

Imagination and hope

by [Amy Frykholm](#) in the [March 22, 2011](#) issue

Olga Grushin is the author of two critically acclaimed novels, The Dream Life of Sukhanov and The Line. Both grapple with the legacy of the Soviet Union and the depths of human character. Raised in Moscow, Grushin was the first Soviet citizen to graduate from a U.S. university after the cold war. She now lives in Washington, D.C.

Can you tell us something about your religious identity?

For the first 13 years of my life, religion was a very vague idea. I was reading constantly, and I came across the Bible when I was 12 or 13. I found myself completely fascinated. It was then that I decided that I wanted to study religion. I have a double major in religion and sociology.

At this point, I am very much an agnostic. My writing impulse comes from the search for meaning in life.

What is the relationship between imagination and hope in your novels?

The way I conceived *The Line* at first was as a story of people in a bleak place hoping for some change in their lives. All the characters are waiting to hear music, but not just music for music's sake. The concert ticket is a way to other things—higher feelings or better places. Waiting becomes a kind of religious or artistic experience.

Could you have set these novels somewhere else?

The stories that I am most interested in are basic, universal stories, but the Russian setting adds both a moral and a historical dimension. The characters are not just sacrificing their time. They are in danger. Issues of courage and betrayal play into the story, setting the ideas in bright relief against the tragic historical setting.

What are the characters standing in line for?

When the line forms, they are all wondering what the line will be for. Maybe it will be coats; maybe it will be boots. That's a very Soviet moment. But quickly it becomes more. Each one believes that this ticket will transform their lives in a way that a simple concert really couldn't. The coming of Selinsky is almost like the coming of a savior. He will bring different things to different people according to their wishes.

Do you see other religious motifs in the book?

Hope and inward meaning can change your life from within, even though outwardly nothing changes. Initially, the people in line each want the ticket for themselves. But in the end, they each want the ticket to give to one another as a gift, an offering. It is their ticket to a place of higher feeling, even though outwardly it is the same place or even worse. I also gesture toward the idea of what the afterlife might be, but I don't think of the book as having a message. If the interpretations are all different, so much the better.

Your novels are written in English, but the reader can detect the influence of Russian. What impact does the Russian language have on your use of English?

I want to have a Russian cadence in my English. The English language that I read nowadays seems very stark, and that streamlined language has never been interesting to me. I'd like to infuse English with richness and use it in a way that is very much my own. The vocabulary in English is extraordinary, and English offers things that you can't do in Russian, but Russian is more fluid.

Are there any aspects of The Line that are based on personal experience?

When I was a student at Moscow State University, all freshman were sent for a month of hard labor. I worked as a salesperson in the coat section in Detskii Mir, a children's store. I was this wispy 17-year-old girl, and my job was to hold back the line. People would swarm into our section, and I had to keep them from taking all the coats. I learned so much about lines: ways to cut in front, what people talk about in line, what people were feeling.

During perestroika, we started getting these wonderful exhibitions and concerts. In 1987, I waited for a full day to see Chagal's exhibit at the Pushkin Museum. Like Stravinsky, he was our own, yet we had never seen his works exhibited. The feeling in those lines was absolutely wonderful. Even though it was very tedious to wait for a day, you met people, you shared interests. Everyone was in line because they were waiting to see great art. It was a unique feeling.

Read Frykholm's [review](#) of The Line.