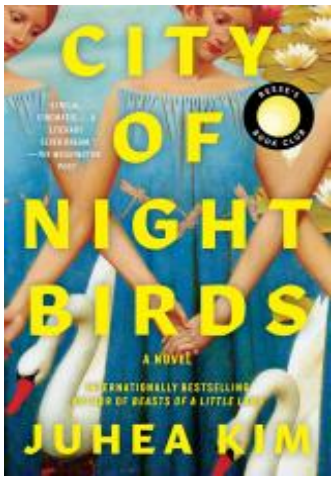
City of Night Birds

by Juhea Kim



About the Book

A once-famous ballerina faces a final choice --- to return to the world of Russian dance that nearly broke her, or to walk away forever --- in this incandescent novel of redemption and love.

On a White Night in 2019, prima ballerina Natalia Leonova returns to St. Petersburg two years after a devastating accident that stalled her career. Once the most celebrated dancer of her generation, she now turns to pills and alcohol to numb the pain of her past.

She is unmoored in her old city as the ghosts of her former life begin to resurface: her loving but difficult mother, her absentee father, and the two gifted dancers who led to her downfall.

One of those dancers, Alexander, is the love of her life, who transformed both Natalia and her art. The other is Dmitri, a dark and treacherous genius. When the latter offers her a chance to return to the stage in her signature role, Natalia must decide if she again can face the people responsible for both her soaring highs and darkest hours.

Painting a vivid portrait of the Russian ballet world, where cutthroat ambition, ever-shifting politics and sublime artistry collide, CITY OF NIGHT BIRDS unveils the making of a dancer with both profound intimacy and breathtaking scope. Mysterious and alluring, passionate and virtuosic, Juhea Kim?s second novel is an affecting meditation on love, forgiveness and the making of an artist in a turbulent world.

Discussion Guide

1. In the beginning of the novel, Natalia says, ?This was what love was, I thought --- being able to forgive. But it was not happiness.? Do you agree with this assessment? Why or why not? What do you think happiness entails?

2. Natalia?s mother is very against her decision to pursue professional ballet, as it comes with so much risk and uncertainty. Have you ever wanted to do something that goes against your family or what is expected of you?

3. Describe the relationship between Natalia and her mother in your own words.

4. On page 81, Natalia says, ?Everything becomes more powerful when it isn?t told. Fears, sadness, desires, dreams.? Do you agree?

5. ?I find trees are similar to people,? Alexey says. ?You hardly ever grow from being matched up with someone exactly like yourself. Best partnerships --- in life, in dance --- are born from two distinct forces coming together.? Have you ever had an experience where the unlikeliest of people had a profound effect on your life?

6. ?No matter how great a work of art is, it comes to an end. In fact, in order to be great, it must end.? What do you think this means?

7. Natalia is deeply in love with ballet and specifically the ways it allows her to transcend to something beyond her wildest dreams. As a child she longs to dance in revered ballets like Don Quixote and Giselle. What is a piece of art you have come to admire, and what are its qualities that distinguish it from the rest?

8. All the dancers within the novel are concerned with reaching the highest level of talent possible, which often leaves them in deep physical and emotional pain. What do you think are important qualities for art to have besides chasing perfection?

9. On page 157, Natalia says, ?In art and in life, nobility is always doing all that one is responsible for, and then even more.? What do you think makes a life worth living? What other qualities do you think makes someone noble?

10. Léon inscribes a message to Natalia on a photo: she flies with her own wings. How does Natalia learn to fly at the end of the novel?

Author Bio

Juhea Kim is the author of the novels CITY OF NIGHT BIRDS and BEASTS OF A LITTLE LAND, the short story collection A LOVE STORY FROM THE END OF THE WORLD, a finalist for the Dayton Literary Peace Prize and shortlisted for the Yasyana Polyana Prize. A graduate of Princeton University, her writing has been published in *Granta*, *Times Literary Supplement*, *The Independent*, *Zyzzyva*, *Guernica* and elsewhere. Born in Korea and raised in Portland, Oregon, Kim now lives in London.

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