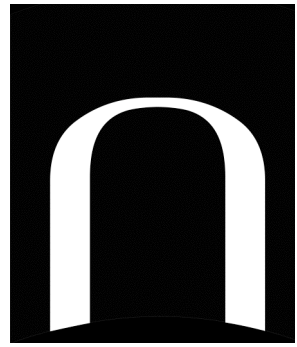


Contact: Rudy Faust
Publicity Manager
Northwestern University Press
(847) 467-0319
r-faust@northwestern.edu



Radiant Daughter

A Novel

By Patricia Grossman

Author Q & A

How did this novel come about?

For whatever reason, I've found myself close to several people with bipolar disorder. Maybe the diagnosis is more prevalent than is generally acknowledged. I've seen this illness take hold of people in different ways and degrees. It is always the commander. Sometimes it promotes them to a higher level of functioning, sometimes it causes them to plummet through several rungs on the ladder. Naturally I've tried to picture the interior landscape of someone who is bipolar. More directly, I've experienced the great strain of trying to maintain a coherent relationship with someone in the grip of the disorder. In creating Elise and Irena, I was able to explore the intersection between the one afflicted and the ones affected—a difficult but never a dull place to be.

Does writing for a main character whose interior life often betrays her present any particular challenges?

Yes, the unique challenge was that I couldn't use familiar touchstones to try to evoke this character's personality and her interior life. In Elise's world, sensible cause-and-effect relationships barely exist. Not only is her interior life foreign to most of us, it is completely unpredictable to her. Yet I needed to discover something about her that was consistent in a way readers could identify with.

I discovered in the writing why Elise was drawn to translating works of literature from one language to another. Foreign language proficiency aside, she was constantly being called upon to translate between objective reality and the private idiom of her illness. For people with a mental illness to survive out in the world, it is essential that they learn to navigate a path between two realities. And yet I think anyone with an interior life—that is, everyone—knows this path and has steered it themselves.

Do you hope that your readers might leave with any new perspectives on mental illness?

I can't speak to what readers will take away, but I do know that by writing the novel I was able to consider mental illness in a new way. By observing its progress in Elise over the course of time, and in her mother for a shorter period, through the folie a deux they experience, I saw not only the true ferocity of unchecked mental illness, but also how the sufferer must constantly refine his or her

strategies for making peace with it. Readers will come to the novel with their own unique perspectives on mental illness. I hope that what I learned by living so close to Elise and Irena will come through in their stories.

Books, bookstores, and the study of Russian literature remain a constant through the story. How are they significant?

Elise was born in the U.S. and grew up fully assimilated, while her parents tended to cling to their Czech past. A very common situation. But a first-generation American cannot escape a relationship with her parents' native country. When Elise first announces her college major, Irena asks her why she would want to study "the people who brought tanks to your homeland." Irena would not want to hear the real reason—that Elise is fleeing what she sees as the oppression of her Czech roots. But later Elise genuinely falls in love with Russian literature, particularly with the work of Anna Akhmatova. Her relationship to this rich literature, so linked to its country's turbulent politics, becomes fully her own. It is, at times, her saving grace.

***Radiant Daughter* spans 30 years and thousands of miles, from Chicago, to St. Petersburg, to the Czech Republic, to San Francisco, to New York City—an amazing scope given that the book focuses so finely on relationships and the life of the mind (both academic and Elise's bipolar disorder). Did the characters bring you to these places, or did the settings drive the characters?**

Both—the characters longed for certain places and in turn the places shaped their perspective. Elise was driven by her love of Russian literature to experience St. Petersburg (then Leningrad) for herself. In 1989, when it was possible to get a travel visa, Irena was eager to visit her hometown of Plzen, in Bohemia. These two settings helped define the conflict and differences between Irena and Elise, especially when precious little else divided them.

About the Author

Patricia Grossman is the author of five previous novels. *Brian in Three Seasons* (2005) won the 2006 Ferro-Grumley Award. She lives in Brooklyn, NY.