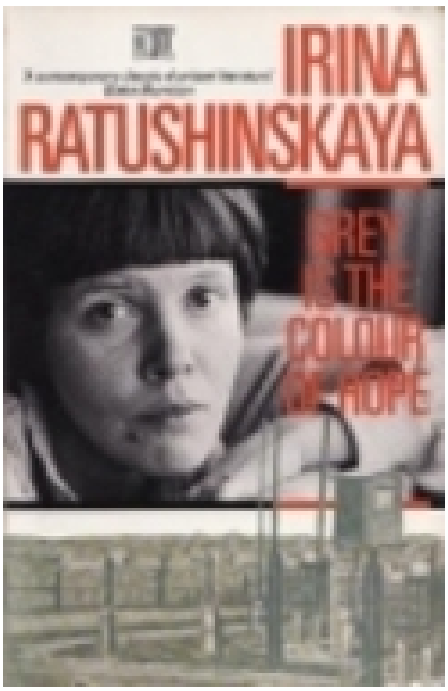

Grey is the Color of Hope

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The gulag memoirs of a brave woman, a distinguished dissident and poet--Ratushinskaya gives her account of the four years she spent in a "strict regime" labor camp at Barashevo, where she endured several types of abuse.

Grey is the Color of Hope Details

Date	:	Published October 23rd 1989 by Vintage (first published 1988)
ISBN	:	9780679724476
Author	:	Irina Ratushinskaya , ????? ???????????
Format	:	Paperback 355 pages
Genre	:	Cultural, Russia, Nonfiction, History, Autobiography, Memoir, Biography, Poetry

From Reader Review Grey is the Color of Hope for online ebook

Meredith Holley says

The relationship between the Russian language and the English language is one of the most compelling proofs that the universe has a sense of humor (and horror). That, democracy, and snuggies. Grey is the Color of Hope is tragic and compelling enough as a story that saying I didn't like it would be like saying I hate babies or ice cream or what have you. Really, how can you find fault with a prison-camp memoir? "Well, if *I* was in a prison camp, *I* would have written something with more sex appeal"? Honestly, though, the translation was so god-awful that it really was slightly painful to read. My Russian is *uzhasno* anymore, but I wondered part way through if I wouldn't do better with a dictionary and the original language text. Unfortunately, I couldn't find the Russian version anywhere (due to a Soviet plot, I'm sure. . . No not really. . . Well, maybe).

Aside from the already daunting challenge of translating everyday Russian into readable English, prison slang was a big part of communicating the feel of Irina Ratushinskaya's experience in Soviet “reeducation” camps. Alyona Kojevnikov, who translated the version of Grey is the Color of Hope that I read (which is actually the only version that exists, as far as I know) did not do a stellar job at this. For example, early on Ratushinskaya relates a few of the common prison terms, one of which was translated as "warmer". Ratushinskaya defines this as *“the acquisition of something not officially permitted, such as [the:] exchange of sweets for cigarettes. The first, obvious interpretation strikes me immediately – something to warm the heart”* (p. 11). I can get past the use of the word “sweets” by thinking of it as just a word I would never use (unless, of course, I was disguised as an evil witch and trying to lure some unsuspecting kids into my gingerbread house – and even then I would probably say “sweeties”), and by accepting that maybe in some other English-speaking city someone else might use it. The translation of “warmer”, though, was disappointing. I could only imagine that this was one of those charming Russian words that end in *nik*, like *tyeplovnik* or something else that sounds really fun. “Warmer” doesn't really convey the sense of usefulness that a word ending in *nik* has, and also it’s stupid. No badass American prisoner would use the word “warmer”. I admit that it would take some poetic license to come up with a better word that conveys that meaning in English, but come on, Alyona Kojevnikov! Can you stop taking everything so literally, or do I need to call Seamus Heaney in to replace you? (Always time for a Beowulf joke, right?)

That brings up the other point that Ratushinskaya is a poet, and I’m willing to believe that her poetry is touching or beautiful, though the translation did nothing to reveal that. Clearly, the problem is that English is Ms. Kojevnikov’s second language, and translating from a native language to a second language awkward. So much connotation isn’t obvious. Still . . . at one point she translated what I assume was the Russian word *“Klass!”*, which means “Cool” in English, to “Class!”, which doesn’t mean anything, unless you are in a school. No excuse.

Other than the translation problem, this is just a pretty outrageous story. Ratushinskaya was pulled from her home by the KGB for writing poetry and generally supporting human rights, and then she basically established a new life with the other political prisoners in her camp. She gives detailed descriptions of detention and torture practices in the Soviet prisons, and I, of course, have respect for memoirs of this nature. In many ways, I believe, she wrote this as a letter to the West, to reveal the inhumanity of the Soviet government, and I would say that she is successful in what she was trying to accomplish. I wouldn’t necessarily recommend this book, and it is definitely not a light weekend read, but I’m not sad that I read it either. I would still like to own a copy in the original Russian.

Jenny Yates says

It’s not a comfortable book, but it is worth reading. This is the memoir of a “zek”, an inmate in a Soviet prison camp. Irina Ratushinskaya is a poet and human rights activist who ends up in the Small Zone, with a small group of other political prisoners. She is defiant, astute, funny, and infinitely courageous, as she details the survival techniques of the group, and the constant attempts of the KGB to break their spirits.

Madeline Moss says

"This is my first visit to the hospital of ZhKh-385/3. That's the official designation of our camp. What do the letters 'zh' and 'kh' stand for? Why, the Russian words for 'Railway Property'. That's because, officially, there are no concentration camps in the USSR! And the #385? Well, the authorities must keep count of the non-existent camps, mustn't they? Our camp was not the last on the Mordovian list." 199

Maureen E says

The autobiography of a Russian poet, who for her poetry was sent to a political prison inside a prison camp during the 1980s. This is a fascinating story which gives a real glimpse into the Soviet Union just before and during Gorbachev. Highly recommended for more mature readers.

Denise says

This is one of the few school assigned books I've felt a desire to read again and again. Partly responsible for the inspiration behind my painting, Grey.

Joshua says

Few people are excited by the prospect of reading a memoir of an interment camp of gulag; and as you might expect, this one is full of suffering, privation, humilation, and degradation. But it's also full of beauty, laughter, and a sinister wit that exposes the fraud of a government that believes in torture as a way of life. Ratushinskaya is a poet with the insight of Shakespeare: she can quickly expose a character to his or her bare essentials, and bring out the comedic gold in double-speak and blundering officialdom. She's also able to make us feel and experience the isolation these prisoners feel in the barren bleakness of their camps, as well as the deep, superhuman friendship they forge together through the simplest (yet most profound) acts of kindness. For example, though they have everything meaningful stolen from them by the guards, they find ways to celebrate birthdays, make "cakes," and make presents--though these presents will inevitably get stolen or destroyed.

She also presents a world of strict values and morals: the prisoners don't turn on each other or revert into a "every man/woman for themselves" mentality. Quite the contrary--the women go on prolonged hunger strikes to protest injustices even though each one brings them to the very edge of death, and the certain promise of further torture and humiliation. They're also full of the deepest compassion when the unthinkable happens, and a longed-for visit with a loved one (they get perhaps one a year) is called off at the last minute for a "camp violation." One of the most beautiful passages in the book is when the author gets an hour-long visit with her husband (with a camp chaperone sitting right beside them), and how they exchange words and gestures in a shared, private language. Yet even the guard breaks down in tears and allows them to share a taboo embrace--the last they will experience for years.

Ultimately, this is a story of hope where there is no hope, and all of the prisoners can expect to die, or at best be forgotten by the mindless, mechanical officialdom (and indeed, they often forget who's alive or dead, who's sick or well, or when a sentence begins or end). This could easily be a Kafkaesque narrative, but instead it becomes the memoir Jane Austen might have written had she been born in Soviet Russia and ineviably fell afoul of the Party (as she certainly would have!). I was inspired by this narrative on every page and learned so much from the author's prose poetry and simple, yet clear way of viewing the chasm between sham and morality.

Alwen says

Ratushinskaya and the relationship she forges between art, personal ethics, faith, and work for social justice affected me profoundly when I read her in high school. She is still one of my heroes, foundational for me in how I grew to view the world and believe in the possibility of beauty and hope even in the midst of profound horror.

Cheryth says

Grey is the Color of Hope stands out as one of the most searingly honest depiction of humanity I've ever read. Irina Ratushinskaya's memoir unpretentiously recounts her time served as a political prisoner in a Soviet labor camp for women. A human rights activist and poet, Irina was convicted of, " agitation carried on for the purpose of subverting or weakening the Soviet regime," and in 1983 was sentenced to seven years of labor camp and five years internal exile.
The women of the Zone (the section of camp reserved for "Politicals") haunted me with their determination, their grace, their courage. Routinely, they faced physical and psychological torture through deprivation of food, warmth, and, when in solitary confinement- or SHIZO, as the book calls it- human companionship. And they faced it all with humor intact- I laughed aloud nearly every chapter. To their captors, who wielded the power to deny the women of the Zone almost anything, including medical care and their precious, infrequent meetings with loved ones, the Politicals were downright sassy. They refused to observe any regulations or orders they found degrading and ridiculous, but to reasonable requests they always complied.
Grey is the Color of Hope celebrates human dignity, and not just that of the incredible, highly educated political prisoners, but also of the common criminals of the surrounding zones who they grew to know and love, and from whom they received unexpected, unwavering support. Irina never generalized, never reduced her captors to unthinking brutes, never glorified her fellow inmates as angels, but respected the complexity of each person.
I could write forever about these women, tell of their hardships, their tolerance, their gritty, everyday integrity. But their story has already been told- read it.

Kate says

This is a very moving book about human courage in the face of the life-draining horrors of torture and abuse suffered by a prisoner of conscience. Eventually Ratushinskaya came to the US and taught at Northwestern University. Out of print now, but worth reading if you find it in a used book shop somewhere.

Pam says

This is a fascinating account of the life of Irina Ratushinskaya, a political prisoner in a Soviet prison camp in the 80's. She is sent there because of her “anti-Soviet” activity, which is to say that she was a poet who wrote about things of a suspect nature, like love and religion. The book is interesting not only because Ratushinskaya's stories are intriguing, but also because it gives the reader a sense of what life was like at that time in the Soviet Union for someone who may not have whole-heartedly agreed with the system, (Gorbachev's perestroika policies didn't seem to extend into Soviet prison camps).

This is definitely a book I'd read again.

Eva Arrhenius says

Found it so disturbing in the beginning that I had a hard time to keep on reading and had to escape into another book. The solidarity, friendships and little things turned things and gave hope. Very well told the story will stay with me.

Janet says

A gulag memoir of Ratushinskaya's seven years in the Special Zone for women politicals in a camp in Mordovia. A poet and human rights advocate, she portrays a life of conviction and integrity which is inspiring in any setting. Has given me much thought about the whole issue of integrity, the compromises we make to 'get along,' and what happens when someone so values her integrity, that she sees herself as free because she makes her own decisions and controls her choices, even when in a special lockdown section of a Gulag camp. It brings up questions of 'what is freedom?' and the nature of compromise, that came as a very interesting followup to 'The Quiet American' by Graham Greene. I found the book more thought-provoking than absorbing after a while, however--I find fiction shapes experience to bring out more meaning. As a character, Ratushinskaya is pretty one-note. But four stars for its ability to make you question your own integrity level, the choices you regularly make. One of the major reasons for reading.

Brooke says

So I was taking a Russian history class in college and we had to choose three books to read and write a paper about each. I randomly chose this book off of the list of 100 works. I had no idea what was in store for me.

This book chronicles the stay in a Russian prison of the author who was a poet in the Soviet Union. It was shocking the things they endure. I mean you know its going to be bad because it was a Soviet prison but it really just shocked my 21 year old brain. I would highly, highly recommend this book. I feel like she tells a story that really was not told by many. It is out of print but if you can find it at a library or through a used book source you won't regret it. Now this is not a book to pick up if you want light reading but the discomfort of reading it was worth it.

Kris says

Wow. It's so good nothing I write will do it justice, so I'm stealing a reviewer's description. "As a [Soviet] camp memoir Ratushinskaya's book gives complete satisfaction. It is uncommonly well written...The central figure is intelligent, witty, self-deprecatory, genuinely compassionate toward her fellow sufferers." New Republic

"Intensely lyrical and acutely observed, Grey is the color of Hope, is Irina Tatushinskaya's account of the four years she spent in a strict regime labor camp at Barasheve, where she endured sub-zero temperatures, malnutrition, and physical abuse in the "Small Zone", an enclave for political prisioners. With haunting eloquence, she describes the complexities of the relationships between prisoners and their guards and the KGB's viritual power of life and death over those in the camps." Book jacket

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Benino says

Grey is the Colour of Hope is a resolute and defiant claim for basic human rights, which is also uncompromising in its belief in human kindness. Ratushinskaya's account returns to the zone of her 1980s internment in a Mordovian prison camp, where the pettiness and stupidity of the camp guards and informers fall away in comparison with the strength found amongst fellow political prisoners. This work testifies to the lives of the individual women who stood and striked together, celebrating their small acts of love, resistance, and principled solidarity, and to the other millions of 'zeks' deported, interned, or enslaved as within the Soviet penal system. A thoroughly inspiring read.
