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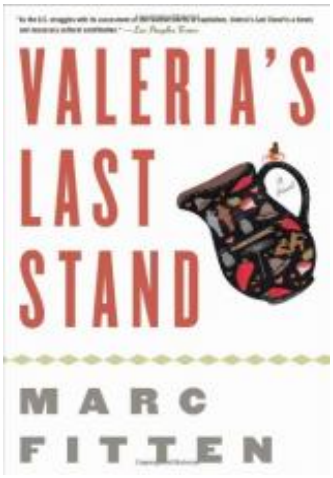
Valeria's Last Stand

by Marc Fitten



About the Book

Valeria has a long list of things she disapproves of. Whistling, tropical fruit, free-market capitalism, and the mayor of her Hungarian village top that list. And Valeria especially doesn?t believe in love past a certain age. Until she bumps into the potter, a widower with white hair and a thick mustache. Suddenly Valeria, the village?s least popular senior citizen, finds herself awash in an unfamiliar feeling: desire.

The potter is equally surprised to respond to Valeria?s overtures; he was enjoying a casual affair with Ibolya, the proprietress of the village?s only tavern. But Valeria inspires the potter to reinvent himself as an artist: he makes her the most beautiful pottery the village has ever seen, then moves on to bigger, less fragile projects. Ibolya tries to break up this unlikely love affair by enlisting an itinerant chimney sweep to distract Valeria. But Ibolya doesn?t count on the chimney sweep?s violent tendencies. The villagers will never be the same after the powerful forces of modern capitalism and old-fashioned sexual desire sweep through town.

Discussion Guide

1. Valeria?s Last Stand opens with an epigraph by Milan Kundera: ?The great matters of nations cannot make us forget the modest matters of the heart.? How does this quotation comment on the story that follows?

2. ?Valeria never whistled,? the first chapter declares (3). Why does Valeria disapprove of whistling? What does she associate with this small musical act? When does she finally begin to whistle herself, and why?

3. Zivatar, the name of Valeria?s village, means ?thunderstorm? in Hungarian. How does this name suit the village? What ?storms? have bypassed Zivatar in the past? What kinds of turbulence are taking place now?

4. Many of the novel?s characters are named by their jobs, such as the mayor, the potter, and the chimney sweep. Why

do these characters remain unnamed? Near the end of the novel, after the mayor?s infidelity, we learn, ?For the record, the mayor?s young wife was named Klara? (199). Why does the mayor?s wife gain a first name at this point of the novel?

5. Discuss Valeria?s social standing. Why do the women of the village despise her? Why do the old men of the town call her a ?firework? (16)? How do the village?s attitudes toward Valeria change over the course of the novel?

6. Describe the initial attraction between Valeria and the potter. Which of the potter?s qualities does Valeria find attractive? Which traits eventually bother her? Why is the potter drawn to such an unlikely lover?

7. The mayor is characterized as a ?driven opportunist? (43). Why is he the ?most dangerous of individuals? (43)? Does he prove dangerous by the end of the novel? Why or why not?

8. The chimney sweep is first introduced through the history of his bicycle. What does the bicycle reveal about the chimney sweep?s personality and history?

9. The potter says of Ibolya and Valeria, ?One?s a volcano, the other is an ocean. It?s a difficult choice to make? (99). What are Ibolya?s volcanic qualities? How is Valeria oceanic? Why is it Valeria who inspires the potter artistically, and not Ibolya?

10. Imagine if Valeria, the potter, Ibolya, and the chimney sweep were in their twenties instead of their fifties and sixties. How would their affairs be different if they were forty years younger?

11. Valeria?s Last Stand features a colorful array of secondary characters, from the scheming mayor to the potter?s clueless apprentice to the lovelorn Ferenc. Which smaller character is the most interesting and vibrant?

12. Consider the potter?s evolution from craftsman to artist. What are the stages of his transition? What leads him to declare, ?I?m not a potter anymore? (189)? Why is he still called ?the potter? to the last page of the novel, if this is so? What might the potter?s future be like, after the grave injuries to his hands?

13. Valeria?s Last Stand is a novel of great changes, individual and collective. Which character evolves the most over the course of the novel? Who changes the least? At the end of the story, ?Valeria was the only one who felt hopeful about the changes? (256). What accounts for Valeria?s optimism and the villagers? dark view of the future?

14. The mayor senses a kindred spirit in the potter; he believes they are both ?Men who know what they want and how to go after it?whether it?s train stations, hotels, fountains, or women? (147). Why does the potter object to this comparison? How are the potter and the mayor alike, and how are they different?

15. Discuss the differences between the older generation and the younger generation of the village. Why has the older generation stayed in Zivatar, while the youngsters ?embraced the anonymity of globalism? (137)? What does the future hold for this tiny village?

Suggested reading

Gary Shteyngart, **Absurdistan and The Russian Debutante?s Handbook**; Jeanne Harris, **Chocolat**; Rivka Galchen, **Atmospheric Disturbances**; Muriel Barbury, **The Elegance of the Hedgehog**; Alessandro Baricco, **Silk**; Kate Maloy, **Every Last Cuckoo**

; Milan Kundera, **The Unbearable Lightness of Being**; Gabriel García Márquez, **Love in the Time of Cholera**.

Author Bio

Marc Fitten was born in Brooklyn in 1974. He spent much of the 1990s living and traveling in Europe, while being based in Hungary. He has been published in *Prairie Schooner*, the *Louisville Review*, the *Hogtown Creek Review*, and *Esquire.com*. Marc is a Ph.D. student at Georgia State University, where he received the Paul Bowles Fellowship in Fiction. He is currently the editor of the *Chattahoochee Review*.

Critical Praise

"Marc Fitten?s excellent new novel has much to recommend it --- wisdom, warmth, humor --- but it is his creation of the title character herself that is his and the novel?s most remarkable achievement. Valeria is every bit as sensual and irrepressible as Chaucer?s Wife of Bath, and she will linger in any reader?s mind long after the last page is turned."

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