

# **The Madonnas of Leningrad**

## **by Debra Dean**

### About the Book

Bit by bit, the ravages of age are eroding Marina's grip on the everyday. An elderly Russian woman now living in America, she cannot hold on to fresh memories—the details of her grown children's lives, the approaching wedding of her grandchild—yet her distant past is miraculously preserved in her mind's eye.

Vivid images of her youth in war-torn Leningrad arise unbidden, carrying her back to the terrible fall of 1941, when she was a tour guide at the Hermitage Museum and the German army's approach signaled the beginning of what would be a long, torturous siege on the city. As the people braved starvation, bitter cold, and a relentless German onslaught, Marina joined other staff members in removing the museum's priceless masterpieces for safekeeping, leaving the frames hanging empty on the walls to symbolize the artworks' eventual return. As the Luftwaffe's bombs pounded the proud, stricken city, Marina built a personal Hermitage in her mind—a refuge that would stay buried deep within her, until she needed it once more. . . .

### Praise for the Book

"[A] remarkable first novel about the consolation of memory."

— *NPR Nancy Pearl Review*

"...this is a novel that dares to be beautiful - and fully succeeds."

— *Daily Mail (London)*

"Dean merges past and present in prose that shines like the gilt frames in the hermitage.... this novel of memory and forgetting glows with love and hope."

— *BookPage*

"Dean writes with passion and compelling drama about a grotesque chapter of World War II."

— *People*

"Exquisitely crafted and deeply satisfying."

— *Oakland Tribune*

*Courtesy HarperCollins*

## About the Author

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## Personal Information

Born 1957; married. Addresses: Home: Seattle, WA. Agent: Marly Rusoff & Associates, Inc., P.O. Box 524, Bronxville, NY 10708.

## Career

Has worked as a stage actress in New York, NY, for ten years; teacher in Seattle, WA.

## Works

### Writings

- *The Madonnas of Leningrad* (novel), Morrow (New York, NY), 2006.

## Sidelights

A former New York stage actress who is now a teacher, Debra Dean has been widely praised for her debut novel, *The Madonnas of Leningrad*. The story, "a poignant tale about the power of memory," according to Allison Block in *Booklist*, centers on Marina and two periods of her life. In the present day, she is an aged Russian immigrant attending wedding preparations for her granddaughter in Seattle, Washington. Suffering from Alzheimer's disease, Marina increasingly withdraws into her memories of the World War II siege of Leningrad, the single most unforgettable period of her life. She is a young docent at the city's State Hermitage Museum at the time, and her knowledge of and love for the great artworks of Rubens, Rembrandt, Titian, and other Renaissance painters sustains her through the years 1941 to 1944, as she and more than two thousand other Russians huddle in the basement of the museum for protection against Germany's attacks. Many hardships, especially starvation, threaten Marina and the others, and critics have praised Dean's vivid descriptions of this horrible period of history as experienced through Marina's eyes. "One of the set pieces of the novel is a brilliant account of the first night-

time bombing raids," related Janice Kulyk Keefer in the *Globe and Mail*, "which Marina witnesses from the vast roof of the Hermitage."

Several reviewers also praised Dean's sympathetic characterization of Alzheimer's disease, about which she diligently avoids being saccharine. As *Library Journal* writer Barbara Conaty put it: "Dean eloquently depicts the ravages of Alzheimer's disease and convincingly describes the inner world of the afflicted." This is not to say, however, that critics found this debut novel to be without flaws. Keefer felt that it was "fanciful in the extreme" for Dean to assert that for her whole life Marina never shares her Leningrad experience, nor her knowledge of art, with her children; and Gregory Cowles, writing in the *New York Times Book Review*, suggested that the "story is a little too schematic, and Dean's writing a little uneven." Nevertheless, reviewers overall considered *The Madonnas of Leningrad* to be a powerful debut in which, as one *Publishers Weekly* contributor stated, the author "weaves Marina's past and present together effortlessly" and "the dialogue around Marina's forgetfulness is extremely well done."

## Further Readings

### Periodicals

- *Booklist*, January 1, 2006, Allison Block, review of *The Madonnas of Leningrad*, p. 52.
- *Globe and Mail* (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), March 11, 2006, Janice Kulyk Keefer, "The Siege of Leningrad Lite," review of *The Madonnas of Leningrad*, p. D11.
- *Kirkus Reviews*, December 15, 2005, review of *The Madonnas of Leningrad*, p. 1289.
- *Library Journal*, February 15, 2006, Barbara Conaty, review of *The Madonnas of Leningrad*, p. 106.
- *New York Times Book Review*, April 30, 2006, Gregory Cowles, "Fiction Chronicle," review of *The Madonnas of Leningrad*, p. 20.
- *Publishers Weekly*, November 21, 2005, review of *The Madonnas of Leningrad*, p. 24.
- *USA Today*, March 30, 2006, Bob Minzesheimer, "Two WWII Novels Probe the Wounds at Home," review of *The Madonnas of Leningrad*, p. D5.\*

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Essay by Author

## The Story Behind the Book: The Madonnas of Leningrad by Debra Dean

In 1995, I watched a PBS series on the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg. My journal entry for the next day read in part: “I was particularly struck by one incident which might make a story (even a novel, but for the research).” During the first winter that the Nazis lay siege to Leningrad, the Hermitage staff and their families – nearly 2000 people - lived in the basement of the museum itself. In the first days of the war, they had evacuated all the art – millions of objects, thousands of undisputed masterpieces - but they had left the empty frames hanging on the walls of the museum as a token of their pledge that the art would return. A story was related that one of the staff, a former guide now living in the cellar, began to give tours of the empty museum to visitors. It was said that he described the paintings so well that the visitors could almost see them.

This image gripped me. Still, I was a short story writer and even my short stories tended towards the brevity of poems, so the prospect of writing something the size of a novel terrified me. Let alone a novel set in a country that I had never visited and during a tumultuous period about which I knew next to nothing. Throw in a foreign language and some art history on top of that, and I dismissed the notion as far exceeding any reasonable hubris. I tried writing it as a short story, but this world was too expansive to be contained in the short form. I set it aside. Every once in a while, I would return wistfully and rework it a little, adding a few pages or moving pieces around.

Meanwhile, my grandmother was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s. A woman who had resolutely focused forward throughout her life, she began in her dotage to drift back to her youth. She told stories that I had never heard before, some of them beginning quite plausibly and then segueing suspiciously into magical realism. (A nice topaz pendant that a great niece had admired spiraled in value and became a rare heirloom that strangers sometimes dropped by and paid money to see.) I started writing about her, but quickly she metamorphosed into a fictional character, a Russian woman who had survived the siege. Before I knew it, there we were again, back in the museum during the war.

The Madonnas of Leningrad was researched and written over several summers between teaching. During most of that time, I and my husband, a poet, lived in a sweet little apartment with a sweeping view of the city and the water but with not quite enough room for an office. So we set up shop in the windowless laundry that we shared with the neighbors, our desk wedged between garbage cans and the hot water furnace – not so different from the cellars of the Hermitage during the war perhaps, but decidedly warmer with the dryer humming. He worked in the mornings and I took the afternoons. The novel was written slowly, circuitously, and without expectations. Eat breakfast, go for a long walk, write another page or two, make dinner, watch a movie. Repeat. And then one day there was a book.

*Courtesy of <http://rusoffagency.com>, 2009*

## Author Interview

Cinderella of the Hermitage – Publishers Weekly Talks with Debra Dean -- by Michael Scharf -- January 23, 2006

A first-time novelist's long road from New York to St. Petersburg

**Q. Which piece of *The Madonnas of Leningrad* (Reviews, Nov. 21, 2005) did you have first, the Alzheimer's narrative, where Marina has long emigrated to the U.S. and is battling the disease, or the Hermitage material, where she is a young Russian docent in WWII St. Petersburg?**

A. They developed simultaneously, side-by-side. But then in 1995 I saw a PBS special on the Hermitage, and I realized I had to buckle under and do a novel's worth of research.

**Q. 1995—that's 10 years. The book is 240 pages.**

A. Yes: —and I'm 48. I worked on it over the summers. Because I teach, that was the only time I could do it. I'm a middle-aged Cinderella.

**Q. You actually chucked a small, stable career as an actress in New York for the security of... writing!**

A. It was a comically ill-advised choice—it's the same set of perils. When I left New York, my agent was still returning my calls! But I got my MFA about 15 years ago, and started teaching in Seattle, where I'm from. I was a committed short-story writer. So I have a collection of short stories—

**Q. Everybody does—**

A. Well, my agent, Marly Russoff, actually took me on with just the stories.

**Q. Wow! Very impressive—**

A. Yes. She has my undying gratitude. But she did eventually tell me, like everyone else, that I had to write a novel, though not necessarily one that involved so much research.

**Q. Any Russians in your family?**

A. No. When I started I knew next to nothing; I had never even heard of the siege of Leningrad. So I had to catch up with the Blockadenitsky. But I didn't get to go until I finished the book and got the advance. It was too expensive.

**Q. The last chunk of the advance?**

A. The first chunk.

**Q. You mean you finished the whole book, and then sold it?**

A. I wrote it without any kind of expectation. I had another novel in a drawer that I wrote thinking that it was the only way I was ever going to get a decent teaching job, and the pressure of that just paralyzed me, and made it a miserable experience. And so I really let go of the idea that a book was going to change my life, and that was the only way I was able to write it.

**Q. All those wonderful descriptions of Hermitage paintings—you hadn't seen them?**

A. The Internet.

About the author

Debra Dean worked as an actor in the New York theater for nearly a decade before opting for the more secure life of a writer. She received her MFA from the University of Oregon and now lives with her husband in Seattle, where she teaches college-level literature and writing.

*Courtesy rusoffagency.com, 2009*

## Discussion Questions

1. The working of memory is a key theme of this novel. As a young woman, remembering the missing paintings is a deliberate act of survival and homage for Marina. In old age, however, she can no longer control what she remembers or forgets. "More distressing than the loss of words is the way that time contracts and fractures and drops her in unexpected places." How has Dean used the vagaries of Marina's memory to structure the novel? How does the narrative itself mimic the ways in which memory functions?
2. Sometimes, Marina finds consolations within the loss of her short-term memory. "One of the effects of this deterioration seems to be that as the scope of her attention narrows, it also focuses like a magnifying glass on smaller pleasures that have escaped her notice for years." Is aging merely an accumulation of deficits or are there gifts as well?
3. The narrative is interspersed with single-page chapters describing a room or a painting in the Hermitage Museum. Who is describing these paintings and what is the significance of the paintings chosen? How is each interlude connected to the chapter that follows?
4. The historical period of *The Madonnas of Leningrad* begins with the outbreak of war. How is war portrayed in this novel? How is this view of World War II different from or similar to other accounts you have come across?
5. Even though she says of herself that she is not a "believer," in what ways is Marina spiritual? Discuss Marina's faith: how does her spirituality compare with conventional religious belief? How do religion and miracles figure in this novel? What are the miracles that occur in *The Madonnas of Leningrad*?
6. A central mystery revolves around Andre's conception. Marina describes a remarkable incident on the roof of the Hermitage when one of the statues from the roof of the Winter Palace, "a naked god," came to life, though she later discounts this as a hallucination. In her dotage, she tells her daughter-in-law that Andre's father is Zeus. Dmitri offers other explanations: she may have been raped by a soldier or it's possible that their only coupling before he went off to the front resulted in a son. What do you think actually happened? Is it a flaw or a strength of the novel that the author doesn't resolve this question?
7. At the end of Marina's life, Helen admits that "once she had thought that she might discover some key to her mother if only she could get her likeness right, but she has since learned that the mysteries of another person only deepen, the longer one looks." How well do we ever know our parents? Are there things you've learned about your parents' past that helped you feel you knew them better?

8. In much the same way that Marina is struggling with getting old, her daughter, Helen, is struggling with disappointments and regrets often associated with middle-age: her marriage has failed, her son is moving away, she may never get any recognition as an artist, and last but not least, she is losing a life-long battle with her weight. Are her feelings of failure the result of poor choices and a bad attitude or are such feelings an inevitable part of the human condition?
9. In a sense, the novel has two separate but parallel endings: the young Marina giving the cadets a tour of the museum, and the elderly Marina giving the carpenter a tour of an unfinished house. What is the function of this coda? How would the novel be different if it ended with the cadets' tour?
10. What adjectives would you use to describe *The Madonnas of Leningrad*? Given the often bleak subject matter - war, starvation, dementia -- is the novel's view of the world depressing?

*Courtesy of Harper Collins*