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This is the author's radio script of this article.

*Otherland*. Maria Tumarkin (Vintage, 2010).

Reviewed by Gillian Dooley for Writers' Radio, Radio Adelaide, recorded 5 June 2010.

Maria Tumarkin left the Soviet Union in 1989 at the age of 15 and came to Australia with her family, who were worried about what the end of communism might mean for Soviet Jews. In *Otherland* she recounts a trip back to Russia and Ukraine with her daughter Billie, who turns twelve during their travels.

She begins with Billie's refusal to use the disgusting toilet on a train from Russia to Ukraine. But she immediately discounts the significance of this beginning:

So ... although this book begins in a rather disgraceful Russian toilet it is, I sincerely hope, not one of *those* books. It is certainly not an exercise in revealing and revelling in the former Empire's underbelly – I am no expat on a mission. My motives are altogether different if not entirely clear, even to myself. There is, first and foremost, the urge Billie and I share to connect her viscerally to her family's history.

Tumarkin is a self-conscious and highly anxious narrator. She uses outrageous emotional blackmail on Billie, then castigates herself for doing so: 'I ache with disappointment. I promised myself I would never become like this. And here I am scraping the bottom because my daughter is not having epiphanies at the time and place of my choosing.' Everything is examined for its significance: 'Am I not the link between my mum and my daughter ... and if so, have I dropped the ball; have I failed to transmit something essential from one to the other?', she worries. She engineers a visit to St Petersburg to fall on Billie's twelfth birthday, because she herself was 12 on her first visit there. She realises that such contrivances are doomed, but, she says, 'I needed the symbolism'. Poor, harassed Billie, tired and bored with her mother's insistent urging to share her feelings, challenged by sadistic minor functionaries

and unhygienic facilities, doesn't need the symbolism: she just needs some rest and time to herself.

Tumarkin over-dramatises and is at the same time ironically aware of her propensity to do so. But Billie, despite 'constantly want[ing] to sit, eat and go home' instead of undergoing 'some sort of transformation', turns out to be more level-headed than her mother, and sometimes startlingly mature for her years. They go to Babi Yar, the site of an horrific massacre of Ukrainian Jews by the Nazis in 1941. Tumarkin is outraged when Billie says it's a beautiful place, but has to concede that she was right: 'in the face of loss, the idea of life going on may seem like an ultimate insult or a self-serving fiction, but this is all we have in the end.' Billie's diary entries are quoted from time to time: her last word on the trip, written a year later, was that 'it was like four seasons in one day. I felt absolutely every single emotion on the spectrum but, even though it was really hard, I'd go back and do it again and again and again.'

It's not only Billie that Tumarkin wants to carry along with her. She constantly invokes writers and musicians who have been important to her, sometimes to a point barely short of tedium. And of course the history behind all these places, and the old friends she meets, is integral to this account of her travels, but sometimes I was just a little resistant to her urgings to feel as she feels and to agree with all her opinions.

*Otherland* is a book that mirrors the mood swings of its narrator – sometimes passionate, sometimes preachy, sometimes ironic: often hot-headed, then ashamed for its hot-headedness. But despite its occasionally longueurs, it's a worthwhile read: an interesting glimpse of Russia through the eyes of an expat who has been in Australia long enough to know our ways, but who still feels a strong affinity with the land of her birth.