without clear purpose or direction, or even passion; the "regulars" are ourselves, while only the outsiders are able to gain any sort of understanding of the real world. Read symbolically, then, the novel is a rich, profound, and evocative allegory of modern life: directionless people seeking and usually lacking purpose in an environment that offers little more than bare survival. In some ways, it is a bleak novel, showing us metaphorically and through the fantastic what reality is. In other ways, however, it suggests that even hollow meanings, and certainly human relationships, can supply road maps through the wasteland.

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Sarah Klassen, *The Russian Daughter: A Novel.* Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2022. Pp. 272. Softcover, $22.

The tradition of Mennonite historical fiction about the Russian Mennonite experience is robust. In her latest novel, *The Russian Daughter*, Sarah Klassen tells the story of the Albrecht family and their beloved village of Friedental, in present-day Ukraine, in the early decades of the twentieth century. With rumours of war and revolutionary fervour swirling in the background, Amalia and Isaak, a prosperous young farming couple, find they have everything they need but a child. Acting on a tip from a neighbour, they seek out and adopt an infant girl they name Sofia, born to an unmarried Russian woman from Kharkov. While Friedental warily accepts Sofia as one of the Albrechts, the family's happiness is marred by Sofia's and Amalia's ambivalent attachment to each other. As she grows up, Sofia is bullied at school for a physical difference caused by an injury she sustained as an infant prior to her adoption. Eventually Amalia and Isaak also adopt the children of Amalia's sister and ne'er-do-well brother-in-law—twins named Hannah and Boris—and the family settles into a precarious happiness. When news of the Romanovs' execution arrives followed by reports of looting, rape, and murder in neighbouring villages, however, the Albrechts must make a series of painful decisions if they are to survive.

Klassen deftly braids together the personal struggles and longings of one Mennonite family with the rhythms of agrarian life and the broader geopolitical convulsions of the period. While Sofia, the Russian daughter of the book's title, is the primary character, the novel is very much a group portrait of a family whose experience is typical of the Russian Mennonite exile narrative. This composite

nature of the storytelling is both a strength and a weakness of the novel. That is, the importance of extended family relations in Mennonite culture is not sacrificed to a single point of view, which I appreciated. But I sometimes wished to know the characters a little more deeply, especially Sofia, whose perspective is somewhat eclipsed towards the end of the novel. But the novel retains its depth through its history: Klassen does not shy away from the horrors most readers know will befall the Albrechts and the other villagers; the novel walks steadily and unflinchingly towards them. Indeed, one of the tensions at the heart of the plot is the dawning realization that Friedental is not immune to change or violence.

Klassen paints the Russian steppe with a poet's eye for detail. The brook and willow bluffs form one of the novel's key settings; the landscape, village, and busy farmhouse are rendered with precision. The Albrechts, too, are clearly presented. They are hardworking, faithful, and proud of their success, assured that God has rewarded them and will continue to provide. They all but worship the German-speaking Czarina and her family of five daughters and a son. Yet there is also a beat of self-consciousness underwriting this narrative of Mennonite accomplishment and rootedness to the land. For instance, Kolya, the loyal Russian farm labourer who works for the Albrechts, sleeps in a shack. Their housemaids come from landless Russian families and observe the Albrechts' relative wealth with envy. Late in the novel one character asks: "When Catherine the Great invited our people to settle the Russian steppes, was that God's way of bringing them to a new and good land? . . . Did they realize they were displacing people who had lived on this land for centuries?" Sofia, both an insider and outsider to the Albrechts, feels a keen affinity with the other Russian characters, especially Kolya. It is often through Sofia's perspective that the reader is invited to question Mennonite certainties and entitlements. While the violence of the revolution is denounced, its ideals are freely discussed and debated by more than one of the Mennonite characters, including Boris, who is reluctant to leave Friedental. To Klassen's credit, references to the political upheavals of the revolutionary period serve the plot, rather than the other way around—storyline and character development are never surrendered to historical context.

If there is a central organizing motif in *The Russian Daughter*, it is that of blood. Several key scenes feature characters bloodied either by accident or intention, evoking the acts of war that inch ever closer to the Albrechts. Meanwhile, the Romanovs' precious male heir, born in the same year as Sofia, suffers from an unspecified illness; the rumour is "bad blood [inherited] from his royal ancestors" (34). An evening sky is described as streaked with "narrow ribbons

red as blood" (177). This mix of references and imagery finds greater metaphoric expression in the theme of the "blood relation" that subtends many adoption narratives. As Isaak observes his children gathered around the table, he notes, "Not one of his children is flesh of his flesh; his blood does not flow in their veins, yet for each of them he feels responsibility" (92). For Sofia, the relationship to family is much more fraught; the "better life" that the Albrechts can provide will never compensate for the losses she has endured with her adoption. "How is it possible that she feels like a stranger in the family she has lived with all her life?" Sofia silently wonders (135).

The larger story recounted by *The Russian Daughter* has been told many times, but Klassen's compelling novel uses the complexities of interethnic adoption to raise larger questions about this pivotal historical moment: Who was the host and who was the guest in the Mennonite villages of the Russian steppe? Who was "responsible" to and for whom? What happens when loyalties to family, church, and community conflict with loyalties to a homeland to which one simultaneously "belongs" and feels alienated from, especially in a time of crisis? What makes a family a family, and how does a family survive? These are the kinds of questions Klassen's novel raises but—like all good novels—never definitively answers, leaving readers to ponder them for themselves.

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