



The Year of the Comet

Sergei Lebedev, Antonina W. Bouis (Translation)

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"You read and reread Lebedev's lyrical, cutting prose with equal amounts of awe and enjoyment. This gorgeously written, unsettling novel—a rare work about the fall of the Soviet Union as told through the eyes of a child—leaves us with a fresh understanding of that towering moment in recent history."—***Kirkus***

Reviews (Starred Review)

From the critically acclaimed author of *Oblivion* comes *Year of the Comet*, a story of a Russian boyhood and coming of age as the Soviet Union is on the brink of collapse. An idyllic childhood takes a sinister turn. Rumors of a serial killer haunt the neighborhood, families pack up and leave town without a word of warning, and the country begins to unravel. Policemen stand by as protesters overtake the streets, knowing that the once awe-inspiring symbols of power they wear on their helmets have become devoid of meaning. Lebedev depicts a vast empire coming apart at the seams, transforming a very public moment into something tender and personal, and writes with stunning beauty and shattering insight about childhood and the growing consciousness of a boy in the world.

Sergei Lebedev was born in Moscow in 1981 and worked for seven years on geological expeditions in Russia and Central Asia. Lebedev is a poet, essayist and journalist. *Oblivion*, his first novel, was published in 2016 by New Vessel Press, to great acclaim.

The Year of the Comet Details

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From Reader Review The Year of the Comet for online ebook

Lolly K Dandeneau says

I'm not yet reviewing this, just reading it for personal pleasure It was wonderful... I'll expand on it more when I can

Anne says

Very well written but extremely boring

Ubaid Dhiyan says

Soporific.

Caroline says

Lebedev has really captured the voice of a child as recalled by his adult self. I was struck by the narrator remembering his astonishment at learning that his grandmother had been born before the 1917 revolution; it was inconceivable that there anyone existed from before that 'beginning of time.' It really captures that wrestling one goes through when forced to integrate pieces of information (or geography) that one has never put in the same conceptual space before. A simple thing, but exemplary of his perfect pitch in a narrative voice sufficiently sophisticated to make useful observations but resonant of childhood and its lens.

The imagery is wonderful throughout. Over and over we read of decaying vegetation, in the streets and at the dacha where the boy and his parents and grandmother spend the summers. The USSR is decaying around them, but they are still forced to adapt to the crazy life of deprivation and process that they have to pretend is evidence of a good society. The enclosed surreal world that defines the lives in this book, bookended tightly by the revolutions of 1917 and 1991, is a powerful way to communicate the sense of dislocation and shock that people felt at the end. It is a fictional precursor of the emotions described by Svetlana Alexievich in *Secondhand Time*.

Recommended.

Andy Weston says

Lebedev writes about a boy growing up as the Soviet Union falls. It is a fascinating account of what matters to a youngster in those turbulent years, from Hayley's Comet, to Chernobyl, and the books he reads. The biggest influence in his formative years are his widowed grandmothers, who compete for his affection. Each school holiday he spends with them outside of the city at their dacha. Descriptions of life here contrast

starkly with the memories the grandmothers have and occasionally slip into conversation; Civil War, famine, the World Wars.

The novel covers three of four years in the boy's life (it is not specific), and during that time his natural adolescent inquisitiveness grows. He becomes aware that his grandmothers are so old that they were living the last time Haley's Comet was visible, in 1910, before the October Revolution. He becomes fascinated by a serial child killer on the loose in the area of their dacha. He yearns to read the set of encyclopaedias grandmother Mara keeps hidden from him, 'until she is gone', which have a fuller and different version of history than his own family's brief volume.

Though it is a narrative, it is clear at times it is the view of an adult looking back, but despite that it is an insightful account of a fascinating period in history.

Melinda M says

The Year of the Comet by Sergei Lebedev is a novel about a neighbor, a serial killer and the fall of the Soviet Union. It was well written and kept my interest.

I received a copy thru a Goodreads Giveaway.

Sarah Furger says

Lebedev's prose is lyrical and truly lovely. The story of a boy's coming of age as the Soviet Union teeters on the brink of collapse. Some passages made me sick, some made my heart sing. Truly a lovely novel.

Kim Kunasek says

An effective examination of the impact of shared history and experiences on relationships and families. I am very nostalgic and appreciate the thoughtfulness with which the author considers what "breeds" a nostalgic person/family. I love the adolescent point of view, which in this case is quite wise (e.g., the narrator's perception that in everything he did, in all his physical attributes, he was a reminder to his relatives, especially the grandmothers, of those lost in war).

Scott Neuffer says

One of the best novels of the year.

kasia says

Within the first 50 pages, you get caviar, vodka, doting grandmothers, mushroom picking, Pushkin, the

Kremlin... so if you're looking for something Russian, you've come to the right place. This is a lovely novel. But I am a curmudgeon who doesn't find stories of children all that interesting, so I found it overly precious.

Alexander Kosoris says

I don't think I can stress enough the importance of actually getting to the heart of your story in your synopsis. If that little summary on the back of your book sets people up for the wrong expectations, it can really affect the amount of enjoyment readers glean from your story. *The Year of the Comet* has an issue with this, not to the same extent as Graham Greene's *Orient Express*, but it was at least clear enough for me to feel the need to comment on. For, I was under the misguided impression that Lebedev's story would encompass the fall of the Soviet Union and its aftermath. Instead, the book consists of a telling of the lead up to the collapse from the viewpoint of a young man trying to grow, mature, and find a purpose during such uncertain times. While I still enjoyed the book quite a bit, I blame the misguided synopsis – at least partially – for the feeling that we finished right when we were just getting started, that we had an extended introduction and jumped away right when we were beginning the story proper.

And it's too bad that it happened this way, because there's a lot to love in *The Year of the Comet*. In the narrator's dry, almost academic analysis of why others around him acted the way they did, we not only get a very clear characterization of him and his two grandmothers especially, but also a great frame of reference on how everyone experienced a sort of shared history differently, and how the world around them strongly influenced their personalities. And I quite liked how the author was able to effectively mute the emotions in his recollections. While the story may have been more exciting and viscerally felt if he instead chose to make these emotions loud and visible, the trade off was that the author was able to evoke a feeling of a genuine exploration of memories, of an older man who is able to separate himself from heated moments of his past and recall them more objectively.

(Of course, with a translated work, I often wonder how much of my experience would be shared with readers of the original. Was Lebedev this matter-of-fact in his original prose, or does it have more to do with Antonina Bouis' interpretation while translating? Similarly, was the sincerity I felt present in the original text? What about the effective characterization? Is there anything that was lost in translation? Or were all these things more or less preserved when we got our English version? I'm genuinely curious about all this, and I'd love to hear some commentary from someone knowledgeable on the subject.)

In the end, *The Year of the Comet* was a thoughtful look at the unravelling of society and the gradual changes that erode your trust in what you thought were sturdy symbols and institutions. While there was plenty that felt ripe for further detail and exploration, I still thought it was good.

Jerry Pogan says

Written in beautiful lyrical prose this is the story of a young boy growing up in the last years of the Soviet Union. The first half of the book is nothing short of amazing. It opens a window into life in the Soviet Union through the eyes of a young boy and is written so beautifully that you can almost smell and feel the texture of the life during this period. The story transitions from there to a somewhat adventure involving a serial killer and then on into the downfall of the Soviet Union.

Christina Tang-Bernas says

This is a lyrical book written about a period in history that I don't often encounter. While the imagery is lovely and the characters are intriguing, the book seemed very distant to me, like a story told rather than an experience lived (which I'm not sure is because of the original prose or the translator). My full review of this book can be found on the Cleaver Magazine website.

Mel says

3.2***

A poignant Russian childhood memoir as experienced by a young boy through the lens of the unspoken emotional histories of his two very different grandmothers impacted as they were by the Stalin regime. Inspired by his late grandfathers the boy pursues a dark stranger hoping to be a hero as Communism crumbles slowly around him.
