia -- is the novel's view of the world depressing?

Author Bio

Debra Dean was born and raised in Seattle. At Whitman College, she double-majored in English and Drama. After college, she worked in the New York and regional theatre for nearly a decade and met her husband when they were cast as brother and sister in A.R. Gurney?s play The Dining Room. She received her MFA from the University of Oregon and has taught creative writing and literature since 1990. She now lives in Miami where she teaches in the MFA program at Florida International University.

Dean is the author of three books: The Mirrored World (Fall, 2012); Confessions of a Falling Woman, short stories (2008); and her debut novel, The Madonnas of Leningrad (2006), which has been published in twenty languages and remains a perennial book group favorite.

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