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THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION: EVENTS AND CHARACTERS AS DEPICTED IN U. S. YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

This article will examine a collection of 12 young adult novels centering on the Russian Revolution published within the last decade. I begin by defining historical fiction and young adult literature, noting the affordances both bring to exploring the Russian Revolution. Next, I describe reader response theory, which is the theoretical framework I used to analyze these novels. Then, I analyze how young adult authors in the United States portray Russian historical events leading up to the Russian Revolution as well as how adaptations are made for the young adult audience, especially regarding the Romanov family execution. I then analyze recurring characters that appear most frequently in the young adult literature plots, such as Rasputin, Anastasia, and Tsar Nicholas II, and end with implications for readers as well as history itself.

Key words: young adult literature, historical fiction, the Russian Revolution, reader response theory.

Rasputin. Anastasia. Tsar Nicholas II. Lenin. Trotsky. These are the names of the people who captured the imaginations of several authors of young adult literature who used the Russian Revolution as the backdrop for their novels. Young adult authors have recently taken an interest in Russia and the 1917 Russian Revolution for use as their plotlines and narratives. As the 100th anniversary approaches, more attention is being placed on Russia and the events leading up to the revolution. There is an interest in how revolutions begin, especially one so dramatized and romanticized in Western culture. The Romanov Dynasty is filled with real life characters and events to fill writers' pages: The mysticism surrounding Rasputin, the rise of Lenin and Trotsky, the luxurious lifestyle of the Romanov family in their palaces while the poor outside the palace gates starved, and the children alone can become fascinating characters for authors to fictionalize. Of course, nothing provokes more foreboding in this narrative than the execution of the Romanov family in the basement of the Ipatiev House. Countless rumors surround the disappearance and possible survival of the youngest child, Anastasia. And in the United States,

readers want to believe that she still lives today and want a happy ending.

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WHAT IS HISTORICAL FICTION?

Historical fiction is defined as a novel that is set in the past (a time preceding the readers' lived experience, at least one generation) in relation to when it was originally written [Bucher & Hinton 2009; Cross 2015]. According to Nilsen, Blasingame, Donelson, and Nilsen (2013), historical novels should "be historically accurate and steeped in time and place" [p. 258]. Nünning (2004) states that historical fiction represents history as a "group of facts, which exists extratextually and which can be represented as it 'really was'" [p. 362]. Furthermore, historical fiction writers use historical documents, letters, diaries and often refer to historians and academics for information on the selected historical time period or event [Cross 2015]. Regarding narrative structures, the historical fiction YA novel typically showcases the past as a way to understand the present via recorded history and often will include a coming-of-age trope to suggest linear growth not only for the individual, but also for humanity itself [Cross 2015].

During personal correspondence with award winning, YA author Candace Fleming, she discussed the difference between writing facts and writing the truth and shared the purpose of writing historical fiction. Below is her response:

The truth is what we make of those facts; what they show us; what they teach us. Stating facts is easy. But telling the truth? It means piecing together the threads of humanity that join the past to the present that make us one people even across centuries. It means taking what is unfamiliar, or difficult to grasp — like turn of the 20th century Russia — and making

it commonplace for 21st century readers. It means finding human themes in narratives, and writing stories — honest stories — from those themes: loss, grief, loneliness, joy, and anger, and love. Above all, it means searching for something greater; to telling a true story that not only connects with readers, but also strives to say something about the way we live today [Personal communication, March 3, 2017].

Historical fiction in young adult literature represents the human condition and explores universal themes in adolescence, such as friendship, maturation, and love. Young adult readers can serve as witnesses to the past, where the past becomes their present during reading moments. Readers can cheer on characters when they overcome obstacles and experience life through these characters' worlds, thus providing the lived-through experience Rosenblatt (1978) yearns for readers to experience. In YA historical fiction, characters' lives become visible within the pages of a novel rather than through research documents giving readers the affordance to make personal connections to historical events and settings. Readers can see themselves in the places and events they are unable to witness in present life. Furthermore, historical fiction can provide voices to those who may not have had a voice during their time period. Overall, YA historical fiction makes the context more authentic, more real for young adult readers, especially when YA literature strives for authentic teen voices in characters, a journey toward identity, and tackling adult issues (such as war) within teens' lives.

THE HISTORY AND DEFINITION OF YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE

Before there was *Harry Potter*, there was *The Outsiders* and before there was *The Hunger Games*, there was *The Catcher in the Rye*. These books, along with others, started a movement called “adolescent literature” in the 1960s in the United States. Students began discovering the pleasure of reading titles that depicted people their own age undergoing similar life experiences, which was in contrast to the dull, dry adult texts deemed required reading in secondary English classrooms across the country. In 1973, the Assembly on Literature for Adolescents (ALAN) was formed, which promoted the right for secondary English teachers to teach adolescent literature in their classrooms.

The publishing industry mirrored the response in curriculum changes over the next thirty years creating a surge in high quality young adult literature. Young adult titles that were popular in the 1990s, such as Walter Dean Myers's *Monster* or Mildred Taylor's *Roll of Thunder*,

Hear my Cry, have now become “canonical” literature typically reserved for in-school reading. Now, among teens’ favorite genres are science fiction, fantasy, gothic, and nonfiction. Furthermore, currently there is a surge in international young adult literature and LGBTQ-represented protagonists, and the industry has included more representation of diversity in characters as well as authors. It seems that genres rotate and topic interests change each year, and the publishing world continues to keep in step with what teens want.

Overall, however, educators will agree to define young adult literature (YA lit) by the intended reading audience age and common characteristics found across titles. To start, many would argue that the intended age for YA lit is between 12 to 18 years old. Roxburgh (2005) lists three elements found in the YA novel: an adolescent character, a plot of character (e.g., coming-of-age story), and first person point of view. Typically, the trope in a coming-of-age YA novel, according to Roxburgh, is a first person character who is innocent or ignorant, making them unreliable. They then experience a life-altering or traumatic moment, which makes the character grow and change, thus leading to a new self-awareness in order to become a reliable narrator at the end of the novel.

Stephens (2007) agrees with Roxburgh but includes additional criteria. He defines YA fiction as “a story that tackles the difficult, and oftentimes adult, issues that arise during an adolescent’s journey toward identity, a journey told through a distinctly teen voice that holds the same potential for literary value as its ‘Grownup’ peers” [p. 40–41]. These criteria shaped my decisions to include various books as part of a recent microtrend I have identified in young adult literature, centering on the Russian Revolution. A microtrend is a theme or topic that seems to suddenly appear in literature. For example, dystopian young adult literature is a theme that has been a huge success with titles like *The Hunger Games* and *Divergent*. However, microtrends can also become short-lived and decrease in popularity. The Russian Revolution microtrend has been around since the early 2000s and does not seem to be waning in interest, especially with the 100th anniversary quickly approaching.

CRITERIA IN SELECTING YOUNG ADULT LITERATURE BOOKS

Over the course of five months, I gathered and read young adult literature that centered the Russian Revolution as its plotline and setting. Specifically, I sought out books that met the following criteria: 1) published

in the United States between 2001 and 2017; 2) included the Russian Revolution (or events leading up to the Revolution) in some way; 3) include a protagonist dealing with identity formation; 4) the plot involves issues that are centered on/or around the teen's life (in many cases, the events leading up to WWI and the revolution); 5) include teen's voice (whether it's first or third person point of view); and 6) the author is from the United States (in order to study the interpretation of the Russian Revolution and Russia in general from an American perspective).

However, I have also chosen to include two YA titles that do not easily fit these criteria but nonetheless deserve to be on this list: *Blood Red, Snow White*, written by Marcus Sedgwick, a British author, highlights the life of famous children's writer (and possible spy for both England and the Bolsheviks), Arthur Ransome. Additionally, I included *The Family Romanov: Murder, Rebellion & the Fall of Imperial Russia* [Fleming 2014], a nonfiction title (and thus, could not include plot or characterization criteria mentioned above). However, it has won several awards, including the prestigious Boston Globe — Horn Book Award for Nonfiction as well as the Orbis Pictus Award for Outstanding Nonfiction.

There seems to be an interest in Russia, its history, and the land and its culture, making this microtrend possibly stretch to present-day Russia in the near future. The next section will discuss possible reasons for the surge in Russian history and culture in literature by American authors over the last two decades.

WHY THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION AND WHY NOW?

To Americans, Russia is a distant, mysterious country just out of reach of easy travel and access to its historical cities. However, since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, historical documents have been released and available to researchers. For example, the United Kingdom's National Archives released secret service files in 2005 regarding Arthur Ransome engaging in secret activities for the Secret Intelligence Service (SIS). In fact, Marcus Sedgwick includes memos and telegrams about Ransome in *Blood Red, Snow White's* appendix. An archeologist revealed a mass grave he discovered in the 1970s but kept secret until 1991 where DNA testing confirmed it contained five members of the Romanov family. In 2007, a second grave revealed two more Romanov children, most likely Anastasia and Alexei. This year, 2017, commemorates the 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution. Mystery and romanticized notions of the Tsar's family, for example, are still portrayed in popular culture

and have been for decades, especially in the United States. There is a clear fascination with the Romanovs, especially Anastasia.

For example, in this collection, one-third of the books are told through Anastasia's point of view (e.g., *Anastasia's Secret*; *Anastasia and her Sisters*; and *Dreaming Anastasia*). Additionally, *The Lost Crown* (2011) by Sarah Miller includes chapters told from each of the Romanov daughters, including Anastasia. Each author stated in the "author's note" a desire to write about Anastasia. For example, Susanne Dunlap, author of *Anastasia's Secret* (2010), described how Anastasia called to her. She wrote, "The thought of what it might have been like to have the real emotions of an adolescent at such a turbulent time took hold of me and would not let go" [p. 331].

Fleming mentioned she initially wrote her historical nonfiction book about Anastasia. She stated, "I, too, believed in the bittersweet magic of Anastasia's story — the rich, spirited princess who should have lived happily-ever-after but who was unable to escape her fate. Doomed, her bloodline cursed, hers was a fairytale turned to tragedy" [Personal communication, March 3, 2017]. However, when she finished her draft, she realized many voices had gone unheard. "Peasants and factory workers. Shop girls and soldiers. Priests, office workers, and cleaning women" [Personal communication, March 3, 2017]. Fleming recognized that Anastasia needed to blend into the background, which is why her award-winning nonfiction book, *The Family Romanov* includes child workers, the rise of the Bolsheviks, living conditions for peasants, and the 300-year history of the Romanov empire.

Overall, with political conditions across the world feeling unsettled, perhaps American authors are intrigued to study the causes of the Russian Revolution and write cautionary tales to ensure that history need not repeat itself. As J. Nelle Patrick wrote in the author's note of *Tsarina* (2014), "My hope is that, factual or fabricated, every line in *Tsarina* leads to a single truth: that when you forget that those you disagree with are *people*, not just your faceless opposition, you don't end up proving who is right and who is wrong. You end up with a body count" [p. 331].

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF READER RESPONSE THEORY

Louise Rosenblatt (1978), mentioned above, emphasized the influential role that the self plays in the meaning of a text. More specifically, she refers to readers' responses to a text as a transaction or a happening of a lived-through experience where the reader draws

on images, feelings, and ideas formulated from the words of a text [Rosenblatt 1938/1995; 1980]. A critical element of Rosenblatt's work is her transactional theory of reading. Here, Rosenblatt posits that every act of reading involves a transaction between a reader and a text, and occurs in a particular time and context. In this transaction, the reader adopts a stance (a conscious or unconscious adoption), which continually moves back and forth between an aesthetic stance — a reader's feelings, contemplations, sensations, and images at one end, and an efferent stance — where the reader focuses on the cognitive, logical, analytical aspects of meaning at the other end [Rosenblatt 1980]. As Rosenblatt (1938/1995) stated, "The reader must remain faithful to the author's text and must be alert to the potential clues concerning character and motive. But he must do more than that: he must seek to organize or interpret such clues. His own assumptions will provide the tentative framework for such an interpretation" [p. 11]. Reading historical fiction encourages a reader to get lost in the narrative (aesthetic stance) while also analyzing facts that appear in the plot (efferent stance).

Therefore, to practically and theoretically analyze these 12 texts (4,333 pages) (see the Appendix for a list and summary of the novels), I approached each reading as a transaction or a happening — "an active process lived through during the relationship between a reader and a text" [Rosenblatt 1978, p. 20–21]. Personal responses during readings of each text were recorded on a Word document. In order to not disturb my flow of reading, I "dog-eared" each page (meaning, I folded the top corner of a page down into a triangle) in order to go back to it after finishing a book. I then reread the marked page selections and recorded my feelings, contemplations, and sensations along with quotes. After finishing all 12 novels, I coded my Word document, noting similarities across titles regarding authors' intentional decisions (such as point of view), repeated characters, plot events (historical and fiction), settings, and primary sources cited. Themes emerged, and I compared them to young adult literature's genre criteria. These categories will be discussed in the next section.

THE RUSSIAN REVOLUTION'S EVENTS AND SETTINGS USED IN YA LITERATURE

When writing historical fiction, authors typically follow the timeline of events during the period of history they are studying. Throughout many of these 12 books, much of the plot is driven by events that happened to the Romanov family, especially when Anastasia

or people close to the family are narrating the story. And even when this is not the case, historical events are mentioned by characters, such as the infamous Bloody Sunday, or the Battleship Aurora used to fire on the palace, or the Romanov family execution. In fact, historical events are used as setting, such as at the 300-year-anniversary ball commemorating Romanov rule, as well as battles during WWI.

PROMINENT EVENTS

Tercentenary Celebration

Chapter 6 in *Anastasia and Her Sisters* is devoted to the tercentenary celebration, and Anastasia describes the ceremony at the Cathedral of Our Lady of Kazan, a visit to the Mariinsky Theatre to listen to the opera entitled, “A Life for the Tsar,” and the numerous formal balls, where Tatiana complained, “I’ve had enough balls. I’d rather have a party on the Standart... or a picnic on our special island” [p. 94]. In *Angel on the Square*, Katya and friend, Misha, notice the grandeur of the celebration, too. She narrates, “Imperial carriages and shiny black chauffeured automobiles rolled up to the cathedral’s entrance. Grand dukes in military uniform and grand duchesses in court gowns and diamond tiaras stepped onto the red carpet” [p. 2]. Anastasia in *Anastasia’s Secret* meets her future love, the soldier Sasha, after one of the parties, where she claims to have worn through three pairs of shoes.

World War I

The war also became a backdrop for plot and setting. In *Anastasia’s Secret*, the reader learns of events that affected Russian soldiers. She overhears her father state, “Thirty thousand brave Russians killed in a single battle. Tens of thousands taken prisoner. It tears at my heart to think of it” [p. 78]. Anastasia and the reader also learn about the uprisings of workers, and scarcity of food and supplies. The reader experiences the front lines of war in *Angel on the Square*, when Misha writes a letter to Katya. Below is an excerpt from the letter:

<...> the war is a disaster. <...> Recruits are sent to the front lines with no training. We have run out of ammunition. Soldiers have to wait unarmed until they can pick up the rifles of their fallen comrades. The German cannons cover thirteen kilometers, but ours cover only six. We go days without food. The generals have no idea what they are doing [p. 139].

Additionally, the execution of the Romanov family appeared in several titles. Although some chose to end their stories before

the actual execution, which will be discussed in the next section, the execution was either mentioned as an event that occurred for characters to respond to, or as part of the plot line itself. For example, in *Blood Red*, *Snow White*, Arthur overhears random crowd members comment, “They’re dead!”; “Good riddance... they deserved it.”; “Maybe he did ... but the whole family?”; and “Did they ever show any concern for you when you were starving? No!” [p. 167–168]. Arthur narrates that the rumor was that the White army was approaching Ekaterinburg to rescue the Tsar and family, when the order had been made to shoot them before they could be saved. With this news, Arthur then describes feeling ill at the thought of murdering the children.

Execution of the Romanov Family

In the historical nonfiction title, *The Family Romanov*, Fleming describes in realistic detail the specificity of the violent murders, since bullets bounced off the jewels the daughters had sewn into their clothing, thus injuring the children but not killing them. Calling the Reds murderers, Fleming writes, “They slashed at the ‘Little Pair’ with bayonets before silencing them both with gunshots” [p. 240]. In *Tsarina*, Natalya overhears soldiers describe the gruesome death, and how Alexei, her first boyfriend and first kiss, was the last one to die. In *The Fetch*, Calder overhears a conversation in a tavern about the disposal of the bodies: “‘All gone, even the children?’ one woman asked in horror. ‘Every one of them, torn open with bullets and thrown down the mineshaft’” [p. 128].

Furthermore, Whitcomb uses fiction to explain the initial disappearance of two bodies from the well: Alexei and Anastasia. In the story, Calder rescues them from the well since the power in a magic key helped them “survive” the execution, because they are in a moratorium of neither living nor dead. In *Angel on the Square*, when Katya is reunited with Misha, he brings news that Lenin has ordered the execution of the Tsar. When Katya inquires about the children, Misha confides, “No one has heard, and no one has seen them. I must tell you there is little doubt that they were executed as well. Lenin wants the Romanov family wiped out” [p. 282]. News of the execution or the act itself often resolves the plot and ends many of these novels, even though a civil war continued for years after 1918. However, it seems that American authors focus on the Romanov family as the epitome of the revolution, so when they’re gone, it appears so is the story.

Primary sources influenced writers’ decisions in their plots as well. In most of the novels, authors included back matter, such

as bibliographies, author's notes, resources, photos, acknowledgements, and epilogues, which discuss in great detail specific sources used to create their stories. Many authors note collaborating with professors in the field as well as using a website created by Bob Atchison called the Alexander Palace Time Machine (cf. <http://www.alexanderpalace.org/palace/>) which houses eyewitness accounts, biographies, palace archives, and a tour of the palace.

SETTINGS

Descriptive settings also frequented pages in these novels. Illustrious descriptions of cities, peasants' living and working conditions, and the harsh winters in Russia were woven into narration. For example, *Tsarina* describes the city of Saint Petersburg as a city of illusions:

Perhaps the biggest of these sorts of illusions was also the simplest — the illusion that we were a single city. Saint Petersburg was naturally divided, a series of islands and canals laced together into a capital by Peter the Great centuries ago. There were bridges from one to the next, and the canals were deep, maintained with stone walls that held the Neva River at bay. But we divided ourselves with harsher lines than the land did: the rich and the poor, the merchants and the nobles, the Whites and the Reds [p. 18].

Peasant's living conditions are described in *Anastasia's Secret*, and Anastasia, witnessing a scene like this for the first time in her life is in disbelief:

We were beyond the part of the town that I knew, and the houses became poorer and shabbier. Some looked as though they might fall down. Their wooden sides had been propped up with rough poles leaning against them. I thought at first that they must only be sheds for animals — they had no windows, and gaps that surely let the wind whistle through in the bitter winter. “A family of ten lives in that one,” Sasha whispered.

Later, in the story, Anastasia approaches a campground. She describes their conditions:

People in rags slept on the open ground, curled up against the rain that fell steadily. A few had constructed lean-tos out of discarded blankets and old broom handles. I covered my mouth and retched. Even from this distance, the stench was abominable. Clearly there was no place for human waste other than among the people themselves [p. 25–26].

Working conditions were no better. *Angel on the Square* contains a scene where Katya is forced to witness children her age and younger working with the rags in filthy conditions in order to make paper

for the government. She seems confused to see they are not in school, and Misha explains that this factory is their school, and their life.

Additionally, Russian winters became the backdrops of many novels. For example, *Blood Red, Snow White* depicts Arthur thinking about snow in several scenes. Here are two:

Snow is always in his mind. So much of everything he can remember about his life in Russia is painted on a backdrop of snow, and a cold that's hard to imagine unless you've felt it yourself [p. 87].

The city founded by Peter the Great two hundred years before sat on the river Neva and froze, as if waiting. It was the coldest February anyone could remember; day after day the temperature rose no higher than fifteen degrees below zero. Frost sparkled on the snow like the diamonds that sparkled on the Tsarina's breast [p. 58].

In *Anastasia and Her Sisters*, Anastasia describes the snow at Alexander Palace and how the Neva River was thick with ice, while in *Tsarina*, Natalya narrates stepping outside into the chill of the Russian winter:

I pulled my coat tighter, bowed my head into the wind. The people of the city were clever; their hats and scarves were tucked safely into their coats, their gloved hands lifted to shield their eyes from the sting of the air. It was a particularly enjoyable pastime, spotting the visitors — the people who didn't know just how to bow into the wind, who hadn't learned the slippery bits of the streets [p. 25].

Like in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*, trains travel through the pages of these books. From *The Lost Crown* describing the Tsar's two trains, one a decoy, to Baba Yaga's Dumb Doma hitching a ride on a freight train in *Egg & Spoon*, to Evgenia, Trotsky's secretary, and Arthur Ransome fleeing by train from Moscow to Reval in *Blood Red, Snow White*, trains transport characters and move the plot forward. The unpredictability of the train starting and stopping also adds suspense in some novels, such as *Tsarina*, when Natalya and Leo hide in a boxcar on the way to Moscow filled with caviar, afraid they will get caught if the train stops. Additionally, Natalya reminisces about the longest train ride she has taken in her life, which was to Siberia in a luxury car, containing a personal butler, tea, and coffee. It had only been nine days, but it felt like one day, she remembered.

In the spring of 1918, in *Angel on the Square*, Katya and her mother travel to St. Petersburg on a harrowing journey. Katya describes the train station as chaos, with people trying to push their way into the cars and small children camped out on the floor. When they were finally

able to board in the morning, they took a crowded, third-class car “with hardly enough room to breathe” [p. 254] and “filthy wooden benches. Smoke and soot blew in through the windows. There was no food” [p. 253]. Katya then compares the train ride she endured at the beginning of the novel in order to live with the Tsar: “Silk curtains at the windows, the comfortable overstuffed chairs, and the delicacies served to us by uniformed footmen” [p. 254]. This luxury is elaborated in *Anastasia and Her Sisters* when Anastasia describes their train as a “rolling palace in miniature” [p. 14]. She describes multiple cars containing bedrooms, bathrooms that included a bathtub, a sitting room, a study for the Tsar, a dining car ladies-in-waiting and one for servants.

In these novels, the train provides a metaphor of journey; in particular, a journey or quest many of the characters must endure in order to overcome naivety and innocence. The train also becomes a physical reminder of the disparity between the rich and the poor: The Reds and the Whites.

PROMINENT RUSSIAN REVOLUTION CHARACTERS’ APPEARANCES AND PORTRAYALS IN YA LITERATURE

In the United States, the “household names” most associated with the Russian Revolution are Rasputin, Anastasia, Alexei, and Tsar Nicholas II. Rasputin for his mysticism and defiance to death; Anastasia for her innocence and possible survival from execution; Alexei for his blood disorder; and the Tsar for his royalty and cruelty. These are the characters that readers in the United States will most likely recognize and have a desired interest to read more about during this time in history. Authors can fictionalize and even romanticize them in a way that fits readers’ expectations. In fact, Disney portrays Anastasia and Rasputin in the 1997 movie, *Anastasia*, as the last surviving child of the Romanov Empire who must now find her way in life as a teenager against the evil forces of the villain Rasputin. These characters and others are easy for authors to name as their protagonists and villains, and the historical context of the Russian Revolution surrounding them drives the plotline.

RASPUTIN

The most notable character in these YA novels is Rasputin, who appears in 10 out of the 12 novels studied. Born in Siberia, Grigory Efimovich Rasputin, a self-proclaimed “starets” (holy man/religious advisor) gained the trust of the Tsarina and became an advisor to not only the Tsarina, but also supposedly the Tsar. Rasputin convinced them he had

magical powers to prevent their son, Alexei (heir to the throne), from dying of his incurable disease of hemophilia (a blood disorder where blood does not clot, which can cause internal bleeding due to being bruised or bumped). Throughout the novels, Rasputin is noted as a wild, drunk, smelly, sexually aggressive, lewd, and illiterate man. Authors describe him as frightful: dressed in baggy peasant clothes, covered in filth down to his muddy, leather boots. He has a long, dark, greasy beard with flecks of food in it, long stringy hair, and piercing, hypnotic, blue eyes.

In *Blood Red, Snow White*, Sedgwick's prose reads, "He was said to be a great lover, and it was even rumored that he was having an affair with the Tsarina herself" [p. 44]. In *Anastasia's Secret*, Rasputin fondles Anastasia's breasts in front of the Tsarina. In one passage, Anastasia says, "He had a way of making me feel like the child I believed I had left behind, and yet at the same time very conscious of the woman inside me" [p. 87]. In *Dreaming Anastasia* (2009) by Joy Preble, Anastasia writes a letter to her mother claiming, "So you let that monster into our lives, thinking he was the only one who could save your son. That creature, Rasputin, who called himself Father Grigory and stood in our room for so long one night while we girls were already in our nightgowns that my cheeks grew hot from anger and embarrassment and the servants began to gossip about his intentions" [p. 130]. In *Anastasia and Her Sisters* (2015) by Carolyn Meyer, however, he is viewed through Anastasia's eyes as a saint and fatherly figure. In one passage, Anastasia comments, "When Father Grigory visited my parents, he usually came to our rooms and spent time with my sisters and me, talking quietly and praying with us in front of our holy icons" [p. 26].

In some of the books, he has a minor appearance, such as appearing to heal Alexei's bleeding, which is shown through first person account, usually a member of the Romanov family, usually Anastasia, or aristocracy, such as a childhood friend or lady-in-waiting to Anastasia. His death is also described in great detail in many of the books. In *The Family Romanov*, Fleming begins her section entitled "Death to the Starets" below:

It was just before midnight and snowing heavily when Rasputin arrived at Prince Yusupov's palace. The starets had been lured there by the promise of finally meeting the prince's wife, Irina, reportedly the most beautiful woman in Petrograd. <...> At first, everything went according to plan. Yusupov showed Rasputin into a basement room where he plied the starets with wine and cakes that Dr. Lazovert claimed to have been laced with cyanide [p. 151–152].

To continue the fateful evening, the main character in *Angel on the Square*, 12-year-old Katya, describes the numerous attempts to kill Rasputin in her own words:

They fed him poisoned petits fours. He ate them all up and did not die. They shot him. Still he did not die. Finally they hit him with a club and threw him into the river. I could not get the image of the murdered man out of my mind. I had nightmares of his bloody body rising out of the icy Neva and making its way back to the palace [p. 171].

Most notable, however, were the novels that involved Rasputin in much of the plotline and fictionally altered his life. For example, in *The Curse of the Romanovs* (2007) by Staton Rabin, Rasputin is revealed to be Alexei's father instead of the Tsar. In this story, Alexei witnesses Rasputin's sexual advances toward his mother and in turn, asks his cousin, Felix, to murder him. Rasputin avoids death with his mystical powers by time traveling to the future. He knows Alexei was behind his murder and seeks revenge on him. Alexei is aware of Rasputin's revenge and learns to time travel due to absorbing many of the spiritual, mystical powers used to cure him. Because of this newfound power, Alexei escapes death during the fateful night of the basement execution and time travels to New York City, in 2010, where Rasputin waits for him.

Another example of a twist in plot surrounding Rasputin's life is in *The Fetch* (2009) by Laura Whitcomb. In this story, Calder, a 19-year-old Fetch (a death escort), repeatedly shows up at Alexei's bedside when he is near the brink of death due to hemophilia. Anastasia and Alexei are the only people who can see him, since he is a shadow. He appears at Rasputin's side who one night drinks himself to death in his bathtub. Rasputin's soul makes a deal with Calder to experience eternity for three days, but this deal means Calder must then enter Rasputin's body as a mortal on Earth. During the infamous scene in Yusupov's basement, Rasputin has difficulty dying after a series of attempts were made on his life, i.e., poisoned cakes, stabbing, bludgeoning, three gunshots, because Calder was in his body rather than Rasputin, and therefore cannot die.

Even though Rasputin played little role in the events leading up to the Russian Revolution before his death, the mysticism surrounding him, especially during the events of his murder, makes for a great character in historical fiction. He can easily become a natural villain in YA lit plots, which in many of these books forces the protagonist to mature and confront "evil."

ANASTASIA

The second most popular character was Anastasia, as mentioned earlier. However, in many of the books, the reader watches as Anastasia matures into a beautiful “woman” (even though she was only 17 when she died). Most of the books begin with Anastasia as a foolish, naïve, innocent, 12-year-old. Anastasia describes herself in *Anastasia’s Secret* in this manner:

I am shorter and a little on the plump side compared to my sisters, and my hair persists in kinking into unruly curls. I’m just one of the grandduchesses, not usually singled out for any kind of comment. Even Mama, who makes an outward show of treating us all the same, scolds me for not being as graceful as Olga and Tatiana, or as sweet tempered as Mashka [p. 52].

In *Angel on the Square*, 12-year-old Katya comes to live with the Romanovs since her mother is training to be a lady-in-waiting to the Tsarina. Anastasia is also 12 and is depicted as “fun loving and more high spirited, but her practical jokes were sometimes cruel, and I winced when she played them on the servants, who could not complain” [p. 102–103]. She is also viewed as naïve in this novel due to her sheltered childhood. Here is an excerpt where Katya tried to tell Anastasia what she witnessed at a paper factory:

We seldom had conversations about what was going on in the country. I had not forgotten the children who were working in the government paper factory. I had not given up my idea of finding a way to let the Tsar know about the factory. One afternoon I tried to tell Stana about the children and about the strikes, but she wouldn’t listen.

“That is just propaganda,” she said. “It’s all lies told by the revolutionaries.”

“No, Stana,” I said, “I saw it with my own eyes.”

Stana grew angry. “You are our guest here, Katya. You have no right to say things against my papa” [p. 103].

Throughout many of the books where Anastasia is the protagonist, the reader senses her desire to grow up quickly. In *Anastasia and Her Sisters*, Anastasia says, “I wanted to wear a real ball gown, like Olga’s and Tatiana’s, but I was sure Mama would insist that Marie and I dress like ‘girlies’ and wear our usual white dresses” [p. 109]. In *Dreaming Anastasia*, Baba Yaga takes Anastasia “prisoner” during the family’s execution to protect her. Throughout the novel, Anastasia writes letters to her family during her captivity. As these letters progress, the reader senses maturity from Anastasia. Her character comes to terms with her

father, the Tsar, having an illegitimate son with his former lover, a ballerina, who becomes the antagonist in the novel. In *The Fetch*, Anastasia must be brave with her brother Alexei as they run from demons and Lost Souls and then accept their fate of death as souls in eternity. In *Anastasia's Secret*, Anastasia meets a soldier named Sasha and falls in love with him. Throughout the novel, as tensions rise between the Reds and the Whites, their love for each other also rises. On her 16th birthday, she and Sasha “consummate” their love, as shown in the following passage:

I, Anastasie, was loved by a man, a man I loved so much that I wanted to give myself to him completely. I wanted to be two people at once: the creature who had nothing but feelings and who was discovering her body in a way she never knew was possible, and my old self, standing aside and watching this love scene — so perfect, and yet real. But that feeling lasted only a moment. Soon I was lost in the sensations that welled up through my body in waves so powerful they made me forget who I was. I let all consciousness go and took that step off a high cliff, trusting that Sasha would keep me safe. Trusting that he cared enough for me to protect me against anything [p. 203].

Furthermore, Anastasia is depicted as witnessing war firsthand when she accompanies her mother and sisters to hospitals. In some books, she helps men write letters to their families, and in others, she reads to the wounded soldiers, which affected her. In *Anastasia and Her Sisters*, she reflects, “Every day I visited wounded soldiers who in the morning were murmuring their thanks for my reading them letters <...> and who in the afternoon were dead, a white sheet pulled over their faces, and I'd had no chance to say good-bye <...> Suffering and death were all around me, and I never did get used to it” [p. 156].

Anastasia is a figure in history shrouded in mystery. According to some of the authors mentioned above, little research is available about the four daughters and Alexei except for accounts from tutors and servants who lived with them. However, readers know her fate. She is and will be forever 17, and there is sadness with that reality. Authors of historical fiction have the ability to manipulate the circumstances surrounding her death and possibly even make it so that she lives. Indeed, she makes for the ideal teen protagonist.

TSAR NICHOLAS II

Another member of the Romanov family, and key character in the events leading up to the Russian Revolution is Tsar Nicholas himself. However, he is not a main character in any of the books in this

microtrend. If anything, he plays the role of the father, a distracted father, and a background character, as in most YA literature. His distraction, of course, is due to the imminent uprising and eventual abdication. In *The Lost Crown*, Maria notes, “Waking up every day and remembering Papa’s gone to the front is like biting into a bonbon with nothing in the center” [p. 33]. When referring to Alexei’s often spoiled behavior, Anastasia notes in *Anastasia and Her Sisters*, “The only one he obeyed without question was Papa, and often Papa was too engrossed in a conversation to notice his misbehavior” [p. 53]. But he is also portrayed as a loving father and doting husband, unabashedly in love with his wife, Alexandra. In *The Gathering Storm* by (2012) by Robin Bridges, the readers meet Nicky, a young Tsarevitch, and his courtship of Alexandra. This scene is just after the pair ice skate during a winter afternoon:

“You will get to wear your beautiful dress and hear the music. And you will see Alix in her lovely Worth gown.” Elizabeth looked at the tsarevitch over her cup of cocoa. “Alix looks lovely in lavender, don’t you think, Nicholas?”

“Oh, yes,” Nicholas said dreamily.
Alix blushed and smiled shyly [p. 108].

Throughout many of the novels, especially books where Anastasia is the protagonist, Nicholas and Alexandra’s marriage is portrayed as loyal and very loving. For example, in *The Lost Crown*, Anastasia notices how Papa consoles Mama after Aleksei (spelling used in the book) falls ill. They’re at the train station: “Papa steps out, and right then I want to run to him. But he goes straight to Mama’s side and hooks his arm around her waist. Tatiana steps back to join my sisters as he speaks softly in Mama’s ear” [p. 65].

Some books depict the Tsar as patriotic, concerned for his country as well as filled with anguish, as in *Angel on the Square*, when Katya observes the royal family eating a meager dinner while in exile in Tobolsk, Siberia. Below is the excerpt:

He looked about at his children, shabbily dressed and bundled against the cold. He looked at the table with its frugal meal. He sank down onto a chair. “I gave up everything because I thought I would save Russia. Now a third of our country is gone, given away by the Bolsheviks.” He bowed his head and covered his face with his hands [p. 242].

Similarly, he is portrayed as old and worn down after he abdicates from the throne in *The Lost Crown*. Through Tatiana’s eyes, the reader

sees how his oldest daughter, Olga, now sees him: “Strands of silver streak his red beard. I cannot remember whether they were there the last time I saw him. He seems sad, almost ashamed of himself at first, but not worried. How long has it been since Papa has not looked worried?” [p. 111].

Overall, the Tsar’s relationship with his family is viewed as his strength, while in many of these titles, he is described as a tyrant and unsympathetic character. For example, in *Blood Red, Snow White*, after news of Rasputin’s death, the omniscient narrator says, “They had thought that the Tsarina, freed from his tyranny, would in turn free the Tsar from his feeble decision making. Quite the reverse was true, and the Tsar imposed further strictures on his ministers and tried to clamp down even harder than he already had” [p. 56–57]. In *Anastasia’s Secret*, Anastasia realizes that her father might be unsympathetic to the casualties of war. She narrates, “He was disturbed. I could see that. But in a way that had more to do with the Germans being on his territory than about the thousands of men who had died” [p. 49].

Occasionally, the Tsar was viewed as a weak leader who was incapable of making any decisions. In *Dreaming Anastasia*, Ethan, who has vowed to restore power to Russia and save Anastasia and the girl, Anne, who dreams about Anastasia, states, “At the beginning, it was about restoring a Romanov to power. That was our mission. That’s what I believed when I pledged to do this thing — the Romanovs were the rightful rulers of Mother Russia, even if Nicholas was a poor excuse for a tsar” [p. 165–166]. In *Anastasia’s Secret*, Nicholas’s mother comes for a visit and warns her son, “Can you not see that Alexandra is ruining you? Everyone at court hates her. They think she has you wrapped around her finger, and that all the decisions you make are at her behest” [p. 110].

While many books show the Tsar’s abdication and impending execution, showing sympathy for him and his family, other titles portray sympathy toward the Bolsheviks. In *Tsarina*, there is a shift in thinking which progresses as the main character, Natalya, daughter of nobility, befriends a Bolshevik sympathizer, Leo. For example, early in the novel, Natalya tells the reader:

For a noble girl, I thought myself quite liberal; after all, I wanted many things the Reds wanted. I wanted the people to have food, money. I wanted people to be happy. But the Reds thought their happiness meant tearing down the nobility, destroying people like me. Like the other Whites, this

notion left me far more angry than piteous. I didn't make them poor, nor did I make my family wealthy. If we handed over our wealth, who would employ them? Who would give them work? [p. 21–22]

Later on, Natalya sees events from which her life in aristocracy has shielded her, such as children wearing open-toed shoes, selling matchsticks in the dead of winter. She tries to understand the Reds' position and their belief system, and Leo is eager to share his thoughts: "The Reds are about equality. About the people ruling themselves. About having votes and voice. Meanwhile, the Whites kill peasants, trample on factory worker — they even murdered Rasputin" [p. 119]. Still, toward the end of the novel, Natalya agrees to disagree with Leo, realizing that even though they both strongly believe in their side's cause, beneath it all, they were both Russian and wanted what was best for their beloved country.

BOLSHEVIK LEADERS

Blood Red, Snow White also portrayed this nationalism between two characters introduced early on to the reader as a Russian named Vladimir, and a Jew named Lev, who were "firm friends, though they spent much of their time arguing" [p. 48]. Since the beginning of the book is told with fairy tale motifs and in a fairy tale-style narrative, the friends come across a bear in the woods that wants to eat them. They convince the bear that it should "stand against the man who has taken the food from your mouth!" [p. 50]. The bear asks whom should he eat? Lev's response:

The Tsar, of course. He's the one responsible. He has starved the land, and you, the great Russian bear, for too long. He must be swept away! Wipe him from the face of the earth, and you will go hungry no more! <...> The Tsar, and the whole system he controls. A handful of people, unimaginably rich, who have taken everything this country has for themselves, and left you with nothing! Now you must fight to get it back! You must fight! [p. 50]

Later in the story, the metaphorical bear "had already become what it had been waiting to be, and the men who set it on its journey changed, too. Lev became Trotsky, Vladimir took the name Lenin, and they stepped into a bright and furious modern world — blood red, and snow white" [p. 71]. Woven through this novel is no definitive right and wrong regarding sides. Instead, the main character, an adult male (which is atypical in YA literature) named Arthur Ransome works for both the Bolsheviks and England to deliver messages

as a journalist. (He is also a famous children's author who wrote *Old Peter's Russian Tales*). Trotsky is portrayed as a charismatic, confident leader. Arthur noted that he "felt overawed. Why were there some people who seemed so sure of themselves that it made him feel small and ignorant by comparison, as if they had a script to life with all the answers on it? He felt he didn't even know the questions" [p. 105]. He even appears arrogant when he tells Arthur, "I can end the war between Germany and Russia by myself" [p. 108], and "I have to save this Revolution" [p. 108].

However, Trotsky also appears dangerous. In a meeting in Trotsky's office in the Smolny Institute in Petrograd, Arthur notices a small bullet hole in the wall. Trotsky's reply? "That?" he said, rubbing his ear. He grinned sheepishly. "I was ... holding my pistol ... trying it for size, and the next thing ... Bang!" [p. 106]. Later in the novel, Trotsky becomes wary of Arthur, and it is Lenin who tells Trotsky "not to be so suspicious of an old friend of the Bolsheviks" [p. 217].

Unfortunately, specific characters who shaped events leading up to and during the revolution were not prominent characters in most books. Instead, the books told the war from general sides, the Reds versus the Whites. And there were moments of sympathy toward the Reds, but overall, since most stories were told from the viewpoint of nobility and privilege, the revolution was seen through naïve eyes, sympathetic mostly toward the Romanov dynasty and nobility.

IMPLICATIONS AND IMPLIED MESSAGES

These historical fiction books are engaging, creative works surrounding a fascinating time period in Russian history, and a part of history that rarely gets taught in the United States. Because of this lack of experience with material, two events may occur for young adult readers; first, some readers might become enthralled with the Russian Revolution; wanting to read everything they can get their hands on, as I did. Making these fictional books "jumping off" points for readers to immerse themselves in other nonfiction accounts of the events they experienced as readers. Or, second, the opposite could occur; because some readers might not be familiar with the historical context of the Russian Revolution, this lack of background schema might interrupt the reading process, especially regarding reading comprehension. As Rosenblatt (1995) noted, "To share the author's insight, the reader need not have had identical experiences, but he must have experienced some needs, emotions, concepts, some

circumstances and relationships, from which he can construct the new situations, emotions, and understandings set forth in the literary work” [p. 77]. Therefore, the events in these plots may not be shared events for the readers, but the emotions due to adolescent themes, and some of the relationships formed with the protagonists can become co-constructions of knowledge and understanding for readers.

Overall, these novels would be a welcome addition to any curriculum centering on the Russian Revolution or even revolutions in general. However, a critical awareness must be addressed with young adult readers. Reading with a critical eye, for example, means noticing whose voices are missing from these texts. What message are we sending readers when most of the books highlight nobility and wealthy lifestyles? When the ethnic makeup is predominantly white? And when romantic relationships are formed based on heteronormativity?

Furthermore, in many of these books, the reader is made to feel sympathy toward the Tsar and the Romanov family. Some books depict the atrocities of war; however, these deaths are mentioned as casualties of war rather than the effect of the Tsar’s orders/commands to send thousands of unprepared soldiers into war, or the needless deaths of thousands of starving civilians, especially when an imbalance of wealth is displayed in most of these books.

Finally, is it okay to use Anastasia? Why not the other sisters? Is it because of her youth and innocence? Or was it because of the mysterious conspiracy that lingered long after her execution, and how people claimed to be the missing princess, Anastasia? What framework do we want the Russian Revolution to be remembered? In these novels, there is a definitive lens through which events and people are portrayed, but there are always two sides to every story.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER?

Historical young adult fiction opens windows to other time periods and people, oftentimes revealing events that should not be forgotten. History is filled with hidden secrets waiting to be discovered. Readers of historical fiction enjoy discovering historical truths embedded in fiction. This is why many educators in the United States now include historical fiction as supplementary texts in the curriculum in order for students to immerse themselves in the narrative of a particular time period in history. Through reading these books, students will immerse themselves in another time period and recognize events and prominent characters that led to one of the most important revolutions in world

history. However, they will also recognize inconsistencies. Here, educators can offer valuable lessons on what it means to write and read historical fiction and how authors can take certain liberties with characters and plot events in order to craft a good story.

Moreover, the themes in these books allow teens to connect to historical events on an emotional level, where statistics and artifacts become human events. The YA books in this microtrend were written for teens, using a teen voice (excluding *Blood Red*, *Snow White*), and readers witnessed protagonists maturing and solidifying their identity through crisis, which usually surrounded the Russian Revolution. Most importantly, historical young adult fiction connects young adult readers across all areas of the world together, thus forming a shared understanding of hidden truths revealed through the narrative comfort of fiction.

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Appendix

List of Young Adult Titles Surrounding the Russian Revolution and Brief Summaries

Bridges, R. (2012). *The gathering storm (Katerina)*. New York, NY: Delacorte Press

Katerina, a royal debutante and duchess, discovers she can raise the dead, which she considers a curse. However, will this necromancer curse assist her in saving the Tsar? Faeries, vampires, and undead flesh eaters abound in this historical fiction-fantasy account of Saint Petersburg in the late 1800s.

Dunlap, S. E. (2010). *Anastasia's secret*. New York, NY: Bloomsbury

Anastasia tells the story of how her family members were removed from the imperial palace and exiled to Siberia, and while held captive, she begins a romance with a guard who could possibly save her life.

Fleming, C. (2014). *The family Romanov: Murder, rebellion & the fall of Imperial Russia*. New York, NY: Schwartz & Wade Books

An amazing historical account starting with Nicholas II's family lineage and early Russia continuing through 1920 with life under Lenin. Numerous primary sources are included, including documentation of peasant life.

Maguire, G. (2014). Egg & spoon: A novel. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press

A train heading to visit the Tsar breaks down near Elena's poor village. Ekaterina, a girl of Elena's age, befriends her and the two switch lives due to a comedy of errors involving a Faberge egg. Only Baba Yaga can help correct the mix-up and save Russia from losing its magic.

Meyer, C. (2015). Anastasia and her sisters. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers

While Anastasia snoops through her older sisters' diary entries in the comfort of her palaces, Russia is changing outside. Told over the course of seven years, Anastasia shares her innermost thoughts about the war, her father (the Tsar), and the harsh living conditions for her and her family in exile.

Miller, S. E. (2011). The lost crown. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers

Told through the four daughters of Nicholas II, Olga, Tatiana, Maria, and Anastasia, each chapter provides a different narrative and perception of events leading up to World War I. With the war, readers witness how each life changes due to political unrest and eventually the revolution.

Patrick, J. N. (2014). Tsarina. New York, NY: Razorbill, an imprint of Penguin Group (USA)

Natalya and the tsarevitch, Alexei, have a budding romance. He is protected by the power of a Faberge egg. The Reds are accused of stealing it after raiding the Winter Palace. Now Natalya must find the egg to save Alexei's life. She receives assistance from a Red supporter, Leo, who also wants the egg for his own purposes. Who will find the egg first, and will it save Alexei?

Preble, J. (2009). Dreaming Anastasia. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks Jabberwocky, an imprint of Sourcebooks, Inc

Believed to be dead by the world, Anastasia is alive and well, kept in the house of Baba Yaga, who was summoned by an ancient brotherhood to protect the Romanov dynasty. Anne, a teenager living in present day Chicago can't stop dreaming about Anastasia. Ethan, a 100-year-old teenager, protected by the brotherhood, recognizes Anne's dreaming power and warns her that evil is near. However, who is evil? Who can be trusted? Baba Yaga? A page-turner told through chapters rotating points of view among Anastasia, Ethan, and Anne.

Rabin, S. (2007). The curse of the Romanovs. New York, NY: Margaret K. McElderry Books

It's 1916; Alexei Romanov is in danger, and only Rasputin can help. However, Rasputin has ulterior motives for helping Alexei, and Alexei knows this. He escapes Rasputin's grasp through time travel, only to find himself in New York City in 2010. He encounters a distant cousin named Varda who happens to be working on a cure for hemophilia. Will she be able to save him before that fateful night in 1918 when they both must travel back in time? Or will it be too late? Told through humorous dialogue and witty banter, this book is a riveting adventure.

Sedgwick, M. (2007). Blood red, snow white. New York, NY: Roaring Brook Press

Arthur Ransome, famous children's author, leaves his wife and daughter in England and begins a rousing adventure in Russia where he is accused of being a double agent by both England and Russia. He falls in love with Trotsky's secretary, and both flee for

freedom during the civil war. Told in three sections: as a fairy tale, one night in Arthur's life, and finally from Arthur's point of view, this book is a page-turner filled with mystery and suspense with Russia as an incredible backdrop.

Whelan, G. (2001). Angel on the square. New York, NY: HarperCollins

Katya's mother has been selected to be a lady-in-waiting for the Tsarina. Her family moves inside the palace walls where she befriends Anastasia. Katya witnesses the Tsar's erratic behavior and slowly begins to question her feelings for the Whites. When the Romanovs are sent to Ekaterinburg, Katya and her mother are no longer allowed to accompany them, so they make the long journey back to their old aristocratic lives, only to find that nothing remains and they must start over again, living as peasants. Will they survive this unaccustomed lifestyle?

The fetch. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt

Calder, a death escort, falls in love with a mortal girl, who happens to be the Tsarina. Only Alexei and Anastasia can see him each time he appears at Alexei's bedside. He encounters Rasputin, who is on the brink of death in a bathtub, and Rasputin bargains with him to trade places for three days so that he can experience eternity. Will Rasputin keep his end of the deal and exchange back, or will Calder be stuck in Rasputin's body forever? And more importantly, can Calder save Anastasia and Alexei from their impending deaths?