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Autobiography & Memoir

Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance
Ericka Johnson
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"Irina, 30, I am kind, good mixer, cheerful, romantic, honest, humorous, and loyal. I can only speak a little English," reads one ad. "Svetlana, 20, cheerful, soft, faithful, humorous, loving woman. I like music and sports. I especially like knitting and sewing," reads another of the thousands of pages listing women from the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe trying to find husbands in the west.

No longer restricted to Asia and Latin America, these mail-order brides represent a new order of women available to men fed up with "man-hating feminists," "bitter divorcees," and "women's rights bitches" in their own countries (like America and New Zealand) and seeking wives young enough to bear children, white enough to provide proper genetic material, and desperate enough to move abroad to marry someone who picked them out of an electronic line-up. Ironically, few of the Russian women listing themselves on internet sites have ever "sat in front of a computer, much less … surfed the Net." As the author puts it, this could be "the public face of a shadow industry for trafficking women." Or it could be that mail-order bride sites are just tapping into a universal desire to find "happiness which involve[s] a husband and family."

Johnson gives six of these "imported housewives" space to present themselves in a way denied by their online biographies. She chooses them to represent the selection process and the results, finding that "each had something unique to say to other women who are looking for husbands in the mail." Subtitled a romance and written in a memoir style, this book tries to fill in the blanks with some cultural context drawn from the author's own stay as an exchange student in Russia, her academic interest in gender and technology, and her insights into the grim realities that play a part in motivating women to look for better lives abroad. As she discovers, the overriding factor for success in these trans-Atlantic romances is not where they are from, but what they want out of a marriage: "a future of love and economic stability." This comes down to the traditional paradigm in which "the woman is more interested in being a wife and mother

than in having a career."

Johnson works at a Swedish university and originally approached the subject as a research topic on internet access patterns. Despite her desire to "use this book to let these women themselves speak," she ends up "always co-opting their voices." Not only that, she alters their identities ("personae") to come up with a composite in some cases and/or alters the transcripts of her interviews with them to clean up their English when necessary. This detracts from the reliability of the research and undermines the premise of the book. Instead of allowing these women "to be the subject of their own activities," she gets in the way of the story with her own observations and experiences.