

Belarusian literary fiction

Lake of Happiness

Novel. Vremya. Belarus/Russia 2016. 328 pages

The fate of badly treated Belarus told as a moving coming of age story. Young and strong, Yasya wends her wondrous way between the sleeping Tsarina Agna and the lunar crater Lacus Gaudii, struggling to get out of her messed-up life and into a more human, even if not brighter, future.

Yasya grows up in Minsk. She is the daughter of a Belarusian oligarch and government minister. But the privileged life has a reverse effect on Yasya. Since the death of her mother, her father's only interests are looking after himself, his business and his lover. Yasya is pushed off to a boarding school where the only friendly person is a student jobbing as a door-keeper. One night he shows her the lunar crater Lacus Gaudii, the Lake of Happiness, and tells her she should always think about it when she is alone, unhappy and is missing her mother.

Treated as a stranger in her father's house, Yasya has to live in a shed on the estate while studying at university as her father will not pay for her up-keep. On the surface Yasya behaves respectfully to him, but inside her rebellion is beginning to simmer. The adversity and unjustness that she is subjected to hit her very hard, based as they are on nonsensical rejections "from above". To pay off the state-sponsored university fees she is sent to work in the country where she meets the student with the Lacus Gaudii again who is now a geologist and in charge of archaeological excavations. She also visits the local museum where she sees the mummy of the so-called Sleeping Tsarina, considered to be the mother and protectress of Belarus.

And now the silent and patient Yasya explodes into an angry young woman who finally makes her opinions known. There is, however, no room for people like her in present-day Belarus and Yasya escapes to Moscow where she ends up in the red-light district. The easy freedom promised by big-brother Russia turns out to be a cliché. A scholarship for the Vilnius University seems to offer her a chance for the future, though even here her origins catch up with her. She is obliged to return to Minsk where she ends up as an insignificant sales-woman in a kiosk. No triumph, no grand finale. But on making her own way through life Yasya has found humanity in the most unlikely places and at the same time discovered her own sensitive heart.

After the staggeringly astute debut novel PARANOIA and the crazy dystopia MOVA, this is a mature work brimming with realistic life-experiences, full of empathy with the humiliated and insulted, but also with an incorruptible, sober view without illusion of the reality of a dictatorship in Europe.



THE AUTHOR

translations
4 languages

awards

Best of Fest LASHorts 2020
Bogdanovich Literay Award
2012
Best European Fiction anthology
2011 (Dalkey Archive)

other works

Mova
Paranoia
Revolution
Night

Martinovich was born in Oshmiany, Belarus in 1977. He is a political scientist, doctor of art history, and professor at the Vilnius University. He is a regular contributor to the German weekly DIE ZEIT. His literary works are published parallel in the Belarusian and Russian languages. Paranoia, published in Russia at the end of 2009, was immediately banned from sale in Belarus (unofficially prohibited). In 2017 he was Writer in Residence at the Literaturhaus Zürich and PWG foundation. Martinovich lives with his family in Minsk.

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