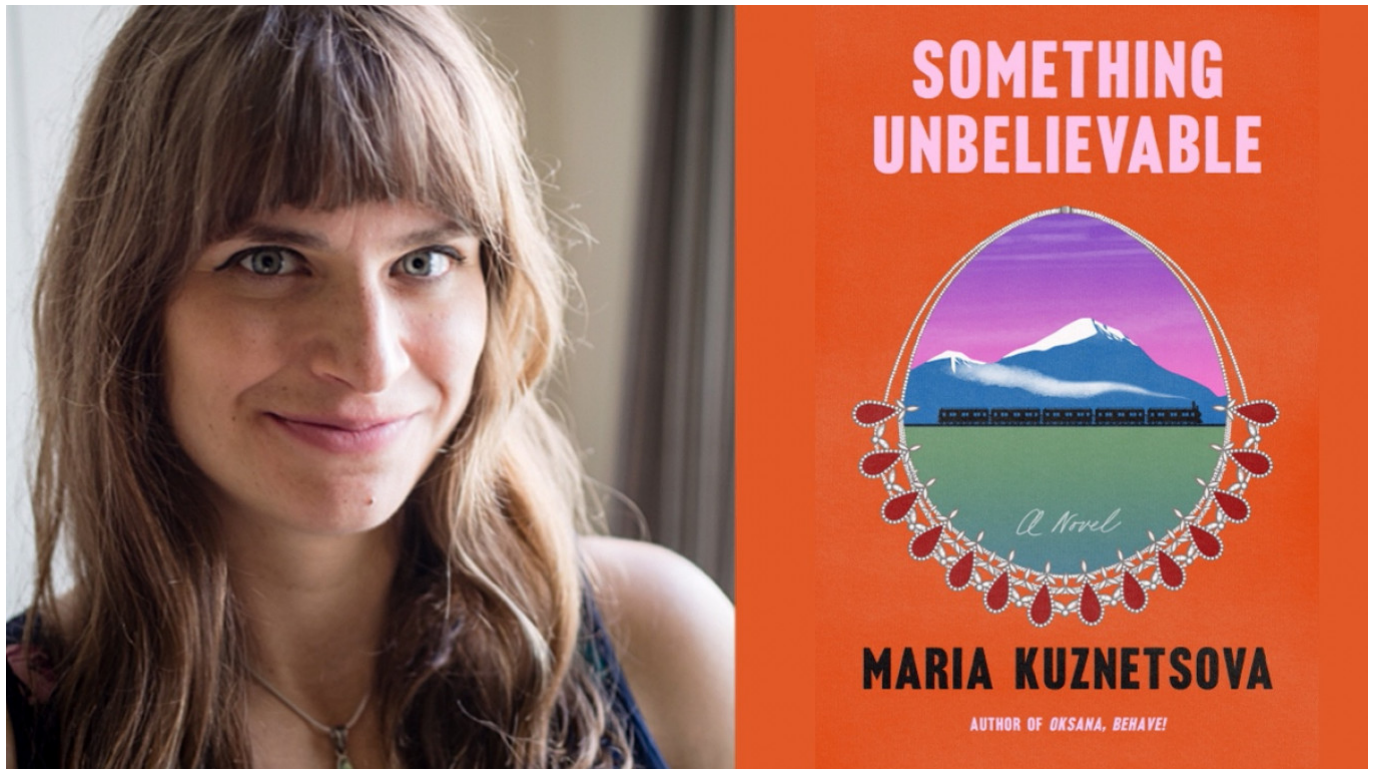


Maria Kuznetsova's Second Novel is 'Something Unbelievable'

This funny, poignant, heart-breaking novel follows "Oksana, Behave!"

By [Joe Crescente](#)

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At the beginning of Maria Kuznetsova's second novel, Natasha, a young mother in New York, chats with her grandmother Larissa in Ukraine via Skype. Larissa has the following advice for her granddaughter who is struggling to adapt to her new parental responsibilities:

If you train that girl to sleep in your arms, she will become a mother-dependent namby-pamby. You should do what my parents did to me, and what I did to your father. Put her in her crib until she is filled with existential understanding. She will see that she is all alone in a cold universe and must drift off on her own.

Both of Natasha's parents have died, and now that her grandfather has passed on, her grandmother is her last living connection to her ancestors. Through this relationship Kuznetsova is interested in exploring the often contradictory human desires for connection and independence. Natasha seeks to understand herself at a moment of crisis through her

increasingly frail grandmother in an attempt to comprehend the permeable boundary between loyalty to family and selfishness. It turns out that this is something that her grandmother knows a lot about.

At first Larissa is bemused by her granddaughter's seemingly impulsive craving for her lineage.

"(N)ow Natasha seems to think the girl will one day feel tied to her mother's Motherland from hearing my sad story," she remarks to herself.

But there is a special connection between Larissa and her granddaughter: both are outsiders. They share a love of playfulness, a wicked sense of humor, and a hunger for more. Natasha's family emigrates to the United States when she is young. Her mother dies while she is in high school, although well into her adult life she remains something of a mystery to her.

Natasha is an actress, whose identity is flexible, but also liminal. On one hand she is comfortable as an American. She understands the culture better than the one where she was born. But she has done a lot – and given up a lot – to fit in to her adopted country. An abyss created by her parents' deaths has been made even larger by the birth of her child as she realizes she has no one to depend on in America other than her husband Yuri. And they are drifting apart. The situation is complicated further by a burgeoning sexual tension between Natasha and Yuri's friend, Stas. Natasha seeks wisdom from her grandmother, hoping that by knowing her past story, it will fill this emptiness in her life and give her a connection she can pass on to her daughter.

Larissa tells her life story to Natasha through Skype. She grew up in Kiev to a family that had been quite wealthy prior to the 1917 Revolution. Larissa's grandmother seems to have never adapted to life in the USSR, often remembering how close she was to getting on a boat and leaving the country. But she doesn't dwell on this choice. She suggests that it is a fact of life that must be accepted, for if your mind gets stuck on what could have been, then you will never live the life in front of you. While Larissa's father spent part of his childhood in an orphanage, he grows up to be a prominent engineer, leading to the family's evacuation to a small town in the Urals during World War II.

Much of Larissa's story is tinged with an optimistic ability to see absurdity through darkness, to find love and connection through pain. One of her older relatives reminds her, "(w)e do anything to survive," which seems more true on the familial and individual levels the longer they stay in their remote mountain outpost. In Larissa's telling, families consist of volatile individuals, who nonetheless must attempt to close ranks around one another when necessary. Perhaps not everyone will succeed, but you have to try; it is your duty. This is the painful wisdom she strives to impart on her granddaughter. The consequences of not trying are too great. It is something Larissa lives with every day.

Although the book features numerous characters, as a reader I never felt overwhelmed by them, a triumph for a story so rich with personalities. If in her first novel "Oksana, Behave!" (2019) Kuznetsova explored the maturation of an American identity in her rambunctious titular character, then here such a formation is only half the process. While Oksana and Natasha share commonalities, Natasha is much less tethered to her roots. Outside of her grandmother, her only ties to ethnicity seem to come from performing it as a caricature for

American audiences on television. Yet Natasha's real audience is composed of ghosts: she is still trying to impress her mother, while her grandfather's imagined criticism is what immediately comes to mind as she gets off the stage.

To pay penance for the frivolous life she sometimes thinks she has built for herself considering her parents' sacrifices, Natasha decides to enact her grandmother's story in a one-woman show. Through this cathartic performance, she seeks to break free from a purgatory plump with indecision that she finds herself trapped in.

The idea that you can be so close to your loved ones and so far away is summed up by this image painted by Larissa early in the book:

My screen is frozen on the image of my exhausted granddaughter blowing me a kiss, and for a moment, stuck in place, she resembles her former gorgeous self, it is something unbelievable.

From one angle "Something Unbelievable" is a masterful telling of the closing out of a life, a memorial to a loved one in anticipation of their looming death. From another, it is about the strengthening of connections to keep that same life alive by transferring its spirit to future generations. Kuznetsova expertly weaves multiple narratives into a vivid tapestry teeming with histories and places, generations and time. The unbelievable in these characters' lives is the everyday. It is beauty, such as the changing colors in the sky, but it is also human frailty: the cheating, the lying, the stealing. And it is also the primeval connection, the conditional love that can only be guaranteed by the family. Kuznetsova's characters seem to tell us that if we don't always quickly forgive a wrong, then it's only because our attachments are so sacred.

My granddaughter, Natasha, has a long history of caring for unfortunate creatures. When she was a little girl, a recent transplant to America, she and her father would rescue endless varieties of pathetic fauna from the woods behind their dilapidated New Jersey duplex—brokenwinged birds and feeble rabbits and oneeyed kittens that they would fail to nurse back to health until their dim flames were nearly extinguished. Whenever I visited from Kiev, I would try to put a stop to this nonsense, of course. Natasha's mother and I would take the pitiful creatures to the backyard and put them out of their misery with a frying pan under cover of night. Oh, her mother, Valentina, was a force, a stunning, steely woman with a vicious gleam in her eye as she wiped the bloody pan on the grass, wanting to harden her daughter against the cold world. But what can you do, she died of breast cancer when Natasha was seventeen, leaving her alone with my hapless son, so the girl has remained as soft as a whore's bottom.

When my son was felled by a heart attack five years ago and handsome Yuri, his former student, began courting Natasha, I thought finally, finally, she will settle down, stop caring for useless men, and have someone care for her. And last year, when she told me she and Yuri were expecting a child, I thought, Well, yes, she will have to make some compromises with her acting career, but she will be a natural! I recalled her rapturous, Madonna-like gaze when she beheld her ailing creatures, and later, the slew of stinky pets she took into her various cramped New York apartments, and I thought, She has my simpleton sister's animal-caretaking genes; she'll also love holding a crying nothing to her breast, much more than I did anyway. But when she first materialized on my computer screen with the rat-faced girl in her arms, she looked weary and ruined and sweat-covered, shaking my faith in her abilities. She

has spent most of the three months since her daughter's birth chained to her infant and lately, also caring for Stas, Yuri's overly young, greasy-haired deadbeat of a friend who fled the Boston suburb where they were raised under murky circumstances, whom she was kind enough to take in.

When I see her this evening, her pale skin emerging in the morning light of her living room, her dark eyes swollen and sleepless, she brings to mind a clump of hair I yanked out of my shower drain just last week. She is holding her hideous baby girl, Talia, stroking her cheek in hopes that she will drift off.

"Now, listen, child," I say. "If you train that girl to sleep in your arms, she will become a motherdependent namby-pamby. You should do what my parents did to me, and what I did to your father. Put her in her crib until she is filled with existential understanding. She will see that she is all alone in a cold universe and must drift off on her own. And while she's in there, you should leave the apartment and go for a stroll or see a movie."

She laughs and shakes her wilted head. "I'll consider it."

"Some would call that child abuse," says Stas from a dark corner of the apartment. Lately, his presence has been as reliable as that of Sharik, Natasha's vulgar orange cat.

"Oh please," I tell him. "Everyone did it in the Soviet Union, and we raised a generation of strong men."

"Alcoholics," he says.

"Strong alcoholics," I concede. "Don't you have somewhere to be?"

"Not at all," he says, approaching the computer to give me a slick little smile, and I shake my head at Natasha for not telling this pesky creature to leave.

She turns to the derelict boy at last. "Why don't you go take that stroll my grandmother was talking about?"

"Fine, fine," he says, lifting a grubby hand at me, and soon enough the door slams shut. Natasha watches him go and then fusses with the quilt on her worn green leather couch and then the threadbare garage sale rug on the floor with her free hand, a desperate attempt to create order. When her gaze returns to me, she looks even more out of sorts.

"Listen," she says, "there's something I wanted to ask you."

"Oh dear," I say, and I feel nervous all of a sudden, though what could she possibly want from me? Could she be asking for money at last?

"Don't freak out," she says, but she does nothing to calm me down. "But I was wondering—would you mind telling me the story of how your grandmother died during World War Two?"

I take a moment to collect myself. Why on Earth is she asking now? "Of course I can tell you," I say. "She threw herself under a train. Then the war ended."

“Right,” she says. “But I was wondering if you would go a bit more in-depth? You always promised to tell me the whole story, and I thought, Tally would want to learn her history one day—”

“And soon I will evaporate and you will have no story to remember.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.”

“You didn’t have to.”

I take a drag on my cigarette and consider the days ahead. I wonder if she truly wants the story, or if she is only asking because she thinks I need more help than one of her mangled rabbits, a distraction to keep the abyss at bay. I have told her bits and pieces of the story over the years, but never from start to finish, because the girl has the attention span of a ferret and because talking about the war for too long wears at my heart. But what else do I have to live for?

Old isn’t gold—I am approaching my ninetieth brutal year and wouldn’t mind being clubbed over the head with a frying pan myself. A season has passed since I buried my husband and the days are long. My body is betraying me and my dear Kiev is of no use to me now. Seeing it in its early summer glory without having the able body to enjoy its lush gardens and verdant parks reminds me of longing for Styopa Antonov, a graduate student and Lermontov scholar who studied under me in 1962, a charming man with the firmest buttocks whom I could not touch on account of my marriage—well, now that I think of it, we did carry on after a while, but you get the point. So! I used to hold literary salons in my elegant home filled with obscenely youthful, lust-crazed students arguing about whether or not Yesenin truly committed suicide and sneaking off to neck on the balcony. Now my main source of entertainment is packing up the few things I’d like to take from my apartment down to my cottage on the Black Sea, and letting my husband’s men sell the rest. Chatting with Natasha could only ease my suffering.

“Fine, fine,” I tell her. “Why not?”

“Really?” she says, her bloodshot eyes lighting up in genuine surprise. “I thought it would take a bit more convincing.”

“Let’s get on with it.”

She is startled once more, caressing the limp strands on her daughter’s head. “Right now?”

“I don’t have forever.”

“All right then,” she says.

She puts a finger to her lips and tells me to wait a second, she has to figure out how to record the call, if that’s all right with me. Then she pats her girl’s butt, and the helpless thing shuts her unknowable eyes, a creature as alien to me as a space monkey, as far away from my Kiev kitchen as a distant planet, an American-born girl whose parents left their homeland as schoolchildren and will hardly be able to pass their Soviet legacy down to her, though they did surprise me by naming her Natalia after my mother, and now Natasha seems to think the girl will one day feel tied to her mother’s Motherland from hearing my sad story. Currently, the

only Soviet thing about the child is that with the cosmically disappointed look on her face, she brings to mind Gorbachev during his resignation announcement. Well, what else is there for me to do? I wait for my pathetic little great-granddaughter to settle, and then I begin.

Excerpted from “Something Unbelievable” by Maria Kuznetsova, published by Random House. Copyright © 2021 Maria Kuznetsova. Used by permission. All rights reserved. The book will be released on April 13.

For more information about Maria Kuznetsov and her book, see her [site](#).

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