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Book review: The Winter Palace, by Eva Stachniak

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Book Review (Starred)

The Winter Palace.

Stachniak, Eva (author).

Jan. 2012. 436p. Bantam, hardcover, \$26 (9780553808124).

Polish-Canadian author Stachniak's brilliant, bold historical novel of eighteenth-century Russia is a masterful account of one woman's progress toward absolute monarchical rule. For Catherine the Great, the path to her eventual coup d'état involves 20 years of subtle strategizing, intelligence gathering, and patience. Born Sophie of Anhalt-Zerbst, this "pale, appealing sliver of a girl" arrives in St. Petersburg in 1743 as a potential bride for Peter, Empress Elizabeth's weak-willed nephew and heir. Through the clear narration of clever, multilingual Varvara, the Polish bookbinder's daughter who becomes her servant, friend, and spy, readers follow Catherine from her early years of barrenness and disfavor through her even more demoralizing years of motherhood. While Elizabeth tolerates and even encourages Catherine's sexual liaisons, she separates her from her children. During the massive rebuilding of the Winter Palace and war with Prussia, which impoverish Elizabeth's subjects, a steelier, more confident Catherine emerges. Varvara, too, gradually awakens to her own inner strength. Stachniak captures dramatic moments with flair, and the Russian imperial court—with its fox-fur blankets, gilded furniture, and carafes of cherry vodka—appears in glorious splendor. This superb biographical epic proves the Tudors don't have a monopoly on marital scandal, royal intrigue, or feminine triumph.— *Sarah Johnson*

First published in *Booklist*, November 15, 2011, p.28