

The Baba Yaga Mask

Kris Spisak

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Two sisters search for their grandmother in Kris Spisak's novel *The Baba Yaga Mask*.

After their grandmother Vira disappears on a trip to Poland, Larissa and Ira rush to Europe to look for her. The only clues to her whereabouts are incomplete scraps of family history, an improbable trail of sunflowers, and versions of Baba Yaga, a mythical witch who only helps those who deserve it. As the sisters follow Vira's trail, they discover the painful secrets that their willful grandmother lived with for decades.

The sisters' frantic search takes them from homely apartments to perilous mountain trails, with each location transforming from mundane to labyrinthine the more that they try to solve its mysteries. The narrative switches between Larissa, an overresponsible mother who needs to be in control at all times; free-spirited Ira, who is convinced she will die young; and flashbacks to Vira's rebellious youth in wartime Ukraine. Each brings her own priorities and perspectives to the story, but Vira remains at the heart of it all. Her stubborn independence and harsh experiences taught her early on the benefits of being as old, ugly, and devious as Baba Yaga—a lesson that her granddaughters have yet to learn.

No matter how reluctant they are to inherit Vira's culture or physical traits, they are the sisters' inheritance nonetheless. Larissa is ambivalent about their heritage, which now becomes significant. And Ira, who was always closer to their culture, weaves Ukrainian folktales throughout the story. But whether any of the stories contain truth is beside the point: they are real enough to lend strength to the women in their hours of need, and that is the true source of their power.

With hints of the fantastical, *The Baba Yaga Mask* is a multigenerational story of endurance and survival.

EILEEN GONZALEZ (March / April 2022)

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