

Literary

2017

Olga Slavnikova

Marian Schwartz, translator

The Overlook Press

978-1-59020-309-5

(February 28, 2010)

Olga Slavnikova's novel *2017**, set one hundred years after the 1917 Russian Revolution, is an imagined amalgamation of Russia's near future and its conflicted past. The fictional Riphean mountain region, where the book takes place, resembles post-revolutionary western Russia, except poets, writers, and artists have lost all cultural relevance and the Red Cavalry and White Guard have resumed fighting—some in the vintage uniforms left over from the original uprising. The region's natural resources have been depleted and the landscape ravaged. But *2017** isn't just a dystopian novel. Slavnikova is a cheeky, intelligent, and forceful storyteller, and the book—which won the 2006 Russian Booker Prize—is a love story and treasure hunt, with the unlikely, downtrodden hero Krylov at the helm.

Obsessed from an early age with collecting stones native to the region, Krylov becomes a gem-cutter to follow his passion. As the product of an obscured cultural history that is shape-shifting and corrupt, he seeks transparency and authenticity not only from the gems, but also from the increasingly disastrous world that surrounds him. Eventually, he becomes ensconced in the greed, espionage, and even murder that accompany the illegal precious-gem trade. Arguably just as dangerous are the mythical creatures of mountain folklore believed to beget fortune-making gem excursions with which Krylov and his cohorts also become entangled.

2017's investigation of human suffering is familiar to Russian literature fans. Krylov's recurring vision of his own specter and his relentless foot travel to every corner of his city bring to mind Nikolai Gogol's Akaky Akakievich and his ghost tripping through the streets of St. Petersburg. At the same time, Slavnikova is a thoroughly modern writer; her cutting humor and over-the-top descriptions of classic Russian characters and nouveau-riche thugs recall Russian-born American writer Gary Shteyngart. In what critic Viktor Shklovsky called Russian literature's "bad tradition [of being] devoted to the description of unsuccessful love affairs," the love story between Krylov and the woman he knows only by the pseudonym Tanya hangs on by the barest of threads. Each knows no identifying facts about the other; they determine their

*rendezvous locations by selecting map coordinates at random and meeting at the point where they intersect. Though the plot twists can be outlandish, Slavnikova's sensitivity to detail, character, and the human condition keeps *2017* clear in the reader's mind, long after the excursion is over.*

Kara Mason