

narrative non-fiction

Look at me

The secret story of Liza Dyakonova

Biography. AST. Moscow 2017. 435 pages

Publishers: UK/US

1902, Austria, the Tyrolean Alps. The young Russian, Liza Dyakonova, a student of law at the Sorbonne University in Paris, interrupted her journey from Paris to Russia to stay with her aunt in Tyrol. During her visit she set off alone for a hike in the mountains and did not return. It is only a month later that the naked body of the young woman is found by a hill farmer on the bank of a mountain stream. Is it murder or suicide? The circumstances of her death remain a mystery. Her diary, found after her death, was published and highly praised by the famous Russian philosopher Vasily Rosanov as „the best literary work written by a woman“, but ultimately it sank into oblivion. Just like Liza herself. Based on the diary and recently discovered archive material, Basinski's „documentary novel“ attempts to find an explanation for her mysterious death.

Liza Dyakonova was one of the first women, if not the very first Russian, indeed European woman, to study law. With great sensitivity, but also with great conviction, Basinski leads us closer to the psyche of this young, brave and spirited intellectual, and to her struggle with the traditionalists in society, her environment and her family. He also shows her own internal struggles. And stepping outside Liza's biography, he presents us with the social circumstances of the time, but only as far as they are relevant to Liza's fate. He describes the different social classes and reform movements, the education system, the bureaucratic administration of the Russian Empire, and the influence of Turgenev on the minds of literarily educated women. By placing her individual tragedy in the context of her time, Dyakonova's importance is not belittled, but rather it is accentuated and the exceptional and exemplary historical aspects of her situation emphasised. On the one hand brave and radically progressive, on the other tragically trapped by her own circumstances, she had the potential to become a guiding figure of European feminism, if her fate had been known or, alternatively, not completely neglected by the Russian intellectuals. The re-discovery of this exceptional woman may well correct this.

“Basinski has written a documentary-thriller about the first Russian feminist.” *Rossiiskaya gazeta*

“Pavel Basinski is the only Russian non-fiction author who, in an abundance of historical facts, can detect a story in the literary sense of the word and then, without deviating from the credibly documented evidence, is able to weave it into an entertaining tale.” *Galina Yuzefovich*

“It is difficult to say whether this book is a biography, a psychological study or a magnificent essay on feminism. What is obvious is that this is no ordinary novel. Nevertheless, this book is more emotionally moving than all others.”

National Bestseller

Basinski was born in 1961 in Frolovo town (Volgograd region). He studied at the Saratov University and the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow. He has a PhD in Russian Philology. Basinski is one of the most influential and highly acclaimed literary critics in Russia. He publishes in *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, *Novi Mir*, *Oktyabr*, *Znanya*, *Druzhba narodov* and others. He was a jury member of several major Russian literary prizes, such as the Russian Booker, the Alexander Solzhenitsyn Prize and the Yasnaya Polyana Prize. He works as culture editor of *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*. Basinski lives in Moscow.



THE AUTHOR

translations
18 languages

awards

2010 Big Book
2010 Book of the Year
(Tolstoy: Escape from Paradise)
2008 Big Book shortlist
1998 Anti-Booker Prize

Pavel Basinski