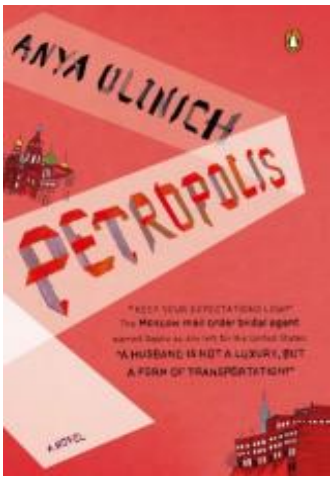
Petropolis

by Anya Ulinich



About the Book

In her stellar debut novel, Russian émigré Anya Ulinich paints a vivid, beguiling, and funny portrait of post-Soviet Russia and turn-of-the-century America.

Growing up in a Dickensian apartment block in a bleak Siberian town, Asbestos 2, Sasha Goldberg has more than one strike against her in the blond, blue-eyed Russian north: chubby, biracial, and Jewish, she consistently disappoints her overbearing mother with academic and extracurricular failures. Mrs. Goldberg is on a feverish quest to shape Sasha into a proper ?member of the intelligentsia,? but Sasha finds love in the arms of an art school dropout living in the town dump, and Mrs. Goldberg?s plans for Sasha unravel.

Petropolis is a richly layered and luminous emotional epic in the mode of great Russian novels. From perpetually gray Asbestos 2 to the shocking green lawns of Paradise Valley, Arizona, where Sasha lands as a mail-order bride; from wealthy suburban Chicago to the streets of Brooklyn, New York, **Petropolis** takes on motherhood, religion, the promise of love, and cross-cultural perplexity, all set against Sasha?s harrowing yet hilarious search for a place to call home. The result is a magnificent work that will stand alongside the likes of Gary Shteyngart?s **The Russian Debutante?s Handbook** and Gish Jen?s **Typical American** in scope, immediacy, and sheer talent.

Discussion Guide

1.The themes of maternal longing, jealousy, and hope turn up in a vast range of literature, from the work of Larry McMurtry and Jane Austen to that of Boris Pasternak, to mention just a few examples. The relationship between Lubov Alexandrovna Goldberg and her daughter is at times cantankerous and strained, yet also oddly loving. How, in light of Lubov?s own past, does this complex bond reflect Sasha and her mother?s day-to-day existence in Asbestos 2?

2. Beset with issues of class, culture, religion, and promise, Sasha Goldberg?s life appears to be a metaphor for a post-

Soviet world still clinging to its old ways. Sasha appears to be only half of everything?half white, not attractive enough, not talented enough, not quite Jewish enough for the Tarakans. Describe and discuss some of the scenarios that illustrate these juxtapositions, from Sasha?s relationship with Jake to her search for Victor and what she finds when she locates him.

3. In a chapter called ?The Friendship of Peoples,? Victor is described as being a Festival Baby. Explain the significance of being a baby born out of a government-sponsored event meant to bring sharply clashing cultures together. How have the circumstances of his birth reverberated throughout the rest of Victor?s life?

4. Though the relationship between Jake Tarakan and Sasha is strained at the beginning, they begin to understand that they are both trapped?Jake, in his own body, and Sasha, in the Tarakan home?and they begin to see each other as allies. Why does Jake help ?free? Sasha from his parents? Are Jake and Sasha in love?

5. The age-old conflict between self-love and love of one?s child is a factor in many of the characters? decisions during the novel. Especially for Lubov, Sasha, and Nadia, motherhood and the deeply conflicted relationship between mothers and daughters is a strong theme throughout Petropolis. Looking forward, what are the possibilities for Nadia and Sasha as they both grow up? Will they have a combative relationship like Sasha and Lubov? Or do you think Sasha and Jake have ended the cycle of unhappy, unhealthy parent-child relationships?

6. Heidi and Sasha might have had an extremely antagonistic relationship, given their respective relationships with Victor, but in the end they are supportive of and affectionate toward one another. Explain why the author chose to unite these two characters rather than set them at odds.

7. 7. Lubov was found in the library, clutching a book of poems. Discuss the ramifications of Lubov?s death in the library, and the poem (p. 321) that she was reading. Why did Lubov return to the library? What is the significance of the poem to her in life, and in death?

Author Bio

Anya Ulinich was seventeen when her family left Moscow and immigrated to the United States. She attended the Art Institute of Chicago and received an MFA in painting from the University of California. She lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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