



A Terrible Country

Keith Gessen

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A literary triumph about Russia, family, love, and loyalty--the first novel in ten years from a founding editor of *n+1* and author of *All the Sad Young Literary Men*

When Andrei Kaplan's older brother Dima insists that Andrei return to Moscow to care for their ailing grandmother, Andrei must take stock of his life in New York. His girlfriend has stopped returning his text messages. His dissertation adviser is dubious about his job prospects. It's the summer of 2008, and his bank account is running dangerously low. Perhaps a few months in Moscow are just what he needs. So Andrei sublets his room in Brooklyn, packs up his hockey stuff, and moves into the apartment that Stalin himself had given his grandmother, a woman who has outlived her husband and most of her friends. She survived the dark days of communism and witnessed Russia's violent capitalist transformation, during which she lost her beloved dacha. She welcomes Andrei into her home, even if she can't always remember who he is.

Andrei learns to navigate Putin's Moscow, still the city of his birth, but with more expensive coffee. He looks after his elderly--but surprisingly sharp!--grandmother, finds a place to play hockey, a cafe to send emails, and eventually some friends, including a beautiful young activist named Yulia. Over the course of the year, his grandmother's health declines and his feelings of dislocation from both Russia and America deepen. Andrei knows he must reckon with his future and make choices that will determine his life and fate. When he becomes entangled with a group of leftists, Andrei's politics and his allegiances are tested, and he is forced to come to terms with the Russian society he was born into and the American one he has enjoyed since he was a kid.

A wise, sensitive novel about Russia, exile, family, love, history and fate, *A Terrible County* asks what you owe the place you were born, and what it owes you. Writing with grace and humor, Keith Gessen gives us a brilliant and mature novel that is sure to mark him as one of the most talented novelists of his generation.

A Terrible Country Details

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From Reader Review A Terrible Country for online ebook

Jennifer says

3.5 stars. In *A Terrible Country*, the main character, Andrei Kaplan, like the author is Russian born and from a young age was raised in America. The year is 2008 and 33 year old Andrei is called back to Russia by his older brother, Dima, to look after their 88 year old grandmother who lives in a "Stalin" apartment in the heart of Moscow, while Dima is away in London on business for an indeterminable time period. Andrei, a recent Russian Literature Ph.D. graduate with no solid job prospects and a failed relationship rents out his Brooklyn apartment and heads to Moscow.

The story is written as a memoir in a quirky prose that follows Andrei's meanderings and attempts to make his way in Moscow, finding friends, a girlfriend, and finding a place to play hockey. He has an endearing relationship with his grandmother, Baba Seva, which I loved. She is very funny. I enjoyed the many other characters, particularly Andrei's academic rival, Fishman.

Not without its flaws, the writing style of memoir seemed to deviate to more of a fiction writing style by creating so many unbelievable situations happening one after another that towards the end were conveniently wrapped up before giving us just a couple of more problematic issues that get somewhat resolved. At times, the writing is repetitious and the author would explain things to the reader which I found unnecessary.

Overall, I found *A Terrible Country* to be a moving story that incorporated daily life in Moscow from an outsider's perspective in conjunction with the political climate in 2008.

Paul Fulcher says

This is a terrible country. My Yolka took to America. Why did you come back?" She seemed angry.

A Terrible Country by Keith Gessen is published in the UK by perhaps my favourite of all publishers, Fitzcarraldo Editions, but is an odd fit for the "ambitious, imaginative and innovative writing" in which they normally excel.

It tells the story, set in 2008 of Andrei a thirty-something graduate in Russian literature and history. As he tells us in the novel's opening passage:

In the late summer of 2008, I moved to Moscow to take care of my grandmother. She was about to turn ninety and I hadn't seen her for nearly a decade. My brother Dima and I were her only family; her lone daughter, our mother, had died years earlier. Baba Seva lived alone now in her old Moscow apartment. When I called to tell her I was coming, she sounded very happy to hear it, and also a little confused.

My parents and my brother and I left the Soviet Union in 1981. I was six and Dima was sixteen, and that made all the difference. I became an American, whereas Dima remained essentially Russian. As soon as the Soviet Union collapsed, he returned to Moscow to make his fortune. Since then he had made and lost several fortunes; where things stood now I wasn't sure. But one day he Gchatted me to ask if I could come to Moscow and stay with Baba Seva while he went to London for an unspecified period of time.

As for me, I wasn't really an idiot. But neither was I not an idiot. I had spent four long years of college and then eight much longer years of grad school studying Russian literature and history, drinking beer, and

winning the Grad Student Cup hockey tournament (five times!); then I had gone out onto the job market for three straight years, with zero results. By the time Dima wrote me I had exhausted all the available post-graduate fellowships and had signed up to teach online sections in the university's new PMOOC initiative, short for "paid massive online open course," although the "paid" part mostly referred to the students, who really did need to pay, and less to the instructors, who were paid very little. It was definitely not enough to continue living, even very frugally, in New York. In short, on the question of whether I was an idiot, there was evidence on both sides.

Although clearly fictional, Gessen has drawn on his own experiences ('One of the seeds for the book came from conversations I had with my own grandmother when I lived with her in Moscow under circumstances a little bit like those in the book' - from a New Yorker interview) and stylistically Gessen has written the novel as Andrei's memoir, emulating the style very successfully, including even a what-happened-next Epilogue that rings so true I took some convincing this was a fictional novel. From the same interview Gessen explains his approach:

I love nonfiction, and I really love oral history. I like fiction that is made up, but I really love fiction that is thinly veiled autobiography. Each form has its rules, not even so much in terms of truth and falsity (although nonfiction should certainly be true) but, rather, in its pacing, its tolerance for coincidence (sometimes greater in nonfiction than in fiction, paradoxically), and even its tone. I think if I'd had enough material for a memoir, I'd have written a memoir. But I didn't—my life in Russia was even less interesting than Andrei's. But I did want it to sound like a memoir.

My ultimate model while writing the book was Tolstoy's novel "The Cossacks," but the books I most enjoyed reading while writing this one were memoirs of people's sojourns in a foreign place for a certain period of time.

But perhaps the attempt to sound like a memoir is too successful as the memoir style extends to both form - the writing is not particularly literary and at times rather crude - and content - with overly tedious detail (as he himself says, Andrei's life really isn't that interesting) and unnecessary anecdotes.

And unfortunately, a high proportion of Andrei's observations simply on life in Russia consist of the idiot abroad style 'but in America we...' comments (even down to ice hockey tactics, a topic with which he is obsessed). As Andrei himself observes:

I wasn't in America. That's the lesson I kept being taught, although I didn't seem willing to learn it.

the problem being that the reader has to experience the pain of Andrei being taught the lesson.

In the last quarter of the book, it takes a more political turn as Andrei gets involved in a protest movement. But a rather odd one that somehow believes the cure to Russia's ills isn't better democracy but rather Marxism (didn't someone try that before ...). In the Epigraph, he records the disappointment of his fellow protesters when anti-Putin protests finally become more widespread, partly that they were no longer in Moscow but *what was worse the protests were fundamentally liberal rather than socialist in character, appealing to free speech and voting rights rather than economic justice.*

Although Andrei does have an astute observation on the liberal opposition to Putin which, read in 2018, also neatly skewers the liberal opposition (and yes that includes me) to his increasingly widespread international bedfellows such as Trump, Brexiteers and Corbynistas:

I had forgotten the tone that Russian opposition always took - "aggrieved" wasn't the right word for it. It was sarcastic, self-righteous, full of disbelief that these idiots were running the country and that even bigger

idiots out there supported them.

And finally in the last 30 pages of the novel, the reader's interest is grabbed as the story comes together and the pace of the narration accelerates to a disturbing end.

There are elements that provide an interesting look into life in Russia in 2008, but ultimately a disappointing novel. 1.5 stars rounded to 2 because of the publisher.

RoseMary Achey says

When a young American man returns to Russia to care for his elderly grandmother you can only imagine what he encounters. Keith Gessen is a talented writer who knows how to engage and keep the reader moving through the story. There are some terrific lines in this novel.

Patricia Doyle says

A Terrible Country is the story of Andrew/Andrei, who was born in Moscow and immigrated to the United States as a child. Now an adult, he leaves New York to return to Russia to care for his 80-something-year-old grandmother. The book follows Andrei and his struggles to acclimate, but, mostly, it's about conditions in Russia.

If you like intellectual discussions regarding Russian politics and philosophies, Socialism, Revolution, Capitalism, Marxism, Fascism, Anarchism, the pros and cons of government versus private education, public housing, failed enterprises, and more, then this is the book for you.

ATC is brilliantly written and, although I admit to skimming over some of those discussions mentioned above, I thoroughly enjoyed reading this candid story about life in Russia. I followed along with Andrei's challenges as he cared for his aging grandma, finally found hockey games to play along in, formed friendships, became more comfortable with the Russian language, learned to navigate Moscow and the Russian countryside, and settle in as not-quite-so-foreign.

Thank you to NetGalley and Mr. Gessen for the opportunity to read and review A Terrible Country.

James says

This was an amiable page-turner for most of the book, but it felt more like a long New Yorker article than a novel, if you see what I mean. I like that the author attempts to inject political urgency and ideas into the novel form, which seems to me like an important thing to do just now. I also LOVE the ending (spoilers below). The characters, though, never quite came alive to me, for some reason.

*** SPOILERS

The best part of this book is the total obtuseness the narrator shows at the end. He betrays everyone and takes an academic job in completely willful ignorance of where the money for it had come from (Yulia told him

but I suppose in a final act of kindness did not spell it out). Why is the country terrible? Maybe because people like Andrei swoop in, betray decent principles, and then get lauded for it back in the metropole.

Diane S ? says

Review soon.

Jill Dobbe says

I enjoyed this book about Russia from someone who was born there, lived there for a time, and speaks the language. Reading about the author's Russian grandmother, and his relationship with her, was the highlight of the book for me. His writing was honest, true-to-life, and at times, very entertaining.

The author knows a great deal about Russian literature and expounds, in parts, on famous authors and poets. He gives interesting details about getting around Moscow and how expensive the food, clothing, and alcohol is, as well as, how cold it gets. He also writes about his love for hockey and his friendships with some of the players. He gives readers a good look at what life is like for the average citizen living in Moscow.

I found Gessen's writing to be sensitive, humorous, and richly detailed. A Terrible Country is an interesting and enjoyable read for those readers who like to immerse themselves in other cultures, and learn a little bit about a foreign country.

Sonya says

As a young immigrant from the Soviet Union, i related to the book a lot. Russia may have capitalism but it doesnt mean the corruption went away. Only the people who have connections and money survive Russia. Anyone interested in how Russia continues to operate should read this book. I recommend it to anyone but especially former soviet citizens

Neil says

This is a book about what it means to return to a place that is no longer home. Reading it brought back memories of Tommy Orange's "There there", or, more specifically, of Gertrude Stein's quote about Oakland, "there is no there there" from which Orange's book drew its title. For both Stein and the narrator of A Terrible Country, the place they thought they knew is now very different.

The men too fit a pattern. Big, kasha fed, six feet tall, stuffed into expensive suits, balancing themselves on shiny, pointy-toed shoes, never smiling. Ten years ago you walked down a Moscow street and ran into a lot of thugs in cheap leather jackets. Those guys were gone now, replaced by these guys. Or maybe they were the same guys.

Our narrator is Andrei Kaplan and the book is written as a memoir. It is very convincing and often hard to remember it is a work of fiction. I understand the author has drawn on his own experiences, but this is not a

memoir of Gessen's life. Andrei returns to Moscow to look after his grandmother at the request of his brother who has had to leave Russia for his own safety. The novel relates Andrei's experiences during the time he spends in Moscow. Because it is styled as a memoir, it can sometimes seem that Gessen is exploring too many tangential issues or providing more detail than is required. That is one way of looking at it. The alternative view is that he is creating a very believable protagonist and writing a story that feels like it must have happened and must have happened exactly like it is written here. I finished the book totally believing in Andrei Kaplan even though he is an entirely fictional character. As Andrei settles down in Moscow and attempts to look after his grandmother who is increasingly senile, we see him struggle to fit in. He is never sure whether to use the formal or informal form of address when talking to people (this whole area seems to be a nightmare that we English speakers sneakily avoid), he thinks he looks like a foreigner and worries, at least initially, about his accent. Gradually, he settles in and meets people, including getting involved with a socialist group called October.

This links to the other main theme of the book which is the effect of oppressive regimes on the societies they govern. Andrei's grandmother worries about walking past any protest groups for fear of getting involved. Andrei finds himself getting more and more involved with October until we reach a dramatic climax. Putin is an ever present factor in Andrei's thinking:

It was hard to square all the talk of bloody dictatorship with all the people in expensive suits, getting into Audis, talking on their cellphones. Was this naïve? ... For me — and not just for me, I think — Soviet oppression and Soviet poverty had always been inextricably intertwined.

And

Luckily, we in Russia had Putin. Whenever trouble reared its head, Putin was there to tame it...Dmitri Medvedev was president and Putin was prime minister - but when push came to shove, Putin was still in charge. Everything was OK. Russians could sleep at night.

And the novel takes time to contemplate the "state of the nation". For example:

...it was as if Russia were a drug addict who received every concoction only after it was perfectly crystallised, maximally potent. Nowhere were Western ideas, Western beliefs, taken more seriously; nowhere were they so passionately implemented...

For me, the memoir structured worked well because it helped me get to know the narrator, and this combination of returning to a changed place alongside views of how a society is affected by an oppressive regime made the whole book compulsive reading. This is the eighth book I have read that has been published by Fitzcarraldo and it feels very different to the other seven, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. This is a thoughtful, though-provoking, sometimes funny novel that talks about two serious topics.

Gumble's Yard says

Keith Gessen was born in Russia of Jewish parents, who emigrated to the US when he was still a child – and is now an author, journalist (specialising in Russia), book-critic, translator and journal editor.

This is his second novel – and comes with by George Saunders and Elif Batuman, authors respectively of the 2017 Booker winner and one of the best books of 2018.

It is published by Fitzcarraldo Editions – one of the leading UK small presses and most notably recent winner of the 2018 Man Booker International Prize with *Flights*. Fitzcarraldo Editions (their words)

specialise in contemporary fiction and long-form essays it focuses on ambitious, imaginative and innovative writing, both in translation and in the English language . Their novels are (my words) distinctively and beautifully styled, with plain, deep blue covers and a "French-flap" style. Fitzcarraldo previously published Kirill Medvedev's *It's No Good* in translation by Gessen.

This book is written in the style of a memoir and although fiction is inspired by some of Gessen's own experiences – living with his elderly Grandmother in Moscow.

The book is narrated in the first person by Andrei Kaplan – who left Moscow with his parents aged 6 in 1981 (exactly like Gessen) and who has struggled to find his way in the US as a Russian literature/history academic – failing to find a tenured teaching or post-graduate position he does low paid on-line teaching. In the later Summer of 2008 he is contacted by his 10-year older brother who has had to flee Russia to some state related problems with one of his business ventures and wants Andrei to go to Moscow to look after their elderly grandmother (an academic who survived the trials of the Communist years only to have much of her remaining wealth taken from her when her second husband's oil explorations are expropriated by the state) and to keep an eye on the next door flat which Dima rents out as an investment.

The book is seemingly set down by Kaplan at a later date reflecting on his time in Moscow over the year or so from 2008 – as the financial crisis strikes first the US but then Russia.

Dima (under financial pressure himself) urges him to return to the US so they can sell the two flats – something Andrei resists as he finds himself increasingly unwilling either to abandon the Russian roots he is rediscovering or the (to him) moving and tragic figure of his Grandmother. Both Moscow and his Grandmother are fundamentally changed from Andrei's childhood memories and cause Andrei to reflect on his assumptions and beliefs, and to think through his loyalties to friends, family, academia and to countries.

Andrei has an idea of using his visit to further his reputation in Russian studies by interviewing and profiling locals and via some pick up ice-hockey he plays finds himself drawn towards a crowd of left wing, literary dissidents who while not communists, believe that the new ills of Russia stem not from a Russian-specific crime and oligarchy led distortion of capitalism but instead from the fundamental inequity and injustice which underpins capitalism – a view which is initially new to Andrei (as a Russian émigré he was fundamentally anti-communist) but which clearly appeals to him as a better explanation of his and his family's lives.

The original inspiration for the book was Gessen's experience of living with his elderly Grandmother in Moscow – and the interactions between Andrei and his grandmother are particularly poignant. She is suffering from age-related dementia - lending a deliberately banal and repetitive tenor to much of their conversations as she often cannot even remember who Andrei is or understand some of the changes she is witnessing, and her distress is regularly underpinned by the loss of her Summer dacha as a result of her husband's difficulties, and the emigration of her only daughter to the US where she then died of cancer (often causing her to say that she has been abandoned by her friends and family – something Andrei finds both heart ending and distressing). Andrei's original hope to gain insights into Communist Russia from his Grandmother are thwarted by her patch memory, but her own sense of the modern Russia's flaws are strongly expressed and when lucid she urges him to leave the "terrible country" before it is too late - a warning which looks more like a prophecy as Andrei's life in Moscow unravels in the last part of the book with lasting consequences not for him but for those he leaves behind when he returns to America.

Overall this is an interesting and easy to absorb novel, presenting a view of the development of Russian society.

Steven Z. says

At a time when Russia, Putin, conspiracy, and collusion dominate the news cycle it is wonderful to escape into a work of fiction that is absorbing, appealing to human emotion on many levels, and sadly, a comment on the reality of Russia today. As useful and engrossing as Keith Gessen's new book *A TERRIBLE COUNTRY* is, it creates the anxiety and frustration that one associates with Putin's Russia. Gessen is a Russian translator of poetry and short stories, but also of Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich's *VOICES FROM CHERNOBYL*. Gessen like his sister Masha Gessen the author of *A MAN WITHOUT A FACE: THE UNLIKELY RISE OF VLADIMIR PUTIN* was born in Russia and raised in the United States, has an affinity for the Russian people who he believes are suffering from the Putin bargain, "you give up your freedoms, I make you rich. Not everyone was rich, but enough people were making do that the system held. And who was I to tell them they were wrong? If they liked Putin, they could have him."

Gessen, like his main character Andrei Kaplan seems to be in a permanent state of semi-exile, somewhat naive, and in search of something-an academic position, a sense of who he really was perhaps. He writes in a somewhat John Updike style as he describes Andrei as a person who cannot seem to achieve the academic success that his peers have attained. He has a PhD in Russian literature, but cannot earn a faculty position at the university level. As a result he earns a living by teaches online courses, communicating through his blog. Since the money is not sufficient to live in New York, and his girlfriend Sarah has just broken up with him he accepts his brother Dima's request to return to Moscow to take care of their aging grandmother. At the same time, Dima left Russia under strange circumstances for London, the reason of which becomes clearer later in the novel.

Upon his arrival in Moscow, Andrei learns that certain promises his brother had made were not true, but he resolves to try and learn as much from his grandmother, Baba Seva Efraimove Gekhtman about the Stalinist era as a basis for a journal article. The scent of Stalinist Russia is put forth through his grandmother who suffers from dementia, much more so than Dima had let on, but despite this affliction the reader is exposed to aspects of Stalinist Russia and how it evolves into Putin's Russia. The same housing crisis that existed during Stalin's regime remains. We witness the uneven distribution of wealth and the Putin kleptocracy. The FSB, much like the KGB in Soviet times seems everywhere among many examples. It is interesting how Gessen uses the location of Baba Seva's apartment, the center of Moscow, close to the Kremlin, Parliament, and FSB headquarters to explain the daily plight of Russians.

The novel takes place in 2008 as Andrei arrives at the time Russian troops are supposedly withdrawing from Georgia. The 2008 financial crash is introduced and one can see how the Russians believe that the effect on Russia's economy is the fault of the United States. Andrei is miserable in this setting and his life seems meaningless. He has no wife or children, he feels helpless in caring for his grandmother, he suffers from a lack of sleep and exercise, constantly searching to play in hockey games, and is forced to deal with the inane comments from students on his online blog.

For Andrei Moscow seems quite boorish as he is rejected by women, fears FSB types, and a bureaucracy that results in long lines for himself and his ailing grandmother. The transition from Stalinist tactics to that of Putin are clearly portrayed as his uncle has lost his life's work as a geophysicist to Russ Oil, a conglomerate run by Putin's cronies. Russ Oil will also reappear as an enemy of Andrei's brother Dima as they create a monopoly for gas station expansion on a new highway. Putin's mastery of the media emerges clearly. "The world may see him as a cold bloodied killer, a ruthless dictator, a grave digger of Russian democracy. But from the Russian perspective, well, he was our cold blooded killer, our ruthless dictator, our gravedigger."

The book begins rather pedantically, and as the story develops the style grows from one of simplicity with little to challenge the reader mentally to a substantive view of Putin's Russia, and the personal crisis that Andrei is experiencing. This is accomplished as the author introduces a number of new characters; hockey goalies, oilmen, academics, and oppositionist writers. However, the most important character remains Baba Seva who embodies the complex nature of Russian politics and society. She lost her country home to capitalism, but received her apartment thanks to her work on a Stalinist propaganda film of course due to the removal of another family from their home. Bab Seva had been a historian at Moscow State University, but as a Jew it appears she lost her position because of Stalin's Doctor's Plot in 1953. Perhaps the best line in the novel is when Andrei refers to living in an apartment so close to the KGB/FSB, it "was like living down the street from Auschwitz."

The question that Gessen asks through a female who rejects Andrei's advances, is his main character really cut out to live in Russia? The remark haunts Andrei as he tries to fit in somewhere in Russian society. It seems he does so finally when he catches on to a losing hockey teams and plays games six nights a week. More importantly he will make friends on the team. Those friendships and the return of his brother Dima shift the focus of the story.

Andrei will finally acquire a subject to write a paper and publish, one of his motivating goals upon returning to Moscow. The subject is in the form of Sergei an intellectual who has a theory concerning the development of capitalism in Russia and its links to Putin's kleptocracy. Andrei hopes an article might lead to an academic position. He develops a strong friendship with Sergei, in addition to beginning a relationship with Yulia, another member of "October," a small opposition group to Putin that Andrei has become part of.

Russia is a complicated topic. But Gessen combines sharp analysis with Updike type writing style. This approach belies a deep knowledge of Russian history and literature. The book is an important contribution as it allows its reader insights and a glimpse into a country that is very impactful for America and the world. Election hacking has been occurring in the United States and Europe for at least a decade, as have killings of people who oppose Putin outside Russia, murderous actions in Syria, and the list goes on and on. What is clear is that the United States must pay close attention to Putin's Russia, because their machinations are not going to end (particularly with the current administration in power) and we as a society must come to grips with that fact and pressure our government to take action to mitigate what has and will continue to occur. Gessen's contribution to this task is a wonderful novel that describes Russia as a country that constantly wore down its people as they went along with their daily pursuits.

Fikayo Adebolajo says

When I stumbled on this book, reading the description and summary, I made the purchase with trepidation, (it just seemed to much of a high praise for a name I've never even heard).

Now that I've completed it I just might have found myself a new favorite author in Keith Gessen.

Not only is the prose for this work solid, it is a captivating and relatable story written with the perfect dose of humor.

As a foreign national hosted by another country, It's nice to know there are some universal sentiments and experiences foreign nationals share no matter what their country of origin or the host country is.

The author also managed to share some really insightful views on economies and political landscapes (through some of the character's scope) and its effect on people lives, the educational system and many

more. I really think this is a great read.

I really enjoyed it!

Worth your time and bucks?

♥Marie Gentilcore says

I loved this book! It's been nearly a week since I finished and I miss it still and wish there was more. It is a novel but it reads like a memoir. It starts off with Andrei coming back to Moscow to take care of his grandmother while his older brother is out of the country. Andrei was born in Russia but immigrated to the US when he was a child and has been living there for the past twenty years or so. The story takes place in 2008 and I feel like I really got to know Putin's Russia along with Andrei as he learns to navigate his way around. I really liked his grandmother too, she was a hoot, a really fun character to read. Must read more by Mr. Gessen.

Liz says

Andrei emigrated with his parents from Russia at the age of six. Now, he's 33 and returning to Moscow to take care of his 89 year old grandmother, who's suffering from some dementia. And who's lonely because all her friends are dead. The book takes you to 2008 Moscow. You feel like you're there and Geisel does a good job of making you feel the time and place. I did feel I got a better understanding of Russian "capitalism".

This is a grim book. And slow moving. Flashes of brilliance, like when it discusses what the switch from communism to capitalism has met for the average person or how those folks manage to live in Moscow with little money. Then, long dry patches when it was all I could do to keep reading. The ending shows how little Andrei still understands Russia, despite living there for a year.

The relationship between Andrei and his grandmother is done well, beautifully articulating the slow descent of someone into dementia.

So, I'm torn with how to rate this book. Settling on a three star, which doesn't really reflect the love/hate relationship I had with this book.

My thanks to netgalley and Viking for an advance copy of this book.

Danielle Tremblay says

A man returns to Moscow to take care of his grandmother and discovers Putin's Russia, its new prosperity and its old problems.

I have not read Gessen's previous novel, but it seems that the author began this one where he finished the

previous one, in 2008, and that the main character, Andrei Kaplan, has a certain something of the sometimes unpleasant "lost boys" of his first novel.

After eight years of graduate studies and a doctorate in "Russian Literature and Modernity," Andrei, 33, is struggling to live in New York with a meager salary for online education. So when his older brother calls him to tell that he must leave Moscow, his business plans have brought him legal trouble, he asks Andrei to come and take care of their 89-year-old grandmother Baba Seva. This seems like a promising alternative that could even strengthen his resume. He begins his trip to Russia, wanting to pay special attention to his grandmother, who is physically healthy but suffers from "middle-grade dementia". He wants to listen to her stories of Stalinist Russia, because he thinks it will be good for his career. But he soon realizes that it will not happen because she remembers nothing of it. And he came to understand that it was not the kind of attention she needed or wanted anyway.

As Andrei settles into his daily routine, he rediscovers his past and learns about his brother and parents and the new Moscow. He is also struck by how much everything in Moscow has changed since his last visit, several years earlier; especially the wealth he sees everywhere in the city. He is then accepted by a group of socialists who show him where he can find what he needs or wants at lower costs. They discuss together Putin's form of capitalism and the "market's dictatorship". They organize political demonstrations and share a strange nostalgia for the Soviet era. All this brings Andrei away from his grandmother more and more often.

Small crises occur throughout the novel, but nothing as scary as what happens in the last 30 pages. What leads Andrei to say that as important as family ties are for us, there is only little we can do for our loved ones. We can't spare them much suffering or prevent them from dying. All we can do is try to get close to them from time to time. The current events also make him wonder how prosperity and political violence can coexist. And he comes to the conclusion that they are doing very well together, as they have always done.

Gessen's writing is usually straightforward and well suited to his tongue-in-cheek humour. His prose can sometimes seem repetitive, but it sadly reflects Baba Seva's deteriorating state of health, who is losing her hearing and memory. So she and Andrei are forced into repetitive exchanges. But I think that they show a literary quality, because they make me think of a kind of modernist theatre: the same dialogue each time, but in a slightly different context or on a different note, with a certain dose of irritation from the protagonist.

The sober style of the author suits the unremarkable action and the often banal existence of Andrei; which helps to highlight the real difficulties and dangers that other people face. Gessen was born in Moscow and lived part of his childhood there. It seems obvious that this story is semi-autobiographical. The themes are relevant, interesting and sometimes touching. The author expresses affectionate sympathy for the smallest actors in the historical and political scene.

Anyone interested in the way of life and daily living of Russians will find in this novel what they are looking for.

Thanks to Goodreads giveaways for a hardcopy of this book.
