

Motherland: A Novel by Jo McMillan

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Category: General Fiction

Rating: 4.5/5

Reviewer: Ani Johnson

Reviewed by Ani Johnson

Summary: A coming of age novel from both sides of the Iron Curtain as a teenage Communist and her mother live through the 20th century revolution they never reckoned on. A beautiful story tinged with fun, sadness and insight.

Buy? Yes Borrow? Yes

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Jess is a teenage Communist which isn't a surprise since she comes from a Communist family. Her late father was a card carrying member and Jess spends her weekends selling *The Morning Star* with her equally enthused mother Eleanor. It's not only a thankless task, it's not a very welcome sight for some citizens in their native Tamworth of the 1970s. However Eleanor and Jess' lives are about to change, thanks to an all-expenses paid trip to the GDR - Communist East Germany; a place on the same side of the Berlin Wall as Jess' and Eleanor's hearts. However, they both learn that even a political heaven has its lessons and, indeed, its downside.

Jo McMillan has a PhD in anthropology and has written an academic work on physical love, morals and science in China. It may therefore seem a bit of a leap to a first novel about a mother and daughter, communism in Tamworth and the years leading up to the demolition of the Berlin Wall. Yet Jo has not only written it, she's created something fresh in the process.

Jess and Eleanor live for communism, their lives revolving around political activities as they work towards the change of world order. Unfortunately, as in the case of all who hold strong beliefs while living among non-believers, they suffer. Their negatively-spun reputation is widespread and causes face-to-face insults (and sometimes violence) both on the streets and, for Jess, at school. Jess is also singled out because of side effects of the poverty that comes with Eleanor's widow status.

Under these circumstances we can understand why summer working in a communist country would be a refreshing change. When they're invited back on an annual basis it provides them with something to look forward to and giving them (as well as us) a comparison of the two modes of life.

There are some poignant moments, especially when Eleanor falls in love with Peter, an East German, not to mention the complications that go beyond those of a normal holiday

romance. However our knowledge of history provides the greatest poignancy of all in that we know how their dreams of a collective future will end.

It's not a novel bathed in sadness though. This is a story narrated by someone going through their teenage years and so it's bathed in humanity and every emotion emanating from that. There are not only moments of uplifting hope, there are some wonderful injections of humour. I guffawed aloud over the goose step comment and loved the bizarre election night fancy dress party. (I'm not going to spoil either for you!)

In with the smiles and giggles are some sharp, tongue in cheek comments that still carry current day relevance. For instance Russia's policy of 'not doing' coups but giving 'military aid' has been witnessed more recently in the case of the Ukraine with devastating effect.

While all this is going on, the core of the novel is the interaction between Jess and Eleanor, capturing the essence of the single parent/child combination. The way that Eleanor treats Jess as an adult equal while Jess swings from illogical teenager to pseudo-parent rings true in many homes. When this is twinned with Jess' gradual loss of childhood innocence (cleverly juxtaposed against the GDR's loss of idealistic innocence) I'm sure that these are characters (and the voice of a new novelist) that I for one will gladly revisit over and over again.

(Thank you so much John Murray for providing us with a copy for review.)

Further Reading: If you'd like to read fiction about the last days of the Berlin Wall, we recommend *The Valley of Unknowing* by Philip Sington. If you prefer the East meets West aspect of it, we just as heartily recommend *The Moment* by Douglas Kennedy.

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