

The Girl in the Water

Joseph Howse

Janet Howse, Illustrator

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Intentional and poetic, the historical novel The Girl in the Water follows a Soviet Union coming-of-age.

Joseph Howse's charming bildungsroman *The Girl in the Water* is set in Ukraine in the 1980s; in it, an observant girl becomes an adult.

Nadia grows up during a tumultuous time in history: her story is set against a backdrop of major events including the Chernobyl disaster, the final days of the Soviet Union, and the Soviet-Afghan War. Still, much of her focus remains on discovering who she herself is becoming. She is surrounded by her sister and a wide range of friends, including rebellious Jaan and clever Ida.

Nadia narrates, infusing even her memories with the 20/20 gaze of a future writer. Many sections hint at what's to come in the world without breaking out of the immersion of the moments themselves. Ida, Nadia's dear friend, holds deep interest in the burgeoning field of computer science; Ukraine's place within the Soviet Union is detailed in ways that foreshadow the fracturing of that relationship; and even the momentary focus on Chernobyl carries understanding of the decades of devastation the accident would wreak.

Still, while its references to history are frequent, the book excels because of its close-up focus on Nadia and her loved ones. Nadia is a lively, sympathetic heroine, and the people around her are engaging in each moment. Her glimpses at the world around her are sensitive and self-aware, and she, her friends, and her family members honor the people who live through difficult times with them. Among their ranks, shy romances bloom into relationships, friendships evolve, and families continue to love one another despite the keen drama around them.

The book moves at a purposeful pace, focusing on character-building over action; though not much happens within Nadia's story beyond the movements of history, it brims with life. Its prose is poetic, and its lines are structured with intention, drawing attention to their forms. This results in some stilted sentences, though; some of Nadia's lines read as though they were written much further in the past than the 1980s. Still, with its refreshing focus on "average" people living through extraordinary times, the novel secures interest: everyday moments between its characters are weighty with their shared history, and there is real tenderness in the relationships depicted.

In the sweet, humane novel *The Girl in the Water*, a girl enters adulthood amid the changing of her very culture.

CHLOE CLARK (December 13, 2023)

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