

Kidnapped: A Story in Crimes

Ludmilla Petrushevskaya

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Deep Vellum Publishing (Apr 25, 2023)

Softcover \$16.95 (268pp)

978-1-64605-204-2

In Ludmilla Petrushevskaya's novel *Kidnapped*, two boys are switched at birth, leading to unexpected consequences.

The story unfolds against the backdrop of the Soviet Union's collapse. Alina, a poor university student who has been abandoned by her boyfriend, plans to give up her baby. Her maternity ward roommate, Masha, is happily married to Sergei, a KGB spy; she prepares to accompany Sergei on his overseas posting. When Masha dies in childbirth, Alina is forced to pose as Masha and go with Sergei. Having changed her mind about giving up her son, she switches the babies' name tags in a desperate attempt to ensure that her own child stays with her. Unbeknownst to her, the hospital's head doctor has plans of her own for one of the babies. This sets off a years-long chain of events involving mistaken identities, criminal activity, and exotic travel, culminating in an elaborate attempt to establish the boys' lineage that results in its own kind of justice.

The story is unflinching in its portrayals of ugliness, but also features mordant wit. And while it includes plentiful examples of people behaving inhumanely toward others, it also includes acts of selflessness and love. Its nonchronological structure and several intersecting plot lines amplify its detective-story elements well: it opens in the twenty-first century, when the boys are grown-up; it then shifts between multiple people's story lines and between time periods, building suspense.

Though it includes a rollicking ending, the novel isn't focused on proffering a neat solution. Instead, it is playful, sifting through crimes that have different ethical weights. It demonstrates both the dysfunction and the love implicit in family structures.

Kidnapped is an inventive novel—a hymn to building a family on one's own terms, whatever form that family takes.

YELENA FURMAN (May / June 2023)

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