

Sisters of the Cross

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In *Sisters of the Cross*, Alexei Remizov captures the strata of human experiences via evocative imagery and scintillating language.

An unassuming and meticulous clerk, Piotr Alekseevich Marakulin, is fired when a mistake is found in his books. Left to wonder if someone has set him up to fail, he is forced to scrape by on odd jobs. A combination of his inner and outer landscapes form the stage for Marakulin's psychological and spiritual development.

His room in Burkov House places him in the midst of a menagerie of characters, mainly women. The wizened Akumovna tells fortunes with playing cards and "rolls around the earth" to escape a traumatic past. Adoniia idolizes living saints and seeks them out whenever possible. Verochka, the target of Marakulin's unrequited love, is determined to assert herself in Russian theater, but instead traverses the path of prostitution. Such women exert a profound influence over Marakulin as he wrestles with existential questions and economic hardship.

In gorgeous prose, the novel blends together the seemingly disparate narratives of its individual characters to form a harmonious whole. The narrative sings of age-old dichotomies—rich and poor, truth and illusion, love and lust. Phrases, sentences, and even entire paragraphs occasionally resurface throughout, like motifs in a symphony of human suffering.

Characters' pasts are often raw and heart-wrenching. There is no glossing over the mistreatment and abuse that some of these women, particularly Marakulin's mother, suffer at the hands of men, yet the novel never glorifies such violence.

Though Marakulin fantasizes about the potential death of a fellow tenant, he never teeters over the edge. Frustration follows from socioeconomic incongruities. His quest for fulfillment and salvation—not only for himself, but also for Verochka—culminates in a poignant and eerie finale that offers little solace for Marakulin's own existential crisis. A persistent note of melancholic hope permeates the final pages.

Sisters of the Cross captivates with the musicality of its writing. Its characters are compelling mirrors, well worth lingering over.

MEAGAN LOGSDON (January/February 2018)

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