



## American Ending

**Mary Kay Zuravleff**

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A girl raised by Russian immigrants in an Appalachian mining community encounters hardships and love in Mary Kay Zuravleff's evocative historical novel *American Ending*.

In a western Pennsylvania coal mining town in the early 1900s, precocious Yelena negotiates her dual identity. The daughter of poor Russian immigrants, she follows the customs of her parents' heritage at home, but she speaks little Russian and identifies as an American. At school, a teacher encourages her academic aspirations. But family obligations force Yelena to cut her studies short and care for her young relatives.

As Yelena grows toward womanhood, she navigates the challenges of her circumstances. A mining disaster guts the town; a family tragedy occurs, rooted in alcohol abuse and domestic violence. At the same time, Yelena cherishes moments of joy and love, hopeful for the day when women will secure the vote. She hopes to achieve an "American ending" unlike the shattered endings of Russian fairy tales.

This atmospheric, animated story captures the sooty mining town and Yelena's tight-knit immigrant home through vibrant descriptions of customs, celebrations, chores, meals, and "Old Believer" religion. When the town's children play "funeral" after a mine shaft collapse, it's haunting.

Yelena's narration brings her pleasure, grief, rage, and determination into sharp focus and vivifies her family members. Her father vacillates between abuse and unexpected warmth, while her mother displays a tender core when she treats Yelena to a surprise birthday trip and supports her daughter's choice in love. Structured in accordance with daily activities, the plot moves at an unhurried pace toward its end, with a handful of gripping scenes breaking through its general quiet.

The historical novel *American Ending* follows a Russian American girl's coming of age in rich period detail.

PAULA MARTINAC (May / June 2023)

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