



Memoirs of a Muse (Vintage International)

By Lara Vapnyar

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Memoirs of a Muse (Vintage International) By Lara Vapnyar

Tanya is a typical teenager living with her bookish professor mother in a cramped Soviet apartment. She is obsessed with Dostoyevsky, and noticing that he always portrays his mistress and muse in his novels—never his wife—she determines to become a companion to a great writer. Her opportunity comes when, as a college graduate newly emigrated to America, she attends a Manhattan bookstore reading by Mark Schneider, a Significant New York Novelist. Tanya quickly moves in with Mark, ready to dazzle in bed, to serve and inspire . . . if only he would spend a little more time writing. But as she struggles to better understand her role as Muse, Tanya also learns more than she expected about the destiny she has imagined for herself.

A touching and very funny novel in the great tradition of Russian realism, *Memoirs of a Muse* is also a lively meditation on the mysteries and absurdities of artistic inspiration.

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Starred Review. [Signature]Reviewed by Caryn JamesWhat kind of person writes a thesis about makeup in 19th-century Russia? Tatiana Rumer, a would-be historian from the collapsing Soviet Union, wants to know where people from the past dumped their garbage, "what men used for shaving and what women used for birth control." Her thesis adviser in New York, where Tanya moves after college, sneers. But Tanya's eye for details—especially the cosmetic details that give life a rosier glow—makes her the ideal narrator for Lara Vapnyar's witty, engaging, beautifully precise first novel. During her Soviet childhood, Tanya is a girl who escapes her unpopularity by dreaming that she will become the muse of a great writer. Her favorite is Dostoyevski, and she chooses as her own inspiration his mistress, Polina, who was immortalized as a character in *The Brothers Karamazov* and *The Idiot*. Dostoyevski's wife, Anna, to whom he dictated *The Gambler*, seems a mere stenographer to Tanya; a muse "influences the great man's work," she believes, in some glorious, "magical way." Throughout the book, as she moves from her youth in the U.S.S.R. to her first years as a young woman in New York City, Tanya interweaves her own story with that of the affair between Dostoyevski and the actual Polina (Apollinaria Suslova), a story that is a mix of fact and Tanya's romantic fantasies. Only after she joins her émigré aunt and uncle in New York, almost halfway through the book, do we learn that the novel's catchy title is ironic. "Memoirs of a Muse" is the name Tanya gives to her diary about her days as an inspiration—others might say kept woman—of an American writer, Mark Schneider. The section about their affair becomes more satiric, with its sly portrait of a pretentious, not-quite successful writer in middle age and his navel-gazing Manhattan literary world. Mark's latest novel has the banal title *After the Beginning*, but then English is Tanya's second language, so what does she know? She learns fast, but Vapnyar learned faster. She writes ridiculously well in English although she only moved to New York from Moscow in 1994, when in her early 20s. Rich with details that simply glide into place, this novel more than fulfills the promise of her 2003 story collection, *There Are Jews in My House*. The conclusion reads like a tacked-on epilogue. Otherwise, this is a wonderfully fresh portrait of the romantic imagination and its inevitable collision with reality. (Apr. 4) Caryn James's second novel, *What Caroline Knew*, will be published in March. She is a critic-at-large for the New York Times.

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From [Booklist](#)

Vapnyar hasn't lost any of the scintillating precision of her standout short-story collection, *There Are Jews in My House* (2003), in her canny first novel. She even turns up the flame on her delectable wit and sexual candor. As a fatherless girl in Moscow, Tatiana becomes fascinated by the great Russian writers, especially Dostoyevsky. As an adolescent, she is told by a lecherous teacher that she will become "the muse to a great man." When she immigrates to America to pursue a graduate degree in history, she chooses to fulfill her destiny as a muse instead, readily abandoning the stifling immigrant enclave in Brighton Beach for a writer's Central Park apartment. As Vapnyar cleverly dovetails Tatiana's story with that of the woman who reluctantly served as muse to Dostoyevsky, she takes measure of the vast divide that separates men and women, bemoans the failings of feminism, offers a claws-extended parody of the self-obsessed male artist, and delivers a withering critique of the immigrant experience. Writing in an Atwoodesque mode, Vapnyar has fashioned a knowing, irreverent, and toothsome ode to the imagination, a power that all too often leads us astray. *Donna Seaman*

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Review

"A smart, fetching comic novel that has its heart in the Russian masters and its attitude in modern New York.

... Full of generous intelligence."—*The Boston Globe* "So good, so consistently fresh, funny and surprising, that every sentence is a pleasure" —*San Francisco Chronicle* "[C]ringingly funny. . . . A captivating literary fairy tale gone awry." —*The Miami Herald* "Beautifully observant and funny. . . . It's already easy to identify that Vapnyar touch, and to fall under its spell."—*Entertainment Weekly*

From the Trade Paperback edition.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Willard Callahan:

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Michael Floyd:

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Jane Turcotte:

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