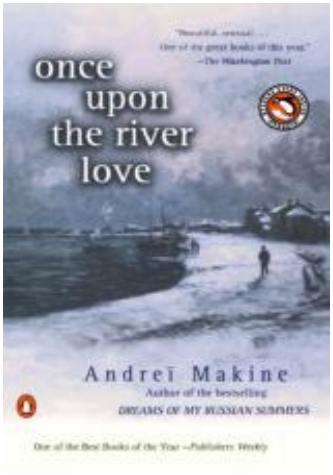
ReadingGroupGuides
The online community for reading groups

Once Upon the River Love

by Andre Makine



About the Book

In the remotest reaches of eastern Siberia, three boys dream of a world beyond the ridge of immense, snow-buried forest that surrounds their village. Twenty years later, Dmitri (Mitya) narrates a time in their youth when dreams were as tangible as reality. The three friends grow up in Svetlaya, once a thriving town now reduced by wars and revolution to a mere cluster of izbas. Six miles away, the district center, Kazhdai, the nearest stop of the Transsiberian train, serves as intermittent, fleeting proof to the boys that another world lies west of the pine forest. Twenty miles from their forgotten village, on the banks of the Amur river, sits Nerlug, the only real city the boys have ever known, and home of the Red October Theater, where the boys will soon encounter intoxicating images and sounds imported from the West.

Svetlaya is thousands of miles from Moscow and marked by political and cultural isolation. The gulag on the outskirts of the village and newsreel footage of old generals pinning medals on each other are the only tangible signs of Soviet rule in Svetlaya. The village life that Mitya recalls is also marked by harsh weather. Every winter villagers expect to awaken one morning entombed in their izbas by snow. Human intervention with nature, however, even more powerfully impinges upon the boys' aspirations as they face adulthood: "the life of the village was gradually reduced to three essential matters: timber, gold, and the chill shadow of the camp. It was beyond us to imagine our futures unfolding outside these three prime elements."

Regularly visiting his aunt at her switch operator's station on a desolate section of the Transsiberian railroad, Mitya expectantly awaits the nightly passing of the train, savoring the image of a glamorous Western woman riding in one of its compartments. One night, however, he peremptorily leaves his aunt before the train's appearance and shuffles through the snow to Kazhdai, to a darkened waiting room in the train station, where a red-haired woman comes to wait each day for a passenger who never arrives. Mitya shows her the five rubles in his pocket and accompanies her to a dilapidated izba on the outskirts of town. There he hopes to fuse the fragments of his desire and imagination.

Following a disillusioning night with the "Redhead," Mitya runs into his two friends, who are on an eight-hour trek to

the Red October movie theater in Nerlug. The theater, sandwiched between the local office for the Communist militia and the Communard factory for barbed wire, usually shows standard Soviet fare in which a robust tractor driver crows about crop yields to a pretty young revolutionary. On this occasion, however, they view a fantastical French film starring Jean-Paul Belmondo. Belmondo-mania soon breaks out, and neither the city nor the boys' lives will be the same again. A new horizon of possibilities emerges and even time is altered as the showtime of 6:30 begins to adjust the monotony of Soviet existence. Hereafter Mitya will refer to this period as Year One of Belmondo. On subsequent viewings, Mitya comes to understand that Belmondo serves as a different archetype for each of the boys. For Samurai, preoccupied with bolstering his strength ever since a harrowing experience at age ten, Belmondo is the Warrior. For Utkin, who turned to writing after being disfigured by a shifting ice floe at age eleven, he is the Poet. And for the handsome Mitya, the film star is the Lover. Seventeen times during the movie's run the boys return to luxuriate in its glorious silliness, which subverts the ideologically freighted newsreels that precede each showing. Although neither the initial Belmondo movies the boys see nor the ones that follow at the Red October are named in the novel, How to Destroy the Reputation of the Greatest Secret Agent is a likely candidate, and Makine has mentioned The Magnificent One as one of his favorites.

Increasingly convinced that he must choose between staying in the East and fleeing to the West, Mitya returns to the "Redheads'" izba, hoping to gain closure through their sexual encounter. Before reaching her door, however, the sound of her singing a simple song stops him short. He is enchanted: "the more I became impregnated with this secret harmony, the more insignificant my febrile fantasies seemed to me." Mitya leaves, never hearing of her again until Year Two of the new chronology when he learns of her tragic fate. Yet he has learned that "beyond this human clay doomed to disintegration, there is something else! There is that song that arose from the depths of the snow and poured out into the dark-purple April sky."

Soon thereafter Mitya says goodbye to Svetlaya, Asia, and the East, as he heads west to Leningrad to begin film school. Samurai and Utkin feel betrayed, yet both soon follow their respective courses out of the snowbound village; out of the empire altogether. Twenty years later, Mitya reunites with one of them at a Russian bistro in Brighton Beach and learns the fate of the other. The two Russian expatriats recall a "moment of beauty and silence" that happened Once Upon the River Love.

Discussion Guide

1. How does Mitya's initial story of a sexual encounter serve as an introduction to the novel and to the characters of Mitya and Utkin? How do you reinterpret the opening chapter when you discover at the conclusion that Mitya's tale is largely fabricated?

2.Topography and weather function as virtual characters in the novel, influencing thought, imagination, and action. How have the stark, harsh conditions of the Siberian taiga formed the boys and their way of life?

3.Enumerate the several images of burial and rebirth. What does each occasion signify?

4. Mitya speaks of leaving his body during the plunge in the snow after the bathhouse and again during his encounter with the "Redhead." Contrast the two episodes and the respective lessons gained by the disembodiments.

5.There is a tension between aesthetics and utility throughout the novel. If Belmondo is the ultimate example of art for

art's sake, identify other manifestations of the aesthetic versus the utilitarian way of life. What are the respective merits and demerits of each mode?

6. Each of the three main characters seeks to transform their reality: Mitya through love, Utkin through the imagination, and Samurai through strength. Over the course of the novel, which way seems most successful in effecting this change?

7.Why is the story of the boys' magical year narrated by Mitya and not by Utkin, who is, after all, the Poet?

8.Does Mitya's late admission that his opening anecdote is substantially false throw doubt on other aspects of his story? Is he a reliable narrator?

9.Although Mitya always assumed that he was the only one to have contact with the "Redhead," he learns by the end that Samurai and Utkin have as well. How so, and how do each of the three respective encounters typify each of the three boys?

10. Explain the "Redheads'" reaction to Mitya when the lights suddenly come back on? Is there a recognition?

11. After Belmondo leaves the Red October Theater for good, Mitya proclaims, "Nothing would ever be as it had been before." In what ways did Belmondo alter individuals and society? In what ways did Belmondomania endure? What remained impervious to Belmondo's magic?

12. This retrospective tale is told by an older Mitya living out a compromised, perhaps debased, reality in the West. Would the novel have been as effective without this frame? How do the fates of the adult Mitya, Utkin, and Samurai inform the story of their adolescent Year of Belmondo?

Author Bio

Born in the Soviet Union in 1957, Makine grew up in Penza, an isolated town about 200 miles from Moscow. Acquiring familiarity with France and its language from his French-born grandmother, he wrote poems in both French and his native Russian as a boy.

In 1987, he was granted political asylum and moved to France, determined to make a living as a writer?in French. However, Makine had to present his first manuscripts as translations from the Russian to overcome publishers' skepticism that a newly arrived exile could write so fluently in a second language. After disappointing reactions to his first two novels, it took eight months to find a publisher for his third, Le testament français. Finally published in 1995 in France, the novel became the first in history to win both of France's most prestigious book awards, the Prix Goncourt and the Prix Medicis. Published in the United States in 1997 as Dreams of My Russian Summers, the novel garnered enthusiastic book reviews and a nomination for a National Book Critics Circle Award. Once Upon the River Love, which was originally published a year before Dreams of My Russian Summers, has met with similar acclaim, including as one of Publishers Weekly's Best Books of 1998. Makine's latest novel, The Crime of Olga Arbyelina, will be published in the fall of 1999.

Once Upon the River Love

by Andre Makine

Publication Date: August 1, 1999
Mass Market Paperback: 224 pages
Publisher: Penguin (Non-Classics)
ISBN-10: 0140283625
ISBN-13: 9780140283624