



# The Little Russian

*Susan Sherman*

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## **The Little Russian** Susan Sherman

*The Little Russian* spotlights an exciting new voice in historical fiction, an assured debut that should appeal to readers of *Away* by Amy Bloom or *Cold Mountain* by Charles Frazier. The novel tells the story of Berta Alshonsky, who revels in childhood memories of her time spent with a wealthy family in Moscow – a life filled with salons, balls and all the trappings of the upper class — very different from her current life as a grocer's daughter in the Jewish townlet of Mosny. So when a mysterious and cultured wheat merchant walks into the grocery, Berta's life is forever altered. She falls in love, unaware that he is a member of the Bund, The Jewish Worker's League, smuggling arms to the shtetls to defend them against the pogroms sweeping the Little Russian countryside.

Married and established in the wheat center of Cherkast, Berta has recaptured the life she once had in Moscow. So when a smuggling operation goes awry and her husband must flee the country, Berta makes the vain and foolish choice to stay behind with her children and her finery. As Russia plunges into war, Berta eventually loses everything and must find a new way to sustain the lives and safety of her children. Filled with heart-stopping action, richly drawn characters, and a world seeped in war and violence; *The Little Russian* is poised to capture readers as one of the hand-selling gems of the season.

## **The Little Russian Details**

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# **From Reader Review The Little Russian for online ebook**

## **Pat Deoring says**

This was such an interesting story based on the suffering of so many Russian people at the turn of the 20th century and through their revolution and pogroms. Telling one woman's story opens a window and lets you see life in her surroundings. I have a friend whose family lived through this. What would you do if a loved one had to flee in the middle of the night with next to nothing in order to survive or avoid being sent to Siberia? No way to contact them, know if they were alive, to get desperate messages sent...those left behind trying to just survive another day, with nowhere to turn for help. You will remember this book.

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## **Cara says**

What a terrific, unflinching and unsentimental story about the reality of what it was to be Jewish in Russia in the early 20th century. Remarkable writing and good characters

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## **Melissa says**

I have fairly mixed feelings about this book. On the one hand it is an interesting historical novel about the pogroms in Russia in the early twentieth century. It is a story of survival in the face of grim death. On the other hand, the main character Berta is not particularly likable (she reminded me of the misplaced entitlement of Madame Bovary) and some of what could be the most interesting parts of the story were left out. For example, when Berta's son hides in the corner of an abandoned market with Red soldiers at the door, I was full of anxiety for him. How will he escape? But then the next chapter begins four days later and apparently all is well. If this had happened once or twice I would be forgiving. But this happened a lot. Too often to really make the story satisfying in the end.

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## **Hollyutah says**

I wanted to like this, but I found the protagonist too unlikeable. She did what she had to do to survive, but I don't want to have lunch with her.

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## **Lauren Hopkins says**

Beautifully written war novel centered around a Jewish family in early 20th century Ukraine. Reads a little bit like "Gone with the Wind"; the author seems to want her work to look like the WWI version of that classic, and it works well. Parts dragged a bit, especially because it's heavy on the narrative and light on dialogue but overall it's interesting and devastating. Not among the best books I've read this year or on my list of favorites but certainly a very good read.

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## Monty says

This is a great debut novel, in a difficult genre. Historical fiction is challenging, and Susan Sherman has done a fine job.

"Little Russia" is a derogatory term for Ukraine. "Great Russia" was a term saved for the Muscovite-Russian speaking, Russian Orthodox Church-believing people who lived in the largest part of the Russian Empire (pre-1917) and largest Soviet Socialist Republic (after 1917). Ukraine, or "Little Russia" was viewed as a lesser, mongrolized state by the Russians, because it was the haven of minority peoples--including Ukrainians, Poles, Jews, Moldavians, gypsies, and other groups.

"The Little Russian" is reminiscent of Dr. Zhivago (same time frame) but from a Jewish/Ukrainian perspective. The writing is fresh, crisp and evocative of the time and places, with all of the inherent problems suffered by the Jewish minority. The class issue is handled beautifully, showing the difference between the ultra-civilized muscovites and the farming and ranching cultures of Ukraine. The differences between the city folks and the rural farming districts were still there in 1994. In the rural districts of Ukraine hot water was only available two days per week, there were only three TV and radio stations from which to choose, and very limited public transportation. On the other hand, the food was plentiful and of better quality than that found in the cities. The umbrella of civilization extended only 10-15 miles beyond the city limits. The Bolshevik Revolution was more devastating to the Ukrainians than the American Civil War was to the people of the American South. Nearly everyone was affected, and the tumult included famine, disease, deportation and the gulags. All minority groups who did not embrace the Communist Party, but clung to their traditional values and religion were persecuted and badly treated. Churches and Synagogues were flattened, or gutted and used for secular purposes. When I was visiting Ukraine in 1994 these buildings were being reopened and converted back into religious structures for the first time since 1917-20. Susan Sherman's novel captures this era and its people very well.

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## Rashel says

A good historical novel, depicting a heart rending story about Jewish family in Russia in the early 1900s as they go to war with Germany. Thoroughly enjoyed it.

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## Leah Beecher says

Had high hopes for this one. It started out good; kept my interest, then it just fizzled out. A great sweeping backdrop of the Ukraine - "Little Russia" for the Jewish people at the turn of the century. Ms. Sherman definitely did her research. Most of the book tells the story of Berta. She hates her poor rural life, and wants to go back to her experience of living with her rich relatives in Moscow. For me it had all the right ingredients for a great historical fiction read, but fell flat. I think because of the author's writing technique of telling the story in such a detached way. Often a very exciting tense scene would unfold, described in great detail, and then just abruptly end. The next scene would be several months later, and the reader has to find out, several paragraphs later what happened, though not in great detail. Some chapters go into great detail about a certain minor character and then only a scant sketch of what happened to them later. I hate that kind of story telling. A good book is a good story, a good story does not leave big gaps to then piece the bare details later. The book takes place over many, many years, and all the characters go through hell because of

persecution and war. Yet, I did not connect with any of the characters, and was not drawn into their sorrow. Even the last scene, supposed to be so touching, felt contrived to be sentimental and symbolic. However, since I did not get drawn into the characters themselves, I felt no real emotion when it was over. I think she is a good writer, it was plotted well, and had good setting details, but just too detached when it came to the characters themselves.

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### **Anne Maesaka says**

This is the story of Berta, a young Jewish woman who is the companion to a young woman of wealth. When the young woman gets married, Berta is sent back to her family who live in a small Jewish town. The family is poor and Berta never thought she would end up back in these circumstances. She meets a young man who is also Jewish and involved in the Underground. However, he has to flee to America and thus begins Berta's struggle to raise children and find a place for herself in war torn Russia.

At times the book is a bit melodramatic, but the story is captivating and the characters are well rounded. I did have trouble with the use of so many Yiddish words. I expected there to be some sort of list of the words somewhere for we non-Jewish readers but there was not.

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### **Erin Al-Mehairi says**

Wonderfully well-written.

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### **Amanda Parker says**

3.5 stars. It is always hard to believe how cruel people can be to each other and to think about how much suffering the Jewish people have endured over the years. This story, set in the Ukraine in the early 1900s, was an interesting glimpse into the life of a Jewish family and the persecution they endured during this time. I kept envisioning the settings from Fiddler on the Roof. The author introduces so many characters with long names who really are completely unnecessary because they are never really developed. I think this book could have been better if some of the needless details had been omitted. There also were some Russian or Yiddish words used that I, of course, did not know. An appendix in the back of the book would have been helpful to navigate some of this unfamiliar vocabulary.

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### **Laurie says**

This was one of those books when I initially started reading it I wasn't sure if I was going to like it but it just kept getting better and better. Needless to say by the end I was in tears over it. It is about a young Jewish girl who grows up being very spoiled and well off and the struggles she endures for her family in Russia when war breaks out and Jews are no longer safe in their own country. It is a love story, a story of racism, endurance, tragedy, loss, perseverance against all odds and survival.

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## **Diane says**

This is a novel about a Jewish girl, Berta, living in Russia in the late 1890s and early 1900s, who was born to a poor family but raised by rich relatives as a companion for a period of time, until they no longer needed her services, and Berta is returned to her family living in meager circumstances. She is resentful that after having a good education and living in a beautiful house, with the latest fashions and great food, she now has to live like the other peasants. She feels herself better than they are & has a hard time adjusting. However, she falls in love with a young, intelligent Jewish dissident and marries him, and he provides a sheltered life for her & their children, as he has made plenty of money. However, at the outbreak of WWI things change drastically, and he leaves for America, which Berta is reluctant to do. The novel tells of her difficulties through the war and revolution, raising her children on her own, and the indignities she is made to suffer. It is a good book in showing the horrors of war for civilians, especially the Jews living in the Pale at that time, but is very predictable.

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## **Claudia says**

Once in awhile a bona fide literary treasure bursts upon the book scene. This book is one of those gems. It belongs on a shelf alongside other chronicles of humans caught between the Scylla and Charybdis of world events written by the likes of Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Boris Pasternak.

This book highlights the plight of Jews-the prevalent anti-Semitism, the Pogroms, and the murder and displacement of them-through pre-revolutionary Russia from 1897, through WW 1, and the Revolution.

It is told through the eyes of a Jewish woman-who as a young girl- gets a taste of upper class life when she lives with wealthy relatives as a companion for a distant cousin her age. Once the girl gets married, the poor relation is sent back to her village where her father is a grocer. Out of place due to her finery, she pines for the good life and puts on airs. I got a very bad taste in my mouth for her when she ignored her mother who was waiting at the train station for her and told a wealthy fellow traveler that she didn't know who that shabby woman was and that her parents had died.

She comes of age and is swept up in the whirlpool of world events and her fortunes cycle upwards, hit absolute rock bottom and edge upwards again. Through it all, she is human. Perhaps not admirable, but human.

I would not be surprised if this book if this book is considered by the Nobel committee. It is another chapter in the Diaspora and an important literary voice.

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## **Tenli says**

Read this while traveling in Russia, on a train from Moscow to St. Petersburg.

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