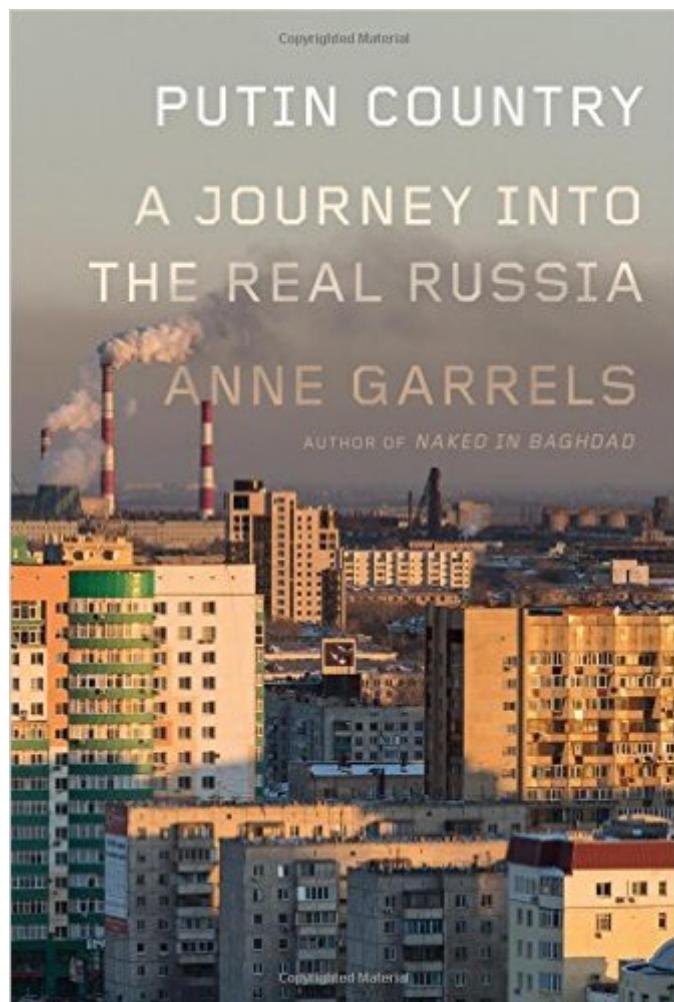


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Putin Country: A Journey Into The Real Russia



Synopsis

More than twenty years ago, the NPR correspondent Anne Garrels first visited Chelyabinsk, a gritty military-industrial center a thousand miles east of Moscow. The longtime home of the Soviet nuclear program, the Chelyabinsk region contained beautiful lakes, shuttered factories, mysterious closed cities, and some of the most polluted places on earth. Garrels' goal was to chart the aftershocks of the U.S.S.R.'s collapse by traveling to Russia's heartland. Returning again and again, Garrels found that the area's new freedoms and opportunities were exciting but also traumatic. As the economic collapse of the early 1990s abated, the city of Chelyabinsk became richer and more cosmopolitan, even as official corruption and intolerance for minorities grew more entrenched. Sushi restaurants proliferated; so did shakedowns. In the neighboring countryside, villages crumbled into the ground. Far from the glitz of Moscow, the people of Chelyabinsk were working out their country's destiny, person by person. In *Putin Country*, Garrels crafts an intimate portrait of Middle Russia. We meet upwardly mobile professionals, impassioned activists who champion the rights of orphans and disabled children, and ostentatious mafiosi. We discover surprising subcultures, such as a vibrant underground gay community and a circle of determined Protestant evangelicals. And we watch doctors and teachers trying to cope with inescapable payoffs and institutionalized negligence. As Vladimir Putin tightens his grip on power and war in Ukraine leads to Western sanctions and a lower standard of living, the local population mingles belligerent nationalism with a deep ambivalence about their country's direction. Through it all, Garrels sympathetically charts an ongoing identity crisis. In the aftermath of the Soviet Union, what is Russia? What kind of pride and cohesion can it offer? Drawing on close friendships sustained over many years, Garrels explains why Putin commands the loyalty of so many Russians, even those who decry the abuses of power they regularly encounter. Correcting the misconceptions of Putin's supporters and critics alike, Garrels' portrait of Russia's silent majority is both essential and engaging reading at a time when cold war tensions are resurgent.

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Customer Reviews

Over two decades Anne Garrels repeatedly embedded herself in a Russian rust-belt city far from Moscow and farther still from most Western preconceptions of Russian reality. Doing so, she discovered the muddle of energy and apathy, of aspiration and repression, of honest faith and endemic corruption that historically has frustrated social reform and personal liberation. With a keen eye and a no-nonsense style, she has brought a distant world to flesh-and-blood life. Looking over her shoulder, we see how similar to one another Americans and Russians can be and, sadly, how far apart we remain. If you hear someone talking about Russia who has not read her brilliant report, either tune them out or get them a copy of *Putin Country*. Ascribe

Now that I am in my senior years I have increasingly developed a keener desire to learn about life in the rest of the world that is not well covered by modern mass media. This book is a true delight and perfect example. The author has done a remarkable job of describing the changes that are taking place throughout Russia by her analysis of the fairly recent history and changes in a single town about a thousand miles east of Moscow. The story that unfolds is probably not what the average reader will expect (I sure didn't!) and unbiasedly discusses both the pearls as well as the warts. This book is cleverly and succinctly written to both teach and entertain all at the same time.

This was especially interesting for me since I lived and worked in rural Russia from 1992 - 1995. Like Chelyabinsk, where this story takes place, I was in a "closed village" in the far north, inside the Arctic Circle. I could definitely identify with many of the characters in this book, and felt like I knew many of them personally. This book will hold many surprises for most American readers regarding the Russians' attitudes toward Putin and his brand of governing. I am a strong believer that democracy is not necessarily the right form of government for all countries, and Russia could not survive if they had an American style democracy. They need a "strong man" in charge or they are completely lost. This is an excellent read and gives some great insight into many aspects of daily life

in rural Russia, and how the people there think.

Loved this book. Much-needed primer on recent Russian history, plus a series of appealing and revealing stories of real Russians, putting broad geopolitical and economic issues into personal perspective. Great read, and the timing couldn't be better, either!

Russians are an enigma to most Americans. Most know little about the history of the Russian people and their sufferings during World War II. A few more are aware of the privations the Russian people suffered under the Soviet system. I have even met people who still think the Communists are in charge in Russia. The tendency is to cast all Russians as somehow anti-Western, anti-Capitalist and anti-American. This book gives a realistic picture of one slice of post-Communist Russia in the Age of Putin by a respected journalist who knows Russia well. Modern Russia and contemporary Russians are a product of a complex history. Russia has no real traditions of Western style democracy, at least during the historical eras, Renaissance, Enlightenment and the modern Industrial Revolution within which representative democracy emerged. Instead, Russians knew autocratic rule by Tsars, revolution and Communist Dictatorship. Democracy does not spring out of nothing. From an evolving parliament in England to the town hall meetings of New England, our ancestors slowly built traditions of self-government. Russia has little of that sort of tradition upon which to build. Most westerners seem unaware that the Russian suspicion and even hostility to the west grows from the real historical experience of being invaded by various Western Countries determined to seize Russian territory and at least in the Middle Ages force the Russian people to convert from Russian Orthodoxy to Roman Catholicism. Swedes, Germans, Poles, Lithuanians, Napoleon, Finns and Hitler have all had a go at Russia and all left a legacy of great suffering and misery. The view of many Russians is that no good comes to Russia or its people from the West. Anne Garrels has covered Russia as a correspondent for many years. She speaks Russians. She has Russian friends who both respect and trust her. Garrels not only interviews Russians she offers a sympathetic picture of their lives. Her work of interpreting their lives attempts to offer insights into why some Russians tolerate Putin though they may dislike him while others consider him the God sent savior of Russia from collapse and the wicked intentions of the Western Powers to dominate their country politically, economically and culturally. It is a complex world that Russians inhabit and Anne Garrels opens a window that is both empathetic to the needs of the people while critical of the failings of their political and so called "State Capitalist" systems. Some of her friends are pro-Western while others are suspicious of Western intentions. Some have achieved success in

the new Russia while others struggle to survive in an economic whirlwind that left them behind. All receive a fair hearing from an American friend who seeks to convey the unique Russian experience to Americans and other English speaking allies. Our politicos might deal with the Russian more effectively if they had a better sense of how current actions raise the spectre of past threats in the Russian Psyche. Reading this book might be a good start.

Kind of a let-down -- some chapters are eye-opening and heart-breaking, such as the ones on LGBT discrimination and the dismal state of Russia's health care system. But for me, the overall tone quickly became repetitive and almost cliche in its negativity -- yes, things are bad on many fronts, but as many of the people interviewed point out, they're not nearly as bad as they once were. I also don't think you can explain the story of a country of that size through the prism of one town. For that reason alone, this felt to me like a magazine article that somehow became a book.

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