

An abstract painting featuring two figures. On the left, a figure in a blue tunic stands with arms raised, holding a large black letter 'L'. On the right, a figure in a black and orange tunic sits at a desk, looking towards the standing figure. The background is composed of various colored blocks and brushstrokes in shades of orange, red, yellow, and black. A red banner at the top contains the author's name, and another red banner at the bottom contains the title.

DINA RUBINA

LEONARDO'S
HANDWRITING

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AD VERBUM

Published with the support
of the Institute for Literary Translation, Russia

LEONARDO'S HANDWRITING

by Dina Rubina

Translated from the Russian by Melanie Moore

Published with the support
of the Institute for Literary Translation, Russia

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DINA RUBINA: READING *LEONARDO'S HANDWRITING* IN CONTEXT

Anna P. Ronell

Dina Rubina, who is one of the most well-known and prolific Russian-language writers in Israel, was born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1953. She moved to Israel in 1990 with the biggest Aliyah of Soviet Jews and by 2017 published 10 novels and numerous novellas and short stories whose plot lines span the world and range in genre and concept as well as literary technique. *Leonardo's Handwriting* (2008) occupies an important place in Rubina's overall artistic oeuvre and exhibits both intriguing continuities and breaks with the novels that preceded it, pointing to the ongoing process of rethinking and building out some of the themes she has been pursuing for more than a decade. Being located in Rubina's post-immigration phase positions *Leonardo's Handwriting* in a somewhat different space within the context of her writing, highlighting the centrality of history and memory in her work and bringing to the forefront a strong female character who weaves her own magic into the time and space of the novel.

Rubina's writing, although unique, typifies the cultural expressions of the latest and biggest Russian Aliyah. She began her career in the Soviet Union and was a well-known author before her immigration to Israel in 1990. While enjoying a near-celebrity status in the Russian Jewish communities of Israel, the United States, Germany, and the former Soviet Union, her works are virtually unknown to the English-speaking public. Only a handful of short stories and one of her novels, *Vot Idet Messiya* (1996) (*Here Comes the Messiah*), have been recently translated into English. While the novel received many positive reviews, some of the distinct stylistic and linguistic flavor characteristic of Rubina's writing has been "lost in translation." Equally hard to capture are the

subtle literary experimentations, fictional techniques, and motifs in Rubina's writing.¹

The new English translation of Rubina's novel *Leonardo's Handwriting* is a bold attempt to introduce her to a new audience and to raise awareness not only of her decades of creativity but also of the existence of a vibrant, rich artistic community of Russian-speaking former Soviet Jews in Israel. This new translation is also the recognition of the fact that since the break up of the Soviet Union, the culture of the Jewish Diaspora has been transformed by the re-emergence of the Russian-language Jewish community into the global arena. The migration of almost 2 million Jews from the former Soviet Union to Israel, the US, Canada, and various European countries greatly impacted every aspect of the Jewish Diaspora and ignited a new wave of scholarship on the history and culture of this community and its relationships with the larger Jewish world. Since then, theoretical work on the Diaspora evolved considerably yet the unique nature of the Russian-language Diaspora within the Diaspora remains underappreciated and the scholarly insight into the paradoxes of globally distributed Russian-language post-Soviet Jewish culture remains scarce. The conversation around Rubina's writing not only highlights her artistic achievements but also adds to our knowledge of the multi-faceted cultural production of the Russian-language community, positioning it within the historical context of its experiences in the Russian Empire, the Soviet Union, and the post-Soviet transnational, supra-territorial Diaspora spaces.

Rubina's writing today is an outstanding reflection of Russian Israeli immigrant culture-in-progress because it occupies a privileged position of liminality, of being at the juncture of several languages and cultures. Her writing is also revealing of her ability to raise herself above the sociolinguistic environment of which she is an integral part and to look at it from the outside, appraising new developments as they are taking place "live" in real time. Rubina's works must be situated in her socio-historic context; they cannot be separated from the legacy of Russian Jewish culture in Europe and from the emerging Russian-Israeli culture with its multilingual diversity as well as with its conflicting norms, values, and behaviors. Yet writing self-consciously at the point of convergence and interaction of the culture of the Russian Aliyah of the 1990s and contem-

1 Parts of this essay are reprinted with permission from Anna P. Ronell, "Some Thoughts on Russian-language Israeli Fiction: Introducing Dina Rubina" in *Prooftexts. A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2008), pp. 197-231.

porary Israeli Hebrew culture, as well as classic European and Russian literature, Rubina has acquired a unique artistic perspective. Her works reflect upon and simultaneously shape her culture-in-flux, providing an intriguing opportunity for cultural mediation and bridging elements of Jewish history, culture and identity from around the world.

Adrian Wanner points out that the subject of “Russianness” among Russian-language Diaspora writers remains contested, as it is not clear whether the language of writing or the subject matter take priority in the author’s self-identification.² Can Rubina be considered a Russian writer if she writes in Russian but calls Jerusalem her home? Is the question even relevant, considering that she occupies a liminal space where the Russian cultural frameworks mixed with immigrant experiences in Israel become yet another permutation of a supra-territorial post-Soviet culture in the Diaspora? Many Russian-language Israeli authors have a peculiar brand of “Russianness” so profoundly diasporic in its nature that it can be seen as a throwback unrelated to present-day Russia proper but rather to the mythology of intelligentsia that anchors many nostalgic memories of Russian immigrants in Israel.

In this context, I will borrow Julia Lerner’s term of “the post-Soviet space” that lies beyond the lands of the former Soviet Union and extends into the worldwide Russian-speaking diaspora, including “the large and heterogeneous Russian-speaking collective in Israel.” Lerner further claims that “using various institutions and media channels, Russians in Israel keep both aspects of their old cultural and political identity alive, along with their affinity to post-Soviet cultures and political formations.”³ While it is clear to all observers that Russian Israelis are very diverse, and that some are not halachically⁴ Jewish, it is also fairly certain that their experiences in Israel are colored by their common Soviet origin. Lerner emphasizes that instead of using “Jewishness” as a common denominator for the Russian collective in Israel, it may be more useful to see their affinity with the cultural and political ideals of Soviet urban intelligentsia as the one shared aspect of their experience. While Lerner claims that

2 Adrian Wanner, “Russian Hybrids: Identity in the Translingual Writings of Andrei Makine, Wladimir Kaminer, and Gary Shteyngart,” in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 67, No. 3, p. 662.

3 Julia Lerner, “Post-Soviet Russians in Israel: Paradoxes and Consistencies,” in *Collective Identities, States and Globalization*, ed. G. Yair and O. Gazit. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2010, pp. 175–202.

4 According to the Orthodox community in Israel, a person must have verifiable evidence of being born to a Jewish mother to be considered a Jew according to the Halachah or Jewish religious Law.

the old intelligentsia has been negated and deconstructed in post-Soviet Russia proper—and is replaced by two new types of “the intellectual” and “the professional”—its echoes still linger in the Diaspora.

As Mikhail Krutikov points out, “in her novels and short stories, [Rubina] focuses on the predicament of the Russian intelligentsia in Israel as it tries to have its cake and to eat it too; that is, as it strives to become part of the new society and retain its cultural identity at the same time.”⁵ Rubina’s writing reflects the fragmented identity of many of her characters, mirroring their alienation from both the Soviet-Russian and from the Israeli aspects of their background. Her biting political satire reflects the uncertainties of the post-Zionist ideological stagnation in Israel, where the necessity of the ingathering of the exiles is intertwined with the multi-faceted, perhaps even confused, historical memory of Russian Jews as well as with the challenges of Israeli elites facing waves of Palestinian terror. In *Leonardo’s Handwriting*, the Russian-language readers in the Diaspora and in the post-Soviet territories can feel this lingering attachment to the values and practices of Soviet intelligentsia integrated with the newer aesthetics of nomadism, more cosmopolitan Western cultural practices and literary trends.

Rubina’s literary interests are dynamic and evolving, many of the earlier motifs are less pronounced in her later works yet some remain central for attempting to understand her oeuvre as a whole. The figure of a creative—a writer, an artist, a performer—is a consistent presence in Rubina’s writing and a corner stone theme in *Leonardo’s Handwriting*. The figure of the artist, often a person who creates both with their mind and with their body, is not only the linchpin of a complicated plot but also a conduit through whom other characters’ backstories as well as the larger philosophical themes are conveyed and revealed. As I discussed elsewhere, the critically important figure of the artist is part of Rubina’s overarching theme of theater mundi, masks, and the carnival. The focus on the performative aspects of everyday life as well as of the human condition sets Rubina apart, foregrounding her continued interest in the fate of the Jewish world and the fate of the Artist.

In her early works that understandably focused on the vagaries of immigrant experience, Rubina used elements of Bakhtinian Carnival to construct a complex image of Israel and of the Russian community there

5 Mikhail Krutikov, “Constructing Jewish Identity in Contemporary Russian Fiction,” in *Jewish Life after the USSR*, ed. Zvi Gitelman. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003, pp. 252–274.

under the overarching umbrella theme of the Carnival. In the short story “Pod Znakom Karnavala” (1999) (Under the Sign of the Carnival), Rubina describes Israeli life as a big theater, presenting the “open, brutal, murderous” carnivalesque quality of it as a uniquely attractive attribute that helps her “keep her head above water.” How does the carnivalesque manifest itself in Israeli life? It is described as “the changing of faces, images, and masks; turned-inside-out meaning of existence; reversed situations with their straightforward theatricality and open idiotic farce. The masks are painted roughly, a maid is dressed as a mistress, a mistress is dressed as a courtesan, and everybody is playing somebody else’s roles. They play those roles in a vulgar, simplified, superficial manner, because nothing can be done—this is, after all, a street performance.”⁶ Life in Israel, both its oppressive qualities as well as its richness and vitality, is associated in Rubina’s writing with popular culture, with a multifaceted street life, and with the subversive nature of the immigrant experience that allows one to start over, often by acquiring a completely new mask.

Rubina is not alone in her attempts to adapt Bakhtinian concepts of the Carnival to the analysis of contemporary Israeli culture and society. A well-known Russian Israeli anthropologist, Narspy Zilberg, uses the categories of analysis of literary texts developed by Bakhtin in her interpretation of the problems of immigrant culture: “Dialogism of liminal existence, i.e., life on the edge, on the threshold, life full of change and renewal, of a particular ambivalence that expresses the inevitability of the reduction of status and the subversion of existing order, is surprisingly parallel to the dilemmas of immigrant worldview.”⁷ Like Zilberg who develops adaptation models of Russian Jewish intelligentsia in Israel, Rubina perceives the crucial moment of transformation of consciousness and of reemergence in a new hypostasis as a point of exceptional importance that gives her an opportunity to expand beyond the limitations of realist prose and to enter the realm of the grotesque where she manipulates linguistic structures to create a highly affective emotional atmosphere.

The post-immigration phase of Rubina’s writing starts off with two intriguing novels: *On the Sunny Side of the Street* (2006) and *Leonardo’s Handwriting* (2008). *Leonardo’s Handwriting* is not set in Israel, nor

6 Dina Rubina, *Chem By Zaniatsia?* Saint Petersburg: Retro, 2001, p. 25. All translations are mine.

7 Narspi Zilberg, “Russko-Evreyskaya Intellegentsia v Israele: Poiski Novykh Modelei Integratsii,” in *Migration Processes and Their Influence on Israeli Society*. Moscow: Institute for the Study of Israel, 2000, p. 204.

does it focus on the immigrant experience. The novel does not have a quasi-autobiographical authorial persona or any attempts at epic depiction of multiethnic and multilingual Israeli society. Yet, the Carnival emerges in a new manifestation becoming the Circus. The creative protagonist—a mysterious genius named Anna (and nicknamed Nyuta)—starts her professional career working as a gymnast and aerial acrobat for the circus and touring the Soviet Union with a rag-tag collection of characters who also perform familiar parts of the Masks: the clown, the animal trainer, the flame swallower, the trapeze flier, or the illusionist. The Circus, yet another creative space that takes upon many of the characteristics of the Carnival, emerges as its own world, an ecosystem where many Soviet cultural and social phenomena coalesce to produce a dangerous place fueled by alcohol and adrenalin. The Russian Circus is a profoundly dark mental and physical place where performers live the life of drudgery interspersed with moments of unimaginable risk. Darkness and light, ugliness and beauty, vile base aspects of the human nature compete with generosity and kindness, creating a complex network of characters that interact with each other inside and outside the circus tent and sustain the epic story of tortured creative souls in the USSR.

As the story of Anna progresses through a series of interviews in an Interpol investigation, the third person narrator whom many of Rubina's committed readers will undoubtedly perceive as yet another reincarnation of the familiar mask of "Dina the writer" remains much less pronounced than in her previous works. Dina Rubina the implied author emphasizes in her writings and interviews the differences between her authorial persona and "the real" Dina Rubina, a human being who lives with her family in Ma'ale Adumim and who may or may not share the views and opinions of Dina Rubina the implied author. Autobiographical details throughout her short stories, novels, and novellas—some factual, some fictional—give a sense of coherent, continuous narrative, creating an illusion of authenticity, which in turn give her readers an illusion of familiarity. The quasi-autobiographical first person narrator sometimes openly takes advantage of the readers' expectations, preconceived notions, and their comfort zone, to conflate the author as a character and the author as a human being as an intrinsic part of her creative process. Over time, similar to such celebrated and recognizable authorial personae as Sholem Aleichem or Mendele Mokher Sefarim, Rubina's protagonist-narrator Dina became a real literary presence that "managed to retain a cohesive and unified personality, a distinct and immediately recognizable voice, tonality, and manner of speech" through

her entire literary corpus.⁸ Thus the persona of Dina, which should not be identified with the writer, assumes both the literary function of tying together her entire Israel-related work and the social function of providing a witty—sometimes even caustic—commentary on the cultural, economic, and political situation of Russian-speaking Jews (and non-Jews) in Israel and elsewhere.

One of the most important aspects of Rubina's post-immigration phase is the new awareness of the transnational, transcultural, and translingual nature of the contemporary world, which is closely related conceptually to globalization, cultural production stemming from migration experiences, and the new identities born of displacement. The paradox is that some writers choose the language of their host countries for their creative writing on the subject of Russia, while Rubina and the majority of Soviet Jewish authors in Israel choose to write in Russian on the subject of life in Israel as well as in other places including Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Spain, and Canada. In *Leonardo's Handwriting*, many of the earlier motifs are seen in sharp relief: imaginary geography and a new focus on space where movement is part of the plot; multiple voices and changing points of view, heteroglossia and linguistic hybridity; non-linear conceptualization of time that sheds a new light on the discussions of prophesy and divinity. In the words of Maria Rubina, "Artistic imagination, shaped by dislocation, transplantation, and the ensuing defamiliarization of referential reality, fosters the superimposition of the realistic and the fantastic, the fusion of various national contexts, a commitment both to local and global points of view, and the creation of imaginary locations, alternate histories, and science-fictional worlds."⁹ Rubina's artistic imagination blossoms in *Leonardo's Handwriting* representing a new phase in the development of her transcultural writing.

Rubina's depictions of geographical places always draw the readers' attention with their richness and vitality, with the atmospheric ambience, and groups of diverse characters. "Rubina describes Kiev as she used to describe Tashkent: deliciously, in detail, with its colors, smells, and distinctive speech patterns," says one review.¹⁰ Indeed, Rubina's portrayal of Tashkent and its environs as well as her rootedness in the mem-

8 Dan Miron, *The Image of the Shtetl and Other Studies of Modern Jewish Literary Imagination*. Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000, p. 118.

9 Maria Rubins, "Transnational identities in Diaspora Writing: The Narratives of Vasily Yanovsky," in *Slavic Review*, Vol. 73, No. 1 (Spring 2014), pp. 62-84.

10 "Dina Rubina," in Read Russia: <<http://readrussia.org/writers/writer/dina-rubina>>.

ory of Eastern European Jewish life are autobiographically inspired, yet, transnational and transcultural in their essence. “With a wave of evacuation, a lot of people found themselves in Tashkent. Quite young, my 17-year-old mother came with the evacuation, and my father was demobilized from the army after the war. Then my mother entered the Central Asian State University (SAGU), where the Moscow and Leningrad professors taught and it was a wonderful education. Dad after demobilization from the front returned to Tashkent, to his parents. I’m from the descendants of the evacuees, we grew up on their stories, their life experiences. Tashkent was the place where a lot of things fused together.”¹¹ Both Rubina’s parents are from the Ukraine—father from Kharkov and mother from Poltava—and both found themselves in Tashkent as a result of the Jewish mass evacuation to Central Asia. And it is certain that the evacuation is central to the family history as well as to Rubina’s life-long writing career.

Rubina’s novellas and short stories illustrate her comfort with her home in Tashkent yet show a profound affinity to her family’s deep roots in the Jewish Ukraine. This advantage of intimately knowing both worlds allows Rubina to show an unprecedented cultural fluidity, navigating between Soviet, Jewish, Russian, and Uzbek cultural, social, and political aspects. The dynamics of cultural mediation that emerges as a key concept in Rubina’s writing, further carrying on into her later reflections of Russian immigrant experience in Israel, are also critically important for *Leonardo’s Handwriting*. Women’s writing in Russian in the present-day Israel—for example, novels by Elena Minkina or short stories by Victoria Reicher—occupy a liminal position at the intersection of multiple cultural, political, psychological, and social phenomena, their works can be often seen as instances of cultural mediation as they address all stages of adaptation from a variety of different perspectives. Rubina takes the mantle of cultural mediation and embarks on a quest to connect dispersed geographical locations across the Jewish Diaspora—and across time and space—to create a set of transcultural works with noticeable threads permeating many of them.

Addressing her childhood in Tashkent, Rubina’s writing examines complex processes of identity formation among the Jewish evacuees who found themselves in Central Asia and who see themselves, for all intents and purposes, as part of the emerging concept of Soviet peo-

11 Dina Rubina, “Greetings to Tashkent and Tashkenters” (An Interview with Dina RUBina for KULTURA.UZ), 10.03.2016: <http://www.kultura.uz/view_9_r_6593.html>.

plehood, strengthened as a result of the Great Patriotic War and now including the far-flung periphery of the Central Asian republics. Rubina has been known to speak highly and very positively about her childhood in Tashkent, about the people of Tashkent and the inspiration she derives from her years of growing up there for her novels and short stories: “Tashkenters are people unique in their fortitude, their readiness to dive straight into life, to offer their hand, heart, shoulder to lean on, to help everybody with anything, and under the circumstances to be proactive, energetic, and productive. I would like to stress that this is the dominant feature of Tashkent, a very unusual Central Asian city.”¹² Rubina often mentions that the images of Tashkent and its inhabitants are cumulative, they are inspired by people she met, people she grew up with, and people she only heard about. These people are often seen by her as a thread that connects her family’s pre-war roots in Ukraine with the post-war life in Tashkent, with an “alternative universe” fantasy of family history in Spain, and further with Rubina’s characters in present-day Israel as well as their travels to Europe and the Americas.

It is possible to suggest that in *Leonardo’s Handwriting* one of Rubina’s goals might be to downplay the familiar quasi-autobiographic authorial persona and instead to foreground the Soviet history 30 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, reaching out to those readers who are looking to ponder the nature of the new, post-Soviet reality, both in the former Soviet space and in the Diaspora. Each voice and each individual story is uniquely important, yet in the context of emerging global literary imagination, the blending of multiple voices into a form of heteroglossia within the very fabric of fiction serves as a very successful medium to relate the Soviet and post-Soviet Jewish experience in a form accessible to the general public. Memory and history are central to all Rubina’s works yet they acquire exceptional importance in *Leonardo’s Handwriting*. Rubina’s profound awareness of the multilayered and multifaceted sociohistorical situation in the Soviet Union corresponds to her fundamental view of history (mostly Jewish) as the foundation of her writing. Addressing the ways in which history is perceived in Rubina’s fiction is central to our understanding of her entire oeuvre. Is it viewed teleologically as patterns of progress? Is history cyclical or can it be represented as alternative time lines? If there are no patterns or cycles, is human history therefore random and devoid of meaning? What is the role of human agency as opposed to the role of God?

12 Ibid., also Dina Rubina, “Biography”: <<http://www.dinarubina.com/biography.html>>.

The Holocaust is a persistent presence throughout Rubina's works but in *Leonardo's Handwriting* it acquires a particularly significant prominence. As Anna grows up in Kiev, the tragedy of Baby Yar and the fate of the Jewish population of Ukraine is always part of the narrative. Sometimes, it feels that the void left behind by the thousands of Jews who disappeared during the Holocaust can be palpable in the streets of Kiev, at other times, the smallest mention in passing of somebody killed by the Germans brings the feelings of void to the surface. Rubina writes, for example, of Fira Avelevna, a blind elderly neighbor Nyuta knew in Kiev.

“Firavelna” was the grandmother and head of the large and noisy Girshovich clan from the courtyard next door. Nyuta had been going there to play for about a year and a half. The family consisted of Uncle Zhora, a foreman at the Transsignal Electrical Engineering Factory, a cocky type with a brazen tenor voice, who wore threadbare tracksuit bottoms; Auntie Rosa, his wife and Firavelna's youngest daughter, who worked as an operating theatre assistant at the hospital; their niece, Sonya, daughter of Busa, the sister-who-was-executed-may-her-memory-be-a-blessing-and-all-who-killed-her-burn-in-hell; their older son, Borya, a student at the music school (he played the cello), and six-year-old Arisha-with-the-slight-squint. She was the one Nyuta really went to play with. (97-98)

In the USSR—unlike World War II and the heroism of the Soviet people—the Holocaust has never been the same part of collective consciousness and public discourse as it was in Israel and the US. Even now, the presence of the Holocaust in Russian-Jewish literature is only beginning to be felt, often mentioned obliquely, sometimes an open secret, other times, an un-mourned trauma never addressed and never healed.

None of the specifically Jewish aspects of the Holocaust were part of Soviet popular culture or public education. In fact, the most significant postwar ideological development was the Cult of the Great Patriotic War. Memorials were built, novels written, and songs composed to commemorate the sacrifice and courage of the Soviet people during the war. In this context, the discussion of the particular nature of the Jewish war experience—both the Holocaust and the participation of Jewish soldiers in the Red Army—was suppressed. A mass murder of East European Jews on the Soviet territories and pervasive collaborationism¹³

13 Rita Vanagaite, *Ours*. Vilnius: Alma Littera, 2015.

was either silently ignored or was presented as a small part of the larger context of the war and the German crimes against the Soviet people. According to Emil Draitsler and other scholars, the total control of the Soviet government over all media allowed for the Soviet information policy, which Paul Ricoeur called “organized forgetting.”¹⁴

As one of the primary sources of legitimacy, the Great Patriotic War (as World War II was called in the Soviet Union) became as much a symbol and a propaganda resource as an object of honest historic inquiry. The central aspect of this symbolic function of the war memory was the display of honoring the dead through elaborate ceremonies, oversized memorials, and, of course, highly ideological literary productions. This version of the war memory did not include the Red Army defeats in the beginning of the war, the enormous waste of human life, or the brutality of political security forces toward their own people. Neither did it include any of the specifically Jewish themes: the destruction of the *shtetlach*, the mass murder of the Soviet Jews in the occupied territories by the *Einsatzgruppen*, nor the collaboration with the Germans fueled by antisemitism as well as by anti-Soviet sentiments. The war cult and the manipulation of institutional and personal means of memorialization emptied meaning out of people’s commemorative impulse while suppressing all mention of the Holocaust.¹⁵

Under the limitations imposed by the Cult of the Great Patriotic War as well as post-war repressions and the general restrictions on all forms of cultural production, Soviet Jewry never enjoyed an outlet for the trauma of the Holocaust. As there was little opportunity for memorialization and mourning, this trauma remained unresolved, and the grief over the loss of loved ones and entire communities went mostly unaddressed. Current literary representations of the Holocaust in contemporary Russian-language fiction in the diaspora are complex. In *Leonardo’s Handwriting*, the theme of the Holocaust is directly connected to the figure of Simon and through him to Nyuta. Therefore, the lengthy epistolary memoirs of his Jewish childhood that Simon sends to Nyuta serve multiple functions: they connect the presently nomadic globalized post-Soviets to their roots in pre-Holocaust Pale of the Settlement, they shape the characters’ perceptions of the present based on their sense of

14 Emil Draitsler, “Introduction,” in Friedrich Gorenstein, *Redemption*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2018, p. xv.

15 For more in-depth discussion of this subject see Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.

history, and they provide different perspectives on what life was in Soviet Ukraine. The Holocaust in *Leonardo's Handwriting* is not yet another moment of darkness; it is part of Rubina's historic consciousness that informs her explorations of post-Soviet Jewish identity.

Addressing different Jewish "histories" throughout the ages and territories of dispersal, including discussions of Jewish history in Spain, Eastern Europe, and contemporary as well as ancient Israel, Rubina's writing is exceedingly Diasporan. Rubina's diverse fictional territory(ies) and her treatments of space in literature and culture, including the interplay between text and world—her interpretations of the geographies of the 'real' and the geographies of the 'imaginary' are exceedingly important for appreciating the scope of her literary vision. Yet in *Leonardo's Handwriting*, the protagonist's nomadic lifestyle questions the familiar concepts of space, home, and belonging as well as the concept of time that comes undone by Nyuta's ability to use complex mirror structures in her mind to simultaneously perceive the past, present, and future at once. Time and space, perhaps even the history of a place, disappear as the figure of Nyuta comes to represent the mystery of life BEYOND time and space. Thoughtful readers would undoubtedly recognize elements of magical realism throughout the novel. Magical realism, known for its dreamlike and somewhat bizarre quality, is particularly well suited for creating a protagonist like Nyuta that echoes a religious concept as much as the human life. Critics usually associate the concept of Magical Realism with the concept of "heightened reality," with the elements of the fantastic that seamlessly become part of "normal life" or with the addition of another dimension of reality through a symbolic or metaphoric structure. While in the case of Borges and Gabriel Garcia Marquez magical realism was distinguished by the fact that its practitioners treated the fantastic as normal, without any sense of surprise or amazement, in the case of Dina Rubina, the scrambled focalization, switching points of view, and numerous alternating yet complementary narrative lines intertwine in such a way that even the characters seem to be aware of their own oddness, their unusual gifts and extraordinary circumstances. What precisely is Nyuta's destiny? And what about other characters' destinies? These intertwining destinies become a narrative knot where the small choices made by "little people" acquire cosmic proportions.

History has always been part of Rubina's writing, little echoes of history are interspersed throughout her works and we can see this technique in *Leonardo's Handwriting* as well. In Rudesheim, Simon encounters a

music box exactly the same he saw all through his childhood in his Aunt Frieda's room in Zhmerinka. That exact music box, made of polished mahogany and labeled by the maker in Imperial Saint Petersburg, triggers Simon's memories and makes an unexpected connection between German Rudesheim and Jewish Zhmerinka. The material culture of the Jews has always been reflected in Jewish fiction and Rubina's writing is no exception. As things acquire their own historical significance, they become markers of Jewish identity, the milestones of family history and connectors between seemingly unrelated people. Jewish artifacts, family heirlooms and ritual articles encountered in the present unleash a flood of memories about the past. The artifacts are not depicted as being actually used in the present; instead, they function as the vehicles of the past, conduits of memory flashes. Why is there a Russian made music box in a museum in Rudesheim, Germany that is exactly like the one a Jewish family had in Ukraine? How Jewish artifacts migrate to Germany? And what do we feel when we see them in a museum? Reading Simon's letter to Nyuta, with its descriptions of Simon's Jewish family in Ukraine, can we avoid thinking about the Holocaust as Simon is sightseeing in Germany?

Anna's life trajectory is unpredictable and the feelings of ambiguity and suspense are reinforced by Rubina's pastiche of various genres, including elements of detective story, mystery, and the epistolary novel. Most questions raised in the novel remain unanswered and the readers are left to decide for themselves how they feel regarding the novel's open ending. Rubina at times hints at various possibilities concealed in the complex mystery of who—or what—Anna might be. One hypothesis may be Rubina's ongoing quest to portray the Fate of the Artist and to contemplate the nature of artistic gift that simultaneously can be a curse. Anna has a number of extraordinary abilities that at times echo the super-heroes of the Marvel universe, mutants, avengers, and others who have exceptional gifts, can bend space and time, and perform physical and mental feats beyond all imagination. On a separate, yet connected, plane, the character of Anna is bound to remind us of the prophets of the Hebrew Bible. Even though most of Anna's life is spent in Ukraine, Western Europe, and Canada, it is the ancient prophetic fervor of the Hebrew visionaries that can be felt pulsating through Anna's energy. It is Simon, an old Russian Jew who understands her the best and whose near-religious faith in her underlies much of the plot, and the person who becomes the conduit of Anna's uniqueness as well as the vehicle of Rubina's storytelling.

All three characters who believe in Nyuta and genuinely trust her abilities as a Seer or a Prophet are Jews: Simon, Eliezer, and Firavelna. Eliezer taught Nyuta about the physics of the mirrors yet the miracle of having the mirrors inside her mind was inaccessible to him. His mirrors were not inside his being and he did not have the abilities of a seer. Eliezer was a scientist who through of Nyuta as his angel. Jewish characters and their spiritual journeys with Nyuta are the narrative threads that tie together the plot lines of the novel. Simon, specifically, is intriguingly the person of profound faith yet also a Jew without a recognizably Jewish religious context. As Vladimir attempts to explain to the investigator, Simon's faith transcended both the Old and the New Testaments:

You should have heard how he explained things! It'd blow your mind. For example, he swore she was an angel. You gotta laugh, right? Not an angel-from-heaven kind of angel but, according to him, her nature was similar to some sort of beings that appear as angels and archangels and other celestial beings in folk psychology... That people believe in them because from time to time such beings really do appear on earth among humans... Jesus, for example. Do you believe? I don't really. (209)

Leonardo's Handwriting also represents an intriguing step away from attempting to deal with the subject of immigration and to a larger, more open-ended subject of migration and nomadism in a global context. As more times passes since the Great Aliyah of the early 1990s, the more Rubina's writing acquires the characteristics associated with transcultural literary works "that engage with and express the confluential nature of cultures overcoming the different dichotomies between North and South, the West and the Rest, the colonizer and the colonized, the dominator and the dominated, the native and the (im)migrant, the national and the ethnic."¹⁶ The earlier signs of this tendency towards transculturalism can be seen in Rubina's celebrated novel *On the Sunny Side of the Street* that purportedly draws on her childhood in Tashkent as well as on her family history in Eastern Europe.

One of the central foci throughout Rubina's works, reaching particular maturity in *On the Sunny Side of the Street* and *Leonardo's Hand-*

16 Arianna Dagnino, "Transcultural Literature and Contemporary World Literature(s)," in *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (2013): <<https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol15/iss5/7/>>.

writing, is the singular preoccupation with the place to live, the place that can be the mythical home or just a place where one's head hits the pillow. Both *Leonardo's Handwriting* and *On the Sunny Side of the Street* have impressively rich mix of characters that includes Eastern European Jews, ethnic Russians, Ukrainians, Uzbeks and other native Central Asian peoples as well as colorful criminals, seekers, wanderers, and trouble-makers, all come to encompass the human condition that is inseparable from the dichotomy of home/exile, being rooted/uprooted, settled/unsettled. This evolution of Rubina's artistic imagination, shaped by globalization, migration, and deterritorialization, draws a renewed focus on the spaciality of human cultures, her characters' growing and evolving identities, and the overall importance of space and place in her discussion of the human condition.

As the plot of *Leonardo's Handwriting* follows the life of Nyuta, it becomes clear that the themes of nomadism and homelessness are central for the character development and for Rubina's explorations of the concept of the living space. Right from the beginning, Rubina emphasized that Nyuta was a highly gifted, unique and extraordinary individual who had no home:

She had her life all planned out for about the next three years. I never knew where she was living at a particular time, where she was racing off to on her bike. Generally, she lived her own way—here and there, one minute locally, the next nowhere at all. In any country, she would hire a motorbike, either a powerful sports bike if she was going off road, or a cruiser, a manoeuvrable one, if she was in the city. And no luggage. A small backpack with a change of underwear, the eternal notebook for working things out. She resolved the wardrobe issue easily: she went to the nearest shop, bought her usual green or navy sweater or tee-shirt, depending on the weather. Then she'd leave them all over the place—in her hotel room, her “nest” at Genevieve's, or on a bench—for people in need... I never knew anyone less bothered about herself than she was. (49)

This itinerant lifestyle is both the protagonist's philosophy of life and Rubina's way to highlight the newness of post-Soviet globalization, the fall of the Iron Curtain, and the opening of the flood gates that allowed individuals to leave the territorial and the familial and to escape into the transcultural space, transcending both the geographical borders and the boundaries of their identities.

Nyuta's ethnic identity is never revealed and we never learn for sure who her parents were exactly. As she rises above the very notion of identity, the reader who is aware of the central place Jewishness occupies in Rubina's writing can't help but wonder if the mystery of Nyuta's birth connects her to the Jews. As Nyuta travels the world, two male figures—both Jewish— emerge as her anchors, supporters, and partners. Both Simon and Eliezer have an inkling of Nyuta's extraordinary nature yet both remain on the margins of her genius. As in many of her other works, in *Leonardo's Handwriting* Rubina structures the movement of the plot through the movement of her characters through varied geography of Soviet and post-Soviet space. The question of identity and belonging (or not belonging) is central to the trope of journey, characters' nomadic existence, uprootedness, and dislocation. This question is raised in many of Rubina's previous works, especially in *Here Comes The Messiah*, where it is reflected through multiple characters, all of whom represent parts of the authorial persona. This authorial persona functions as connective tissue between things Soviet and things Israeli, bringing into sharp focus the confusion Russian Israelis experience while differentiating between "here" and "there" and "us" and "them." As different characters in the novel question their place in the world, the discussion extends into a larger existential quandary: Who are the Jews? What makes a person Jewish? Why are Jews destined to wander around the world? The well-known Russian literary critic Lev Anninsky, for example, sees Rubina's perception of Jewishness as "not a nationality, not a population, not a peoplehood, not a tribe, not a religion, but as some secret vow, a sign, a fate that is inescapable."¹⁷ Does Nyuta have this sign? Rubina never gives us a direct answer.

I would also like to theorize that there is an evolutionary trajectory of the female characters from the autobiographically inspired writer Dina, the struggling immigrant intellectual in Israel, to the celebrated Tashkent artist Vera Scheglola and her mother Katya, a criminal mastermind in charge of all Tashkent drug trade, to the figure of Nyuta, an acrobat, a performer, a prophet, and a witch. Nyuta emerges as the strongest of all Rubina's female characters, she is never helpless, nor a victim. She is one of the rare people who has full confidence in her abilities, her unique role in this universe, and is in full control of her life. Nyuta is portrayed as a uniquely independent woman who makes her

17 Lev Anninsky, "Otshecheno? Otrubleno? Otrezano?," in *Druzhba Narodov*, No. 10 (1996), pp. 218–222.

own choices and pursues her freedom to the fullest. Even though Nyuta's speech is mediated by the third-person narrator, there is no doubt that she does not set any limitations on herself on spiritual, intellectual, or physical levels. Despite the fact that throughout the novel she is the object of the male gaze and the performer for the spectators' visual pleasure, Nyuta shapes her own life and her own story. As a highly successful aerial acrobat and later a stunt performer, Nyuta creates art with her body which is subjected to the judgment and the gaze of hundreds of spectators, actors, directors, producers, and others in her creative universe. Rubina mentions on multiple occasions both the beauty and the extraordinary physical strength of Nyuta's body, sometimes appearing as an exotic marvel bedecked in sequins and feathers flying on the trapeze, and sometimes as an almost non-gendered biker riding a motorcycle at a neck-breaking speed, wearing rough boots, jeans and leathers. Sometimes Nyuta is a boyish girl, fit, muscular, and wound up tightly as a spring, sometimes she is likened to a musical instrument attuned to a special melody while making love. The two men through whose eyes we see Nyuta—her ex-husband Vladimir and her lover Simon—are both men, their views of her body are openly sexualized both inside and outside the Circus. The Male Gaze follows Nyuta everywhere yet the readers awareness that the writer Dina Rubina is actually a woman adds an intriguing dimension to the perceptions of her male characters. Nyuta's own self-perception, presented by the third-person narrator, adds yet another level to the mystery of Nyuta's nature and identity:

All her life, the moment of recognizing herself in the mirror was like a delayed parachute drop. She was never able to merge with her reflection straight away. In that first moment there was an encounter, a shock, a heartbeat—someone else is wearing your clothes. She had to turn herself the other way around and every single time she had to teach herself how to look all over again.

Although she could always recognize herself in any distorted surface, in water, in a spoon, in the fat belly of the enamel teapot. (58)

The multi-dimensionality of Nyuta's body imagery, the portrayals of her strength and self-confidence, acceptance of her sexuality and her being, is perhaps Rubina's subversive incursion into the territory of male focalization.

Quite a few readers noticed the polyphonic quality of Rubina's writing, often attributing it to the experience of growing up in Tashkent:

“It may partially derive from the fact that Dina was born and spent her childhood years in Tashkent, a sun-soaked Central Asian city where representatives of different cultures and ethnicities lived side by side. The scorching sun, the polyphony of an Oriental city, various episodes from her early and teenage years come up again and again in Rubina’s novels and short stories.”¹⁸ Although it is undoubtedly true that the multiculturalism of post-war Tashkent is the basis for Rubina’s polyphonic writing style, it is possible to suggest that over time it developed into one of the most fundamental qualities of her entire artistic oeuvre. The richness of Rubina’s multi-faceted depictions of the diversity of the Tashkent’s human multitudes—similar to her later depictions of the carnivalesque life in Israel—stems from her affinity for exploring the multi-lingual and multi-cultural coalescence. As I previously argued, Rubina is known for her complex dialogic imagination, incorporating and inter-weaving various voices to create an image that represents an all-encompassing mode of existence in Israel as well as in Tashkent.¹⁹ Unfettered by the conventions of one particular genre or literary style, Rubina engages as many socially and historically charged voices as possible. Her continuous effort at heteroglossia and a multilingual milieu create an intricate, polyphonic textual quality. Thus Rubina’s texts are implicitly dialogic, not only because she addresses her reader as a potential interlocutor, but primarily because her tropes, as complex networks of meaning, represent a variety of voices deeply rooted in languages. The totality of these often disaccorded voices is more generative than each one taken separately; they function together to produce a heterogeneous collective—the characters of the novel that span the width and breadth of what was coined as Soviet People. Rubina’s *Leonardo’s Handwriting* emerges at the crossroads of cultures, where Israeli, Russian, and other cultural, intellectual, and aesthetic trends come to bear fruit unseen anywhere else.

18 Alena Tveritina, “Dina Rubina: Turning the Central Asian Sun into Words,” in *Russia Beyond*, 14.01.2015: <https://www.rbth.com/literature/2015/01/14/dina_rubina_turning_the_central_asian_sun_into_words_42855.html>.

19 Anna P. Ronell, “Some Thoughts on Russian-language Israeli Fiction: Introducing Dina Rubina” in *Prooftexts. A Journal of Jewish Literary History*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (Spring 2008), pp. 197-231.

LEONARDO'S
HANDWRITING

To Lina Nikolskaya,
Aerial Tightrope Walker

*And Jacob was left alone and
a man wrestled with him until the breaking of the day.*

Genesis 32:24

So let nobody expect us to say anything about angels.

Benedict/Baruch Spinoza, *Of the Human Mind*

PART ONE

*Mancinism or leftsidedness is today regarded
as a character of atavism and degeneration...*

Cesare Lombroso, *The Man of Genius*

*It appears, then, that left-handed people
are more numerous among criminals,
and sensitive left-sided people among lunatics.*

Cesare Lombroso, *Left-Handedness
and Left-Sidedness*

CHAPTER 1.

The phone rang, drawn-out and insistent, like the whistle of a train: long distance.

It was in the hall beneath a large oval mirror, and when her husband's relatives rang, it seemed to Masha that the mirror shook as if rocked by a passing train and was about to fall off the wall.

A flat, official voice: "Please hold. Mariupol for you." Do they pick these people for their voices?

It was Tamara, her husband's cousin.

She usually called to say Happy New Year or to report the death of yet another aunt—Anatoly had a whole set of ageing relations in Mariupol.

Masha wanted to put him on right away but Tamara said, "Hang on a sec, Masha. It's actually you I want to talk to..."

And spluttering self-consciously she said that Aunty Lida's niece had passed away after a failed appendix operation in Yeysk. There now.

"What Aunty Lida?"

"Oh, you have met her and you met her niece at my wedding. Aunty Lida—she's dead now—she wasn't related on our side, she was an in-law."

And she was off ... In short, Aunty Lida was an in-law, not on the Mariupol side, on the Yeysk side.

It was a long time since Masha had abandoned her attempts to remember all the family connections of her husband's abundant relations.

"And, just listen, the niece might be gone but she's left a little girl. She's only three."

"Yes, and?"

And, clearly anxious, Tamara hastily relayed the fact that none of their relatives wanted to take the little girl even though those same relatives were really pretty well-off: the dead woman's cousin was a dental technician, didn't want for anything.

Since in that family the living and the dead marched amicably arm-in-arm from one generation to the next with cheery banter and bickering, still arguing, still singing, still draining their glasses, it was really strange that not one of them wanted to take the child in.

Masha gritted her teeth. Don't get worked up, she told herself, no one meant to insult you. No one's thinking about what you're going through.

"Tomka," she eventually brought herself to say calmly, "Why are you telling me all this?"

Tamara halted. An indifferent swell of voices boomed in the receiver and Masha suddenly realized that, in order to have this conversation, Tamara had gone to the telegraph office and waited in line for a booth...

"Well, maybe have a think, Masha," Tamara said, as if apologizing. "After all, you don't have any children. Perhaps this is a chance? No matter how you look at it, you're already, what, thirty-six?"

"Thirty-four," Masha broke in. "And I'm not giving up hope. I'm having treatment."

"Well, you know best..." Tamara immediately sounded deflated, she had lost interest in further conversation. "So, you won't even take the phone number of that woman, the dentist? Just in case?"

And for some reason Masha wrote it down, so as not to upset Tomka—after all, she meant well, fool that she was.

It was all so easy for them, those milk cows in Mariupol with their full udders.

She put the receiver down and raised her head. A woman, still young, her mobile face sprinkled with an enchanting smattering of freckles, gazed out of the oval mirror in its black frame. Her husband, resting after his shift, could be seen behind her in the gap of the open bedroom door. One bare foot swung like a pendulum keeping time either with his thoughts or with a tune he was humming silently. His face was shuttered by an open book, the title and the author's name inverted in the mirror—impossible to read.

Further in, the depths of the mirror revealed a window onto a Kiev chestnut tree, its crown studded with white candles, tossing in the wind while, higher and deeper still, the blue void of the heavens ascended as reflection merged with source and vanished into nothingness....

All of a sudden, it frightened her.

What? she asked herself, attending to an ill-defined but very keen sense of dread. What's wrong with me? What does this fear of the pit,

wide-open in welcome, have to do with an ordinary reflection in a household mirror?

Masha lay awake all night. She got up twice to dose herself with valerian drops. Tolya said nothing although she could hear him tossing and turning until dawn.

Exactly twelve months ago, after years upon years of medical ordeals, they had become parents to a big, bonny stillborn boy.

The morning after talking to Mariupol, Masha waited for the door to close behind her husband to dial the number of the strange woman who couldn't—or wouldn't—take in her orphaned niece.

Everything went well: she got through quickly, the woman was in, the line was incredibly clear and the conversation was brief, brusque and exhaustive as if fate was in a hurry to skim through a page that had nothing much to say.

When she heard Masha's opening words, the woman said, "You won't take that child. She's incredibly thin."

"What does that mean?" Masha inquired, "Is she ill?"

"I'm telling you, you won't take her. You'll be too scared."

"So... where is she now? Who's looking after her?"

"There's a neighbour, she's kind. Used to be friends with Rita, who died. She's busy trying to get the child into an institution."

"Address!" said Masha, breathing hard. The woman spelt it out.

Masha replaced the receiver in silence.

That afternoon Tolya phoned from the hospital and said there were two tickets available to see Arkady Raykin in action. "Should we go?"

"I don't really feel like it..."

And she wasn't herself the whole evening. She started going through their paperwork for some reason. She sat quietly, pensively setting out school leaving certificates, diplomas, their wedding certificate, like cards in a game of patience. The letters Tolya had written to her when he was still studying at the Military Medical Academy.

He came out of the bathroom on his way to bed and looked at his wife. She hugged herself as she hunched over the coloured cardboard files, her feet in their soft slippers tucked beneath her chair. Masha looked up with an apologetic smile.

He sighed and said, "Go on, go. See what's going on... But you'd be the one bringing her up."

Masha had an easy journey as far as Yeysk, with just one change of train, but when she found the address she wanted on Shosseynaya Street, the little girl turned out to have gone off with a children's home to their summer quarters.

It was Shura, that same kind-hearted neighbour, who had got her onto the trip. Every year, she helped in the kitchens of the children's home's summer quarters. "Well, judge for yourself: it's got to be worth it, free food, the sea air, you don't even touch your pay packet." It took just ten minutes for Masha to learn all this from two old ladies, the garrulous denizens of the bench always found at the entrance to any block of flats.

"Shura got herself into a right old state, worried herself sick: the child won't eat, no matter what you do. P'rhaps, out there, with the children, she'll come round? Or she's going to waste away altogether?"

"What about the father?" Masha asked. "Is he around at all?"

"Him? Oh, he's around..." echoed one of the old women. "He's around alright, in a lovely place. In the nick. Nice, free lodgings."

Her companion started cackling at the joke and she laughed for a long time, spluttering, wiping her hand across her mouth and saying over and over, "Aye, that's right. In the nick. He's around, that's for sure."

Masha made her way to the bus station and bought a ticket, as instructed by the neighbours, to Dolzhanskaya village.

...The summer quarters of the children's home was in a four-storey building of what used to be a holiday centre for either the iron and steel or the textile industry.

"It's four years now since the building was transferred to the Ministry of Health and they moved the children's health and holiday centre in after renovations. They bring children with cerebral palsy along and, you know, the treatment's not too bad at all. And one of the buildings is rented out to children's homes as a summer residence."

In addition to this information, Masha was obliged to listen to various facts from the life story of an imposing gentleman in striped pyjamas: *My Life and Struggle in the Tractor Factory Assembly Shop*.

He had fetched up alongside her out of nowhere as she went for a stroll to await the children's nap time—or more precisely as she paced to and fro beside the stone parapet of the embankment—and he just kept hanging around, oblivious to her acute agitation.

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Firstly, my thanks go to Lina Nikolskaya, the brilliant performer who led me out on the wire above the abyss of this novel and made sure I kept my footing.

They go also to stunt performer Dmitry Shulkin;

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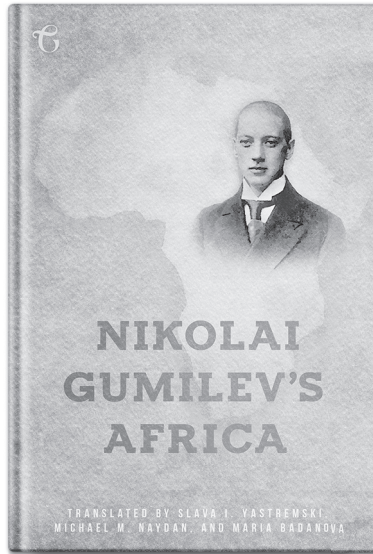
Sonya Chernyakova;

Shurochka and Manya, African grey and Amazon parrots respectively, members of the family of Lina and Nikolay Nikolsky;

And to my own family—for their infinite patience.

Dina Rubina

Nikolai Gumilev's Africa



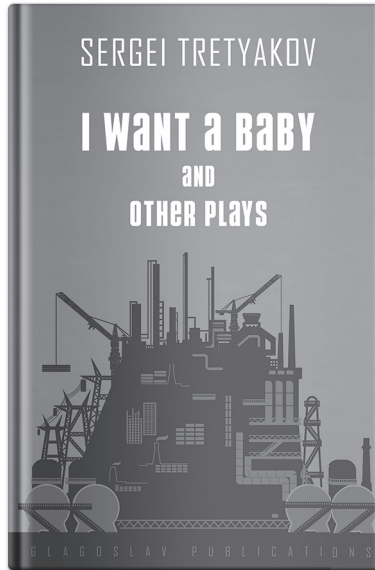
Gumilev holds a unique position in the history of Russian poetry as a result of his profound involvement with Africa. He extensively wrote both poetry and prose on the culture of the continent in general and on Ethiopia (Abyssinia, as it was called in Gumilev's time) in particular. During his abbreviated lifetime Gumilev made four trips to Northern and Eastern Africa, the most extensive of which was a 1913 expedition to Abyssinia undertaken on assignment from the St. Petersburg Imperial Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography. During that trip Gumilev collected Ethiopian folklore and ethnographic objects, which, upon his return to St. Petersburg, he deposited at the Museum. He and his assistant Nikolai Sverchkov also made more than 200 photographs that offer a unique picture of the African country in the early part of the century.

This volume collects all of Gumilev's poetry and prose written about Africa for the first time as well as a number of the photographs that he and Nikolai Sverchkov took during their trip that give a fascinating view of that part of the world in the early twentieth century.

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I Want a Baby and Other Plays

by Sergei Tretyakov

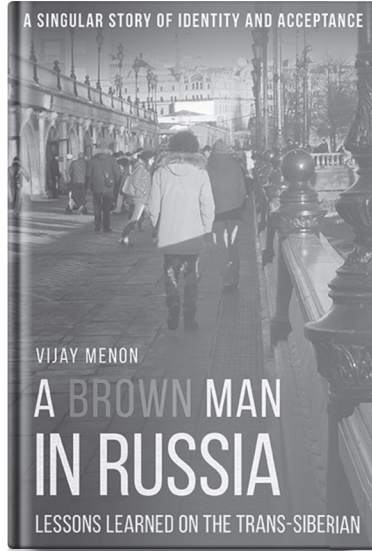


When Sergei Tretyakov's ground-breaking play, *I Want a Baby*, was banned by Stalin's censor in 1927, it was a signal that the radical and innovative theatre of the early Soviet years was to be brought to an end. A glittering, unblinking exploration of the realities of post-revolutionary Soviet life, *I Want a Baby* marks a high point in modernist experimental drama.

Tretyakov's plays are notable for their formal originality and their revolutionary content. *The World Upside Down*, which was staged by Vsevolod Meyerhold in 1923, concerns a failed agrarian revolution. *A Wise Man*, originally directed by the great film director and Tretyakov's friend, Sergei Eisenstein, is a clown show set in the Paris of the émigré White Russians. *Are You Listening, Moscow?!* and *Gas Masks* are 'agit-melodramas', fierce, fast-moving and edgy...

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A Brown Man in Russia
Lessons Learned on the Trans-Siberian
by Vijay Menon



A Brown Man in Russia describes the fantastical travels of a young, colored American traveler as he backpacks across Russia in the middle of winter via the Trans-Siberian. The book is a hybrid between the curmudgeonly travelogues of Paul Theroux and the philosophical works of Robert Pirsig. Styled in the vein of Hofstadter, the author lays out a series of absurd, but true stories followed by a deeper rumination on what they mean and why they matter. Each chapter presents a vivid anecdote from the perspective of the fumbling traveler and concludes with a deeper lesson to be gleaned. For those who recognize the discordant nature of our world in a time ripe for demagoguery and for those who want to make it better, the book is an all too welcome antidote. It explores the current global climate of despair over differences and outputs a very different message – one of hope and shared understanding. At times surreal, at times inappropriate, at times hilarious, and at times deeply human, A Brown Man in Russia is a reminder to those who feel marginalized, hopeless, or endlessly divided that harmony is achievable even in the most unlikely of places.

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Leonardo's Handwriting is a romantic morality tale, with an unconventional woman at its heart. Nature has given the heroine, Anna, the gift of clairvoyance, and it is this that determines her singular fate. The characteristic “left-handed mirror handwriting”, which in psychology came to be known as “Leonardo’s handwriting” (since that’s how the Renaissance genius wrote his notes), simply adds to the “weirdness” both of Anna’s personality and the twists and turns of the novel. Is the divine gift of prophecy a blessing or a curse? And how is it possible to withstand the burden of such an astonishing gift?

This is also a novel about love: a strong, noble, tragic love, love, in short, that “is stretched to breaking point”. Here, as well as the classic love triangle, there is another character whose bizarre, platonic yearning for Anna resembles a call from the “mirror universe” that has entranced and attracted her since childhood. The reader must put together the pieces of this “mirror” puzzle of personalities and events in a storyline that falls into place and “comes into focus” like an image in a misted mirror—bit by bit. The events of the book become fully clear only in the very last paragraph.



Dina Rubina is an Israeli Russian-language writer. Born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1953, Dina had her first stories published in the 1970s. She studied music at the Tashkent Conservatory. Dina has received numerous awards, and is the bestselling author of over 40 titles, including eight novels. Her novels and short stories have been made into films,

adapted for TV, and staged in theatres in Russia and Israel. She is the 2007 Big Book Award winner for the novel *On the Sunny Side of the Street* and a Russian Prize finalist for the novel *The White Dove of Cordoba*. Since 1990, Dina Rubina has been living in Ma’ale-Adumim, Israel, with her family.

