



by Olga Grjasnowa
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Fiction

July, August, September *Juli, August, September*

review

Lou, her husband Sergej and their five-year-old daughter Rosa are a typical modern Jewish family: but what does that even mean? Olga Grjasnowa's latest novel, *July – August – September*, delights with the author's trademark cynicism and keen eye for observation, following one woman over the course of three months, as she questions not just her marriage and the tales passed down to her as family history, but also her own identity and purpose in life.

Born in Baku, Lou lives with her family in Berlin – unlike most of her relatives, who have settled in Israel. Having recently suffered a miscarriage, she is taking time away from her job as an art historian at a gallery and is trying to write a book. Her husband, a concert pianist, is often away with work.

It is July, and Lou is unsure of everything: her marriage, her work, her family, her Jewishness. So when the whole family is invited to an all-inclusive resort on Gran Canaria for the 90th birthday party of Lou's great aunt Maya, she isn't exactly thrilled – but she reluctantly agrees to accompany her mother. Sergej stays behind to practice for some upcoming concerts, and Lou finds herself having to quell her relatives' suspicions that their marriage is coming to an end.

August sees Lou, her daughter Rosa and her mother arrive first at the somewhat dilapidated but comfortable resort. The other relatives soon join them and immediately start bickering. Over the course of

shared meals and the inevitable speeches, it becomes clear that Maya has a totally different version of her and her older sister Rosa's flight from Russia than the version Lou has been told. When Lou attempts to question this narrative, her relatives rebuke her, and her confusion about her and her family's history deepens.

She decides to go to Tel Aviv to seek answers and spends September moving from one family member to the next. She struggles to get in touch with Sergej. Her relatives prove unhelpful when it comes to untangling the family history – and their repeated questions about whether she is getting divorced begin to haunt her. Eventually, she discovers in an archive that her grandfather died not in the war, but in a Soviet prison. Meanwhile, Sergej has returned home without telling Lou.

Grjasnowa is a prize-winning German author, whose earlier novels *All Russians love birch trees* (tr. Eva Bacon) and *City of Jasmine* (tr. Katy Derbyshire) have already gained acclaim in the English-language market. *July – August – September* is an evocative and thought-provoking read about identity, family and multilingualism, which will appeal to fans of Deborah Levy and readers who enjoyed Zanna Sloniowska's *The House with the Stained-Glass Window* (tr. Antonia Lloyd Jones).

Find out more:

<https://www.hanser-literaturverlage.de/en/buch/olga-grjasnowa-juli-august-september-9783446281691-t-5407>

about the author

Olga Grjasnowa was born in Baku, Azerbaijan. She has spent long periods abroad in Poland, Russia, Turkey, the USA and Israel and today date has published an essay and four novels, most recently 'Der verlorene Sohn' in 2020. Her work has been translated into 15 languages and has been adapted for radio and the stage. She lives in Vienna where she is a professor at the University of Applied Arts.

Previous works: *Der Russe ist einer, der Birken liebt*, Hanser (2012); *Die juristische Unschärfe einer Ehe*, Hanser (2014); *Gott ist nicht schüchtern*, Aufbau (2017); *Der verlorene Sohn*, Aufbau (2020).

Previous works translated into English: *All Russians Love Birch trees*, Other Press (2012, translated by Eva Bacon).

Find out more on Instagram:

https://www.instagram.com/olga_grjasnowa/.

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