

Nina Revskaya is an old woman living in Boston with no family and few friends, confined to a wheelchair and silently enduring deep physical pain.

She avoids taking the pills that could relieve her because under their influence she finds herself talking about the past, and above all, she must protect herself from the past. The narrative of *Russian Winter*, Daphne Kalotay's debut novel, alternates between present-day Boston and Stalin's Russia, where Nina was one of the Bolshoi's brightest stars, living purely for the dance and for love of Viktor Elsin, a dashing poet. As a child, she and her best friend Vera were encouraged to audition for the Bolshoi by Nina's mother, but Vera was forced to leave Moscow under mysterious circumstances. The two women are unexpectedly reunited when Vera, now a beautiful young woman and a talented dancer, returns to Moscow and the Bolshoi. Friends and rivals, Nina and Vera form a close foursome with Nina's husband Viktor, and Viktor's friend Gersh, a Jewish composer who becomes an enemy of the Stalinist regime. The circumstances surrounding Nina's defection to the West, and the fates

Daphne Kalotay

RUSSIAN WINTER

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of Viktor, Vera and Gersh, are shrouded in mystery, as the present-day Nina gives nothing away. Grigori Solodin, a young man who thinks that Nina holds the key to his own past, learns this the hard way when he approaches her and finds the door shut in his face. We meet Grigori twenty years later, a recent widower struggling to make sense of life without his wife. When Grigori learns that the famous ballerina Nina Revskaya is to auction off her jewels through Boston's Beller auction house, old questions begin to haunt him once more. The production of the auction is assigned to Drew Brooks, a young divorcee and fine jewellery specialist, who has disappointed her parents by separating from her perfectly nice husband. Drew too faces Nina's steely reticence when she tries to extract supporting information from the ballerina to accompany the jewels. Gradually we learn Nina's secret, as she herself learns the awful truth about how the dance

played out between herself, Viktor, Vera and Gersh. Nina's story illustrates the tragic way in which Stalin's Russia robbed its inhabitants of the ability to trust, and the legacy of deep and insidious paranoia it left.

While the writing may not reach the sublime heights of the dancing it describes, Kalotay's novel draws the reader in and maintains its momentum throughout. It is a satisfying mystery with a finely drawn plot. Kalotay is equally effective when dealing in broad brush strokes – life in Soviet Russia – and the minutiae of modern life, such as the party Grigori attends at the home of a pretentious academic couple, who showily display old LPs but actually play music on an iPod. The book benefits greatly from the light, natural way in which Kalotay handles specialist knowledge – of ballet, gemology and academia. She never strikes a false note, and the characters are believable within their own world. The secrets at the heart of the novel are treated as delicately, and guarded as carefully, as the precious stones at the story's centre, and only revealed at the novel's satisfying end.

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