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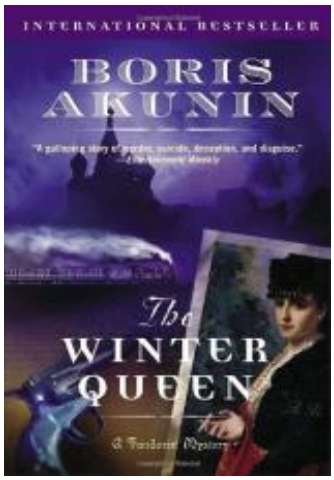
The Winter Queen

by Boris Akunin



About the Book

Set in 1870s Moscow, St. Petersburg, and London, **The Winter Queen** introduces Boris Akunin's internationally celebrated sleuth, Erast Fandorin, who soon realizes that the suicide of a wealthy student in Moscow's Alexander Gardens is not an open-and-shut case but, instead, the tip of a spectacular global conspiracy, with the deadliest of implications.

Discussion Guide

1. Confronted by an epidemic of suicides amongst his young countrymen, Erast Fandorin tells the highly experienced detective Xavier Grushin that "The very best of the educated young people are simply giving up on life?they're suffocated by a lack of spiritual oxygen." Explain the tension between the new and old generations in the novel, and why Fandorin thinks "living in your world makes us young people feel sick." How and why have aspirations?for career, money, public honors?changed for the disenchanted youth?

2. What is the meaning of the code word "Azazel," and how does this rebellious demon figure in the anarchists' plot?

3. Humor and coincidence figure prominently in the plotting of **The Winter Queen**. Describe Akunin's play on cultural perspective; for instance, in his characterization of "American Roulette." Also, how does Fandorin's luck come into play with the Lord Byron corset and the breathing practices of Indian Brahmin Chandra Johnson? Why is humor and chance so unexpected and thrilling in the plotting of a mystery novel?

4. Describe Xavier Grushin; is he merely an "old duffer," or truly someone with a "genuine analytical talent," as Fandorin says? Further, how does Grushin compare with the seemingly ingenious Detective Brilling, both as a detective and as a man of character?

5. During his interview with Fraulein Pfuhl and Lizanka, Fandorin is very conscious of his rank as "a civil servant, fourteenth class." After all, as Pfuhl emphasizes, "order is order." Describe the importance of rank in the novel, both on a romantic and an official level for Fandorin. Take a look at "The Table of Ranks" on pages 243 and 244; what would it have been like to live in a rigidly structured class system like that of Russia at the end of the nineteenth century?

6. Solving the mystery of Pyotr Kokorin's public suicide turns out to be a far larger puzzle than even Fandorin initially had suspected. Describe the various principles of investigation that Akunin skillfully weaves into the narrative, such as cui prodest ("seek the one who benefits") and Brilling's deductive method. In the end, how does Fandorin's pluck and intuition solve the mystery?

7. Lady Astair conducts her depraved orphanage based on the outwardly noble idea that "Finding one 's own path is the most important thing for anyone." Describe Astair's educational philosophies and the larger plot against society that it entails. What does the twisted baroness mean when she says: "One cannot clean out the Augean stables without soiling one 's hands."

8. How does Akunin's sleuth compare with the famed detectives of other mystery novels? Discuss how Fandorin's moments of guilt, fear, vanity, and despair add dimension to his character, and how he matures over the course of his investigations and the novel.

9. Compare Erast Petrovich Fandorin's love interests: the pure and innocent maiden Lizanka, and her foil, the dark Cleopatra, Amalia. By the end of the novel, a shocking catastrophe takes place on Fandorin and Lizanka's wedding day. How did this traumatic cliff hanger alter the tone of the novel? What changes have taken place in Fandorin, both physically and mentally in the course of the novel?

Author Bio

BORIS AKUNIN is the pen name of Grigory Chkhartishvili, who was born in the republic of Georgia in 1956; he is a philologist, critic, essayist, and translator of Japanese. He published his first detective stories in 1998 and in a very short time has become one of the most widely read authors in Russia. He has written nine Erast Fandorin novels to date, and is working on two other series as well. Akunin enjoys almost legendary popularity in Russia. He lives in Moscow.

ANDREW BROMFIELD was born in Hull in Yorkshire, England. He has lived in Moscow for long periods, where he co-founded and edited the literary journal Glas, and now lives and works in rural Surrey. He is best known for his acclaimed translations of the stories and novels of Victor Pelevin, including**The Life of Insects**, **Buddha's Little Finger** , and **Homo Zapiens**.

Critical Praise

"Atmospheric and engrossing, **The Winter Queen** is a historical thriller from the world of the czar. Boris Akunin is Russia's answer to Caleb Carr."

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