



The Russian Word for Snow: A True Story of Adoption

Janis Cooke Newman

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Janis Cooke Newman first saw the baby who would become her son on a videotape. He was 10 months old and naked, lying on a metal changing table while a woman in a white lab coat and a babushka tried to make him smile for the camera.

Four months later, the Newmans traveled to Moscow to get their son. Russia was facing its first democratic election, and the front-runner was an anti-American Communist who they feared would block adoptions.

For nearly a month, the Newmans spent every day at the orphanage with the child they'd named Alex, waiting for his adoption to be approved. As Russia struggled with internal conflict, the metro line they used was bombed, and another night, the man who was to sign their papers was injured in a car-bombing.

Finally, when the Newmans had begun to consider kidnapping, their adoption coordinator, through the fog of a hangover, made the call: Alex was theirs.

Written with a keen sense of humor, *The Russian Word for Snow* is a clear-eyed look at the experience of making a family through adoption.

The Russian Word for Snow: A True Story of Adoption Details

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Gina says

I am a huge fan of author Janis Cooke Newman, and this book was one I devoured, just as I did another of her books (Mary: A Novel about the life of Mary Todd Lincoln).

This is the true story of the process the author went through to adopt her son from an orphanage in Russia. The first time she laid eyes on the child she would call Alex, he was a naked 10-month-old baby in an orphanage, being held by two ladies trying desperately to get him to smile for the camera.

The process was not an easy one. There were many obstacles to be overcome, not the least of which was a bombing on the Metro line they used. A power struggle was happening, and one in which it was feared the adoption of Russian children would be banned.

This is a touching, heartfelt love story.

Cherity says

I have pretty mixed feelings about this book. I'm Russian, so I know the situation from the inside. While I understand that in early 90s children in orphanages indeed had extremely hard life and few chances to be adopted domestically, the whole description of this adoption is just sketchy and filled with hatred for Russia. The authors treats the whole situation as if she was entitled to adopt a Russian child and people have to be grateful to her for doing that, while in reality, she basically bought a child from an impoverished country, while giving bribes and treating locals like trash...

Shanna says

I shouldn't have read this one right after Locas, because they both present similar situations: two women, one an illegal immigrant, and one a wealthy white woman, both who want to have babies, but can't. However, the tone of Locas was so matter-of-fact, while the narrator's voice in this book can come across as entitled and whiny, especially when she threatens to reduce her Russian adoption coordinator's pay by 100 dollars for every day he doesn't produce the signatures for the adoption. While she may be describing the adoption process, and even the setting, accurately, it often reads as overly harsh.

Linda says

I had read and enjoyed some of Janis Cooke Newman's travel writing a few years ago and was excited to know that she had a book in the works. The Russian Word for Snow is the story of the author and her husband's trip to Russia to find and adopt their young son Alexander. The story is fine, the outcome heartwarming. It didn't really hold up to my expectations based on her earlier essays.

Jeanine says

One couple's story of international adoption.

I really enjoyed all of the details of life in and outside of the orphanage in Russia.

I was inspired by the relentless bravery and persistence shown by this couple.

I was surprised that the writer did not change adoption consultants upon realizing the inadequacy and corruption surrounding Yuri. I also found the couples implied wealth difficult to relate to.

Gripping and coarse but with a happy ending. Definitely more than "just another feel good adoption story".

Loved the inclusion of photos.

Kim says

This is a lovely heart-warming story about an American family who adopts a little boy from a Russian orphanage. His Russian name meant 'snow.' I'm a sucker for books like this and if I had more money, I would have loved to adopt kids from other countries. It's expensive and you have to jump through so many legal hoops. Kudos to Angelina Jolie for doing it!!

Carolyn says

This commentary on adoption shows a need to be extremely selfish, tenacious, and willing to be treated with discrimination and disdain. The entire situation was driven by greed and dishonesty by these people all along the way offering a couple a child with freedom to make possible a homeward bound Alex.

Ken and Janis have to be admired for sticking with this project for so many months. It is understandable how they began to bicker with each other and virtually Janis made herself ill with this tension. It reminds me of the true story of Philomena and her plight with the Catholic Orphanage in Ireland. We aren't aware of these inequities all over the world.

The financial as in all dishonest contracts leads the temptation for desperate people.

One thing I did notice at the final portion of the book, when Janis is dealing with Alex and makes her threat about going downstairs. Alex retorts, "Calm down" holding up both his hands. This is a sign of the power he is learning to exert on these parents. Or is he so mature and understanding at this young age?

Joanne says

Very touching true story. Learning to be parents is always a challenge but adding the bureaucracy of an international adoption adds even more complexity. I met the author last week and she is a special person.

Brynn says

I loved the story. It teaches a lot about international adoption and Russian culture. The life style over there is completely different to America!! I once e-mailed the author about my reaction to the story, and she responded. Great read!

Arlene says

This is the year of the Reading Passport at our local library and I chose this book to read for the country of Russia. It is the story of an American couple who use a rather dubious adoption service to adopt their son, Alex, from Moscow. They spend one month in Moscow, dealing with the surly Yuri, who they are dependent upon for government signatures for the adoption. Just as they are at the end of their rope, they are allowed to bring their son home to America. The description of the orphanage where Alex(Grisha) lived is heartrending but you realize the caretakers are doing the best they can do with limited resources. Like the Newmans, I breathed a sigh of relief when they boarded Finnaire to head home.

Lauren says

This is a beautiful work on foreign adoption and the trials that adopting couples face (especially with semi-hostile governments). The author illustrates the frustrations and humor of working through a Russian adoption agency, and the struggle to adopt their son from an orphanage. I found the book difficult to put down and felt like I had a better understanding of adoption, motherhood and the necessary strength of a couple to get through trials. A+

Jessica says

I couldn't wait to read this book! And now that I have, I can honestly say it was a complete and total let-down. The self-absorbed author begins the book with, "I never wanted to have children." Yes, she clearly changed her mind over the course of time, but as someone who has spent their entire life dreaming of having children, it immediately turned me off.

I continued reading nonetheless, respecting her immediate honesty and candor...and hoping upon all hopes that it would get better. Unfortunately I found myself only growing more and more frustrated. I was looking for a book that told a heartwarming story of bringing her child home from a third-world country. All this book did was complain about how difficult it was for them. Having gone through Russian adoption I have experienced many similar situations to those described in this book, but the wonder overpowers all of them, and that was only a miniscule focus of this book. Yes, adoption is difficult, but aren't all things in life worth having difficult?! They should be in order to appreciate the true beauty of them.

Had the book not been a true story, telling the tale of a sweet boy brought to America from a Russian orphanage, I'd want to give this book zero stars (if that was possible).

Stephanie says

I was really excited to read this book but it was just a huge flop for me. She made me angry from the very beginning when she said "'He's ours, he's ours, he's ours!' he sang, dancing around the bed with his penis flapping." If I were her husband, I would be appalled that she wrote that for the whole world to read. It disgusts me just to read it. Later towards the end when talking about other children being adopted she described ones without arms, crossed eyed, or other issues as being "not whole". This came across as them being less than a human being. How could you say that about someone?

Then there is the whole thing with Maggie and Yuri. It was quite apparent they didn't know what they were doing. When asking Maggie questions she would just shrug and not give them answers. Janis and Ken signed papers that were not translated for them. I can't believe people would pay \$15,000 and not even know what they were doing. It seemed very unorganized and a lot of the time I felt like they were being scammed. I was waiting for them to say it was all a joke, and thankfully for them, that never happened.

Becky says

I am a sucker for books on adoption, especially international adoption. Takes you through her story of not wanting children at all, then trying to conceive, falling in love with a Russian baby, and then the trials of being in Russia to adopt. Very well written.

Kayrene Smither says

I have happened across thrift store finds lately, about adoption. This story is very good. I felt so, for the children in the orphanage, and how desperately they all needed homes. This took place in the 90's, and there was unrest, along with a controversial election, while the couple was in Russia. Lots of jumping through hoops. Really good story, and so happy for them all.
