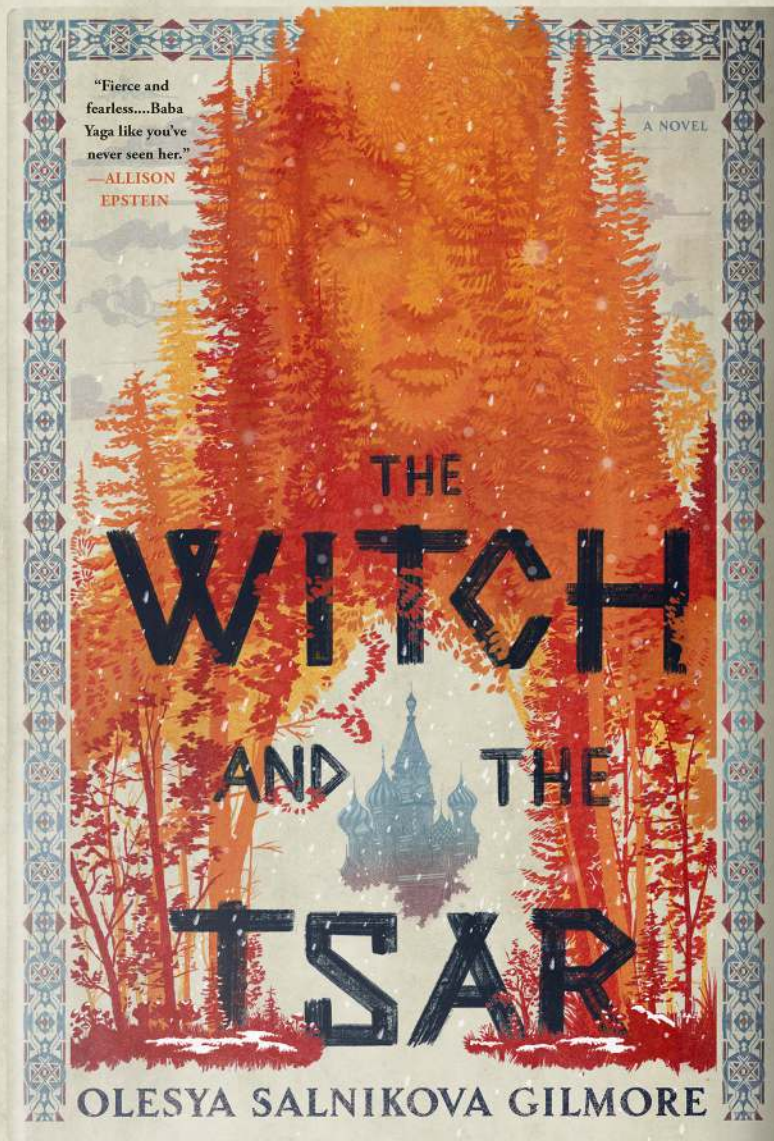




READERS GUIDE





DEAR READER,

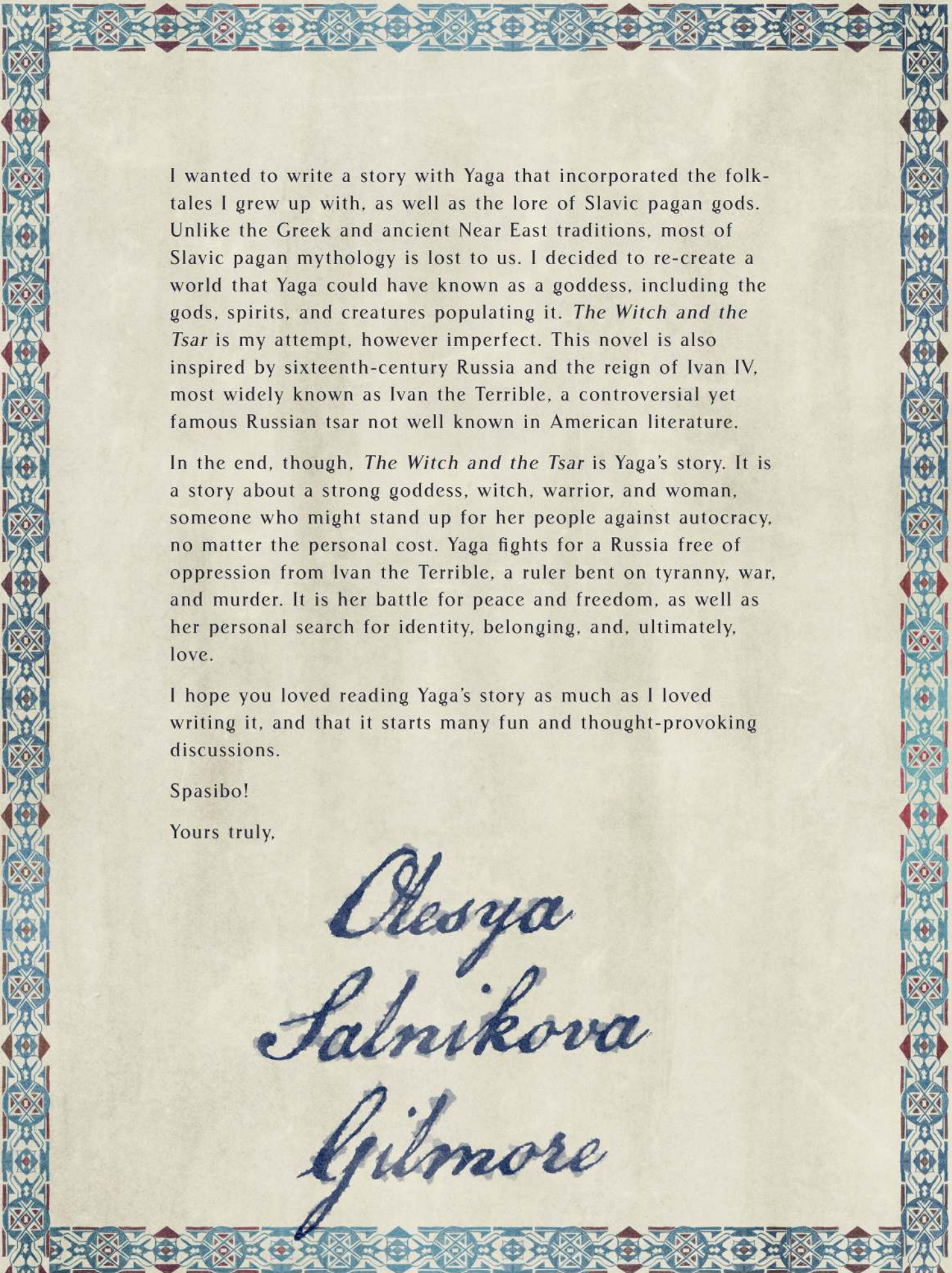
I am so excited that you are reading *The Witch and the Tsar* for your book club!

Ever since I was a little girl in Moscow, Russia, particularly when I misbehaved, my mother would tell me stories about the Slavic witch Baba Yaga. In these stories, Baba Yaga was always portrayed as a fearsome and villainous old woman, a hag who stole children from their beds and flew them in her mortar to her mysterious chicken-legged hut deep in the woods.

As I got older and moved to the United States, I kept thinking on Baba Yaga's often elusive character: a benefactor and a villain, a mother and an old maid, a witch and a woman. I wondered if there was another story about her and her origins. Maybe she wasn't as evil or as old and ugly as she was made out to be. Maybe I had to find out.

After I read Andreas Johns's *Baba Yaga: The Ambiguous Mother and Witch of the Russian Folktale*, I learned that the Baba Yaga we know is an invention of the fairy tales written and disseminated in the nineteenth century—mostly by men. Some believe that before Christianity arrived in Russia, Baba Yaga had been a fertility and earth goddess worshipped by Slavic pagans.

That's when I knew I had to write a feminist tale about a powerful yet vulnerable woman reduced to a witch by the men of her time. And I would call her simply Yaga.



I wanted to write a story with Yaga that incorporated the folktales I grew up with, as well as the lore of Slavic pagan gods. Unlike the Greek and ancient Near East traditions, most of Slavic pagan mythology is lost to us. I decided to re-create a world that Yaga could have known as a goddess, including the gods, spirits, and creatures populating it. *The Witch and the Tsar* is my attempt, however imperfect. This novel is also inspired by sixteenth-century Russia and the reign of Ivan IV, most widely known as Ivan the Terrible, a controversial yet famous Russian tsar not well known in American literature.


In the end, though, *The Witch and the Tsar* is Yaga's story. It is a story about a strong goddess, witch, warrior, and woman, someone who might stand up for her people against autocracy, no matter the personal cost. Yaga fights for a Russia free of oppression from Ivan the Terrible, a ruler bent on tyranny, war, and murder. It is her battle for peace and freedom, as well as her personal search for identity, belonging, and, ultimately, love.

I hope you loved reading Yaga's story as much as I loved writing it, and that it starts many fun and thought-provoking discussions.

Spasibo!

Yours truly,

Olesya
Salnikova
Gilmore



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1

Were you familiar with Baba Yaga before you read the book? If you were, what did you think of the author's portrayal of her and the choices she made in the retelling of her tale?

2

Why do you think the author chose to tell the story of this mythological character in a real historical setting instead of in a mythological one? Does the setting of sixteenth-century Russia feel like a character in its own right?

3

In the beginning of the novel, Yaga hates the mortality in her blood, considering it her weakness and curse. How does this change and why?

4

How does what happened to Yaga—her mother's death, the loss of her home, the mortals betraying and vilifying her—drive the narrative? What role does it have in her successes and failures?



5

Ivan's transformation from a volatile young tsar to an oppressive autocrat happens mostly behind the scenes. How does it play out through Yaga's eyes? Did you find him worthy of empathy?

6

Yaga and Vasily's relationship is one of the most important and lasting in the novel. How does it grow and change, and how does it compare to Yaga's relationship with Koshey?

7

When Yaga learns she has a sister, and that this sister was unloved and abandoned by their mother, how does Yaga's opinion of her mother change? Do you think she forgives her?

8

Who was your favorite character in the novel? Who was your least favorite?

9

How did you feel about the end of the book? Did you think Yaga deserved her ending as compared to her mother, her sister, and the other characters and their endings?