



International Fiction Book Club

Maria Stepanova – *In Memory of Memory*

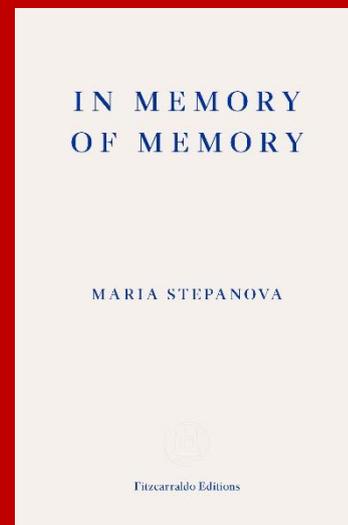
Monday 17 May 2021, 6.30pm by Zoom

The thirteenth meeting of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 17 May 2021 at 6.30pm.

We discussed *In Memory of Memory* by Maria Stepanova, translated from the Russian by Sasha Dugdale, and published in paperback and as an eBook by Fitzcarraldo.

About the Book

'Maria Stepanova's sweeping meta-memoir, superbly translated by Sasha Dugdale ... pieces together a picture of life in Soviet Russia... More than just a family and cultural history, Stepanova's meditations on the nature of memory place themselves on a continuum of Proust, Nabokov's *Invitation of a Memory* (1951) and the work of W.G. Sebald'
Mia Levitin, *Irish Times*



We chose this book for the way it pieces together a family story from the scraps of history, for its superb reflective qualities, and the way that it stretches the boundaries of what a novel can be.

If you haven't read *In Memory of Memory* yet, we hope you will.

Unfortunately, Sasha Dugdale could not join us on 17 May due to problems with the wi-fi, but she very kindly agreed to answer our questions by email – and here they are.

Tereze What drew you to the book?

Sasha I've been translating Maria's poetry for ten years or more, and she asked me to translate her book, to my astonishment and delight. I knew it would be a huge adventure, although I approached it with some trepidation as I am not really a prose translator. I wrote a little about this in a piece published by *Korean Literature Today* (Musings): <https://koreanliteraturenow.com/essay/musings/sasha-dugdale-musings-making-patch-land-myself>

Lisa How much poetic licence did you allow yourself?

Sasha I don't really know what that means. I aim to cleave very closely to the text and I only depart from it when I really have to. I could liken the process to going on a walk to trace a river or stream back to its source, and then being forced occasionally to make detours because the bank is muddy or the river flows through private property. If I could I would reproduce it exactly, and every deviation from the original gives me pain – I try to see whether I couldn't, with more effort, achieve something a little closer.

Sam How long did you need to translate the book and how much did you have?

Sasha I took around a year to translate the book. I thought at the time this was because of my terrible laziness, but looking back I can see that actually it was because it was such intricate poetic prose, and every sentence took hours to shape and make beautiful.

Chris How much research did you have to do, how much did you know already?

Sasha I know a lot simply by osmosis, I suppose. I am Maria's contemporary and I went to Russia as a teenager and lived there for most of the nineties, so much of Maria's context, her Soviet past, the perestroika moment onwards, is clear to me. However I also did a lot of research, I lived with the Charlotte Salomon and the Rembrandt and immersed myself in Cornell and Woodman; I read all the books she refers to or quotes in *In Memory of Memory* and often made my own notes on them. This was deeply enriching for me, I should add.

Margaret How much did you feel you needed to gloss/ explain for the English-language reader?



Sasha Dugdale, courtesy of the translator

‘I could liken the process to going on a walk to trace a river or stream back to its source...’

Sasha Maria doesn't gloss at all, and not all her references would be clear to the average Russian reader. When I did a first draft of the translation I wrote long footnotes explaining all the references. I ended up deleting them all as it gave the novel a scholarly feel it simply doesn't have in the Russian.

Carole How much did Maria Stepanova contribute? How much did she change and how did that collaboration work?

Stephen In your translators' note, the first thing you say is that *In Memory of Memory* is a living text. Can you explain to what you mean and understand by this?

Sasha Maria had edited the original Russian text for German publication and I believe that edited text is the version I received to translate. However, as I worked on the book I often asked her for permission to shape a phrase or line differently, so I could add context that would make it comprehensible to a non-Russian audience. Because it's a work that straddles cultural borders, the location and viewpoint of the audience is important to the reading experience. Some references, for example, might seem more commonplace to a reader in the former Soviet Union, others might seem more obvious to a reader here or in the States. Maria read the translation and was very encouraging when I asked if I could subtly shift a line to give it weight for the non-Russian reader. This is what we mean when we say that it is a 'living text'.

'As I worked on the book I often asked her for permission to shape a phrase or line differently...'

Kane If the book is a living document at what point did the structure (of parts and chapters and 'not-a-chapters') come into the process?

Sasha This is all Maria's doing and was part of the book's structure when I received it.

Bill How does *In Memory of Memory* sit in the tradition of Russian journal and reflective non-fiction writing of writers like Nadezhda Mandelstam, Lydia Ginzburg and Emma Gerstein?

Sasha *In Memory of Memory* borrows from that tradition of Soviet memoir, and Maria clearly reveres it (she refers to the writing of all those women as well as a body of memoir about the Siege of Leningrad which is not yet in translation), however for me it stands apart from the tradition because it seeks not to illuminate the isolated Soviet space and memorialise it, but to place it in the context of international nineteenth- and twentieth-century experience. Maria's main protagonist, her great-grandmother, travels to France and around Europe and as soon as she can Maria follows the same routes, emphasising the continuity with European history and the many ties that bind us together.



Maria Stepanova © Andrey Natotsinsky

Tereze Is *In Memory of Memory* what happens when a poet wants to write a longer piece?

Sasha Lots of poets write prose and their work can vary incredibly. I love the prose of poet-philosophers like Zbigniew Herbert, and Kim Hyesoon, and something in Maria's work resembles these poets' essayistic and lyrical writing. However, this novel is a very different endeavour and it stems as much from Maria's prose and her long-standing commitment to the art of essay writing. I believe it is one-of-a-kind.

'I love the prose of poet-philosophers like Zbigniew Herbert, and Kim Hyesoon'

David A number of us read the book on a Kindle, but might it have been easier to see the structure if we had read it in print form?

Sasha Kindle is quite tricky because it can hide the shape of a book, I agree! I sometimes reread a book I've read on a device and it feels very different 'in the flesh'. I think Maria's book probably benefits from being on paper so you can make notes and crumple the pages etc. and make it a lived-in wasps' nest of a book...

Tereze Is translating prose a different process to translating poetry? You have translated both for this author.

Sasha Yes it really is, although I struggle to explain how. I suppose one obvious difference is the sheer number of words – the difficulties of poetry are more elusive and incalculable. In Maria's case the complexity of her poetic language is matched by her metaphorical and densely rich prose, but I don't have the formal structures, and the musical shape of a poem to orient myself.

David A number of us struggled to get through the book in the month we had to read. What do you think is the ideal way to read the book?

Sasha It took me a year to translate, as I said, and I was amused by the number of people who read the translation in a few days! I think it's a dish to be kept and enjoyed at length, like a fruitcake... I personally hope that people get as much joy from a good page as the whole book, as it is a book of many rich parts. I've started reading books at breakfast, a few pages every day, and I wonder whether Maria's book wouldn't be a good and thoughtful way to start the day.

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Kasia Some reviewers have pointed out that some of the essays (on Rembrandt, on Sebald, etc.) have only a tangential relation to the main story of Maria's family. Did it feel that way to you?

Sasha I didn't feel they were tangential, really. I could see that Maria's project was to weave a Soviet family history back into the history of the Western world, to restore its international cultural heritage, to throw open the doors of the Soviet *hortus clausus* (as another poet, Elena Shvarts once called it). The segregation of the Cold War lives on in how we consider European history and Maria's legacy has a far wider geographical reach.

The idea that we use artworks as cardinal points in our thinking on how to capture the past seems very instinctive to me, and Maria throws her net wide. However it would be fair to say that artists and writers such as Sebald and Woodman are very pertinent to Maria's discussion of the traumas of the European past.

Carole Is *In Memory of Memory* really fiction? What is fiction in the translator's view?

Sasha I translated the book without giving a thought to genre. I suppose it doesn't interest me terribly. I followed Maria's voice as faithfully as I could. But the line between fiction and non-fiction is terribly faint in my view. When we write fiction we use personal experience and observation to shape it. Here the apparently real lives and personages turn out to have been the fictional creations of oral and family historians.

'Maria's project was to weave a Soviet family history back into the history of the Western world'

Bill What did you most enjoy about working on the book?

Sasha I think, although perhaps I didn't know it at the time, that tussling with each restless and lyrical thought was a sort of fight with an angel in the sense that I was confronted with the possibilities of my own language and thinking. The narrator of the book is a humane, funny and gentle character, and spending time in her company was civilising.

Jo You call it a book that changed your life. In what sense, and what did you mean by the book giving 'a different perspective on life'?

Sasha I am used to translating poems and plays and this was a very different endeavour. I lived under its banner for a year, and it changed me and how I think about the world and twentieth-century history (as any good book should). I was always preoccupied with history in my own writing, and now I feel as if I have new rich reserves to draw on.

Sasha Dugdale is a poet and translator, whose most recent collection, Deformations, is published by Carcanet. A former editor of Modern Poetry in Translation, she has also translated a selection of Maria Stepanova's poetry, War of the Beasts and the Animals (Bloodaxe).

Bill Swainson is a freelance editor and literary consultant and co-convenor, with Sam O'Donoghue, of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club.

Next Meeting

The next book to be discussed at the Litfest International Fiction Book Club on **Monday 21 June at 6.30pm** will be Yu Miri's *Tokyo Ueno Station*, translated from the Japanese by Morgan Giles, and published in paperback and eBook by Tilted Axis Press.

'How Kazu comes to be homeless, and then to haunt the park, is what keeps us reading, trying to understand the tragedy of this ghostly everyman. Deftly translated by Morgan Giles' Lauren Elkin, *Guardian*

