

STALINA

Emily Rubin (Amazon Encore, \$14.95)

Stalina Folskaya, a 58-year-old Russian émigré to the US in 1991, is the sort of sweet, accepting soul who tells a beleaguered nursing student she smells like peaches, just to brighten her day. Named Stalina as a joke or a talisman (after all, they couldn't possibly send a Jew named for Stalin to Siberia), she loves her name rather than shuns it – people's reaction to it can tell her what they expect of the world.

But Stalin died, the Soviet Union died, and Stalina has transplanted herself to a dying suburb of Hartford, CT, where a friendly cabby tells Stalina, upon hearing that her mother too has died in far off St. Petersburg, "I'm sorry. It's like that, people and things go away, they end, leave us to ourselves."

Left to herself in America, Stalina expresses a relentless immigrant optimism and creativity, opening her to all sorts of interesting people and experiences at the by-the-hour

motel where she works. And her difficult past slowly unfolds before us through her poignant, first-person memories. Yet she has not an ounce of resentment or hatred about the past, and the world she sees – full of kind words and considerate observations, one all about the pursuit of happiness – is one we want to inhabit and accept as fully as she does.

(A curious aside: Rubin sprinkles the novel with numerous incidents of accidents involving fingers. Missing digits arise repeatedly and one cannot help wondering if this is some oblique reference to Stalin himself, who had a deformed hand.)

While filled with nostalgia for the past, Stalina has no interest in going back. Instead, she revels in the differences between the world of her past and the one of her future: "Emotions for Russians are like test tubes of boiling sulfurs. Everything is potentially a drama. I noticed that holidays here always coincide with sales in stores. In Russia we

have parades..."; "Compared to our glorious Russian metro, the New York subway was like a creature suffering from a bad case of gastric distress coupled with rheumatoid arthritis..."

But her past will not leave her. In fact, it arrives with a flourish and changes her life in ways even she could not have expected.

A marvelous, captivating debut novel.

TRAVELS IN SIBERIA

Ian Frazier (FSG, \$30)

Forget everything you know about Siberia. Honestly. Set aside all knowledge of Baikal, the Lena river, Chukotka, the travels of George Kennan, the TransSiberian. Forget all of it.

Then pick up this book and revel in Frazier bringing it all back to you.

Frazier is the perfect armchair travel companion. He loves Russia with a strange, inexplicable love, one driven by equal parts self-loathing, guilt, awe and fascination. And

he has fought against it mightily for over two decades, share his agony in the pages of the *New Yorker*, and now collected in fullest form in this new book.

The bulk of the book is comprised of an eye-opening van trip east across Siberia, filled with camping, mosquitoes, questionable dietary choices and countless phlegmatic observations that are as insightful as they are entertaining (though he does seem to obsess over much about the beauty of Russian women). In fact, Frazier's two page observation on the men's room at the Omsk airport may be some of the funniest, most profound travel writing on Russia ever committed to ink.

Frazier brings an American's practical sensibility to the insensate pleasures of this ultimate road trip. Thus we hear a lot about roadside trash, airborne filth and we empathise with his mostly vain attempts to persuade his hosts to help him see a prison, to let him linger at a GULAG monument.

But what is best about Frazier's book is not the recounting of his five forays into and across the length and breadth of Siberia. It is the discursions his adventures allow into all aspects of Russian history and culture. He is particularly fascinated by the Decembrists and by George Kennan's travels, but he also considers everything from the metaphorical significance of

Siberia, to the Mongols, to Russian America, Baikal and the GULAG – and always with a depth and balance that demonstrates he has spent a lot of time researching and thinking about these issues.

"Travel, like much else in life," Frazier writes, "can be more fun to read about than to do." And relearning all you ever knew about Siberia – and surely much else you did not – does not get more fun than reading Frazier.

CHILDHOOD

Maksim Gorky (Ivan R. Dee, \$27.95)

Translated by Graham Hettlinger

Given our historical vantage point, it would be easy to dismiss Maksim Gorky as a sycophant and a patsy. Anyone who allowed themselves to be hoisted up as the leading light of Socialist Realism must surely be a talentless hack, no?

No.

There is no question that Gorky was wittingly or unwittingly duped by Stalin after the former's return to Russia in 1928. But prior to that Gorky had been an uncompromising champion of human rights and a vicious critic of Bolshevik rule. Indeed, from our remove it is easy to forget that Gorky was the sort of larger than life figure in literature that comes along just once or twice in a generation, a person who is as significant as an individual as they are as a writer – e.g. Solzhenitsyn, Twain, Lawrence, Tolstoy.

The reality is that Gorky was an immensely talented writer whose work was respected by Chekhov, Tolstoy and many in the pantheon of Russian literature who were spared the hard ethical choices wrought by Bolshevism by the inescapable fact of their deaths. Gorky's writing brims with a gritty, hard-edged realism that is as powerful and unsettling today as it was 100 years ago. And in this new translation of *Childhood*, which many Russians count as their favorite among Gorky's writings, Graham Hettlinger – whose translations of Bunin are brilliant – continues to prove his skill as one of our most gifted translators from Russian.

If you want to understand why Gorky was considered one of the finest writers of his day (and marvel at our literary amnesia), this excellent volume is a perfect place to start.

RUSSIAN LESSONS

Olga Konskaya & Andrei Nekrasov

russianlessons.org

When it comes to the tortured relations between Russia and Georgia – an undeclared war that has killed thousands since the breakup of the USSR – the truth did not even stick around to be the first casualty.

One year after the 2008 war in South Ossetia, the Council of the European Union issued a report stating that Georgia started that war with an attack "that was not justified by international law," meaning by Russia's precipitate military buildup in the region.

Konskaya and Nekrasov, in this gripping, horrifying documentary, show that reality is never as cut and dried as a committee report might indicate. In August 2008, the couple courageously ventured into the still roiling war zone from

continued, page 62



BALANCING ACT

Natasha Borzilova (Hadley Music; iTunes, \$9.99)

natashaborzilova.com

In this, her second solo album since the dissolution of Bering Strait, the supremely talented Borzilova compresses a refreshing mix of styles punctuated by clever lines and choruses (I'd rather look a fool than never have tried; All these emotions had so many owners before me; You're never lost if there's no destination), all woven together by her dreamily clear voice and brilliant guitar picking. The sound throughout is bare, acoustic, poetic – music to cook or drive by, or to play while sitting and watching the snow fall. True to the title of the album, all the songs (which Borzilova wrote or co-wrote) are about balance between lovers and emotions, between being true to one's self and getting along. And the ancient Russian folk song, *Rechka*, that concludes the CD is a true gift.



CENSORSHIP

(continued from page 64)

selves to blame for this kind of attitude” - which equates to blaming a rape victim for provoking the rapist or hating an actor for playing a villain.

The medieval urge to shoot the messenger who brings bad news is especially damaging to journalists in Russia, and you can't blame it all on Putin. I used to stand in for the Clubs editor in *Time Out Moscow* (a position where the biggest occupational hazard was supposed to be a royal hang-over after another opening) and I had calls at 3 A.M. from club owners on a cocaine binge threatening to “come and find me” over a line in a review in which I meekly complained about a lack of ventilation or an unimpressive Long Island Iced Tea.

You see the line of thought: the first thing they did wasn't install better AC or scold the bartender for watering down

drinks. It was to go after the journalist who pointed out a flaw in their enterprise. Imagine what can happen when a multi-million under-the-table deal is involved.

Khimki forest – four acres of litter-strewn arboreal mediocrity on the northern outskirts of Moscow – has become a complex study in shady deals involving multinational corporations and ruthless big business versus brave but gravely outnumbered activists. Three of the latest brutal attacks against environmental activists and journalists – Mikhail Beketov, Oleg Kashin, Konstantin Fetisov – are directly related to the Khimki forest scandal. But the consistent lack of progress on any of those cases is already encouraging thugs hired by Big Timber and road construction firms (among the most lucrative, hence the most corrupt businesses in Russia) to harass activists daring to defend other public parks and forests.

So it's not Putin or Medvedev who are

responsible for the journalists' plight. But they do have the power to change things: Conduct a fair and public investigation, punish those responsible, for the whole of Russia and the world to see, and hopefully that will act as a deterrent to those who consider the press a mere nuisance on their way to unlimited wealth. Then we'll have to deal with the attitude.

UNDER REVIEW

(continued from page 61)

opposite sides, providing visual proof that could well refute the CEU's report, and showing numerous cases of human rights abuses against ethnic Georgians.

More telling still, they present frame-by-frame proof of media deception, delivering a searing indictment of the BBC, Russian and German media outlets, of the Kremlin, and of renowned conductor Valery Gergiyev, for retransmitting falsehoods which could only be designed to inflame the conflict (notably the claim of 2000 civilian deaths in Tskhinvali, despite the fact that the entire civilian population had been evacuated prior to the Russo-Georgian clash there).

Less convincingly, but no less horrifyingly, the filmmakers then proceed to argue a pattern of Russian imperial aggression and brutality against Georgia that dates back to 1992, when Cossacks and the Russian military came to the aid of Abkhazian and Ossetian separatists.

While one cannot but admire the courage and passion behind this film, and accept that it carries no small measure of Truth, its effect is emotional rather than analytical: it numbs the viewer's senses without providing a clear analysis. After two hours, we are more than convinced of the bloody brutality of this forgotten war, but we have little understanding of what the filmmakers think is truly behind all this killing. Nebulous geopolitical goals are stated but not explored, incendiary accusations are hurled but no closing argument ties the disparate threads together. But this film should not be ignored for that failing. In fact it should be embraced for spurring us to investigate and understand this of our own accord.

Gift & Individual Subscriptions Form

BILL TO ADDRESS OR GIFT GIVER ADDRESS:

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

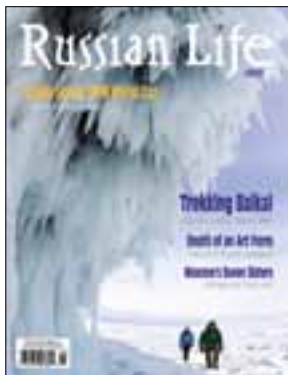
CITY/STATE/ZIP _____

SHIP TO ADDRESS OR GIFT RECIPIENT:

NAME _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY/STATE/ZIP _____



My payment is enclosed (\$33) in the form of a check made out to Russian Life.

Bill me later.

Bill my Visa/MC/Amex:

_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|_____|

Expires ___ / ___ Signed _____

Clip or Copy and Mail to:

Russian Life, PO Box 567

Montpelier, VT 05601

Phone: 802-223-4955 • Fax 802-223-6105

email: orders@russianlife.com