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Fairy tale and history, wilderness and civilisation collide in this brilliant and magical new novel from the author of Little Exiles.

In the depths of winter in the land of Belarus, where ancient forests straddle modern country borders, an orphaned boy and his grandfather go to scatter his mother's ashes in the woodlands. Her last request to rest where she grew up will be fulfilled.

Frightening though it is to leave the city, the boy knows he must keep his promise to mama: to stay by and protect his grandfather, whatever happens. Her last potent gifts – a little wooden horse, and hunks of her homemade gingerbread – give him vigour. And grandfather's magical stories help push the harsh world away.

But the driving snow, which masks the tracks of forest life, also hides a frozen history of long-buried secrets. And as man and boy travel deeper among the trees, grandfather's tales begin to interweave with the shocking reality of his own past, until soon the boy's unbreakable promise to mama is tested in unimaginable ways.

Gingerbread Details

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Author : Robert Dinsdale

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From Reader Review Gingerbread for online ebook

Beth (bibliobeth) says

This is the first book of Robert Dinsdale's that I've read and picked up this copy from a wonderful Oxfam charity shop near Tottenham Court Road in London where the synopsis immediately intrigued me and begged to be bought and devoured. I love fairy tales, fairy tale re-imaginings, alternative fairy tales... you name it. Just the mere mention of the word fairy tale will ensure it gets put in my basket and after reading lots of positive reviews of this novel on Good Reads, I was eager to get stuck in and form my own opinion. *Gingerbread* is like nothing I've ever read before and although fairy tales play a huge part in this novel, it's not your average "happily ever after" read. If I had to compare it to something, I would probably choose Roald Dahl's version of *Cinderella* from his *Revolting Rhymes* book (not entirely sure why!) except that the story is incredibly unsettling and plays on your mind long after the book has been closed.

Our narrator for *Gingerbread* is a young boy (unnamed at least in the beginning) who has moved in with his grandfather (known as Papa) in Belarus with his mother who is herself dying of cancer. Before she passes away, the boy's mother manages to extract two promises from her son. One, that he will scatter her ashes in the forest by the cottage where she used to live in her childhood and two, most importantly, that he will look after his grandfather, no matter what. Unfortunately, the boy is about to discover how hard it is going to be to keep these promises to his mother. Papa is hugely reluctant to go into the forest but after a lot of pestering the boy manages to persuade him to go there so that he can fulfil part one of his mother's wishes.

The problem is, now that Papa has arrived in the forest at his old cottage, he becomes increasingly loath to leave it again which is okay at the start as the two ensconce themselves safely within the house. The boy has always enjoyed the magical stories his papa tells him and indeed he seems to have a gift for luring the listener deep within a time where a Winter King wars against enemies of the West. It is not long however before everything slowly begins unravelling leading to the cottage being abandoned, the two living in makeshift shelters in the woods and practically starving and the stories that Papa tells becoming more frightening erring on the monstrous. The boy stops going to school and is filthy, thin and very concerned about the transformation he sees day by day in his grandfather's character. The lines between fiction and reality become blurred and when a family with a girl called Elenya moves into the cottage it could be a desperately needed lifeline to bring the boy and his grandfather back to civilisation. Or, it could be very dangerous for them all.

This was such an intriguing novel and definitely not what I expected when I first picked it up. I loved the way in which the author used historical fiction blended in with fantasy and even at some points horror, to create a mish-mash of genres that fit so perfectly in this unique story. It's a fairy tale yes, but a very different one and I really enjoyed the pockets of darkness that Robert Dinsdale placed within the narrative to illustrate a descent in mental health that takes the characters back to their very basic selves. I think the phrase "survival of the fittest," definitely applies to this story and there are certain depths you think as an individual you would never stoop to but perhaps when your life is on the line, this attitude no longer holds weight and you have to fight to stay alive.

For some parts of the novel, you have to suspend your disbelief which wasn't a problem for me personally but I can understand why some people may find it difficult or too unbelievable. In this way I thought Papa was a fantastic character and loved exploring his murky depths but my heart also bled for the boy who at the end of the day is just trying to keep his beloved mother's last wishes and look after his grandfather. The addition of Elenya was also a nice choice, bringing new life to the story and it was interesting to follow her growing relationship with the "wild boy." This book probably isn't for you if you like your endings all wrapped up with a little bow and everyone living in harmony together – it's incredibly dark and twisty and

will play with your mind for days after finishing it. However if you're a big fan of the darkness and subtle horror like me, read this book immediately (and maybe don't go into the woods on your own).

Please see my full review on my blog at <http://www.bibliobeth.com>

Aditi says

Nancy Wynne Newhall was an American photography critic, who once quoted remarkably about the wilderness in nature:

"The Wilderness holds answers to more questions than we have yet learned to ask."

Robert Dinsdale, an English author, has spun a spectacularly wild tale about a boy, some unforgettable forest fables and forest in the unexplored land of Belarus, in his new novel, *Gingerbread*.

I'd like to thank the author immensely, for sending me over the copy of his new novel, in return for an honest review.

A young boy travels to the other part of city with his mama to visit his grandpa, who he used to address as "papa". But then his mother dies due to cancer, and his mama make him promise her that he would take care of his "papa" no matter what. Thus begins the story of a boy and a man who was once a boy! His mother wanted to take her ashes to the tenement where she grew up with her baba and papa in the forest. But after reaching the forest and after laying his mama alongside her baba, his "papa" couldn't leave the forest and become relentless to go away from the wild, so they settle up there in the forest by making camps and dens and eating the dead his mama's gingerbread and listening to the trees and living up with the wild. Each season goes by, and the boy's "papa's" wild fables become wilder and more sinister with the tales of the Perpetual Winter in the City of Gulag and the Winter King's wrath. But when a little girl, named Elenya comes to live in the forest along with her parents in the boy's old house, things get changed and the boy becomes more drawn to the life he had abandoned in the city and seeing the girl with her parents in a warm home, leave the boy with a longing feeling and thus eventually he grows more distant from his "papa". Will the boy hold onto his wild "papa" to keep his mother's promise? Will his longing make him go away from the wild which is now his only home? Read this delirious novel which not only awes your mind but also leaves your heart with a longing feeling for the unknown wild out there.

You must be wondering what the boy's name and why the protagonist do not have a name, well to be honest, that's a mystery and it is revealed later, and for that you really need to read this compelling novel!

This is a good book to break away from the daily hustle-bustle of the city. But this book is not a light-read book, instead, it has got a depth like *The Devil's Sinkhole*, that for the whole time you lose yourself in the wilderness of the forests. What can I say about the author's illustrious storytelling, in one word- *completely incredible*. Not even for a single second, I found myself wandering away from the gripping tale.

A boy, his dead mama, and his papa (his mama's father), Elenya and Mr. Navitski are the key characters of the book, which adds an edge to the tale which makes the story more believable and justifiable. Their flaws are dark sides are strikingly portrayed, for example, the girl, Elenya had a dark side and it was not revealed in the story and that anticipation made the story more intriguing. The characterization is skillfully crafted and the unfolding of the plot was remarkably narrated by the author.

The author has shed light about the wilderness which somehow held the answers to the boy's unanswered questions and curiosity.

Do read this novel and find yourself losing away in the wild of the nature and in the fables that touch your mind and soul by leaving an impression upon your mind.

I'm looking forward in reading the author's previous novel, *Little Exiles*.

Simone says

A beautiful novel with all the elements of eminent storytelling. This is for readers who like to be swept-off to faraway lands and tales of survival, humanity and betrayal. It takes the reader on the journey of a (mostly) unnamed boy through the grief of his dying mother to the love of his grandfather whose stories will reveal shocking secrets locked in time, in the dark, depths of the ancient forests. Dinsdale challenges readers, at a couple of points, to suspend reality entirely but his magical story and its lure to read-on-regardless, is surely a sign that this is a brilliant book.(less)

Mar 20, 2014 01:51PM · delete

Jenny says

'Gingerbread' is a wonderful tale mixing stark reality with fairytale and folklore. Dinsdale tells the story of an orphaned boy and his grandfather, who go to the forests in Belarus to scatter his mother's ashes. The boy has promised his mother that he will protect his grandfather, a task he takes very seriously; a task much bigger than he imagined. As the story unfolds, Grandfather's tales unearth a terrible history, which bring to life horrors the boy had imagined were only for stories.

As the story progresses, Grandfather's health unravels, and his grasp on his current reality wavers. It happens slowly, and we see it through the eyes of the boy, who does not understand what is going on, which has a similar effect on the reader as 'The Yellow Wallpaper' by Charlotte Perkins Gilman - we don't notice how much the horror has built until it reaches its climax.

The way I read this book - which was piecemeal - did not do it justice, and I'm wary now of critiquing too much. I found it difficult to get into Grandfather's tales, but I think if I'd had the freedom to read for longer periods, this might not have been a problem. The main strength of this book is, I think, the intricate tapestry of history, folklore, and realism, which addresses the horrors of war and the fragility of mental health. The unravelling of Grandfather is managed so well that it haunts you.

This is certainly a book that got under my skin.

Simon says

I think this is more a 2.5 for me than a two and I feel a little mean saying that because some of Ginger Bread is very good (and very me). I loved the idea of fairytale and folklore intertwining with a history of sorts, though the whole history of Belarus was oddly in parts absent bar the fairytale retellings of its history - will make sense if you've read it, sorry. I also loved the idea of trees and a tiny bit of sorcery being part of a boys

granddads hidden side. I also loved the first 100 pages. But then the book starts to get lost in itself. Is it a fairytale or a horror story? Is it a fairytale or historical retelling through a metaphor? It also sadly becomes over written, a little long and the denouement over the top. So a mixed bag, I still want to try Dinsdales next book though as some of this really had me.

Lucy Jackson says

This book will stay with me for a long time, it's a tragic tale about a grandfather and a boy after the boy's mama dies and how resilience and a promise keep them together for good and ill.

Its a very emotional novel and very well written, I am looking forward to reading more of Robert Dinsdale's books.

Louise Groom says

I received this book in a goodreads giveaway and I really enjoyed it!

I haven't read a book like it and really enjoyed the storyline!

Sophie Boddice says

I won this in a goodreads give away and I absolutely loved this book. Started out thinking it would be a lovely sad book about a kind grandfather and a boy, not at all what I expected it to be. One of those easy reads that you cant put down, Im definitely going to recommend it to friends and family!

Liz says

This book took my breath away multiple times. It's so beautiful, yet horrifying and terribly sad. Set in Belarus, a boy ventures into the woods with his grandfather, who has wonderful folk tales to tell...which soon merge into something much more sinister. the way the story unfolds is so gripping, it was very hard to put down.

Becky says

The five star system doesn't seem to be adequate when it comes to books like this. Having read Little Exiles, I was expecting this to be good, but couldn't anticipate just how well written, and horrifying the novel would be. Robert Dinsdale has taken a story of loss and emotional trauma, and wrapped it up in the history and folktales of Belarus to create something quite exceptional. Alek is a young boy determined to honour the last requests made by his dying mother; to protect his 'Papa' and to return her ashes to the forest cottage where she was born. Alek cannot possibly imagine the horrors that have taken place in the forests of Belarus, or the effect that this history will have on his grandfather. The tragic story of Alek's family, and of his country, is

slowly revealed through the 'fairy-tales' told by 'Papa'; and as the pair become increasingly distanced from the modern world, these dark tales begin to have a horrific impact on both of them. This is an unforgiving book, as brutal and twisted as the stories that weave through the lives of Alek and his Papa, and yet remains one of the most perfectly beautiful things I have read this year. It's an incredible work.

DLS says

Having never read any of Dinsdale's novels previously I was unsure what to expect, and found myself trudging through at a slow pace. Within 20 pages, this all changed and I was racing through to the end, sat on the edge of my seat for the last 50 (or so) pages.

The book follows the story of a boy, and the tragic events which lead up to him living in a forest for over a year. Within the narrative however you are introduced to fairytales told by the boy's Grandfather which oddly reflect the events happening in the book.

I can't begin to tell you how much I adored this book, and I will definately be racing off to my nearest bookstore to find the rest of Dinsdale's novels.

Juliet says

I'm still digesting this dark, compelling, wonderful novel and will review fully in due course.

Jo Bennie says

A boy is brought to the house of his grandfather, a bleak tenement flat in a Belarussian town. His mother is dying of cancer and has brought her son to live with her father. Slowly, reluctantly, Grandfather, or Papa, begins to tell the boy and mother the stories he told to her as a child. Of Baba Yaga, the deep forests, and of the mighty Winter King and the King in the West who fought a terrible war over Belarus when it was Poland.

The mother's dying wish is for her ashes to be scattered with those of her mother in the great ancient forest beyond the town. Grandfather, or Papa, is deeply reluctant but on a day when the roads are deep in ice he relents and takes the boy and his mother's remains out to a near ruined house. It becomes clear that Papa is not afraid of the forest, he is afraid of not wanting to leave it. Daily Papa remains in the house only venturing to collect the boy from school, then one day he does not come and the boy goes in search of him.

It is the beginning of a stunning magical cartwheeling story where boy and grandfather leave the urban for the wild and enter a world of stories, of partisan fighters who retreated to safety among the trees, of women and children massacred and the trees that drank too deeply of their blood and have become wicked, of survival, and love.

Dinsdale weaves the two parts of his story - narrative and folklore, together in such a skillful way that both drive each other. Crises come, injury, new people in the forest, decisions to be made over loyalty, faithfulness and friendship, but always the ancient forest full of wildlife is a world beyond narrative where the past and present are bound together.

Rebecca says

Read this review and more on my blog

In a nutshell: A dark and atmospheric story that combines history with fairy tales and is unlike anything I've ever read.

With some books, you read the description and you kind of know what you're going to get. That's not a bad thing - I love what's familiar and when I pick up most books, I'm in the mood for that thing and I'm mostly satisfied by what I get. With some books, it's a bit more complicated and there's more to it than meets the eye. This is when genre labels have their limitations, in my opinion. Gingerbread is one of those books and because of that, it's very difficult to describe. At least I don't think I can describe it and come even close to giving it justice. How could I possibly represent the essence of this weird and wonderful story?

At the very heart of this story is a young boy and his grandfather, who cares for him after his mother's death. It's a dark tale set in Belarus, mostly in the woods, and like the book itself, there's a lot more to the stories that Papa tells than meets the eye. I appreciated the combination of history and the tales. Papa's stories were very haunting. It's chilling when you come to the realisation of their truth, along with the boy. I had a suspicion about it early on, but it's built on throughout and adds to the atmosphere of the story.

Gingerbread is a story unlike any other I've read before, but with the vibe of Grimm's fairy tales, which echoes throughout. It's very dark in tone and the lines between reality and something else entirely blur, particularly in the second half. Gingerbread is quite odd and there were times when I wasn't even sure what was happening. Honestly I enjoyed the intrigue of the first half more than the second half, with the introduction of another character, and I wasn't necessarily too invested in the characters. My favourite things were the words themselves.

Overall this book was so captivating. Robert Dinsdale is a great writer in how he creates the atmosphere and really absorbs the reader with his words. I wanted to find out what was going to happen, but more than that I wanted to make it last and savour every word. It was different to the majority of my reading experiences in that sense and I didn't want it to end.

Gingerbread is definitely the kind of book that you should try for yourself to properly appreciate it. It's not going to be for everyone and I understand why, yet if you like dark books and fairy tale twists on stories then give it a try. For me, it was a reading experience unlike any other.

Source: Booktopia

Kirsty says

I won this book through Goodreads First Reads.

There is more to this novel than meets the eye. I would never have expected the story to develop and end in quite the way it did. Gingerbread begins by introducing us to a young boy, who through most of the book we only know him by "boy". His mother is dying of cancer and she takes him to go and live with his grandfather "Papa". After an emotional and gripping beginning, the author then takes you on a journey which as I have already said is unexpected to say the least.

I enjoyed this book a lot and I feel that it started off strongly. I couldn't wait to see how things would develop after the death of the boys mother. Things got interesting, however somewhere mid way through the book I did temporarily for maybe 50 pages or so find my attention wavering somewhat. I only became interested again once Elenya became a regular character as I feel that she brought a breath of fresh air to the story. From there I was gripped again right up until the end.

I found the characters believable and intriguing. Elenya, as I have already mentioned was one of my favourites. I liked how innocent and daring she was, along with being so fierce and loyal. Meanwhile the "boy" gives the reader a believable view of the world and his situation through the eyes of a child. He seems so innocent and naive at every turn and I desperately wanted him to understand what was really happening and do something about his terrible situation. Papa was possibly the most interesting character of the lot, and his stories were fascinating.

I would highly recommend this book to anyone looking for something different. I had a feeling this would be one of those stories that would surprise me and I was right. I have yet to read anything else by this author, but I will definitely be looking into his other work.
