



Metro Stop Dostoevsky: Travels in Russian Time

Ingrid Bengis

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A Russian American writer catapults herself into the maelstrom of Russian life at a time of seismic change for both

The daughter of Russian émigrés, Ingrid Bengis grew up wondering whether she was American or, deep down, "really Russian." In 1991, naïvely in love with Russia and Russian literature, she settled in St. Petersburg, where she was quickly immersed in "catastroika," a period of immense turmoil that mirrored her own increasingly complex and contradictory experience.

Bengis's account of her involvement with Russia is heightened by her involvement with B, a Russian whose collapsing marriage, paralleling the collapse of the Soviet Union, produces a situation in which "anything could happen." Their relationship reflects the social tumult, as well as the sometimes dangerous consequences of American "good intentions." As Bengis takes part in Russian life-becoming a reluctant entrepreneur, undergoing surgery in a St. Petersburg hospital, descending into a coal mine-she becomes increasingly aware of its Dostoevskian duality, never more so than when she meets the impoverished, importuning great-great-granddaughter of the writer himself. Beneath the seismic shifting remains a centuries-old preoccupation with "the big questions": tradition and progress, destiny and activism, skepticism and faith. With its elaborate pattern of digression and its eye for the revealing detail, Bengis's account has the hypnotic intimacy of a late-night conversation in a Russian kitchen, where such questions are perpetually being asked.

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