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CLARION REVIEW ★★★★☆ GENERAL FICTION

A Simple Soul

Vadim Babenko
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Carefully crafted, with a strong sense of place, Babenko's novel is an immensely engaging contemplation about the nature of reality and illusion.

A Simple Soul is anything but simple. As with matryoshka nesting dolls, Russian author Vadim Babenko fits stories inside stories in this clever, cerebral, and complex novel. Babenko tucks an unlikely romance inside an intricate thriller, wraps it in intellectual musings, and sends the whole thing on a tour of modern Moscow and environs. Filled with astute observations about the contradictory inner and outer lives of modern humans, *A Simple Soul* offers much food for thought even as it engages in an entertaining quest for love and treasure.

At the heart of the story is Elizaveta Bestuzheva, a Moscow resident who begins receiving mysterious phone calls, flower deliveries, and anonymous messages. As Elizaveta follows the clues that lead to Timofey Tsarkov, an old flame with new ambitions, Babenko introduces a wide-ranging cast of characters. There's American treasure-hunter Frank White Jr., Russian historian Nikolai Kramskoy, and spurned lover Alexander Frolov. All of them are passengers on the same train that is taking Elizaveta to her old lover. Unaware of how their stories will intersect, the travelers ponder their own motives and next moves.

The constant contradiction between personal motives and public actions is a theme repeated throughout the book. Timofey, for instance, wants to marry Elizaveta not out of the passion he pretends but to escape the clutches of the daughter of an overzealous mafia boss. He's willing to trade intimacy for safety and security. Similarly, Nikolai has a deep respect for history, but he works for clients who want to locate historical documents that bolster their images, a task that often requires Nikolai to embellish his finds. The author explores this duplicity from many angles, and while his observations remain fresh throughout, their frequency and length can at times stall the progress of the story.

A strong sense of place permeates Babenko's writing, whether in his characters' departure from the urban landscape of Moscow or their arrival on the smaller streets of Sivoldaisk. Babenko uses vivid imagery throughout, ranging from the dramatic to the subtle. Of Moscow, for instance, he writes boldly, "This was a strange world with its own color spectrum: poisonous greenery and puddles producing reddish-yellow lichen and rosy moss oozing into the cracks of the Khrushchev projects."

Sivoldaisk gets a more nuanced treatment as a "wild steppe for some; for others it's the dust grinding in their teeth." The specificity of Babenko's descriptions not only makes them effective and evocative but also asks the reader to pay attention to his carefully crafted sentences. Paying attention is crucial since the conflicted main characters run into unexpected, and serious, trouble on their journey, and it's important to know each person's private and public story.

Those expecting an edge-of-your-seat page-turner might find the contemplative tone of *A Simple Soul* to be challenging, but it can also be immensely engaging. Babenko's reflective rhythm encourages immersion into his world; he poses pivotal questions about the nature of reality and illusion and the creation of identity in the modern world.
SHEILA M. TRASK (September 4, 2013)

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