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An intriguing love and espionage story set in Moscow in the late 1970s, in the midst of the Cold War.

Twenty-nine-year-old Anna Viktorovna lives in Moscow with her young son and her father, a once popular and respected poet who has fallen into disgrace because of his dissident views. Her husband, a junior officer in the Red Army, is on active duty and living seven time zones away. Anna struggles gamely through her difficult existence, doing the best she can amidst the long lines, bureaucratic inferno, and corruption and incompetence of the police state. When she meets and makes an impression on a powerful Soviet official—Alexey Bulgyakov—her life begins to look a little brighter. Alexey is married and nearly twice her age, but he turns out to be a man of infinite patience and forbearance, and gradually a strange but solid bond grows between them. Though Anna still loves her mostly absent husband and harbors no illusions about the future, she and Alexey become lovers.

Soon Anna and Alexey's burgeoning romance is irrevocably threatened when a KGB colonel forces Anna to spy on Alexey, who is suspected of disloyalty to the state. Though Anna loathes the notion of double-crossing the man she has come to love, when her family is threatened she must comply. But Anna isn't the only character playing a double game.

With bravura storytelling, stunning authenticity, and complex yet sympathetic characterizations, *The Russian Affair* depicts a love that struggles to survive against all odds and despite its many-layered deceptions.

The Russian Affair Details

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From Reader Review The Russian Affair for online ebook

Andi says

This book takes place during the Cold War in 1970. Anna is an artist and lives with her ill son. The only bright spot in her life is the affair that she has with Alexey, however their relationship begins to affect his position in the KGB. She then decides to try and mend things with her husband, and that doesn't work out.

The book is filled with all kinds of twists and turns; it leaves you on the edge of your seat. I wanted to see Anna find happiness, yet it's Russia and the Cold War, I'm not sure anyone could find true happiness there and in that time period. Recommended!

Paul Pessolano says

“The Russian Affair” by Michael Wallner, published by Nan A. Talese.

Category – Fiction/Literature

“The Russia Affair” may well be classified as Fiction/Literature but has enough romance and mystery in it to satisfy just about any reader.

The story takes place in Moscow during the Cold War and Anna Viktorovna is about to depart on a journey that will put her entire life in jeopardy.

Anna is married to a junior officer in the Red Army and they have a young son, Petya, who has a medical problem. Anna works as a common laborer on a building project and becomes involved in the life of the Deputy Minister for Research Planning. This involvement grows into an affair that sees Anna receiving special privileges for herself and her son. Petya is now able to see a qualified doctor thanks to her involvement with the Deputy Minister.

Anna's husband is convinced to take a position in Siberia that will assure his advancement in the Army and a pay raise. He is unable to take Anna and Petya with him, but he has been promised that he can return to Moscow in a year.

Anna finds her involvement with the Deputy Minister has now come to the attention of the KGB. She finds herself an unwilling agent of the KGB, but discovers that spying in Russia is a very convoluted game.

While all of this is going on her husband has fallen in love with a doctor in Siberia and is contemplating divorcing Anna.

Anna is torn between her love for her husband and the Deputy Minister, who is now under suspicion of being disloyal to Mother Russia.

The book ends with everyone making decisions that affect their lives and those around them.

A sentence in the book gives the reader an idea of the deceit that was part of Russian life at this time, “Kamarovsky distrusts Bulyagkov, Bulyagkov deceives Kamarovsky, Lyushim betrays the Ministry”, and Anna is involved with each and every one of them.

Judy says

Growing up with the fear of the Russians (I remember when it was announced on the radio that Stalin had died and I was even more afraid thinking that his ghost might get me) and now seeing how the U.S. is changing to become more Soviet-like in its distribution of wealth and "equality", it was informative to read this "romantic" novel translated from German.

The novel exposes us to the Russian hierarchy and its privileges and the games played in espionage at all levels. This book, for me, was flawlessly written. The story, characters, and settings were all well crafted and believable. Most of the book takes place in Moscow, but there are a few chapters in Siberia and I sure could feel the bleakness and penetrating cold of the place. There are love stories on all levels, too....mother/father/son; wife/husband; grandfather/grandson; daughter/father and then there were the affairs of heart.

It was refreshing to read a book where the adversaries weren't Russian/American. It was a complex story about being a non-Russian from a Russian territory and being a Russian living in Moscow.

Recommend.

Jill says

An interesting view of life in the Soviet Union when everyday people were asked to spy on each other and access to medical treatment and accommodation depended on power and status. Anna is a house painter who becomes embroiled in an affair with a high ranking bureaucrat, attracted initially by the perks this brings and then by the man himself. As the story unfolds we realize she is being manipulated by both her lover and the KGB in a rather contrived plot with significant holes. Interesting for the descriptions of everyday life in Moscow.

Mary (BookHounds) says

spoiler alert

Anna, a house painter, lives with her ill son and her former poet, now alcoholic father barely making ends meet since her husband is mostly absent while away in the army. The story takes place during the Cold War in the 1970's and describes the dismal and bleak existence that Anna must endure. The only bright spot in her life is her affair with Alexey, a married man, twice her age. The KGB threaten the relationship by forcing Anna to spy on him. Alexey, a true player in espionage feeds Anna false information to put the KGB off the track while he plans to defect. Anna confesses to Alexey her double dealing and dashes any hope of continuing the relationship. She then tries to mend her relationship with her husband, but receives a letter

from him that he is in love with another woman. Oh, but wait! Anna may be able to redeem herself with Alexey -- you will have to read the book to see if that works out. Whew!

There are lots of twists and turns getting to the end of this book and it is filled with the dense machinations of Cold War politics and very descriptive. The book did have a sort of thrilling part to it and I wondered whether Anna would finally be happy, but I still got the sense that in Russia during this time period, the chance that anyone could possibly be happy under the dire circumstance of mistrust and poverty that are every day life were pretty small. If you like stories about the Cold War, this is a nice peak inside that time period with a little romance thrown in.

Martin Grayson says

Fairly standard espionage/spy novel (not really a mystery or "thriller"). What makes it quite interesting is that it is an excellent view of the Russian "state security" apparatus. The entire story takes place within Russia, the characters all Russians trying to manipulate and control other Russians in high places.

Superb descriptions of day to day Russia itself (including travel within the country, the cold, the housing situation, medical care, even the political meaning of certain cars on the street, etc.) especially the hinterlands.

First 2/3 roll along and then the author can't figure out how to end the thing, or keep the suspense at a high level so it rather falls apart.

Onna says

I thought this would be a good read. Oh it wasn't. I read this over a span of two weeks. It doesn't take me long to read at all, but this book was so horrible, I could only read it a little bit at a time. Towards the middle I thought, hmm this is getting good, and then that quickly changed again.

One of the few books I wish I never picked up. The plot was all over the place. The characters were even worse. First time I didn't like the main character besides in Twilight. Which is saying something.

Dawn says

This was on the New Fiction shelf at the library, looked interesting, and fit in with my recent kick for Russian related books so I gave it a try.

It's not bad exactly, yet neither would I consider it good, exactly. Sort of blah.

It's the story of a Russian woman whose Father is a renowned poet that has come under the scrutiny of the government. She has a small son with unexplained health issues and a husband who is in the Russian military. By chance she meets a high ranking government official who becomes intrigued with her and they begin an affair. When she is summoned to a meeting with a mysterious official of the KGB and instructed that it would be in her and her families best interest if she agrees to spy on her lover for them, she has little choice but to do as they want. In return, she receives special favors - the best doctor for her son, an end to the inquiry into her Father's purpose and loyalty in his poetry as well as a book deal for his new work, and an isolated assignment far away for her husband.

But as events progress, she slowly comes to realize that her lover is hiding something from her and her

husband falls in love with a female surgeon he meets in his far-flung post. In order to straighten out the complicated puzzle her life has become she will need to determine who she can trust and what it is she truly wants out of life.

There are long passages of detail, dry narrative and yawn-worthy dialogue. It is a story that is certainly intelligent and well-done, if not always so entertaining. Some will love it, some will not finish it, some, like me will finish but kind of wish they'd moved on to a better read.

Kaye says

2.5*

Dorothy says

If you judge this book by its cover you would probably think it was a spy/ love story and you would be right. The story takes place during 1970's at the height of the cold war.

Life in Russia for Anna is cold and dreary existence. Anna meets Alexey and the two eventually become lover. Once the KGB finds out Anna is put in a position where she must become a spy for them. I think the book does a wonderful job of portraying life in the Soviet Union during the cold war. The spying part also seems very realistic not like it is often portrayed in many books and movies. The book was a slow but interesting read.

Lesley says

In Michael Wallner's "The Russian Affair," nicely translated from the German by John Cullen, twenty-seven year old Anna Tsazukhina lives in her father's apartment with her husband, Leonid, an army officer, and their little boy, Petya. Stalin is long dead and Kosygin shares power with Brezhnev. Five Year Plans are still being made, the KGB is feared, and Soviet citizens are expected to forgo their personal needs for the good of the state. Government leaders insist that their land is Utopia, but the reality falls far short of this ideal.

Anna's life is stressful. She works as a house painter and shops, cooks, and cleans when she gets home. Petya is often ill and has difficulty breathing; he desperately needs a good doctor to diagnose and treat his condition. Anna's father, Viktor Ipalyevich Tsazukhin, is a cantankerous but good-hearted individual who was a celebrated poet at one time. He now leads a fairly secluded life, and misses the acclaim of bygone days. Adding to her worries, Anna's marriage is falling apart; whatever passion she and her husband once shared is gone.

Everything changes when Anna meets the Deputy Minister for Research Planning, Alexey Maximovich Bulyagkov. Although he is married, somewhat portly, and much older than she is, Alexey finds Anna appealing and arranges to meet with her surreptitiously. Their relationship complicates Anna's life tremendously. Although she is not dishonest by nature, she is willing to live a double life in order to procure better medical care for Petya and a higher standard of living for her family. Her desires are not unreasonable: "a good education for her son, her own apartment, and perhaps, eventually, a car."

Wallner has written a powerful and evocative work of historical fiction that recreates life in the Soviet Union in the early seventies. Everyone had to monitor his or her words and deeds, since counterrevolutionaries were subject to arrest and severe punishment. "The Russian Affair" is a critique of totalitarianism, with its stranglehold on a citizenry whose choices were limited unless they had the proper credentials and connections. There was a huge chasm between the privileged elite and those who struggled to make a living.

This is a finely tuned work of fiction in which Wallner goes back and forth in time, scrutinizing his characters' innermost thoughts and revealing their regrets, anxieties, and hopes for a better future. Anna, Leonid, and Alexey must make difficult choices that will have irrevocable consequences. Michael Wallner offers an insightful and engrossing portrait of men and women who yearn for the privileges most of us take for granted--privacy, freedom, personal gratification, and love. "The Russian Affair" is an engrossing, moving, and thought-provoking book that shows how much people are willing to risk in order to fulfill their dreams.

Debi says

(NEWER) Before I left for vacation I noticed that this book was due at the library. Rather than bring it along and pay the small late fee, I chose to return it. I guess that's saying something about it. It was okay as it went along...Anna, the main character had an affair with a member of the Russian Ministry. Her husband knew about it and chose to ignore it. She then was approached by some individuals to relay information to them on this Ministry dude. She became a spy. Sounds interesting but it sort of just moved along at a regular pace. Anna was an interesting character, but it lacked any spark. The part where her husband gets stationed in some remote part of Russia was a bit more exciting, but it was only one chapter. We couldn't really get to know him very well. So, maybe I would have finished it if it wasn't overdue, ha ha, but I wasn't dying to read this each night. It started to feel like a bit of a chore.

(OLDER)I just started this book in what I will call my "Russian Series" in preparation for my trip to Moscow in October. So far, this book is pretty good, but I'm not very far into it. I like the main character so far, but I'm only on page 65 and they're still setting up the plot and the rest of the characters. Some of the Russian names are a bit confusing and I had to flip back once or twice, but I keep reaching for the book when I have down time (hahahahaha) so that's a good sign.

Daisy says

5 stars for atmosphere, 3 for plot, 3.95 for characters.

It's Moscow in the 1970s and Anna is a proud, relatively content housepainter. She's drawn into an affair which takes sort of expected turns, but she carries on naively, almost ignorantly. She's an idealist and supposes this is what it takes if you need the little extras to make your father happy and your son healthy.

The pace drags at times, especially in the last quarter of the book. But the characters speak for themselves as the tone of the book is less critical than many of the other novels I've read about this era. As a whole, I think it could be more focused, tighter, but all the tangents are interesting to any Sovietophile. It's the same era as Gorky Park and I won't give anything away when I say there are spies in this book, but it's by no means a thriller. It's perceptive and the Soviet life details are interesting even if you read a lot about this subject.

"In most cases, the truth hurts. It can only benefit the person who tells it." p. 168 (Ah, if you read this, see if that pans out...)

Did anybody gaze at the red star on the top of the tower or the flag flying over the Kremlin and not feel called upon to do everything he could to ensure that what those symbols stood for would become reality? At that moment, in the shadow of the brightly illuminated walls bordering Red Square, Anna would have given anything to have been one of the early revolutionaries, one of those who had made their way there in the old days to hear the speeches and see the personages, the builders of the new state founded on the principles of a brilliant theory. p. 253

In Yakutsk: *"People have died just from breathing. The moisture in their breath turns to ice, they swallow it, and it chokes them," the woman said. She poured him some tea. "Where did you come here from?"* p. 216

Felice says

The Russian Affair is about affairs of the heart and the affairs of state. It's the story of Anna Tsazukhina and Russia in the 1970's. Anna is a twenty-nine year old house painter, the caretaker of her father who was once a respected poet but is now just another dissident artist, a loving wife and mother to Petya. Her husband, Leonid, is in the Red Army. The separations brought on by his service have made him a somewhat shadowy but still beloved presence in her life. Bureaucracy and Do Without fill up what moments of her life aren't spent working, caring for her family and in standing in line. She is in line for food, for medical care for her son, for jobs, lines to find out what line to be in, endless lines. Daydreams are her constant companion while in line. Anna fantasies about having a larger apartment, the parts needed to fix a fawcett, more food, a less spartan life.

Anna catches the eye of Alexey Bulyagkov a minister in science research. A smooth dinner leads to gifts and gifts lead to an affair. Alexey is decades older than Anna and successful in ways that Anna or her husband couldn't be in a hundred years. But hey this is Brezhnev's Soviet Union and soon the KGB shows up. Anna is recruited to spy on Alexey. She is a patriot and if the state needs her to do this to be reassured that Alexey is also a good citizen then she can do it. These are the things that the KGB does to justify their paychecks and kickbacks, right? It turns out that the KGB can be even more seductive than Alexey. They offer much greater gifts. The perks that go along with spying bring a full stomach and medical care for Petya, the reinstatement of her Father's reputation and a level of luxury to Anna's life that she has never known. Living a double life proves to be more difficult than Anna expected. The new found prosperity is wonderful. Alexey is wonderful. Living a double life? Less than wonderful and quite costly.

The Russian Affair is a different kind of spy novel. The author, Michael Wallner has ignored most of the usual espionage trappings in this novel. There are no breakneck chases, microfilm, meetings with handlers, state secrets aren't bandied about between generals and arms dealers. There are not cliffhangers every five pages. Wallner has written us a compelling study of a woman whose indiscretion brought her into a world that put herself and her family in great jeopardy. Anna isn't magically, unrealistically transformed into Mata Hari after the KGB comes to call nor does she become a martyr to justice. Wallner keeps her true to her upbringing, her experience and her time. The story of Anna's choices, of personal and political corruption and the ceaseless toil of life as a have-not in 1970's Moscow come together to make their own unique version of an action packed spy story.

Jessica at Book Sake says

Maybe it was because the novel was not originally written in English, or maybe because the spy tales were realistically mundane, or maybe I just didn't get it but any way I looked at it *The Russian Affair* wasn't my cup of tea. Not really knowing what life is like in a communist country I don't know that I could really relate to the main characters and their lives, because I live in Florida where it is sunny and warm, and they go to Siberia (by choice) where it is negative 60 degrees on a regular basis, and a lot of the book describes the extreme weather at length, which was nice in the beginning but got old by chapter 4.

I also haven't really been able to pin down the time period in which the novel takes place. I know there is still KGB according to the book, so is this before the USSR became Russia or afterwards? The spying is predictable, and the affairs are somewhat boring, the most exciting part of the book is when the grandfather gets his poems published and has a party and gets so drunk that he forgets his day to day misery. Anna, the main character wants to be strong, but really stays obedient to her country and "Comrades", making her somewhat annoying and despised by this reader after I finished her story. While the typically spy and espionage novels may be over the top, I think I prefer the excitement of those stories to this depressing kind any day of the week.

Reviewed by Gabi for Book Sake. <http://booksake.blogspot.com>
