

# The Winter Palace: A Novel of Catherine the Great

by Eva Stachniak



## About the Book

Catherine the Great is one of history's most fascinating rulers --- a monarch whose 34-year reign brought Russia into the modern industrial world, whose affairs were the scandal of her court, and who truly embodied the ideals of the Enlightenment. Drawing on letters, diaries, and on-the-ground research in St. Petersburg, Peterhof, and Tsarskoye Selo, award-winning author Eva Stachniak delivers a passionate novel that illuminates the early life of one of history's most enigmatic and powerful women. **The Winter Palace: A Novel of Catherine the Great** tells the epic story of Catherine's improbable rise to power, as seen through the ever-watchful eyes of an all-but-invisible servant close to the throne.

That servant is, like Stachniak herself, Polish --- a woman who straddles the crossroads of Eastern European immigrant culture, and for whom the world of the Winter Palace is simultaneously alien and familiar. Her name is Barbara --- in Russian, Varvara. Orphaned early in life, nimble-witted and attentive, she makes her way into the employ of the Empress Elizabeth amid the glitter and cruelty of the world's most eminent court. Under the tutelage of Chancellor and spymaster Count Bestuzhev, Varvara is educated in skills from lock-picking to lovemaking, learning above all else to listen --- and to wait for opportunity. That opportunity arrives in the form of a slender young princess from Zerbst named Sophie, a playful teenager who will become the indomitable Catherine the Great. Sophie's destiny at court is to marry the Empress's nephew, but she has loftier, more dangerous ambitions, and she proves to be more adept at court politics than she first appears.

What Sophie needs is an insider at court, a loyal pair of eyes and ears who knows the traps, the conspiracies, and the treacheries that swirl around her. Varvara becomes Sophie's confidante, and together the two young women rise to the pinnacle of absolute power --- surviving ill-suited marriages, illicit seductions, and, at last, the shocking coup to assume the throne of all of Russia --- but at a tremendous cost, emotionally, physically and psychologically.

**The Winter Palace** is the first of two books on Catherine the Great. The second --- **The Empire of the Night** --- will

tell the story of Catherine's life from her own point of view.

## Discussion Guide

1. The novel starts with a quotation from a letter the future Catherine the Great wrote to the British Ambassador, Sir Hanbury-Williams: *Three people who never leave her room, and who do not know about one another, inform me of what is going on, and will not fail to acquaint me when the crucial moment arrives.*

What does this sentence tell us about the future empress of Russia?

2. Varvara is an immigrant to Russia. She is an outsider in many other ways, a tradesman's daughter among aristocrats, a Roman Catholic among Orthodox Christians, a Polish wife of a Russian officer. How does she cope with the need to belong? How much is she willing to sacrifice for a sense of home?

3. Catherine too is an immigrant. In the 17th century Russia, keen on developing its national identity, her Prussian blood is suspect. How does Catherine cope with xenophobia? How does she turn it to her advantage?

4. Much of the novel is about power. The characters crave it, gain it, lose it. How are the principal women characters: Varvara, Catherine, and Elizabeth defined by their understanding of what power is? What in their background made them think that their definition of power is the right one?

And what do men in the novel think of power? Powerful women? Their role in a country ruled by a woman?

5. Why is power so important to these three women? What do they wish to do with it? How much are they willing to sacrifice for it? And, when they finally have it, what do they actually do?

6. Motherhood is another pivotal issue in the novel. Elizabeth wishes to be a surrogate mother to her nephew, Peter, and later to Catherine's son Paul. Catherine and Varvara give birth to their own children. What does motherhood mean to each of them? How does it transform them? Why?

7. Darya and Paul are two children whose birth we witness in the novel. How does their childhood differ? What is expected of them? What emotional future do envisage for them and why?

8. Love, lust and marriage are always present at the Winter Palace. How do the three principal characters, Varvara, Catherine and Elizabeth, understand them? How do they use love, lust, and marriage to further their own needs? Why?

9. The Russian court is the backdrop of the novel. Historical sources confirm that spying was ubiquitous there. How does being a spy affect Varvara? How does having spies affect Elizabeth and Catherine? How does being watched affect the lives of the courtiers?

10. Loyalty is another important theme in "The Winter Palace," national, political, personal. How is each of the three main characters defining loyalty? How does this definition affect their actions?

**11.** Peter the Great has transformed Russia. Is his presence felt in the novel? In what ways? What is your sense of Russia under Elizabeth and later under Catherine? Why does the country feel snubbed by the rest of Europe? How is Catherine and Elizabeth play to this sense of rejection? What are their visions for Russia? Do they really differ that much?

**12.** Toward the end of the novel Catherine decides to reassess her own needs as an empress and her obligations as a friend and lover. Is she justified in this decision? How does she do it? What are Varvara's expectations of their friendship and what is Catherine's assessment of it?

**13.** The novel ends when the reign of Catherine II has just begun. How much has Catherine sacrificed for her position? Is it possible to predict from her behavior as Grand Duchess what kind of a ruler is she going to be? What are her best qualities? Her worst?

**14.** Varvara leaves Catherine's court. In the last chapter of the novel she meets one of Catherine's former lovers, recently elected the king of Poland. What are Varvara's feelings about Stanislaw's prospects? What does she fear? Why?

**15.** The novel ends with the image of Varvara beginning to tell Darya the story of her life in Russia. How much do you think she will tell her child? What will she keep to herself? Why?

## Author Bio

Eva Stachniak was born in Wrocław, Poland. She came to Canada in 1981 and has worked for Radio Canada International and Sheridan College, where she taught English and Humanities. She is the bestselling author of *THE WINTER PALACE*, *EMPRESS OF THE NIGHT*, *NECESSARY LIES* and *GARDEN OF VENUS*. She lives in Toronto.

## Critical Praise

"This is a majestic and splendidly written tale of pride, passion, intrigue and deceit that is brought alive from the first page to the last."

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