



Mistress of the Solstice

Anna Kashina

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THE DARK ESSENCE OF RUSSIAN MYTH

As the head priestess of the ancient Solstice cult, Marya must sacrifice a virgin every year. She copes with this gruesome duty by assuming a mask of cold detachment, as her father—the evil tsar Kashchey—devours the maidens' souls to maintain his youth and power. It is his power alone that keeps Marya's kingdom safe from all enemies—or so she was raised to believe.

When Ivan arrives on a quest to stop the virgin sacrifices, Marya throws all her magic against him. To maintain her life—and that of her father—she must destroy Ivan before he completes his quest. But can she find it in her heart to do so?

Baba Yaga, Leshy, Vodyanoi, and the ancient animal deities come alive in this beautifully crafted romantic story that will take you into the authentic world of Russian fairy tales—with a dark, sensual twist.

Mistress of the Solstice Details

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Author : Anna Kashina

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From Reader Review Mistress of the Solstice for online ebook

Courtney Vasiliev says

Mistress Of the Solstice

Anna Kashina

Ebook

★?

I received a copy of this book from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review

I am very upset that I did not enjoy this novel. I'm very fascinated with Russia and even more fascinated by Russian folklore.

I can't really tell you what this book is about. I felt at times it droned on and I honestly got bored. Bored enough to where I was just reading words on the page to get the book over with, but not really taking it in. I hate to knock any authors writing because I know when they write a book they pour themselves into these novels. I think this novel upset me so bad because I had high expectations.

This story droned on to me. I know Ivan is this special boy chosen by the Wolf to defeat Marya's father whom sacrifices a virgin every year for his youth. I think I have that correct. Her (Marya) father is known as the immortal king. I got from this that Ivan had many difficult tasks he had to face. A cat who could play with his mind, capture a raven, etc. just a lot of different things. Along the way he falls for The king's daughter and just really wants to free her from her father's clutches.

On top of everything Marya has this magic mirror that tells her whatever she wants to know.

I personally didn't feel the authors writing style, which in the end really messed with the flow of the book for me.

I didn't feel any connections to the characters.

Marya actually got on my nerves with how many times she had to remind us how heartless, detached, and soulless she is. On top of it she was proud of it.

Then when she was able to be a person and feel it felt forced and fake.

Amanda says

This was a very interesting twist on several Russian folktales. It wasn't a straight retelling but a story with fairy tales woven into it. There were characters that are well known, such as Baba Yaga, and the lesser known Primal Spirits. It was very much like reading Grimm's Fairy Tales, only with some naughty bits worked in. Because I'm sure I would have remembered if Grimm's had that much sex in it.

Anyway...

The writing style was rich and brought life to the story, especially the parts with Baba Yaga. I love anything about the old crone.

There were some odd grammatical mistakes, though that could be because of kindle formatting errors in the copy I was sent.

I have one complaint which kept me from rating this book four stars. The two main characters weren't people I really cared enough about. I knew from reading the synopsis that Marya was going to be difficult to like but I had hoped that eventually I would grow fond of her. I didn't like her at all, even at the end of the story. She was willfully blind to the fact that her father was evil and her sacrificing girls was nothing short of murder. Several times she felt anxious and troubled, but she pushed the thoughts away and kept on with it. She ignored everyone who had tried to tell her the truth. There were very few parts in the story where I could feel like I could empathize with her and it left me feeling like she didn't deserve Ivan's kindness. Anyone who knows they are doing wrong but ignore their intuition so they don't have to feel guilty isn't going to make my list of people I want to know. Even in the end I didn't feel as though she had really changed.

Ivan was more interesting, but we didn't get to know him very well. I was constantly trying to figure him out but there was no actual insight into his personality. He was a two-dimensional hero thrown into a quest by the other characters.

Even with the problems I had with the main characters, I was interested enough to keep reading. The world-building was unique and the addition of characters from Russian folklore made it fun.

Lily at Bookluvrs Haven says

Review originally featured on Bookluvrs Haven.

I am not very familiar with Russian folklore, or fairy tales. I've heard of Baba Yaga, but not sure where I came across this dark character, to be honest. After reading this novel I am certainly as curious to explore Russian fairy tales, as I was absorbed in the dark twists of English ones.

This was quite new territory to me, and having no or extremely limited background or knowledge, it took me a little while to get into this story after the introduction. Sacrificing young virgins is pretty riveting subject matter. Once it cut to Ivan's point of view, I did get a little lost.

Marya and Ivan were very interesting characters. Not to mention the lesser cast. They were pretty well developed, though it was too delayed for Ivan for my taste. He seemed to have been thrown into this story without much background. I didn't really know who he was and why he was on these missions until later in the book.

Unfortunately, the plot line lacked as much development. Though I was intrigued every time I read a chapter in Marya's POV, I was still quite confused when it switched to Ivan's. I was never quite sure where he was, and what his goal was, until the storyline between both characters begins to really merge. The lesser cast of characters also lead to my discontentment. I would have liked to have seen more back story on Baba Yaga, Leshy, and even Marya's father, for example. I felt like I was at a disadvantage reading this novel without

any knowledge of Russian folklore, which is unfortunate.

Though there were some good points and not so good points to this story, it has wet my appetite to delve a little more into this author's works and Russian folklore on the whole. I wouldn't discourage readers who have limited knowledge on Russian folklore to read it, but those readers that do have some familiarity may actually enjoy this a little more.

* Received from Netgalley/Publisher for an honest review. *

Tracy says

Immortals, primals, shapeshifters, and mere humans populate Ivan and Marya, a dark and daring fantasy novel by Anna Kashina. Taking inspiration from Russian folklore, Kashina has created a captivating fantasy novel about how love can be exploited or liberated.

Marya is the Mistress of the Solstice. Her twisted upbringing by her father Kaschey the Immortal robs her of proper emotions. A powerful sorceress in her own right, Marya prepares a virgin girl for sacrifice every Summer Solstice. The poor soul feeds the immortality of Kaschey and promotes the fertility of his kingdom. This prosperity along with fear drives most people to tolerate the brutality.

Heroes have tried over the years to kill Kaschey and end the annual sacrifices. They have all died, and now Ivan the Fool, a young prince from a distant kingdom, is the newest man to take up the impossible quest. In a very classic manner, Ivan travels the hero's path and must obtain various magical items or information as he contends with dangerous magical beings.

This novel becomes very engaging when Ivan must play a game of riddles with Leshy, a ruthless Immortal, who rules a frightening swamp haunted by the captive souls of the people who could not guess his riddles. Ivan dares to play riddles with Leshy because if he can correctly guess three riddles, then Leshy must tell Ivan how to obtain a magical net he needs to capture a shapeshifter. The creepy swamp and the suffering of Leshy's previous victims make the stakes high for Ivan. As the reader, I almost wanted Ivan to give up his quest instead of risking the game with Leshy.

Ivan is assisted on his quest by Wolf, a powerful primal feared by many. Wolf fits nicely the role of an ancient and wise being who assists an inexperienced hero. Wolf has a long and complicated history. He tends to be grumpy and likes to complain about Ivan's impulsive kindness and naiveté.

Ivan, whose goal is to destroy Kaschey, continually sidetracks his mission by pursuing the love of Marya. She rebuffs him at first with a beating and then sends him on what should be an impossible quest when he asks for her hand in marriage. Despite her outward disdain for Ivan, she inwardly is obsessed with him. His ability to provoke her buried feelings distracts her terribly.

Marya, as the Mistress of the Solstice, is cold and cruel, but I gained sympathy for her as the story revealed how strategically she had been shaped by Kaschey since childhood. She idolizes Kaschey because he has never allowed her to be close to anyone else. She is indifferent to the frequent horrors that go on in Kaschey's household. Marya believes herself to be impervious to love, but the irrational attempts by Ivan to woo her crack the evil shell around her heart.

The writing throughout the novel is lovely and deeply inspired by the natural world. The thorns on bushes prickle your skin, the lichen hanging from trees tickles your cheeks, and the hazardous swirling waters of the Sacrifice Pool chill you with the thought of gurgling death.

Kashina is also very experimental in the crafting of her narrative. She does not take the easy route but still manages to create a story that moves swiftly and that continually compelled me to keep reading. The novel shifts between the perspectives of Ivan and Marya. The Ivan parts are written in the third person and the Marya parts are written in the first person. Although such an approach could have easily produced a garbled story, the result was quite the opposite. The Ivan elements were filled with many strange beings, and the third person style suited its diversity of action. The first person narrative for Marya exposed her deepest thoughts and her efforts to avoid love and emotion. It also made me as a reader squirm alongside of Marya as she recounted twisted episodes with Kaschey.

In addition to the mixed writing styles, the novel also cunningly played with nonlinear narrative techniques. For example, when Ivan was introduced I felt that he was lacking back story, but then his past was revealed piece by piece throughout the novel in innovative ways.

My experience reading Ivan and Marya was very positive. It was like experiencing a fairy tale during a fever dream. My only complaint would be that the end felt rushed and lacked the emotional outpouring I was expecting. Based on my enjoyment of the characters and the writing skills of the author, I rate Ivan and Marya four bottles of love potion.

Chelsey Nichols says

Mistress of the Solstice, by Anna Kashina is an intricately woven fantasy. Infused with Russian folklore, this story centers around a young man, tied to prophecy, who has come to stop the yearly solstice—and it's virgin sacrifices—from happening.

I really enjoyed the way this story makes use of an interesting narrative—and one that I'm not used to seeing used often in fantasy literature. We get a first person perspective from the Mistress of the Solstice—Marya and a third person perspective from the “hero,” Ivan the Fool. I really liked this storytelling—it felt more visceral and poignant getting Marya’s perspective (especially given her take on the sacrifices she must make, both literally and figuratively) and it almost, for me, added a layer of (enjoyable) disconnect between the hero and myself—as if he had to work to get both myself and Marya to understand his reasoning just that much harder.

I also really enjoyed how Marya comes into her own throughout the story. At the beginning, she has a very detached and clear sense of her own self, but Ivan and revelations that come throughout the story cause her to question her own identity. I found it really enjoyable to see the story through her eyes—to learn through her experiences and betrayals—and finally come to the ending where she is both herself and someone entirely different from who she was at the beginning of the novel. She’s also a very strong female character in a genre that doesn’t always shine in this regard—it was great to read about an empowered woman coming into her own.

I also found the love story incredibly enjoyable—for a somewhat fated type of romance, or a love at first sight, it seemed genuine and interesting—and I was definitely rooting for Ivan and Marya by the end of the

tale. Another aspect of the story that I really found fantastic was the incorporation of Russian folklore—I definitely love retellings of fairy tales and stories that feature their own, original spin are great fun for me.

What I found a bit distracting was some grammatical and typographical errors—not a huge issue, but something that I hope gets worked out in subsequent versions. Another issue was that I wish there was more back story for the secondary characters. I felt like we were introduced to these really interesting themes and characters, but weren't really given that much to go with—especially in Wolf's case. I think it would have almost been better to have focused on less legendary type characters in order to not sacrifice the back story, but I'm sure that is something that will be resolved with time.

All in all, it was a good read and I'd recommend it to anyone looking for a Russian folklore themed story—or a fantasy with legendary characters, romance, and an unconventional storytelling method.

**I was given this book from Netgalley in exchange for a fair and honest review.

ERIN SCHMIDT says

It's been over a hundred years since one of my maternal great-great grandfathers left Russia to avoid serving in the Tzar's army. I'm still fascinated with Russian, and indeed all of Eastern European folklore. Anna Kashina puts Russian folklore to excellent use in her romantic fantasy/epic novel *Ivan and Marya* (Drollerie Press, 2010).

It's not an epic on the scale of Lord of the Rings, though like Tolkien did with Anglo-Saxon folklore in his novels, Kashina weaves the kind of tale my Russian ancestors would have told around their hearths. It's more on the scale of The Hobbit, but while it may not be as sweeping as War and Peace, the fast-paced storytelling keeps the pages turning. I read it in one sitting.

Ivan and Marya is the classic hero's journey. Ivan (nicknamed "The Fool") is on a quest to fulfill a prophecy. He and his sponsor, Wolf, seek to bring an end to the human sacrifice perpetrated by the Tzar, Kashchey and his daughter Marya in the name of the god Kupalo.

Young Ivan (a stock character in Russian folk literature, though he never feels like it in Kashina's telling) is the sort of everyman hero the reader can easily identify with. What makes this story so compelling is rooting for Ivan to complete his perilous, virtually impossible tasks.

Marya, though she is beautiful with her long black hair and pale skin, is compelled by being the priestess of Kupalo to be cold-hearted, incapable of love. Ivan isn't sure if he wants her love. He wants to complete his task; the wildflower the peasants call Ivan and Marya is an omen to him, a symbol of hope.

The theme of the yearly human sacrifice is a common one in ancient Pagan storytelling. In the Celtic world (as in *The Mists of Avalon*), the sacrifice is a young man who may father as many children as he likes before going to his noble death. In this version, the sacrifice must be a female and a virgin, recalling the Greco-Roman myth of Persephone/Proserpina. The virgin sacrifice is a close folkloric cousin of the straw effigy (sometimes named Marzana) that is, even today, "drowned" in Slavic countries as a rite of spring. The name of the death god in this novel, Kupalo, recalls the modern Slavic summer solstice holiday of Ivan Kupala...John the Baptist. The virgin sacrifice's drowning in a sacrificial pool was replaced and

Christianized with the rite of baptism.

Even if the ancient origins of the myths bore you, though, you'll enjoy Anna Kashina's storytelling. She makes it both fresh and exciting. There's some adult content (this is a romance, after all), so this enchanting fairy tale is not for very young readers.

If you enjoy this book, you might also like *The Book of Flying*, *Whispers in the Dark* and *The Raspberry Girl*.

Kelly says

Have you ever read a short story and wished there was more? What came before or after? Another voice or just a bit *more*. Often, that's the mark of a good short story. The questions don't really need answering, but that you'd like them to be means you were invested and you'd like to read on. It's always with a sense of delight that I pick up a book that delves back into a quickly visited world.

I first encountered Mayra, mistress of the solstice, in a short story called 'Solstice Maiden' which appeared in the anthology 'Once Upon A Curse: Stories And Fairy Tales For Adult Readers'. 'Mistress Of The Solstice' expands on that short story and does so in a way that answers many of the small queries I had.

Mayra is a priestess. Once a year, she must sacrifice a virgin in order to prolong the life of her father, the tzar Kashchey. She believes Kashchey uses his power to protect the kingdom from their enemies and so performs her gruesome task with the emotionless detachment he has taught her. Ivan is the youngest son of another tzar who wants to see Kashchey's cruel dominion come to an end. With the help of select Immortals, Baba Yaga, Leshy, Raven and a mysterious grey wolf, he hopes to end the sacrifices. Mayra holds the key to her father's power but first, he has to make her feel emotion. She has to care.

The twist in the tale still came as a surprise, which is a testament to the author's storytelling skills. I was caught up, again, until the end. Ivan's side of the story, previously unexplored, is the stuff of classic fairy tales. He calls himself a fool, but he is not foolish and is only earnest in his beliefs and his desire to be good and help others.

Mayra's journey seems to go the opposite direction. She believes she knows everything when, really, she is more innocent than the boy she thinks a fool. The intersection of these two characters is symbolised by a flower called Ivan-and-Mayra. It should be two flowers, but they grow together and inspire stories of fated lovers.

'Mistress Of The Solstice' is not Anna Kashina's strongest book. I prefer her 'Dhagabad' novels. I enjoyed Ivan's side of the tale and found him to be an endearing character. I had more difficulty connecting with Mayra. Sometimes, the short snippets of thought, chapters of a single page, raised more questions than they answered but Kashina's interest in folk lore and desire to tell her own story does shine through. This is still a good book and at just over two hundred pages, it's a quick read and one fans of her other books will likely enjoy.

Written for SF Crowsnest.

Tish says

The take on Russian folklore was interesting (and new) to me and the plot was good with some exciting reveals at the end, but I never felt like I got to know or care about the main characters. Marya was a mystery to me--I never really got how she could so easily participate in the repeated sacrifices of village maidens and her feelings for her father were just plain creepy and not adequately explained for me to find the whole thing plausible. Ivan seemed to just be a cut-out hero character stuck into the story without adequate development. I would also have liked a lot more development of the Primal Spirits, Baba Yaga, Leshy, etc. as they seemed more interesting than the hero!

Thanks to the publisher and Netgalley for providing me a free copy of this for review.

Sigourney says

Received from NetGalley for review.

Mistress of the Solstice is quite unlike anything I have ever read before, and I was in equal parts disgusted and fascinated as I read it; I still can't decide if I truly enjoyed it or simply got swept up in Marya and Ivan's bizarre tale. Figuring out my thoughts has proven to be rather more difficult than I'm used to, but I can't deny that I devoured this book in one sitting and had no real desire to stop reading it until I reached the end; in many ways it weaved that rare magic of books, it hooked me and it held me and I could not stop reading until I found out everything that was going to happen.

The novel is a twist on Russian myth and fairy tale and I admit I had to Wiki most of the mythical characters to find out who they were. I expected to delve into a rich fantasy world when I started reading it, and found myself in a strange, twisted and sexual fairy tale; I won't go into detail about this, but I will say that I found aspects of this book quite disturbing, notably the character of tsar Kashchey and his strange hold over his daughter, the Mistress of the Solstice herself, Marya. It is dark and disturbing, but intriguing and engaging at the same time; I just can't quite figure out how I feel, especially as the first few pages made me want to throw my kindle at the wall.

I found the characters oddly endearing. Although it took me quite a while to get hooked by this book, I found that I genuinely cared about some of the characters, even some of the minor ones (let's face it, it's not every day you sympathise with Baba Yaga). Marya and Ivan are unexpected heroes, not quite conforming to what you would expect from an unfeeling priestess and an unlucky-in-life son of some distant tsar. Marya is such a complex blend of unfeeling badass and simpering, dutiful daughter that I can't decide how I feel about her; she is at times infuriating for following her fathers every word and awe inspiring for unabashedly taking what she desires from men and moving on without a second thought. I found myself falling for Ivan as I read; he seemed to be transported into the novel from nowhere to begin with and somehow became part of it without me even realising it, with his humble and intelligent ways. Kashina has crafted the characters in such a way that they get under your skin in the most unexpected ways, just like the story itself.

A strange magic is at work in *Mistress of the Solstice*, one that sucks you in and leaves you feeling both satisfied and wanting something else. I think I may have just read the strangest love story ever told.

Sasha says

I requested this book because I was feeling nostalgic for the fairy tales of my childhood - the cat that walks around the gold chain, the mighty knights, the triple-headed dragon, the old hag in the chicken-foot cottage... So I was really excited to see that an English-language book was embracing all those elements and more to maybe bring those bizarre and captivating stories to the mainstream literary awareness. The author is Russian, so I was feeling pretty confident that she would stay true to the spirit of the old tales.

Okay, so I put way too much hope into this book. It's a standard hero's journey type of story, where Ivan the Fool goes off on a quest to prove to his cruel family that he's not a complete idiot and can do some good in this world. He chooses to try to rescue the innocent maidens that keep getting murdered at the summer solstice, falls in love with the cold-hearted mistress in charge of the whole thing, and tangles with the king of the undead in the meantime. He has several wise people/creatures to help him along, battles of wits are played, kindness is displayed, and unexpected revelations made. You know, the standard hero's journey type of thing.

My biggest problem with it is not the authenticity or the writing. It's the odd cobbled-together format. Yes, there are elements from almost every single fairy tale, but damn are they just stuck together! No additional back stories, no interesting twists to traditional story-telling, nothing new or even well-told. Brief mentions of various creatures and tropes were amalgamated into this too-short, poorly thought-out book. I didn't get anything new or anything particularly satisfying to my nostalgia.

I really wish Russian fairy tales could make that cross-over to the US. They can be just as messy and sordid as the Greeks! Okay, nothing can be that bad.. but it's still a ton of fun. So if you're looking for some of that tasty Russian folk tale morsel, maybe look elsewhere. This book isn't bad as an introduction into the world, but I'm afraid it wouldn't hold anyone captive.

-I received a free e-book from the publisher in exchange for an honest review-

Isis says

I would like to thank both NetGalley and Dragonwell Publishing for granting me the chance to read this eARC in exchange for an honest review. Though I received the e-book for free that in no way influenced this review. Had it been possible I'd have given this book 3.5 stars!

Goodreads Blurb

As the head priestess of the ancient Solstice cult, Marya must sacrifice a virgin every year. She copes with this gruesome duty by assuming a mask of cold detachment, as her father—the evil tzar Kashchey—devours the maidens' souls to maintain his youth and power. It is his power alone that keeps Marya's kingdom safe from all enemies—or so she was raised to believe.

When Ivan arrives on a quest to stop the virgin sacrifices, Marya throws all her magic against him. To maintain her life—and that of her father—she must destroy Ivan before he completes his quest. But can she find it in her heart to do so?

Baba Yaga, Leshy, Vodyanoi, and the ancient animal deities come alive in this beautifully crafted romantic story that will take you into the authentic world of Russian fairy tales—with a dark, sensual twist.

Though somewhat slow to start, once the story gets going it continues to gain momentum until it is snowballing down a steep hill, racing toward the conclusion of the tale. Not to worry, it still answers all questions set up along each perilous path traveled.

While steeped in Russian folklore, the author doesn't restrict herself to strictly traditional interpretations. Instead the folklore is viewed through set of very creative lenses. We have the requisite hero on his quest to save not just one kingdom, but possibly all the land, from the evil sorcerer. Then there is Kashchey, the evil sorcerer who commands the Mistress of the Solstice, who just happens to be the most beautiful young woman in all the land, and also his daughter. Nor can we neglect the infamous Russian fairy tale characters and animal deities, for they too play a large role in this unique tale. Though the story certainly starts out sounding like the typical fairy tale, but it certainly doesn't remain that way for long.

To begin with, Ivan (known as Ivan the Foolish back home) is not your typical swashbuckling, sword-fighting hero. He is a gentle soul with a perpetually sunny disposition, always putting others before himself. It is this character trait that just may allow him to win through where all others have failed. Interestingly enough he really is a gentle soul, totally unaware of his impact on those around him. With cornflower blue eyes, and a smile that lights up any room, his exterior matches his inner self. As the hero of the quest one would expect an arrogant jerk accustomed to having things his way at all times, rather than the self-effacing, wholesome young man he is. A man more concerned with doing the right thing than with being the conquering hero featured in famous ballads. His innocence isn't just an act he uses to gain what he needs or wants, which just may prove to be the undoing of those who oppose him.

With Wolf, a reclusive Primal as his guide, young Ivan sets out upon his quest. Even though every other man to attempt this same quest has died, Wolf is oddly confident Ivan has what it takes to succeed. Because of Wolf's faith in him, Ivan's very nature compels him to do the right thing and risk his life in an attempt to free the kingdom from the tyrannical rule of the evil sorcerer Kashchey.

Marya, the Mistress of the Solstice, is another complex character. Each year she travels the land searching for the most beautiful virgin to sacrifice. In Marya's eyes being chosen as the annual sacrifice an enormous honor, for the young virgin's sacrificial offering of her life empowers Kashchey, allowing him to successfully protect the borders of their kingdom for another year. However, like all fairy tales there is more to this story than meets the eye, much of it centering on Marya and her father Kashchey. Of course the lovely Mistress of the Solstice must surely be innocent of all her father's evil machinations, for that's how fairy tales work, isn't it? And yet, Marya demonstrates some rather interesting abilities of her own, abilities that she uses in a most unusual manner considering she is in a fairy tale of sorts.

The truth begins to become clear as Ivan moves through his quest, a truth that causes the characters of Russian folklore to respond in unexpected ways. Even the Primals - such as Baba Yaga, Leshy, Bayun, Vodyanoy - beings more powerful than Immortals, step out of character to varying degrees as Ivan encounters them along his journey. What could cause these solitary creatures to alter their traditional behavior, almost as if they are banding together? Ms. Kashina has woven an entertaining tale, replete with all the expected characters, yet she has interwoven aspects and characters in a surprisingly creative way.

Given the unique hero, powerful villain, and beautiful villainess, the end of this story is in no way guaranteed to fall in line with the usual fairy tale. Will the hero win through and save the day? Is the villain truly a villain? Could it be that the beautiful villainess is behind all the evil machinations, or perhaps the Primals are the ones to have created this entire scenario? Maybe the quest isn't real, but rather a test of Ivan's purity of heart. Ms. Kashina has taken famous characters straight out of a rich cultural history and bent them to her will, blending modern and traditional mores into a rich tale that, with a few adjustments to the more modern aspects, would work in any period of time it is told.

Victoria says

For this and other reviews please visit **Zemfinka Blogs**.

Digital review copy provided by Dragonwell Publishing via NetGalley in exchange for fair and honest review.

What a mess! I think I picked this book up and kept reading against my better judgment, sincerely hoping it will get better. The premise sounded intriguing enough to get me curious but the execution left a lot to be desired. In addition, I cringed at the sexualization of the traditional Russian folklore characters; there was something fundamentally wrong with this picture. I'm not a prude but I grew up reading and watching these characters come to life and they are firmly cemented within my childhood and this is definitely not the way I'd like to perceive them. Nonetheless, stubborn as I am I kept reading, hoping for redemption that never came.

Mistress of Solstice takes on a darker side of classic Russian folklore tales, at its premise – the Solstice cult, a twisted take on the Ivan Kupalo festival marking the Summer Solstice. Marya is the daughter of Tzar Kashchey who is an archetypical male antagonist. She is the priestess of the cult and is tasked with performing the virgin sacrifice each year which helps maintain Kashchey's youth and power, and by extension provide seeming peace and protection for their kingdom, or so Marya is made to believe [*she is never bothered by or questions what she is told*].

She is a renowned beauty throughout the kingdom and been brought up into the role of the priestess, taught to forego any notion of love from young age, making her narcissistic and heartless. I couldn't bring myself to like her, even with later revelations. As part of the story is told from her first person point of view, it was still hard to find any redeeming qualities – she was a passive character. First, an instrument of her father's evil game, then prized spoils, a pawn in the big scheme of things.

Ivan – our hero, is the youngest son of the Tzar from another kingdom, dubbed the *fool* but of course, he is far from such, he is simply kind and virtuous to a fault. Carefully guided by the mysterious *Primal Spirit - Wolf*, Ivan begins his quest that will end Kashchey's rule. But as tradition demands his quest will test his skills. He will face many folklore characters along the way, including Leshy, Raven and Baba Yaga [*who are probably the only truly interesting and likable characters in the novel*], all of whom will try to thwart his attempts. At the end, he will have to choose: listen to his heart or follow Wolf, and face the consequences of his choice, whether death or triumph.

Despite Ivan's almost innocent nature and undertaking of such an honorable quest, his character still fell flat. There was very little insight and development, and it was hard to see him more than just another pawn in the

game. While the folklore characters certainly had more dimension, if only for the inherent development of their characters through known myth and legends, their parts were only supportive and couldn't move the story solely along.

Aside the "*could-be*" interesting and perhaps even unique premise, this book was poorly executed, the story jumping around without providing much in a way of explanation as to the characters' actions. Ultimately I was left frustrated and disappointed and probably unlikely to pick up another novel by this author.

Erth says

now i am hooked. This was such a great, easy and creative book. i was hooked after the first page.

The characters were easy to fall in love with and follow, along with the story. the author made the mental visions so easy and vivid of the surroundings and the characters actions felt so real.

i would highly recommend this author and this book.

Kenya Starflight says

I absolutely love Russian mythology, and find that it doesn't get nearly enough love in modern fantasy literature. So when I came upon a Kindle freebie that took place in Russia and claimed to explore the creatures and themes of that country's mythology, I bit, hoping for a nice tribute to a favorite branch of mythology. The fact that it was written by a Russian author should mean good things, right? Sadly, this book fell terribly flat for me -- the elements of Russian myth felt haphazardly used, the two leads were flat as cardboard, and there are creepy and uncomfortable elements that spoiled the story for me.

The titular Mistress of the Solstice is Marya, a priestess in the service of her father, Tzar Kashchey the Deathless. Every year she must sacrifice a virgin to sustain her father's powers... and must remain untouched by love herself in order to maintain her own powers. But this year a hero is determined to thwart the sacrificial ceremony -- Ivan the Fool, a young nobleman accompanied by a powerful wolf who seeks to defeat Marya by winning her heart. Contemptuous but intrigued, Marya sets him off on an impossible task... little dreaming that in accomplishing it, Ivan just might change her world forever.

The writing in this book is servicable, with some nice descriptive bits, but I found a scattering of spelling and grammar mistakes that should have been caught before publication. Even if English is the author's second language, a good editor should pick up on these things. Also, I found the choice of POV odd -- Marya's chapters are told in first person, while Ivan's are in third. I'm not sure why the author made this decision, and wish she would have stuck with either first or third person instead of switching between the two.

I was also disappointed to find many of the grand tales and fascinating characters from Russian mythology were largely swept aside for a bog-standard romance story. I'm not against romance in a novel, but too often it feels like said romance takes over the story -- and in a case like this, where the romance is pretty much "love at first sight," it gets obnoxious. It doesn't help that both Ivan and Marya are flat characters, making it hard to care about either of them -- and despite both being hailed as great characters, Marya a powerful sorceress and Ivan a Chosen One of prophecy, both are ultimately passive characters, mostly hanging back

and watching as other characters push the plot into place around them. This gets especially obnoxious in the ending, where a number of ridiculous twists are thrown into place to hurry up and give the story a conclusion.

The worst aspect of this book, to me, was the creepy sexual vibe running through it. More than once Marya is shown to have lustful feelings toward Kashchey, her father, and while I understand that incest crops up a LOT in world mythologies of all sorts, it's still played very uncomfortably here. And there's a scene where it's strongly implied that Marya is raped (or at the very least coerced) by multiple men, which isn't treated with nearly the gravity that it should be. Authors, rape and incest are VERY touchy and uncomfortable subjects that need to be treated with respect, and when authors try to use them for cheap drama or *shudder* erotica, it's disgusting. SPOILER ALERT: The book tries to retcon the incest bit, at least, by revealing that Marya's father is someone else entirely, but it's still very creepy to read about...

All in all, a disappointment of a novel and a waste of some of Russia's fascinating myths. I might have merely written this one off as mediocre if it hadn't been for the uncomfortable sexual elements, but those are enough to elevate the book from "forgettable" to "awful" in my mind. Skip this one, and if you want a fantasy that utilizes Russian mythology to a much better degree I'd go with Mercedes Lackey's "Firebird" or Catherynne M. Valente's "Deathless" instead.

Mei says

I received this book from Netgalley for my honest review.

When I was a little girl I loved, loved, loved reading Russian fairy-tales. They were my favorit! I loved the lore, the abiance, the third/youngest-son hero, the poor girl becoming enchanted... everything appealed to me!

So, maybe because of this obsession, I have to read this book! :D

And I liked it! Really! It was like returning to those times for me. It had the same flavour, the same appeal!

Obviously, I'm a *little* bit older now, so the story had also a more grown-up imprint. There're more dark feeling woven into the story, but it still has the magic of Russian fables.

I would like to know more about Ivan earlier in the story, but still I'm content to having found out later in the book. :D

I didn't like Marya at the beginning, but I ended liking her very much at the end!

By the way, I would have preferred her name to be Marija or Mariya, since it seems much more Russian than Marya... But that's sooo irrelevant to the story! :D
