

## REVIEWS

Katherine Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale* (2017), *The Girl in the Tower* (2017) and *The Winter of the Witch* (2019), (*Winternight Trilogy*). New York: Del Rey. Notes. Glossary. \$27.00 (hard cover) 978-1101885956, \$28.00 (hard cover) ISBN 978-1101885963, and \$28.00 (hard cover) ISBN: 978-1101885994.

*The Winternight Trilogy* is the collective title for three novels by new writer Katherine Arden. The fantasy series is set in 14<sup>th</sup> century Russia and heavily relies on Russian folklore.

Although Arden finished the first book in the trilogy in 2014, the books were published in relatively quick succession, partially in response to the complaint of long publishing timelines between books in the fantasy genre. Arden studied at Middlebury where she received a bachelor's degree in Russian, and she spent two years living in Russia. Her familiarity with Russia's history, language, and culture shows through in the trilogy, as does her desire to have her audience appreciate Russian folk culture.

*The Bear and the Nightingale* is the first book in the *Winternight Trilogy*. The book is a coming of age tale that centers on Vasilisa Petrovna, a young girl born with the power to see the magical creatures of Russia's folklore in a time when Russian Orthodoxy is pushing these beings out of existence. Like many heroines in folk tales and fairy tales, Vasilisa is motherless and her widowed father soon introduces a stepmother into their lives who fears her stepdaughter and her unseen powers, and her resentment of Vasya only grows as she and the village falls under the influence of a priest determined to end the old belief system. As Vasilisa's stepmother makes plans to marry her off as a way of curbing Vasilisa's wildness, Vasya is faced with an even bigger challenge: a war between Death and Moroz: two warring forces who take an interest Vasilisa because of her second sight. Domovoi, rusalki, vazili, and other creatures help guide Vasya as she tries to help keep their world alive. Arden's Russia is one of magical realism, and her descriptions of Russia in winter are vivid and striking. *The Bear and the Nightingale* establishes the folklore that will serve as the backbone of the series.

The second book in the series, *The Girl in the Tower*, starts shortly after Vasilisa has left her village. However, although Vasilisa successfully fended for herself in the first book, she quickly discovers that traveling is full of dangers for a young woman, even one under the protection of Moroz. As the dangers on her journey intensify Vasilisa must go to Moscow to help her cousin the Grand Prince Dmitri fend off the looming Mongol threat, yet she is stuck between two identities: the young warrior she pretends to be and her true self. *The Girl in the Tower* sees Vasilisa reunited with her older sister Olga and her older brother Sasha, who is now Brother Sasha, a well-liked monk willing to help his cousin defend the empire. However, the reunion is not all that Vasilisa had hoped. Her older sister, as the wife of a minor royal, is bound by the rules of the court. Olga is content to live her life according to the strict social rules that govern Moscow's 14<sup>th</sup> century

nobility and wants to see her sister do the same to keep both herself and her family safe. Arden creates an interesting family dynamic; Olga and Sasha love their sister yet neither understand her and her desire to break free.

One of the more interesting aspects of *The Girl in the Tower* is how Arden explores traditional gender roles in Muscovite Russia. While Vasilisa is the hero of the series, she is certainly not viewed that way in society, and her victory in the previous book does not grant her immunity from judgment. While modern readers might cheer her need to buck the system and find her own path, the characters around her fear her and view her willingness to fight as a violation of the norm. If scholars like Pinkola Estés argue that Vasilisa is a tale of female liberation and empowerment, Arden shows how a young woman like Vasilisa might be interpreted in her own time and by her own people.

The final book in the series, *The Winter of the Witch*, is grounded in Russian history, which may also explain why it is the darkest in the series. While the folk elements of the first two books still come through in the trilogy, the setting and history of medieval Moscow take precedence as the work builds to the Battle of Kulikovo. In *The Winter of the Witch* the folk characters become a safe haven for Vasilisa Petrovna: they represent a time when her world was much smaller and known to her. Unlike the first two books, the third drags a bit in pacing. At times the plot gets too bogged down by both Vasilisa's family history and Moscow's history. However, Arden's fantastical version of the battle still hits at the heart of the matter: which direction will Russia go, and who will lead her there? Who will her people side with, and what happens to the things left behind?

Since her writing is not specifically geared towards Russian scholars, Arden guides the way with a glossary and notes at the end of each book that become more sophisticated as the series progresses. Her glossary for *The Bear and the Nightingale* includes entries for Russian neophytes that range across folklore, culture, and language: "Baba Yaga—An old witch who appears in many Russian fairy tales. She rides around on a mortar, steering with a pestle and sweeping her tracks away with a broom of birch. She lives in a hut that spins round and round on chicken legs" "kvas—a fermented beverage made from rye bread" and "Devochka—little girl" (p. 286). Her author's note at the end of the first novel acknowledges both her non-Russian and Slavist audience, "I wanted these Russian words to be reasonably pronounceable and aesthetically pleasing to speakers of English" (p. 285). By the third book, Arden contextualizes her trilogy in both the note and the glossary, "The Battle of Kulikovo really did happen in 1380 on the Don River, The Grand Prince Dmitrii Ivanovich acquired his historical moniker: Donskoi, of the Don, by leading a combined force from several different Russian principalities..." (p. 355).

Arden's trilogy is not a study of Russian folklore and should not be read as such. A scholarly reading of her texts will only lead to frustration since her novels only lightly brush against the facts. Her novels are intended for a wide mass-market audience with little knowledge of Russian culture. However, Arden's knowledge and appreciation of Russia's folklore and culture shine through, and her series brings the tradition of Russian folklore to a new and wider audience.

Jill Martiniuk  
University of South Florida  
Florida, USA