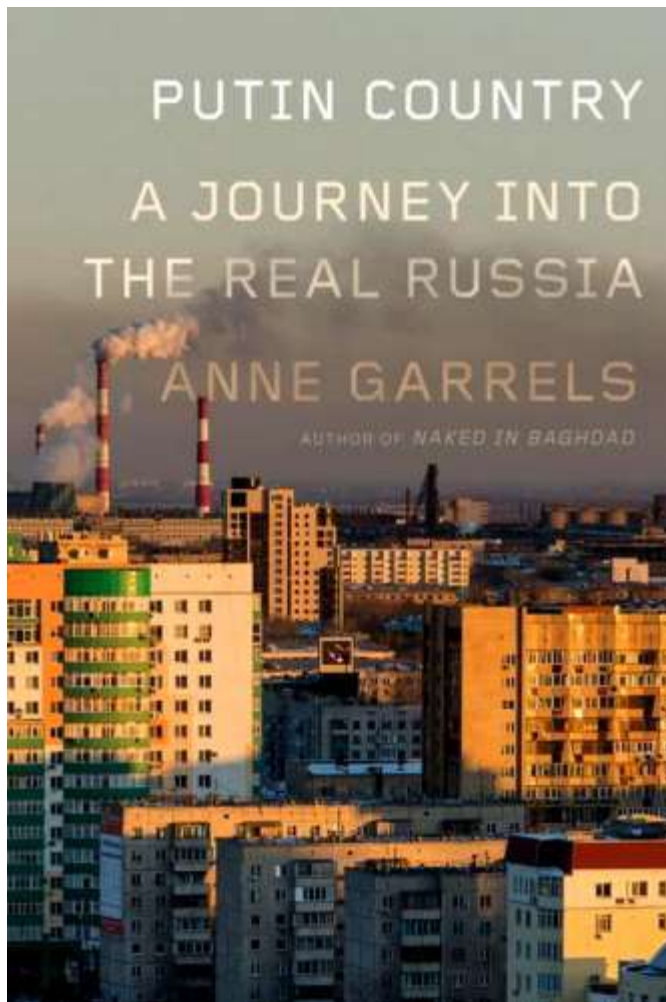


'Putin Country' an inside look at ordinary Russians

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"Putin Country: A Journey into the Real Russia" by Anne Garrels. New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2016, 240 pages, \$26.00.



“Deciding to focus on one provincial area, I considered any number of towns and regions and finally let fate decide,” Anne Garrels explains near the beginning of *“Putin Country: A Journey into the Real Russia,”* her book on the day-to-day lives of ordinary Russians.

“Lacking a dart, I threw a sharpened pencil at the huge map of Russia in my office. It landed close to the center, making a small rip in a region that, like much of the country, had long been closed to foreigners, but had recently opened up to the world. Given my silent pledge to go wherever the pencil point landed, my relationship with the city of Chelyabinsk and the surrounding region of the same name was sealed. I have been going there regularly ever since. It has indeed become my second home.”

I learned about *“Putin Country”* as I was listening to NPR’s *“Morning Edition”* on WKU Public Radio. I enjoy when they interview authors, and this one piqued my interest from the moment I heard Garrels describe her motivation for writing the book: “One of the reasons I did the book was to go back and look at maybe what mistakes we may have made along the way that helped create a

Putin by sort of dismissing Russia as a loser and by not acknowledging that it really might have a say in some things, and I think trying to understand that Russia is wounded and is licking its wounds.” Indeed, a significant portion of the volume is devoted to making sense of the adoration many of the “common people” Garrels came to know have for their leader.

The book is comprised of 18 relatively succinct, easy-to-read chapters and consists of a very personal account of the journalist’s numerous visits to Chelyabinsk, which is located in Russia’s heartland. What I found most appealing about the narrative was the writer’s intimate knowledge of the culture she is describing. Most of what the average American knows about Russia comes from the mass media and is focused on a relatively few widely known people and places. Think of how you would view the United States if you were only given information about New York City, Chicago and Los Angeles. In order to get to know what it’s really like in a country, you have to visit the smaller towns and villages that are home to a majority of the inhabitants who live there. This is

exactly what you get with “Putin Country” – a kind of relaxed detail and real-world honesty permeates virtually every page.

Garrels was senior foreign correspondent for NPR for almost 25 years. During this time, she reported from Russia and most of the Soviet republics, Yugoslavia, the Middle East, China, Mongolia and Iraq. She was assigned to Baghdad during the 2003 U.S. invasion and covered Iraq for six years. Prior to joining NPR in 1986, she was chief correspondent in Moscow and Central America for ABC and the State Department correspondent for NBC. She has won numerous awards including the Courage in Journalism Award from the International Women’s Media Foundation and the George Polk Award for Radio Reporting for her coverage of the war in Iraq. A 1972 graduate of Harvard University’s Radcliffe College, she is also a member of the board of Oxfam America and the Committee to Protect Journalists. This is her second book; the first being “Naked in Baghdad: The Iraq War and the Aftermath as Seen by NPR’s Correspondent,” which was published in 2003.

It is important to recognize the historical significance of Chelyabinsk, one of the many “secret” cities in Russia. Due primarily to the military and industrial installations located in the region, it was off-limits to outsiders during most of the Cold War. When Garrels began visiting the city and its residents more than 20 years ago, she opened a door that had been closed for decades. The portrait she paints of the people who have lived there for generations is both illuminating and compelling; it also serves as a kind of cautionary tale about the effects isolation can have on both individuals as well as the communities in which they live.

“Alcoholism remains the bane of Russian family life, a major factor in a divorce rate that is now No. 1 in the world,” Garrels notes in “The Russian Family,” the sixth chapter and one I found particularly poignant. “Workers on their way to the factory and kids well under the legal drinking age stroll the streets, beers in hand, not even bothering to stash them in a discreet brown paper bag.”

Garrels points out some improvements have been noted in the past few years, although the situation is still dire by American standards: “Over the past 10 years, Russians are on average living a little longer, drinking themselves to death less frequently, killing themselves less often and killing each other more rarely, but the statistics still aren’t great in global terms. The Russian taste for liquor is still serious. Twenty-five percent of Russian men die before the age of 55, compared with 7 percent in most Western countries, and researchers cite alcohol as a key reason.”

In many respects, “Putin Country” is a testament to the resiliency of the human spirit in the face of extreme adversity. The people Garrels encounters are not unaware of what is going on in the rest of the world, although the lens through which they see events unfold is somewhat clouded. Most Russians, although ostensibly living in a democracy, still do not enjoy the same freedoms we do in the West and have to be careful regarding what they say and especially what they post. Witness the following from “Freedom of Speech,” the 15th chapter: “The managing editor of a major Chelyabinsk online news site, who spoke only on condition I did not use his name, says he can’t remember the last time his site criticized the government. In general, he says, ‘we try to avoid conflict’ – a nice way of saying he and his owners don’t want to offend officials and advertisers or end up in court or worse. The financial penalties for libel and defamation, which are loosely defined by the courts, are crippling.”

I enjoyed this one immensely and I highly recommend it for anyone who wants a sense of what life is like for the majority of Russian citizens. Garrels does not disappoint.

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