

Stalin's Children



Owen Matthews

*Heart-breaking, moving and utterly compelling
historical fiction*

Stalin's Children: Three Generations of Love and War

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An indelible portrait of Russia over seven decades and an unforgettable memoir about how we struggle to define ourselves in opposition to our ancestry only to find ourselves aligning with it.

On a midsummer day in 1937, a black car pulled up to a house in Chernigov, in the heart of the Ukraine. Boris Bibikov - Owen Matthews's grandfather - kissed his wife and two young daughters good-bye and disappeared inside the car. His family never saw him again. His wife would soon vanish as well, leaving Lyudmila and Lenina alone to drift across the vast Russian landscape during World War II. Separated as the Germans advanced in 1941, they were miraculously reunited against all odds at the war's end.

Some twenty-five years later, in the early 1960s, Mervyn Matthews - Owen's father - followed a lifelong passion for Russia and moved to Moscow to work for the British embassy. He fell in and out with the KGB, and despite having fallen in love with Lyudmila, he was summarily deported. For the next six years, Mervyn worked day and night to get Lyudmila out of Russia, and when he finally succeeded, they married.

Decades on from these events, Owen Matthews - then a young journalist himself in Russia - came upon his grandfather's KGB file recording his "progress from life to death at the hands of Stalin's secret police." Excited by its revelations, he has pieced together the tangled and dramatic threads of his family's past and present, making sense of the magnetic pull that has drawn him back to his mother's homeland. *Stalin's Children* is an indelible portrait of Russia over seven decades and an unforgettable memoir about how we struggle to define ourselves in opposition to our ancestry only to find ourselves aligning with it.

Stalin's Children: Three Generations of Love and War Details

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From Reader Review Stalin's Children: Three Generations of Love and War for online ebook

Chrissie says

This was a very interesting book about three generations of the author's family and life in the former Soviet Union under Stalin, through the Cold War and Perestroyka. This is a book about how some people were destroyed and yet others entered the dark tunnel and came out the other side still being able to smile. People are so different in how they react to what life throws at them. This book made me stop and think about how you look at people in your family and summarize their traits - for example, she was kind, he never liked children, he always joked. It makes you stop and think both about yourself and others. The place and time period covered was fascinating, and the author brought it to life by intimately explaining how it affected his own family. His parents had to fight for six years to finally be able to get married. His mother then had to leave all her friends, family and homeland with the belief that she could never return. This struggle ultimately consumed their love! The book lacked a map, but it did provide interesting photos.

James says

Heather gives such a complete synopsis of the book that I'd almost think she was the author.

Two other people mention 2 generations, actually it's quite clear there are 3, so I wonder how closely they read the book.

The first part was interesting, the grandfather was a party man, and has the task of building a tractor factory with almost no tools. He and his wife were later victims of Stalin's purge.

Stalin's actions in that decade, the starvation of millions of people to show "who is master", and the purge, are such unbelievable stories, that I take every chance to read about them. Every book has something new.

The stories of life after WW2, are not very interesting and the author has the annoying habit of writing 2 paragraphs about one generation and then skipping to tell a story about one of the other generations.

The last 120 pages or so I was only reading about 1 or 2 sentences a page. Hoping for something interesting, but not finding it.

Laurel says

Beautifully written book. I found it all interesting, but was drawn most into Mila and Mervyn's courtship during the Cold War era. My memory of that time evolves around an image of Kruschev pounding a shoe on

a table, fallout shelter plans, and school air raid drills. Those memories appear rather juvenile compared to the dark and disturbing events that drew Mila and Mervyn together and also kept them apart. It's incredibly romantic and filled with passion, not only between a man and a woman, but between three family generations and an entire country.

Melissa says

Owen Matthews is a wonderful storyteller. Really magnificent prose. He does a good job of painting the various shades of Russia, depending on which decade/social class/ethnicity you happen to belong to. I think this effort deserves praise since Russia in the 1930s was vastly different from Russia in the 1990s, not to mention the years between them. Matthews captures this change, and shows the heart of Russia with insight and intelligence, all while portraying the resilience and instinct for survival that Russians have garnered through their experiences.

His family certainly has impressive stories, but I couldn't shake the feeling of sadness I felt while reading, even when reading of undying faith, fortitude, and determination. This novel seemed to be just as much about loneliness and loss as it was about courage- which is not a bad thing. I just thought the tone was a little heavy. Matthews tells an extraordinary story, and then seems to wonder if it was worth it. I finished the novel glad that I had read it, and equally glad that it was over.

Hamish Davidson says

Owen's family story is unbelievable. From the Ukraine, Russia, and beyond, three generations of his family have experienced countless hardships as a result of war. I greatly enjoyed this tale every step of the way. If you are interested in Eastern Europe and it's people in a personal level, you will love this book.

Evi Routoula says

Η ιστορία της Σοβιετικής ονομασίας από τον Στάλιν ως την Περετσούρικα αλλά και της σημερινής Ρωσίας μας σα από τις αληθινές περιπτειες μιας οικογένειας. Τρεις γενιές Ρώσων: ο παππός της πέθει θύμα των μεγάλων εκκαθαρίσεων του Στάλιν, οι κρεες του μεγαλώνουν σε οργανοτροφεία την εποχή του Δευτέρου Παγκοσμίου Πολέμου, η μια από τις δύο κρεεις το σφλημα να ερωτευτεί γιγλο, ο αγναντός του ζευγαριού να παντρευτεί την δεκατητή δεκαετία του ψυχρού πολέμου. Ο εγγονός ζει την πλευρά της Τσετσενίας ως δημοσιογράφος. Κρωτικές ενδιαφέροντες και ωραία γραφή από τον συγγραφέα (τον εγγονό!)

Lara Calleja says

Its a personal recounting, where the author tells his family's both brutal and beautiful story - through it come out the difficult pre-stalin / stalin / fall of the soviet union and the failing of democracy in the 20th century Russia

All these eras, though difficult, violent and disappointing, recount the magical spirit of Russia, and its people, who still dreamt of the unfulfilled promises of Communism - of a better Motherland, which is fair and fruitful to all of its children

Heather says

Stalin's Children is the story of one family's unique experiences amid the changing social and political sphere of Russia. Encompassing Russia's history from the 1920s onwards, Matthews acquaints us with three generations of his family who experienced extreme persecution and overwhelming odds, each bearing witness to pre- and post-Stalinist Russia. The memoir begins with the story of Boris Bibikov, a prominent Russian party member in the 1920s. Bibikov and his small family lived in relative comfort and plenty, taking full advantage that his status afforded him, until, like so many others, he was accused of anti-Party sentiments. After his arrest and imprisonment, his wife and two young daughters were left to fend for themselves. Eventually the girls were taken to a state-run orphanage after their mother was also imprisoned. It is here that the girls, Lyudmilla and Lenina, became separated. Lenina eventually moved in with relatives, and Lyudmilla remained a ward of the state until her adulthood, in essence becoming one of Stalin's many children. After many heartrending circumstances, including the orphans' harrowing escape from the Germans invasion of the city in the early days of WWII, near starvation, and serious disease, the sisters were once again reunited by miracle and chance. Although their years of separation and abandonment left indelible marks upon them for all time, they remained optimistic.

The second section of the book tells of the love affair between Lyudmilla and Mervin, the author's parents. Mervyn, a British russophile, begins a scholarly career in Moscow, living his dream of immersing himself in Russia. When Lyudmilla and Mervyn meet, it is clear to both that they should be together. But after Mervyn rejects the courting of KGB officials in their attempts to recruit him into their organization, he becomes persona non grata to the Russian government and is deported. He must leave Lyudmilla behind in Russia with promises that he will return soon to marry her. What follows is the couple's anguished battle to attain Lyudmilla's right to marry a foreigner and leave the country. Peppered throughout this tale is the author's own story of returning to a Russia in the 1990s that has changed in so many ways, yet in some ways remains the same.

This book was very impressive. From the distinct and eloquent nature of the author's ability to express his family's story, to the staunch and ardent persistence of the players involved, I found myself completely captivated by this memoir. Not only were the stories of his family very moving, the author has a very encompassing and instructive way of conveying the politics of Russia from the early 1900s until today. The book was informative and dealt with a vast amount of history, but it was not sluggish or boring. Each era of political change in the country was illustrated not only in terms of what was going on in the government, but also in how these changes affected the people living amongst the tumult of their oppression. In addition, the shifts in the narrative melding the past and present were deftly handled, blending the stories of each of these generations into a panoramic view of life in Soviet Russia. Although at times the author's sentiments appear somewhat dark and maudlin, I would argue that his attitude fits perfectly with the story he tells. Although there are small triumphs and large victories, there is also a sense of grim strife throughout the story. In particular, I found the hardships that Lyudmilla endured as a ward of the state to be very tragic and distressing, but I truly marveled at her optimism and perseverance. She had a quintessentially hardy spirit that I found remarkable. In addition, the struggles that Lyudmilla and Mervin face in their efforts to be married were by turns bitter and poignant. I admired the strength and conviction of these two lovers, fighting with indomitable resoluteness for their relationship. I read with mixed emotions the joys and disappointments

of the couple, and felt that the inclusion of pieces of actual love letters between the two was a brilliant touch that gave Lyudmilla and Mervyn a real sense of humanity. I liked this book for so many reasons. From the soulfulness of the characters, to the conversational style of the history, I found much here to be impressed with. This is not only a story of history and politics, but a story of people. People with hopes and fears and dreams that were expertly captured by the author.

I would recommend this book to anyone who has a curiosity about Russia. It is easily the best and most concise history of the times and people that I have ever read. The bonus of reading this for the history is that you will also get the very wonderfully rendered story of the people inside this country, and the sacrifices and joys that shaped their lives. Filled with unforgettable characters and relateable history, this book was a great read. Highly recommended.

Simona says

The personal family story of the three generations is intertwined with the historical facts in the Soviet Union under Stalin, and up to modern Russia after the fall of communism. In the foreground is a love story (between Englishman and Russian woman) of the second generation, described in a very detailed way, which the author extremely roughly interrupts with his experience with modern Russia. The problems of today's state are touched briefly, only as an antipode to the communist Soviet Union. The story is enough informative that it is not the easiest book to read, and is, at the same time, enough easy that you can read it almost as a novel about love in the difficult times.

Dem says

What an interesting and compelling read this is , an account of a love and loss in 20th century Soviet Union seen through the eyes of the authors parents and Grandparents.

Drawing on KGB files and his parent's correspondence through years of separation, Matthews pieces together his grandfather Boris Bibikow's arrest and disappearance at the hands of Stalin's secret police and the details of his wife (the authors grandmother) time in the Gulag, her crime being being an " enemy of the People" leaving two children to be raised by the state.

This is a well written and researched book and I just loved the family story here, its a story of love and heartbreak and a grandson's quest to find the truth about his family history from the Stalin era through to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

I love family history stories and this was interesting and informative and the book contains numerous photos of the authors family throughout the years.

I came accosts a hard copy of this book in while browsing in a used bookstore and am happy to add this one to my book shelf.

Cal says

Really interesting memoir, I felt like it was a good introduction to soviet Russia. Not too much info and not

too heavy, but enough to make you want to know more. The story is amazing and writing also very good. I liked his approach to the story, where he is not judgmental but presents the story for what it is.

Erica Crosen says

I really enjoyed this book. It really gives perspective and insight into the life of Russia. How it was, how it is, and a little bit of why. It is sad and at the same time uplifting to see the strength of people when harsh circumstances and tragedy surround you. It may be partially my desire to learn more about that part of the world but I found this to be a great book.

Jillian says

Very informational, but I liked that he wasn't overly descriptive of the most horrible moments. I know they happened, but that doesn't mean I want to re-live it. He is detailed without making me miserable, which allowed me to learn more than I would have otherwise. Overall, a good look at what happened in Soviet Russia.

Peggy says

What we learned from "Animal Farm" really was true. "All animals are equal, but some are more equal than others." Greed eventually destroys any political system.

Owen Matthews is a great writer.

Kl says

I really wanted to like this book. The family's story was compelling. However, the author's style was difficult to handle. Memoirs/histories are best told in straight chronological order. It takes a special kind of author and tale to be able to handle a story that moves back and forth between time periods. This book would have been better served had the author told his family's story first and then, in the end, shifted to his experiences in Russia. Every time I really started to get into the story of one of his family members, every time I started to be moved by their struggles, he would shift to his experiences in more contemporary Russia. It made for a choppy story.
