

historical novel

Uranium

Historical thriller. Fluid Publishers. Moscow 2019. 377 pages

1953, the year of Stalin's death. Soviet Estonia. A secret nuclear factory is being built at a site with uranium ore and around it a city for specialists from Russia and for Estonian workers. The forced laborers for the mine are housed in a GULAG camp. This secret site, Combinat No. 7, is intended to ensure the uninterrupted supply of uranium for the Soviet nuclear project. Stalin's death puts the lives and souls of the Combinat residents to the test. The magnificent opening of the Palace of Culture is not canceled, but nobody knows what is coming. The announced amnesty brings unrest between forced laborers and the population. Leaked Gestapo files about the former Estonian Waffen-SS puts pressure on partisans, who are hiding in the woods and have so far been looked after secretly by locals. And in Moscow the power struggle is raging between the Politburo and Beria, who has so far been able to cover up the fact that the Klooga concentration camp discovered during the construction of the combinat was simply converted into a Soviet forced labor camp, including a mass grave. A number of mysterious deaths in Combinat No. 7 suddenly puts everything in a different light. The external investigator sent from Leningrad encounters communist leaders engaging in cult and religious-orthodox occult practices, hypnosis and manipulation, sex and violence. When almost all the local men are suspected of murder and arrested for the time being, the investigator also becomes a victim. Everyone seems guilty and unhappy, every crime and sin has its own motives and backstory. The murders are brutal clues as to who is really related to whom and how. Even the killer, who calls himself Agent U-235, ends up causing pity rather than hatred – he seems above all to have gone astray in search of himself.

In *Uranium*, there are neither absolutely negative nor clearly positive characters. As in real life, each acts according to the circumstances. Without justifying or judging, the author tries to understand and to convey this desire for understanding to the reader. Like an exciting Netflix series, the plot of this historical novel, which is also a spy thriller, is told horizontally from the different perspectives of the various characters, without a central hero. Each character not only has his own truth, but also his own voice.

The novel is based on the memories of residents of the closed city of Sillamäe, as well as documentary materials and some reports cited in original from recently released CIA archives.

"Uranium is nothing less than the exciting experience of fully immersing yourself into history, its reconstruction illuminating the mentalities of the time, but also trying to understand many of the central contradictions of that time." LITERATURNAYA GAZETA

"Uranium is an important and hopefully symptomatic event for modern Russian prose. The willingness to speak with understanding about the Soviet era, but without effort and without intrusive political allusions, combined with the desire not only to cause fear, pain and discomfort to the reader, but also to make it interesting." GALINA YUZEFOVICH

"Directors, KGB members, simple workers, engineers, intellectuals, prisoners, deportees, partisans, guards – the novel is densely populated with characters and none of them is a cardboard cut-out." VLADISLAV TOLSTOV

Olga Pogodina-Kuzmina was born in Siberia in a small mining town in the Kemerovo region. Her ancestors include engineers, Siberian gold miners and the poet of the Silver Age, Mikhail Kuzmin. Pogodina-Kuzmina graduated from the St. Petersburg Theater Academy and works successfully in various genres and fields. In addition to novels and screenplays, she also writes articles and reviews. An important part of her work is dedicated to the theater – plays, libretti, musicals. Olga Pogodina-Kuzmina lives in St. Petersburg.



THE AUTHOR

AWARDS

2020 shortlisted
for National Bestseller Award
2018 Silver Shallop Prize
2017 Best screenplay
for Two Women
2013 Shortlisted
for National Bestseller Award
2011 Shortlisted
for Nonconformist Award

sample translation

english

Olga Pogodina-Kuzmina

historical novel

Uranium

SUMMARY

Factory director and convinced Stalinist, Gakov dreams of the great future of the USSR in general and his Combinat No. 7 in particular: how well the builders of communism will live in the city, with its cultural palace, department store, fashion studio, and modern cinema. Engineer Vorontsov is sick, he sometimes speaks German while sleeping and suffers from his unfulfilled, criminally persecuted homoerotic tendency. The head of the local committee, Alevtina Butko, tries to matchmake her daughter, a failed actress, with the engineer Vorontsov. Meanwhile, Gakov's secretary Ninotchka only raves about fashion and her boss. Taisia runs the factory laundry and is a single mother of two not so childish children. Despite divorce, she has to fight her ex-husband's jealousy and drunken violence while secretly in love with engineer Vorontsov. The victim of multiple rapes, she transforms into a woman without shame and lets herself be initiated into the knowledge of women by one of her laundresses in an obscene, allegorical way. While the factory chauffeur Ishchenko tries not to miss a skirt, he remembers his partisan past. Behind the barbed wire, the young felon Lenechka solves the complicated problems of his criminal career, which began with human meat trade during the Leningrad blockade. The 'forest brothers' – partisan fighters for the liberation of Estonia from the Russian occupiers – are hiding in the taiga. The Estonian student Else also loves her homeland and, on the instructions of her patriot mother, brings food to the forest brothers' cave. She also dreams of expelling the occupiers, but has fallen in love with the factory director's Russian nephew. And then a spy hides in the combinat. Who is this mysterious spy saboteur with the code name U-235? Is he really a foreign secret agent or a dangerous schizophrenic from within the Soviet ranks?

ADDITIONAL REVIEWS

"Uranium is also a reconstruction of Soviet reality, a special part of which is the history of the Gulag. Criminal and 'political', 'red' and 'black' authorities, amnesty, stage pigs and insurgents, camp customs and jargon – all very realistic, so that the reader is immersed into the 'cold summer of fifty-three'." LABIRINT

"The author skillfully composes a 'roundel of heroes': the director of the factory and the criminal thug; the beautiful farmer and the bureaucrat's daughter; the partisans hiding in the forest, fighting for an independent Estonia and the spy hiding from everyone; the saboteur and... And beside them all, Lavrenti Beria, curator of the Soviet atomic project, and even the poet Igor Severyanin, the most famous Russian resident of Estonia between the wars. Their fates are expertly woven into a fine crime story, at the end of which not everyone will survive. The central moment is of course the death of Stalin, which releases an energy no less lethal than the enriched uranium." MIKHAIL VIZEL

"If readers still have illusions about the author's condemnation of the bloody regime or, conversely, her admiration for the first post-war years, they are wrong. This is a novel about historical necessity. The characters simply live and reflect according to the logic of their time. The author is not in the mood to blame anyone." ELENA ODINOKOVA

Olga Pogodina-Kuzmina