



★ **Open Fire**

Amber Lough

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In 1917, Maria Bochkareva commanded the Women's Battalion of Death, a unit in the Russian army that fought against invading Germany. In Amber Lough's novel *Open Fire*, this episode in women's military history is the piercing backdrop.

Seventeen-year-old Katya is a munitions factory worker. Her father is loyal to the tsar, and her brother is reluctant to revisit the front. Katya's friends are a mix of socialist sympathizers and women who want their deprivations to end.

After witnessing the February Russian Revolution and learning about Bochkareva, Katya is resolved to help her country. Within the coiled, multisectioned story, she transforms from a young woman who dreams of studying chemistry into a platoon leader in the trenches.

Laced with a story about St. Olga that unfolds in fable-like fragments, Katya's story is one of troubled loyalties and friendship, belief in duty and brutality. Economical descriptions of the minutiae of war infuse scenes with tense immediacy. Amid the bloodshed, the book is elegant with honed images. From a gold-leafed icon to a hat pin, peonies to ceramic latticework, spare instances of a civilized life bring the darkness into sharper relief.

Depicting women warriors in a balanced way that acknowledges their rarity while keeping them human, the women's backstories and dreams are incorporated into the novel. Katya's distant relationship with her father is renewed because of her valor; their complicated love comes into relief. Meanwhile, her alliance with a former classmate (also a Bolshevik) highlights that their shared hope matters more than ideology.

Depicting pain in a realistic way and conveying ambivalence about whether single battles advance wars, *Open Fire* is a lively, passionate novel set in a pressurized time, in which a strong-minded girl displays inspiring commitment.

KAREN RIGBY (January / February 2020)

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