

Russian horror

Nash Dvor - The Courtyard on the Brink of Midnight

Horror novel. Astrel. St. Petersburg 2021. 352 pages

Publishers: Poland - Nowa Fantastika (excerpt)

An anonymous city courtyard somewhere in Moscow's old town center - a space that is both open and separated from the outside world by a clear natural boundary. A bakery in the courtyard above, a river below, the garages in the middle and next to them a bird cemetery where the children bury pigeons, rats, hamsters and, with a bit of luck, even a cat. On one side of the courtyard is an elegant, cream-colored Stalin building (famous for its deep and horribly flooded cellars), on the other side a pompous block with a rich mosaic (everything would be fine, if the stout collective farmers and muscular miners pictured in this mosaic did not sometimes come to life at night, and woe to those upon whom they cast their dead eyes). But there are also plainly boring nine-story brick buildings and an unhygienic two-story brick shack inhabited by a poltergeist. Behind the houses is a duckweed-covered pond full of tadpoles, behind it a boarding school for mentally handicapped children (in whose catacombs the abbot of the neighboring monastery, who went underground in the civil war and rotted there, still celebrates black masses). The theater's infamous „fourth wall“ that separates the spectator from actor does not exactly collapse in the novel, but rather creeps and ripples, becoming dangerous and disturbingly porous - just like the mirror from which a sinister mummer stares at the novel's heroes. Such neighborhoods are often dangerous, but for a while the sides are in a delicate balance, thanks to an all-female family of fortune tellers living in the corner house. With the help of unusual tarot cards, they understand and explain what is happening in the yard. The fortune tellers are unpopular and considered either witches or charlatans, but as soon as something inexplicable is suspected, everyone rushes to them for help.

“A real “Russian horror book”: joyless, full of despair and tenderness ... The novel is a whole, but it consists of many parts, and each part, each individual element, can be viewed for a long time and reread several times. Images from different times that twist and enchant in a kaleidoscope of events... There are no limits to despair and death... Impossible to tear yourself away from the book.” DARK

“OUR YARD is about not turning a blind eye to some things or it will only make things worse for everyone - both those who turn a blind eye and those who happen to stand by.” FANTLAB.RU

“The stories of Darya Bobyleva immediately bring back memories of that sweet, sleepy childish horror when a first shadow fell on the then rock-solid belief in one's own protection, in being shielded from the power of evil.” MEDUZA (Galina Yuzefovich)

Darya Bobyleva was born in Moscow in 1982. After graduating from the Gorky Literary Institute, she worked as a translator for cinema and television, as well as a voice actress for cinema and computer games. Today she works in an antiquarian bookshop. Bobyleva lives in Moscow.



THE AUTHOR

other works

The Village at the
Edge of Noon

awards

Master of Horror 2021

New Horizons 2019

Master of Horror 2019

Big Book longlist 2018

Yasnaya Polyana longlist 2018

sample translation

English

Darya Bobyleva

Summary

A city courtyard in the center of Moscow is constantly plagued by the supernatural. Local residents live side by side with otherworldly „neighbors“ - characters from Soviet and post-Soviet urban legends as well as creatures far older and stranger than that. This neighborhood is often dangerous, but there is a delicate balance thanks to an all-female family of fortune tellers living in the corner house. They have similar ancient names – Avigeya, Dosithea, Pelageya – and with the help of unusual Tarot cards they can interpret what is happening in the courtyard and beneath it. They are not exactly popular, more feared than liked, and yet they are the guardians of the human world from the “other” one.

At the beginning of the novel, the elderly fortune-teller Avigeya does not have time to save the philosopher Lev Veniaminovich, who has fallen under the spell of his housekeeper Agafya. Agafya prepares unusually delicious Russian folk dishes, sprinkled with black „salt of the earth“. In the end it turns out that this salt is made from burned human bones and the philosopher was fattened to be slaughtered.

The downtrodden boy Lesha, locked in the basement of a „Stalinistic“ house by court thugs, accidentally touches a mysterious subterranean creature and begins to transform into its likeness.

The pioneer Lyusya from the finds a page from an old, pre-revolutionary newspaper in the yard, and responds to the advertisement of a certain Umr - “DeAth” -, which she thinks is an interesting riddle to solve. The mysterious being sends parts of itself through the mail until it can finally put itself back together in the form of Lyusya’s father, who has abandoned the family. Umr tries to kidnap Lyusya’s sister, but fortune teller Avigeya dares to fight him – and wins, though she is left with a „bone-crushing disease.”

The director of a boarding school for special needs children conducts experiments to cure the children of mental retardation and make them ideal communist citizens, slowly going mad all the while. The children get smarter at first, but then quickly exceed the limits of the human mind and torture themselves with the fact that they „see through” everything. A boarding school worker who has glimpses of visionary gifts tries to resist the director, but she dies and the children themselves make short work of the director and then disappear from the boarding school.

Rosa, an adopted orphan girl with paranormal abilities, also ends up in this boarding school. Rosa and her half-sister Ada share a deep friendship, and for Ada’s sake, Rosa tries to control her gift of harming people, but she doesn’t always succeed. Rosa protects Ada from her former lover, releases her own gift, and the mosaic on the house’s facade comes to life. The true end of the world begins in the courtyard. The yard is saved by the family of fortune tellers together with old believer sorcerers who came from nowhere. Rosa and Ada, afraid of being separated, decide to flee south together and literally vanish into thin air. The elderly fortune teller Abigail dies from the illness caused by Umr and her place is taken by her daughter Dosithea, who is lazier and more insecure. Everyone compares her to her deceased mother, even she herself thinks that she will not make it. And the affairs of the fortune-tellers’ family are going really badly: the youngest of them, Pelageya, accidentally releases a demon from the mirror during Christmas fortune-telling. The demon takes the form of deceased loved ones and draws people into a mirror, into the realm of the dead. Pelageya can defeat the demon, but to do so she must go through the looking glass, and remain there as a kind of Bloody Mary.

Then the yard appears a TV show because of the story about the poltergeist in the communal barracks. When filming the story, the TV crew devote a lot of time to the ugly living conditions in the tenement, which the tenants perceive as a disgrace. Thanks to the fortune tellers, the TV crew find the source of the poltergeist: the remains of sewage in the basement from a secret toilet that one of the residents of a communal apartment had built in his room. But the yard is soon back in the news for a different reason: children fall into a lethargic sleep when picking up toys that have appeared out of nowhere on the street. Dosithea saves them and doesn’t have to face the usual evil spirits, but aliens she doesn’t even believe in. All of this changes Dosithea’s understanding of the interplay of worlds and her place in them, and she ends up in conflict with those „new Russians” who decide to build a bank on the site of a monastery ruin. Dosithea not only protects the courtyard and life in it from businessmen-bandits, but also from evil spirits. The abbot, who lives underground and whose apartment is being destroyed by the construction workers, comes to her at night with complaints. The „New Russians” have Dosithea murdered. The remaining fortune tellers leave, but the missing sisters Rosa and Ada now return to the courtyard. Rosa leads a „crusade” by alien beings against the newly opened bank. Participating in it are Lesha, who has turned into a cellar creature, the mirror-witch Pelageya, and children from the boarding school.

And finally, in the finale, it turns out that the story was told all along on behalf of the otherworldly beings. It was them who told the events in the courtyard from their point of view, they represent the Moscow of centuries of accreted history that are being forgotten and obliterated. After the bank is defeated, everything calms down and the fragile balance between this world and that reigns once again in the courtyard. And in the apartment where fortune-tellers once lived, a girl named Virineya rents a room - from her name it is clear that she is their descendant, and also of “special blood”.

Darya Bobyleva