



A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian: A Novel

By Marina Lewycka

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When their recently widowed father announces that he plans to remarry, sisters Vera and Nadezhda realize that they must learn to put aside a lifetime of bitter rivalry in order to save him. The new woman in his life is Valentina, a voluptuous gold-digger from Ukraine, fifty years his junior, with fabulous breasts and a proclivity for green satin underwear and boil-in-the-bag cuisine, who will stop at nothing in her single-minded pursuit of the luxurious Western lifestyle she dreams of. But separating their addled and annoyingly lecherous dad from his new love will prove to be no easy feat—in terms of sheer cold-eyed ruthlessness, the two sisters swiftly realize that they are rank amateurs. As Hurricane Valentina turns the old family house upside down, all the old secrets come falling out, including the most deeply buried one of them all, from the war, the one that explains much about why Nadezhda and Vera are so different. In the meantime, oblivious to it all, their father carries on with the great work of his dotage—a grand history of the tractor and its role in human progress, giving due credit to the crucial Ukrainian contribution. The story carries us back to prerevolutionary Ukraine, through wartime Germany, to contemporary England, taking in love and suffering, tanks and tractors, bitchiness, sibling rivalry, and, above all, the joys of growing old disgracefully.

A funny, enchanting novel about the belated healing of old family wounds under the most unlikely of circumstances and the trials and consolations of old age, *A Short History of Tractors in Ukrainian* manages both to transport us somewhere entirely fresh and to echo what we ourselves know in our hearts about how families work (and don't). Written with great and well-earned wit, empathy and grace, it is a debut worthy of full-throated celebration.

A wise, tender, deeply funny novel about an eccentric elderly Ukrainian widower in England and the struggles of his two feuding daughters to thwart the voluptuous young gold-digger from the old country who sweeps him off his feet



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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

The premise of Lewycka's debut novel is classic Viagra comedy: a middle-aged professor's aging and widowed father announces he intends to marry a blonde, big-breasted 30-something woman he has met at the local Ukrainian Social Club in the English town where he lives, north of London. It is clear to Nadezhda and her sister, Vera, that the femme fatale Valentina is only after Western luxuries—certainly not genuine love of any kind. Smitten with the ambitious hussy, their father forges ahead to help Valentina settle in England, spending what little pension he has buying her cars and household appliances and even financing her cosmetic surgery. In the meantime, Nadezhda, a socialist, and Vera, a proud capitalist, confront the longstanding ill will between them as they try to save their father from his folly. Predictable and sometimes repetitive hilarity ensues. But then Lewycka's comic narrative changes tone. Nadezhda, who has never known much about her parents' history, pieces it together with her sister and learns that there is more to her cartoonish father than she once believed. "I had thought this story was going to be a knockabout farce, but now I see it is developing into a knockabout tragedy," Nadezhda says at one point, and though she is referring to Valentina, she might also be describing this unusual and poignant novel.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

In this comic first novel, two estranged sisters living in England discover that their addled elderly father, a Ukrainian war refugee and expert on tractors, is planning to marry a young, enormous-breasted woman who sees his modest pension as her ticket to capitalist comfort. The sisters put aside their differences, and embark on a spirited campaign to save him from boil-in-the-bag dinners, slovenly housekeeping, and such extravagant purchases as a broken-down Rolls-Royce. In the midst of these machinations—which include long-winded letters to solicitors, venomous gossip, and all-out spying—Lewycka stealthily reveals how the depredations of the past century dictate what a family can bear.

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From [Bookmarks Magazine](#)

Much of the comedy in this first novel comes in the form of Viagra jokes. But add in a mix of Ukrainian history, World War II drama, and the classic strife between the Old and the New, and overall it succeeds. Lewycka draws on her Eastern European roots in order to incorporate a believable social history into this typical sitcom formula. A few critics found the novel too corny, too weak, and too predictable to recommend, but most were won over. A good Viagra joke will do it every time.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Paul Howard:

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