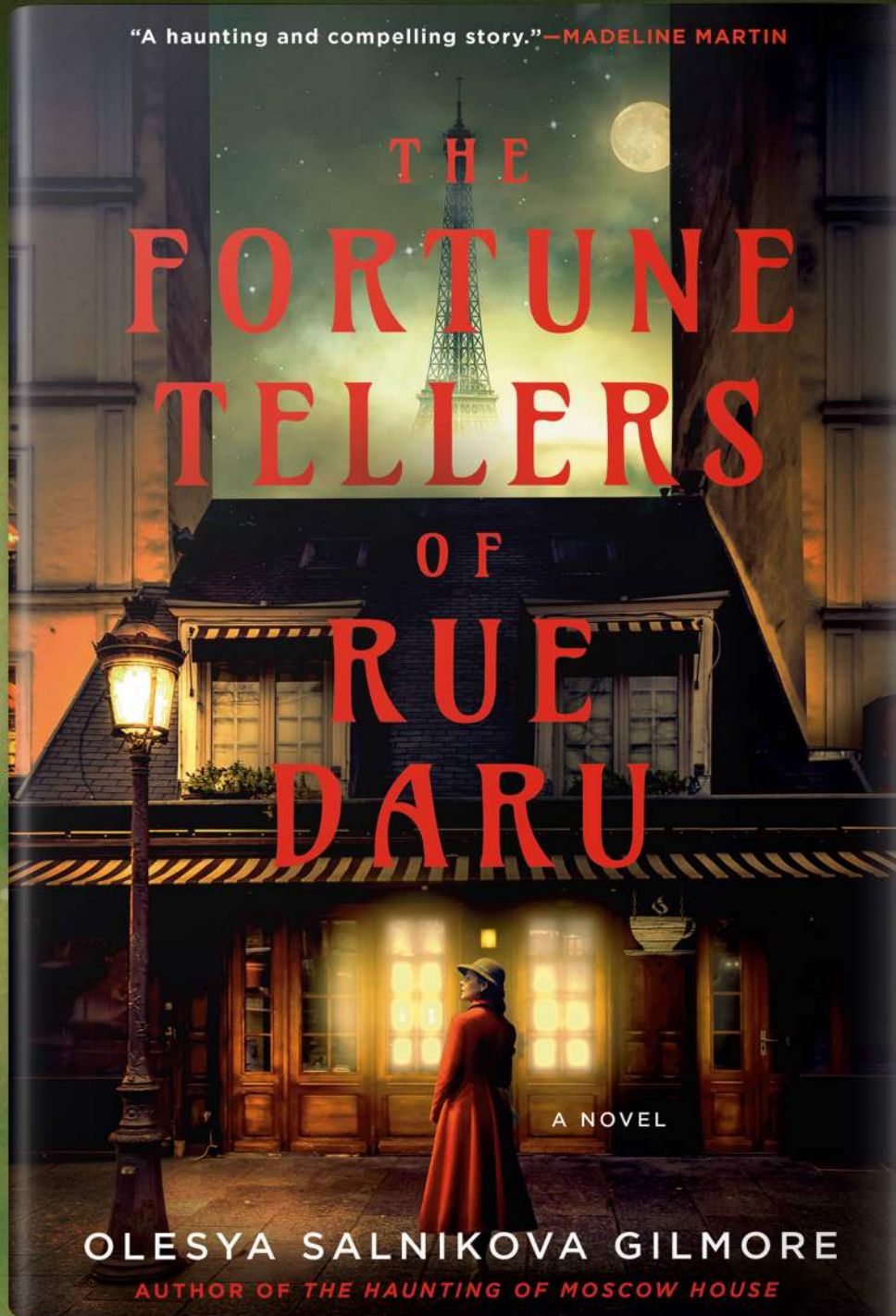


BOOK CLUB KIT



BERKLEY

DEAR READER,

Welcome to the Samovar tearoom on rue Daru, in the heart of old Paris, where fortunes are whispered over coffee cups and séances are held instead of evening tea service.

There live the Lenormand women, Valya and Zina, a grandmother and granddaughter fortune-telling duo who will tell your fortune and probably hand you a tin of tea laced with an herbal remedy along with a sweet or two. You may see strange happenings in the tearoom—lights flickering, tea spilling. A ghost, blinking in and out of sight. Pay no attention. They come with the territory.

This is a gothic novel, after all. And I have lived with spirits and with fortune-telling all my life. My grandaunt would read my palm regularly. My grandmother gifted me a pendant with a magnet and told me to ask it any question I had about the future. My sister's sleepwalking was cured by an egg yolk placed in a bowl under her bed. Superstitions rule my daily existence. I shouldn't talk about my baby to strangers or say I'm doing well; I should say "tfu, tfu, tfu" and knock three times against wood (real wood, mind you) to ward off the ever-present evil eye. And of course, my departed family members are still alive, in the portraits and paintings that have always surrounded me.

These were the seeds for the story: a family of fearless women, fortune tellers, who discover their power by contending with the ghosts of their past. Thankfully, my family's secrets aren't as dark as the Lenormands', who must untangle two murders before the killer returns for them.

But like them, I am an immigrant, having moved to the US from Russia when I was seven. Like Zina, I have grown up in my adopted country, yet the country of my birth was everywhere. I wanted to write about people like me, but in a different time and place. When researching my previous gothic novel, *The Haunting of Moscow House*, I learned the 1920s saw an astronomical rise in Russians settling in Paris after fleeing the Old Country during the bloody 1917 Revolution and subsequent civil war. Their story was one my family and I knew intimately: the struggle to build a new life in a new country, falling in love with it while aching at being parted from family and homeland, the cultural and social divides that come with it. I understood them at their core, in spirit.

My first trip to Paris was while studying abroad in college. And even though it was cold, and with people I didn't really know, and completely devoid of romance, I felt that *je ne sais quoi* of Paris. Since then, it has come to symbolize so much for me—love and passion, travel and inspiration, even a flicker of the home I had left behind. I came back many years later, to experience the true Paris and to walk the footsteps of the displaced, the exiled, the immigrants.

People —women—like me, Valya, Zina. We women (still) carry the brunt of survival on our shoulders, in immigration or not, in the 1920s or in contemporary times. I have been lucky to be surrounded by strong women all my life. In some form or other, they now live in the pages of this novel.

I hope you fall as in love with Samovar and my Lenormand ladies as I have. I hope you sit with them a while, with a steaming cup of tea or coffee at your side. Maybe you will see a fortune or two at the bottom of your cup. I hope it is everything you dream of and more.

Olesya Sabrikova Gilmore

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does Zina grow in her power as a fortune teller and a woman throughout the story? Do you agree with the choices she makes to get there?
2. How does the relationship between Zina and her grandmother evolve? Which of them is your favorite?
3. How does the author use the setting of the tearoom and the greater Paris area to create atmosphere? How does the setting heighten the gothic and historical elements?
4. How does the past, specifically, the Lenormands' generational trauma and choices, influence the story and Valya's and Zina's paths?
5. How is fortune-telling and spiritualism the same and different in the novel from what you've heard? What is the author's twist on them? Is their existence, and the general belief in the supernatural, accepted by the characters?
6. How do Valya's and Zina's struggles as émigrés in 1920s Paris reflect the difficulties faced by the émigré community at large, both in the book and in history?
7. Did you feel empathy for Olga, Alec, and their father, the Grand Duke? Why or why not?
8. Are Zina and Gabriel enemies-to-lovers? What growing do they have to do to get past their conflicting motivations?
9. What was your favorite scene in the novel?
10. Is the end a happily ever after?