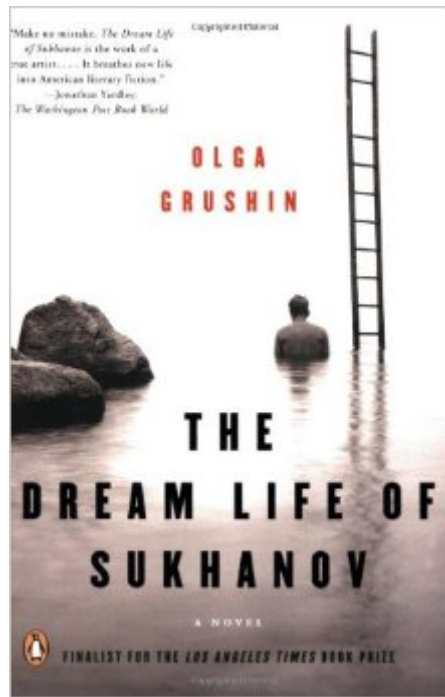


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The Dream Life Of Sukhanov



Synopsis

Olga Grushin's astonishing literary debut has won her comparisons with everyone from Gogol to Nabokov. A virtuoso study in betrayal and its consequences, it explores, really, the consciousness of Anatoly Sukhanov, who many years before abandoned the precarious existence of an underground artist for the perks of a Soviet apparatchik. But, at the age of 56, his perfect life is suddenly disintegrating. Buried dreams return to haunt him. New political alignments threaten to undo him. Vaulting effortlessly from the real to the surreal and from privilege to paranoia, *The Dream Life of Sukhanov* is a darkly funny, demonically entertaining novel.

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Customer Reviews

And your old men shall dream dreams. This biblical prophecy plays out with a vengeance in Olga Grushin's extraordinary first novel, *"The Dream Life of Sukhanov"*. "Sukhanov" has received glowing reviews in both the *New York Times* and on the cover of the *Washington Post's* Sunday Book Review. Such advance praise often leaves me with heightened expectations that almost invariably lead to disappointment. In this instance my expectations were not only met but exceeded. The book's publishers claim it is "steeped in the tradition of Gogol, Bulgakov, and Nabokov." To be sure, Grushin has not (yet) attained the mastery of a Bulgakov or Nabokov but it is no small achievement to have the comparison made with a straight face, even if one hasn't quite reached that stature. The fact that English is not Grushin's first language also calls Joseph Conrad to mind. The protagonist of the novel is Anatoly Sukhanov, known as Tolya to his friends and family. It is 1985; Tolya is 56 and

an apparatchik (a mid-level party-functionary entitled to many of the benefits of the ruling class) of the first rank. An artist in his youth, Tolya is now the editor in chief of the USSR's leading art magazine, "Art of the World." Tolya's career consists of writing articles praising 'socialist realism' (paintings of heroes of labor working in factories and the like) and condemning Western art, be it cubism or surrealism and the like as decadent work of no value to a progressive society. He is seemingly content, has a nice Moscow apartment, a beautiful wife, two children, and a chauffeur to drive him to and from his job and to his dacha outside Moscow. The story opens with Tolya and his wife attending a state-sponsored birthday party for his father-in-law an artist of limited talent but high rank.

Russian emigre Olga Grushin has crafted a fine first novel about the wounds we inflict on ourselves whether we cling to our youthful dreams or turn away from them. The setting is Moscow in the mid eighties. Fifty six year old Anatoly Sukhanov is a prominent art critic and the Editorial Director of a respected art journal. In return for being the Party's first line of defense against the decadence of western art, Sukhanov receives the perks of a mid-level party apparatchik: dacha, chauffeur, fashionable Moscow apartment. But change is blowing through the Soviet system, and it's becoming more difficult for Sukhanov to maintain his ideological footing. At home, his wife Nina seems distant and distracted. His two children have begun to unnerve him because their personalities reflect the split in his own. His son has become a cold-eyed careerist while his teenage daughter believes passionately in the transforming power of art, just as Sukhanov did back when he was a young artist of promise. Sukhanov starts slipping into reveries about his past - the tragedy that befell his father during the Great Patriotic War, his first subversive exposure to Renaissance and modern art, his early days as a painter, when his soul burned with desire to capture what he saw in his mind. Sukhanov's passionate paintings are caught in a Khrushchev-era political crossfire, which gets him fired from his job as an art teacher. With a young family and an uncertain future in front of him, Sukhanov takes the lifeline offered by his father-in-law Malinin, a hack painter with good party connections. Sukhanov puts away his paints and becomes a successful art critic by attacking in the name of Soviet ideology the same surrealist and modernist art he revered as a painter.

Despite having received some reviews from tough critics that are unreserved in their admiration, this thoroughly beautiful, original and deeply compassionate novel seems not to have caught the attention of many readers, and this is discouraging. I can only hope it catches on, and (possibly?) another positive review here may help get a few more copies into reader's hands. I find it hard to

imagine a sympathetic reader being disappointed. Sukhanov is certainly an "anti-hero", and his character and position, and the choices he has made, are easy to sneer at in the early pages of the book. But the reader very gradually gains a fuller and fuller understanding of the complexity of a man's life as shaped by history, family, and happenstance, and as Sukhanov's sufferings bring him self-knowledge, we are brought to an equally rich understanding. The reader and Sukhanov are gradually brought to full enlightenment at the same pace, and the final effect is deeply moving, as well as unexpectedly elating, at least to me. As others have noted, dream, reality and potential madness are interwoven with an astonishing deftness - the reader is never lost or deliberately mystified. We are in a very concrete, sensuous world here, with a painterly precision that reflects some of the ideals of the artists in the novel. The novel is lavish in its appeal to all the senses, and recreates Moscow as well as some of the greatest novels that evoke "place" do. Grushin has said that Nabokov is an "unattainable" model, and this is apparent in the gorgeous language, and ambitious but clear structure. But she is not imitating anyone - this is an original voice.

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