



## The Sky Unwashed

*Irene Zabytko*

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Marusia, in her seventies, is the matriarch of the Petrenko family. She has lived and worked all her life in Starylis, a tiny town in rural Ukraine. Starylis is a place where families still live in the ancient thatched-roof cottages that have been their homes for generations. It's a place where everyone grows their own vegetables, where the old women (the babas) sweep the church steps daily and bake bread in outdoor communal clay ovens. It's a place where everyone knows everyone else, and everyone else's business. It's a little town just down the road from Chernobyl.

On April 26, 1986, the lives of Marusia, her family, and her townspeople change forever.

The air begins to taste strange, the workers don't come home from their shifts at the nearby power plant. Eventually the Soviet government orders a mandatory and permanent evacuation. But less than a year after the accident, a handful of elderly women - the first of whom is Marusia - defy the government prohibition and return, one by one, to their now deserted town. Despite their differences and their losses, they band together for survival, companionship, and to confront the Soviet officials responsible for their fate.

This is a tale of ordinary citizens who, when faced with extraordinary circumstances, become the most unexpected heroes. Inspired by a true incident and transformed by the talents of a remarkable young writer, *The Sky Unwashed* is a simple story told with gentle humor that redefines our notions of home and community.

## **The Sky Unwashed Details**

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Author : Irene Zabytko

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## **From Reader Review The Sky Unwashed for online ebook**

### **Ann says**

I know a book is good when I immediately want to Google it and learn more about the subject matter. As we start looking at nuclear power to solve out energy needs, this book becomes a must read.

"The Sky Unwashed" brought back memories of Chernobyl, the horrible fate that awaited the residents and the horrific response of the government. It follows the story of an elderly woman who loses her only son to radiation sickness, then enables her daughter-in-law and grandchildren to escape. Then she does the most amazing thing. She returns to the only home she has ever known even though it is an abandoned toxic dump. She rings the church bell daily and waits for her neighbors to return. They slowly do return to die on their native soil.

A beautifully written book and a lesson for all of us. I own this book and would be glad to lend it.

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### **Lavon says**

This was an interesting fictional read about a small village near Chernobyl and the aftermath of the explosion at the nuclear plant there in 1986. It centered around a family and the matriarch of the family that eventually moved back to her village after the evacuation because that was the only place she had ever known. It was appalling how the Soviet government treated all the people affected by the Chernobyl fall out. What amazed me the most was that it I had not known this story takes place in the 80's I would have assumed it was set in a much earlier time period. The village people were so poor and sheltered by the Soviet government I thought there was no way this was a modern day story. A really interesting read about a piece of history we are all familiar with, but do not truly know very much about.

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### **Jenny (Reading Envy) says**

This is not the cheeriest book, but takes a look at the daily lives of people living in a small town where most of the people of working age work at Chernobyl. When the disaster occurs, they aren't given any information and have to figure out what to do. I liked the older female characters a lot (they have attitudes) and was not surprised to see them moving back home despite not feeling well and not living long.

We will discuss this in book club, so I may find more to say.

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### **Ladory says**

I recommended this book to my women's reading club. We will discuss it in a week or so. It was a bookbub deal on Kindle so I grabbed it. I'm really looking forward to the discussion!

I work at one of the national laboratories and when the Chernobyl meltdown occurred, some of the Lab

employees were called upon to go help. They gave a talk when they returned. They said that it was a holiday and the few employees working that day ran an experiment but unthinkingly turned off all the "braking" systems. So the reactor was like a train running downhill with no brakes. I also remember that they said the Russians remarkably evacuated something like 100,000 people in just a few hours checking each one over and administering some medication. Workers suited up and went inside to do what they could to slow it down and reduce the damage to the best of their ability knowing full well that they would die in doing it. This was one of the most hair-raising, inspirational things I ever heard in my life! I could not get over the courage such an act would require!

The story in this book has already been told by other reviewers so I'll just give my impression. Unfortunately, I read this book immediately after reading "Conditions are Favorable" by Tara Staley. That book was so rich and imaginatively written, it was like a work of art. So I started off with "The Sky Unwashed" rather disappointed that the writing style was so dry and unimaginative in comparison. That's why I only give it 3 stars. However, I did enjoy this book and am very glad I read it. It shows what could so easily happen in our country with nuclear power. Scientists have told me that in the U.S., power plants are all built by different companies and none of them are alike. This makes it very difficult to control in case of an accident because nothing is standardized. I was told things are much safer in Europe because the nuclear plants are all built exactly alike. (I'm not a scientist, by the way.) Anyway, this book did grow on me and was difficult to put down as I got into it more. I do recommend it.

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### **Marissa Pineda says**

I didn't really enjoy this book---the tone was so "down"---but, how else is a book about the aftermath of Chernobyl supposed to be? Not at all my favorite book, or my favorite subject--but I learned that you don't have to like a book to gain something from it. Worth reading for the history/culture/politics--if you're into that kind of thing.

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### **Jeannine says**

I gave this book four stars, despite the pedestrian writing, because it manages to be a feel-good book even in the face of government lies, cheating spouses, radiation sickness, starvation and death. Like Faulkner's people, these villagers endured. Not just endured -- enjoyed the paltry slice of life left to them.

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### **Chris Enderle says**

Chernobyl is a name that will forever live in infamy and shadowy deception of what was once the pride and joy of the Soviet Union. During the height of the cold war, Chernobyl was a little town within the region of Pripyat, established by the Soviet Union at the time so that workers at the nuclear plant there wouldn't have to travel so far. Over time, they began bringing their families with them, and the government believed that this was a sign to the rest of the world of their power, and of how Nuclear energy was to be the future. Yet much of what happened to Chernobyl is shrouded in cover-ups and conspiracies, with very few of its residents ever telling what really happened. Irene Zabytko tells what happened not a straight recounting of what happened, but through a fictional family that lived the life many chose after the explosion. In her story the main character Marusia, an elderly woman who loves her home and family, is forced out of her home

after the Chernobyl plant explodes. Throughout the story, we read about the struggles most families faced back then, the horrors of radiation poisoning, and what it means to never give up on what you believe in. Irene Zabytko's story is a touching tale, one that while perhaps is a bit overdone in modern times, still hits home a little harder simply because of the point of history it covers. I personally enjoyed the book, if not for the historical aspect so much as the inspiring nature of the family. If you're a history buff, love anything to do with the Cold War or the Soviet Union, or just love a heart warming story about never giving up, this is the story for you.

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### **Sarah says**

This story is about the matriarchs of a Russian village poisoned by Chernobyl, and their experience living through the disaster, and with the fallout. Literally, in this case - the main character escapes briefly with her family, but after getting them out, she goes back to the village to live out the rest of her life on her home soil...even though it is poisoned with radiation and she knows she will die there.

Somehow, though this is a tragic and sad story about people being lied to and failed by the government and dying slow, horrible deaths as a result...the emotion in this story sometimes has a hard time coming through. The main character is fairly stoic, but I don't think that's it - I think the narration somehow feels removed from the experiences of the characters. That's a weakness, but the story is still impactful, and because you can't fail to be moved by such a thing, it is still moving.

Also, I really valued the way the story centered on the women, and on their deep relationships.

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### **Mieczyslaw Kasprzyk says**

This is a lovely, gentle book about the slow death of a community. It starts with the normal friction and vivacity of everyday life in a Ukrainian village and progresses through the chaos and aftermath of the Chernobyl disaster; displacement, loss of identity and, finally, return, by the older members of the village, to a dying land. The book reflects this contrast between the vitality of life and the uncertain peace of dying (poisoned by radiation) and drifts slowly into a hopeful oblivion. When I started reading the book it slightly annoyed me - I felt there were too many cliched images and characters - but as I became drawn into the story its simplicity took over and won out.

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### **Suzanne says**

Set in the Ukraine in the wake of the Chernobyl nuclear accident, *The Sky Unwashed* is a novel about a family and what they must do to survive. It is bleak and sad, but I appreciated the author's depiction of the events and the effect of the lives of Marusia, her son and daughter-in-law, her grandchildren and her neighbors.

It seems like Americans do a lot of complaining these days. We have a notion of our rights (whether they are actually rights or not), and we demand they are met. Contrast that with senior citizen Marusia, who

returns home to her little village and attempts to survive without running water, electricity, and her pension. She asks the government to give her cow - and yet she's facing certain death from radiation poisoning. It's simply tragic - and a stark reminder to count our blessings.

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### **Jeannette Nikolova says**

What I really didn't like was the lack of depth to the story. If I didn't know about what actually happened in Chernobyl, I would have no idea about the magnitude of the event in comparison to what happens in the book. I get that the author wanted to recapture the lack of information that the real people had back then, but I am positive they couldn't have been that oblivious. I wasn't born yet, but my parents lived in another closed-off socialist country - Bulgaria, and in a few months they already knew that what had happened was a pretty big deal. On the other hand, as much as I can believe the old women were misinformed, after living for months in Kiev and Moscow and somewhere in Poland, if I recall correctly, they could not have been THAT misinformed. They must have known it was not safe to return home, and that it was actually extremely dangerous.

The effects of the radiation seemed pretty weak next to what I've seen from the actual Chernobyl and other cities and even countries that suffered from the radiation. A dead butterfly, a dead goat, two people dead from cancer. How about a three-headed butterfly, a big dead goat with a little dead goat which grew on its back, and a load of people dead or mutilated, in a way, by cancer. That would sum it up.

Also, I cannot comprehend why the author uses Ukrainian words, just to translate them soon after. Yes, many western readers would not understand, but why bother trying to sound more native if you know that you'd have to translate it anyway? That's a bit too prude-ish for me. I'm Slavic, so I understood pretty much everything, but since she's writing in English, she must have targeted the US readers and it becomes pointless to even write like that.

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### **Bernie Gourley says**

*The Sky Unwashed* is a character-driven novel, telling the story of an elderly pensioner residing a few miles from the ill-fated Chernobyl nuclear plant. The protagonist's name is Marusia, and she lives with her beaten-down son Yurko, his cheating wife Zosia, and the dysfunctional couple's children (her grandchildren.)

The first part of the novel is a bit of a slog, though the character portraits of the adult family members may be enough to keep one intrigued if one enjoys being pulled into a dysfunctional Ukrainian village household. (The first part is a bit like "Jerry Springer—Ukraine Edition.") Zosia's unfaithfulness provides the main source of tension, but that tension is a quiet one between Marusia and Zosia. Yurko knows about his wife's infidelity, but doesn't seem to care--or doesn't seem to be able to muster the energy to make the appearance of caring. Marusia, on the other hand, is the doting mother who feels that her doofus son could do better, but she bites her lip as she doesn't feel it's her place.

It's the Chernobyl meltdown that kicks the novel into interesting territory. One is shown how tragedy can bring out the best and worst in people. Both Yurko and Zosia have jobs at the plant, but it's Yurko who's working when the incident occurs, and it's he who gets a dose of radiation that will prove lingeringly fatal. Interestingly, the reader isn't taken into the plant often. We don't see Yurko fighting the fires, but rather we see the family in the village Starylis. We experience the family first noticing Yurko's failure to return and then becoming increasingly concerned. We see the family noticing the subtle signs of something gone

awry—like air that tastes of pennies.

Staryl's occupants—including Marusia's family--are eventually evacuated to Kiev. It's here that we see how events press the once hostile family together before ultimately tearing them apart. The Zosia we found unpalatable in the first part is now seen in more sympathetic terms. We see her at her best and her worst, and we see that in sum she is a survivor. Her behavior, good and bad, is committed saving the remainder of her family—which is her children.

The truly visceral part of the novel is reached when Marusia opts to move back to Staryl, despite the fact that it's abandoned. At first, the elderly woman is completely alone. It's the eerie loneliness of an abandoned place that one once knew as a thriving community. Even the livestock Marusia left behind is long gone. Her daily ritual includes ringing the church bells to let any other stragglers know they aren't alone. Eventually, she befriends a cat gone feral, and shortly thereafter others begin to trickle back to the village—virtually all of them women.

In retrospect it seems the author might not have been comfortable writing male characters. The only male character of note is Yurko, and he's by far the most flat of the major characters—that's probably on purpose and it feels true enough. The only other male character we get to know in any detail is quickly killed off. Given all the male-dominated works of literature, this isn't necessarily a complaint or a problem—just an observation.

I'd recommend this book for the patient. If you need a hard and fast hook to keep you engaged, you'll have trouble with this book. However, once one gets into the parts set in Kiev and the abandoned Staryl, you'll find the book intensely engaging.

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## **Dem says**

### **3.5 Stars**

The Sky Unwashed by Irene Zabytbo was an interesting read which told the story of Marusia Petrenko and her family who live on a small farm in the Ukraine and how on an April Saturday Morning in 1986 her life and the lives of her family and neighbours is changed forever by the horrors of the Chernobyl accident and the disturbing way in which the government mislead the people.

This is fictitious account of the Chernobyl disaster which made the word sit up and take notice as we all waited and wondered what if? How will this affect us? but while we were safe the people of Chernobyl were frantically trying to come to terms with the reality of the situation.

I enjoyed the book and really did get a feel for the people who lived in this part of the country and their traditions. I enjoyed reading how the older women lived their life's and watched as the younger women pushed the boundaries with their desperate attempts to dye their hair and take on the looks of pop stars of the day. I was amazed at the consumption of alcohol by workers at the plant and by people on a daily basis. I learned so much from this book but this is not a happy story and there is so much sadness. I found the following passage so disturbing,

*Because abortion was the only available birth control in soviet Union, Zosia had not mourned her four past*

*abortions. She knew women who had had twelve or fifteen and she expected as many for herself.*

This is a story of a people who struggle to survive and who want to just get back to normal after this terrible disaster and who have no idea the effects for years to come they will have to deal with.

The only downside of the novel for me was the lack of information about the actual disaster and I was looking for facts and figures that this book did not give me. Having said that I did enjoy this book and felt I learned something from it.

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### **Bonnie says**

An amazing story. The writing is sublime, the true back story of Chernobyl as lived by these wonderfully rich characters. I remember so well when this happened and it brought back all the fears of Three mile Island and how bad it could have been.

This book brings home the truth that when something this bad happens the natives are on their own. Even when they are evacuated to another city and hospital they are subject to long lines, incompetents and lazy mean people, who don't care about anything but themselves. What happened at Chernobyl was a crime against nature and it's truly terrifying in that there are completely untrained people manning these reactors in Russia. I look forward to more books by this talented author.

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### **Emily says**

I loved this book! I picked it up on a whim as I was leaving the library because I have a passing interest in Chernobyl and the Soviet Union. I honestly didn't expect anything too great but it just sucked me in. It was so heart-breaking to see how the people were treated and, reading in hindsight, how they were lied to. I really felt for all the characters and I thought Zabytko did a great job building up them up. Yes, I will admit they were a bit stereotypical, but despite that I still found myself caring for them and genuinely being sad when anyone passed away. I also liked how quick it was -- it didn't "bog you down" with the details and was nicely paced.

The only things I disliked was, as mentioned before, the stereotypical characters, and the last chapter. It just felt very rushed to me, and I kind of would have liked it to just end when Part 2 ended.

Overall it was a very good book, great for anyone who's interested in the SU and/or Chernobyl.

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