

## From Chernobyl with Love: Reporting from the Ruins of the Soviet Union

**Katya Cengel**

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Journalist Katya Cengel's adventurous memoir *From Chernobyl with Love* begins in the 1990s, when, fresh out of college, she was posted to an assignment abroad.

Cengel arrived in Latvia with the name of her new employer, school newspaper experience, and luggage full of brand new winter gear. She was assigned to report on post-Soviet news and culture. Her rich story of contrasts is set during a time of change and revolution, and features rollerblading through streets of identical tenements while personal stories fill in the gaps between news events.

Cengel's time in the Baltics was her introduction to reporting abroad; that experience led her to Kyiv, where civil unrest and mistrust of a shady government led to the Orange Revolution. She shows that, after September 11, 2001, journalism underwent major changes as American news sources refocused their international coverage on terrorism.

Cengel's love story with a photographer is included, too; it overlaps with accounts about friends and her boyfriend's controlling family. These relationships help her through daily life and some hair-raising health crises.

Cengel recalls incidents like submitting to radiation screening after interviewing the residents of Chernobyl and finding out then that if she didn't pass, she couldn't leave. Reporting on the slow, boozy ceremonial burial of the head of an admired and long-dead Cossack hero adds another angle. Cengel ably captures a complicated region in which citizens make do with few resources, where phones are tapped and many workers aren't paid, and where the people encountered sometimes seek bribes, are pessimistic, or are drunk.

Cengel's language is precise, and her historical context invites readers in, regardless of their knowledge of former USSR countries. Big risks and moments of gravity make *From Chernobyl with Love* both human and heroic—a satisfying and gutsy memoir.

MEREDITH GRAHL COUNTS (November / December 2019)

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