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The Bear And The Nightingale: A Novel



Synopsis

A magical debut novel for listeners of Naomi Novik's *Uprooted*, Erin Morgenstern's *The Night Circus*, and Neil Gaiman's myth-rich fantasies, *The Bear and the Nightingale* spins an irresistible spell as it announces the arrival of a singular talent with a gorgeous voice. At the edge of the Russian wilderness, winter lasts most of the year, and the snowdrifts grow taller than houses. But Vasilisa doesn't mind - she spends the winter nights huddled around the embers of a fire with her beloved siblings, listening to her nurse's fairy tales. Above all she loves the chilling story of Frost, the blue-eyed winter demon who appears in the frigid night to claim unwary souls. Wise Russians fear him, her nurse says, and honor the spirits of house and yard and forest that protect their homes from evil. After Vasilisa's mother dies, her father goes to Moscow and brings home a new wife. Fiercely devout, city bred, Vasilisa's new stepmother forbids her family from honoring the household spirits. The family acquiesces, but Vasilisa is frightened, sensing that more hinges upon their rituals than anyone knows. And indeed, crops begin to fail, evil creatures of the forest creep nearer, and misfortune stalks the village. All the while Vasilisa's stepmother grows ever harsher in her determination to groom her rebellious stepdaughter for either marriage or confinement in a convent. As danger circles, Vasilisa must defy even the people she loves and call on dangerous gifts she has long concealed - this in order to protect her family from a threat that seems to have stepped from her nurse's most frightening tales.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Vasilisa Petrovna never knew her mother, Marina, who died not long after giving birth to her, but she inherited her mother's gift: the ability known as second sight. Able to see and commune with the various guardians of the houses and forest, Vasilisa, known as Vasya, spends her child and teen years exploring and running wild through the forest of her father's land. Nature is kept in balance and Vasya enjoys the company of the various guardians until one day a stranger arrives in town, and the changes he sets in place begin to tip the order of things. A beast, known as the bringer of storms, has awoken and, with the unintentional help of this stranger, has begun to slip the control which his brother, Morozko, Lord of Winter has over him. Soon a battle will take place between the two brothers and Vasya is the key. Debut novelist Katherine Arden has created an enchanted landscape of characters and creatures fighting a terrifying battle to save their woods and people. Arden's beautifully crafted prose contains a bit of Dracula, a dash of Lewis Carroll's *The Monk*, some folklore and a touch of *Wuthering Heights*. It is all of these things, and yet is uniquely Arden's own brilliant creation at the same time. This is likely the IT book in fantasy for 2017 and is highly addicting reading. *The Bear and the Nightingale* is one of those perfectly crafted stories that jumps genres and will appeal to large audience outside fantasy as well as in it. (I personally rarely read fantasy, but this one kept me up all night reading.) Beautifully written and possessing a fairytalike quality, this book is destined to be an instant hit. Disclaimer: I received an ARC of this book from the publisher on Netgalley in exchange for an honest review.

The story centers on Vasya, the daughter of a boyar who lives in the freezing countryside in medieval Russia. Life is harsh, but good. As the granddaughter of a woman who was rumored to be enchanted somehow, Vasya, as a young girl quickly discovers that she has certain powers. For one, she is able to see the household spirits that secretly keep the house running smoothly. No one else can see them, though people have a tradition of leaving little sacrifices (a crust of bread, some milk) around the house for them. Vasya also has the ability to tame and talk to animals. Her wildness and strangeness quickly causes her stepmother to hate her. Things change when the stepmother sends for a new priest and in return gets Konstantin Nikonovich, a vain and arrogant man tells the village that because of their belief and sacrifices to the household spirits, they have been cursed by God (partly because he believes it is his divine mission and partly because he wants to have the people's loyalty, fear and admiration). The people, terrified, stop leaving sacrifices to the old spirits, and as a result, famine, fire, cold, and death quickly overtake the land and only Vasya has the power to stop it. Let me start off with the things the book does well. *The Bear and the Nightingale* is a

captivating and original fairytale crafted by the very talented Katherine Arden. One would never guess upon reading this novel, that it's her first. She has quite a way with words, as her prose is immensely poetic and vivid, almost cinematic in the way it paints a picture of the harsh Russian countryside. This novel exuded originality--a rare thing in the fantasy genre--and was unpredictable enough that for most of the novel I had no idea what was going to happen next. I have never read anything quite like it, and for that it gets major points from me. Another thing that stuck out to me was just how real her characters felt--both important players like the priest Konstantin Nikonovich, to minor characters like Sasha, are fleshed out and three-dimensional with their own dreams, fears, personalities, and desires. For the writers out there, it might be worth reading this book just to study how well Arden accomplishes this. Konstantin is easily one of the most complex and interesting characters I've ever come across in a fantasy novel. Now for the things this novel doesn't do so well. Unfortunately, I felt that the character that received some of the least character development was the protagonist herself. While we do see Vasya mature and grow throughout the novel, from a wild, selfish child into a woman willing to give her life for her family, I felt like we didn't really get a good glimpse at her internal motivations like we do with the other characters. By the end I felt like she was the typical independent young heroine that you find in just about every fantasy novel. I was especially confused as to why she was so intent on saving everyone when her family mistreats her and the villagers hate her and constantly accuse her of being a witch. The author uses alternating viewpoints throughout the story, with some chapters shown from Pyotr (Vasya's father), Anna (the stepmother), Dunya (the nursemaid), and Konstantin's point of view. Without this convention we wouldn't be able to have all the details we need to understand the story, but on the other hand, it makes certain characters seem more important than they are (in particular I think Anna takes up way too much space). This leads me to my next point: this story has a lot of loose ends. A lot. It wastes what could have been immensely interesting plot threads. Vasya is given a special necklace about halfway through the novel that is seemingly enchanted, yet its importance and/or purpose are never explained. Vasya's older brother, Sasha, leaves to be a warrior-monk and guardian of the prince, yet his storyline is never followed up on (I would love to read a novel just focusing on Sasha and his adventures). There a quasi, not-quite romance that begins to develop between Konstantin and Vasya in the first half of the novel, that then all of a sudden kind of drops off. Pyotr goes to aid the survivors of a mysteriously burned down village, but we are never told what he found there or why it took him so long to return. Arden also never quite gives us enough backstory or context as to why the things that are happening are happening. [SPOILER ALERT] Who was Vasya's grandmother? What did her powers entail? Why was Medved so interesting in her descendant, Vasya, anyway?

Why did some of the creatures warn Vasya not to trust Morozko? Who is Solovey the horse, is he an actual horse or some sort of shapeshifting spirit? How were the household spirits able to leave their hearths to help Vasya in the climax? Did Vasya fall for Morozko by the end? [SPOILER ALERT END] Lastly, the ending felt very rush. This book was a slow burn, slowly knitting a careful tapestry of foreshadowing and dread that left you hanging on the edge of your seat, wondering how it was going to all play out. Unfortunately, the big climax of the novel was sudden and unoriginal--your stereotypical big battle against the monster in the woods--and left me severely disappointed. The way the bad guy was defeated was also very cliché, and made very little sense. I honestly felt like the climax and ending of the novel should have been at least twice as long and better developed. Again that said, it is still a great read with a (mostly) original plot and interesting characters. I can only hope Arden will consider writing some sort of follow-up to this novel to tie up all her many loose ends.

Other reviewers have given an overview of the plot of the book, so let me just add my impressions. The last time I read a book as breathtaking, gripping, and multi-layered as this was when I spent an entire Christmas holiday obsessively reading all 3 volumes of Kristin Lavransdatter by Sigrid Undset. In fact, Katherine Arden's style is very similar to Undset's, weaving cultural history and tradition, familial and romantic relationships, clashing religious beliefs, superstition, and picturesque prose in an engaging saga. Arden has many unique elements to her style, however, and the book lives and breathes Russia as though the author and her ancestors had been natives for generations. Fairy tale, myth, folklore, drama, romance, history, tragedy, it's all here, woven through the lives of vivid characters in a lush, unforgettable setting. Buy this book and plan to spend your winter nights reading it by the fireside, with the embers slowly dying while you forget how many hours have passed.

I read a book called Uprooted, and it gave me a taste for more of the dark side of fairy tales. Unfortunately, there aren't many, and few of those satisfied the way Uprooted did. But then, my sister mentioned The Bear and the Nightingale. I could not read this fast enough. Yet, at the same time, I wanted to savour the story. This book is amazingly written and rich in detail. I envy writers who can make me forget the here and now. This is a story of folklore with all its darkness and warts, and where the good and evil edges blur. And no one has darker folklore than Russia. I now want to peer around for my own house spirits, and learn the art of horseback riding from the horse. I wish I could have placed myself, but it was just too delicious of a read. It had to be devoured.

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