
Review by Gillian Dooley for Writers’ Radio, Radio Adelaide

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*Ice road* is a novel of nineteenth century proportions by prolific British author Gillian Slovo. With its broad canvas of Russian history and large cast of characters, led by a young woman called Natasha, it consciously harks back to Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*. But Gillian Slovo is not Tolstoy. She somehow fails to provide the forward motion needed to hook the reader in until a good two-thirds of the way through the novel.

The story begins with a cleaner called Irina Davydovna Arbatova, a pragmatic worker born at the beginning of the twentieth century, who by various chance encounters becomes involved in the family of Boris Aleksandrovic Ivanov, a party official, one of the new soviet ruling class. The setting is Leningrad, and the year is 1934. Boris for some reason puts Irina forward for a number of jobs which give her an unusual amount of status and contact with famous people for one of her humble origins. First she goes on an ill-fated, though not fatal, journey through the arctic on the *Chelyuskin*, a ship which becomes icebound for months. Rescued with her ship-mates, she returns to share in a heroes’ welcome. She then takes up housekeeping positions with an historian who becomes a posthumous celebrity, and with the leader of Leningrad, Sergei Mironovich Kirov, who is assassinated soon after.

Irina’s sections of the book are narrated in the first person. She is down-to-earth, a realist who has no time for ‘what-ifs’. Boris’s preferment of her is almost absent-minded and nothing to do with any sexual relationship: he is busy enough with a wife and a
mistress. She provides the thread which unifies the novel: all the important characters come into contact with her. Her phlegmatic attitude to life sets the tone for the rest of the novel, a peculiarly Russian kind of stoicism which allowed people to live through Stalin’s purges and the devastating siege of Leningrad.

There are no anti-Stalin heroes in *Ice Road*. Boris, an intelligent and kind man, survives the purges of the 1930s which wiped out huge numbers of his colleagues, while the character who does fall victim is entirely innocent – a keen factory worker, a supporter of the Russian state, without a dissident thought in his head. There are victims and survivors, and no corny poetic justice.

There are many interesting and worthy things about *Ice Road*, including a lot of fascinating historical facts about Leningrad before and during the second world war. The main problem with the novel is a lack of focus in the first 350 pages or so. The action moves with glacial slowness through the dismal, wintry years of the 1930s, with several intertwining plot lines any one of which could be compelling in its own right; but these ingredients somehow fail to add up to a coherent whole. The book is worth persisting with, however, as in the final 200 pages the narrative threads start to hang together in a more satisfying way and the novel almost reaches its potential as a successor to its great nineteenth century models.