



★ **Castle of Concrete**

Katia Raina

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Imagine becoming an adult under the imposing shadow of the Soviet Union. That's what Sonya faces when she's pulled down from her quiet life in Siberia to rejoin her mother, a Jewish dissident, in the USSR's waning days. In Katia Raina's fascinating and sympathetic *Castle of Concrete*, the concerns of young adulthood are amplified tenfold against a background of historical upheavals.

In her first days just outside of Moscow, Sonya sees tanks roll toward the capital; is given clothes from the West and a home of conveniences thanks to her mother's new marriage; is introduced to her Judaism, and learns that it makes her vulnerable; and meets a boy who turns her insides to jelly and light, who takes her on her first date, and who is obsessed with what it means to be authentically Russian.

What's expected of Sonya often clashes with the woman she's becoming. Her appearance says "Russian," but she carries a new Magen David in her pocket, and she knows she has more in common with her synagogue-attending classmate, Misha, than she does with her blond, square-jawed peers. Her new boyfriend, Ruslan, is the class dream, but he's also involved in amorphous political organizing and is jealous to a point of concern.

Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin clash in time with Sonya and her mother attending their first Yom Kippur services. An aging history teacher reveals the too high personal costs of the old USSR. Misha teaches Sonya about Babi Yar and Israel and how to play Hava Nageela on the guitar. Ruslan drops *Jid* as an insult and implores Sonya to forget the past.

As her first year fades toward spring and political demonstrations heat up, Sonya is forced to choose who she wants to be—Jewish, or Russian, or both. *Castle of Concrete* is a riveting story about growing up in dark political times.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (May/June 2019)

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