



THE KNIFE SHARPENER'S BELL

Coteau Books, Regina, 2009. 362 pages.

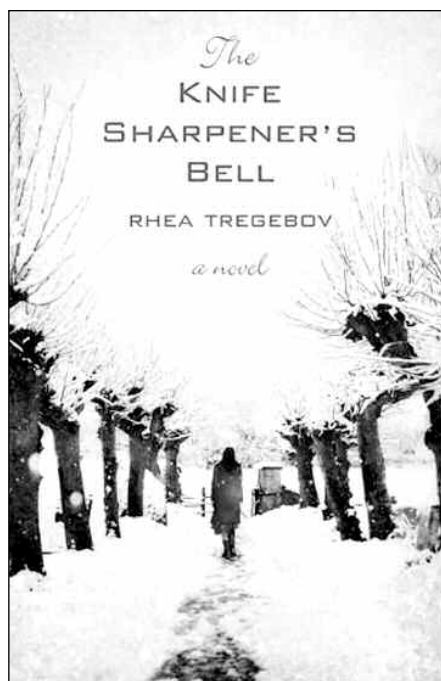
Reviewed by Dvoira Yanovsky

Award-winning Canadian writer Rhea Tregobov has added another achievement to her impressive list of accomplishments—her first novel, *The Knife Sharpener's Bell*. Currently Assistant Professor of Creative Writing at the University of British Columbia, Tregobov is well known for her collections of poetry and children's picture books. She has also edited many anthologies of fiction, poetry, and essays. *The Knife Sharpener's Bell* demonstrates that fiction is also well within the range of her talents.

The Knife Sharpener's Bell is the story of Annette Gershon and her family, Russian Jewish immigrants living in Winnipeg during the Great Depression. Communist idealists, Annette's parents return to post-revolutionary Stalinist Russia to live the socialist dream. However, perhaps before discussing what the novel **is**, it would be wise to begin by stating what it **is not**.

The novel's cover blurb and publisher's press release suggests that *The Knife Sharpener's Bell* is a novel of ideas and ideologies, a novel detailing the historical experience of those Jews who, having fled Tsarist Russia, returned to live in the Soviet Union. If you read the novel for this experience—a political book that turns facts into fiction, delving into the hopes and disappointments of the returnees, the political twists and turns of Soviet history—you will be disappointed. However, if you read *The Knife Sharpener's Bell* to experience the familiar archetypal story of a young girl struggling against her mother, struggling for her identity—then you will be rewarded with an intriguing, sensitively

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written novel. It's not that the historical canvas adds nothing to the story—it's just that, really, this story could happen in any time and place because it's the people and their relationships, not their ideologies, that are at the heart of this novel.

The novel mainly spans the period from the early 1930s to the 1950s. The narrative appears to move in two distinct patterns. One is more linear, as the present-day Annette narrates the story of her personal history to its tragic climax. The other pattern is more impressionistic or circular as Annette loops her story back and forth between various memories as they occur to her. The effect is a very controlled stream of consciousness, allowing us to experience Annette's story as she herself does.

The Gershon family consists of father Avram, mother Anne, son Ben, and daughter Annette. Avram also has a son, Joseph, from his first marriage. Abandoned by his first wife, Avram makes his way from Simferopol to Winnipeg, leaving behind his young son. By the time Anne—disappointed in love

and seeking solace—arrives from her beloved city of Odessa, Avram has found success in his adopted land. Now a store owner, Avram is a "catch," a man who is "handsome, kind as could be." More importantly, Avram is a "believer," which is essential to the fiery Anne who can "talk politics till you're blue in the face," defending the Soviet Union, even throwing "a Menshevik right out of the apartment!"

One of the novel's strengths is Tregobov's ability to evoke character, taking us into the heart of each personality and creating characters that are beautifully, and frequently irritatingly, human. This effect is clearly revealed in the characters of the narrator and her mother. While Avram is a kind but essentially passive man, Anne is hard, demanding, and controlling. Born into this unequal partnership, Tregobov's heroine is a contradictory mixture of passivity and desire. Annette often says, "I want what I want," but two demons stand in her way: her mother and Annette's inexplicable, instinctive fear of life. Virtually impossible to stand up to, Anne rolls over adult and child, friend and foe alike, making decisions and pronouncements with a confidence and vigour beyond arrogance. Anne is a force of nature, possessing all the energy that remains stifled in Annette, creating a tense, combative relationship between the two. Anne makes things happen; Annette has things happen to her.

Tregobov is clever in her presentation of Anne. She presents Anne from multiple viewpoints by manipulating the first-person narrative, using Annette to report Anne's conversations, actions, and long ranting speeches, as well as her own perceptions of her mother. Through this device, we come to understand Anne, if not like or admire her. Wounded by life, Anne retaliates by existing in a solipsistic universe that pulls everyone along with her, resulting in tragic consequences for all.

Annette's other demon is her fear of life and resulting passivity, which is constantly at war with

her desire for freedom and self-expression. Her fear is symbolized by the sound of the knife sharpener's bell: "I hear it, the *dah-dong*, full-bellied, swaying. The opening note light, and then the second note a gap in the heart, a falling. No way out." This gap, this falling of the bell, is the counterpoint to life's sweetness and joy—the inevitability of tragedy and death. Annette's sensitivity to the tolling of the bell increases as she leaves home in Winnipeg for the uncertainty of Odessa's shores. Only many joys and sorrows later does Annette finally diminish, if not fully conquer, the bell's ominous ring.

The other major strength of the

novel is Tregebov's prose, which has, as you might expect, the compressed clarity and exquisite imagery of poetry. A typical example is the narrator's description of a cut pomegranate: "The honeycomb of waxy white skin wraps seeds bright as rubies." The alliteration of "waxy white" vividly suggests the smoothly polished inner skin of the fruit; the simile "bright as rubies" reflects the jewelled abundance of pomegranate seeds. Tregebov also excels at creating mood through her careful observations of the environment and actions of her characters. She piles tiny, realistic details one atop the other, slowly, slyly manipulating the atmosphere. For example, she

can build anxiety in the reader with just a few simple observations: "Pavel sips, swallows, keeping his eyes on the bowl. Another sip, another swallow." Something is very wrong and eventually we learn the Germans and Romanians have taken Odessa.

The Knife Sharpener's Bell is a rewarding novel, particularly if you are already familiar with the time period and socialist issues of the day. Indeed, if you are not familiar with this milieu, I can imagine some readers not understanding the implications of certain parts of the plot. Nevertheless, it is a compelling read and hopefully Tregebov will continue to hone her fictional prose in a future novel. ♦



SIMA'S UNDERGARMENTS FOR WOMEN

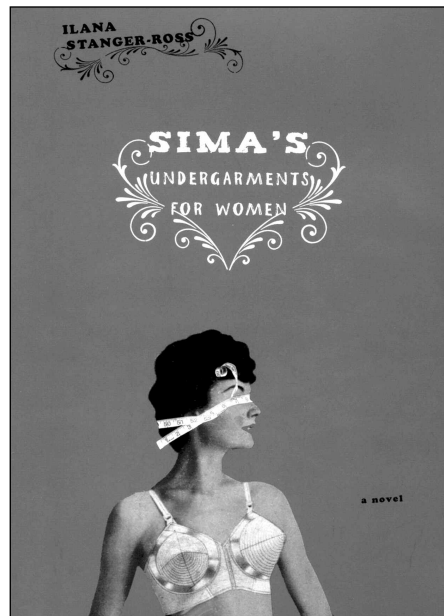
Ilana Stanger-Ross. The Overlook Press, Woodstock/New York, 2009.

Reviewed by Seemah C. Berson

Sima's Undergarments for Women is a novel which takes place in a shop in the basement of Sima's house in Boro Park, New York; a neighbourhood where the Orthodox Jewish people live and shop, go to school and synagogue, work and play. In other words, a community of people more or less self-contained.

Sima lives with her husband Lev, a retired school teacher. Sima's shop is an institution in Boro Park where all the ladies— young and old, short and tall, slim and well-built—come to buy their undergarments. As well, they come to exchange a little gossip, to share some of the good things that happen in their lives—a daughter getting married (*baruch ha'Shem*)— to unburden a little heartbreak here and there, another pregnancy and so it goes in Sima's bra shop.

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The clientele come with their little ones in strollers, clinging to their skirts and legs, and are always greeted by Sima by name and a considerate question about the family: how is Rifka's cough? Is Benny back at school? Are you feeling a little stronger today?

It happens that Sima finds herself without a seamstress; after all, to perfectly fit a support bra for a traditionally built woman or a slip

for a young girl to wear while shopping for a wedding gown, you will need a good seamstress on hand. When Timna walks into the shop, Sima falls in love with this young Israeli girl. She comes to buy a bra and no matter which style Sima gives Timna to try on, it fits her perfectly. She is beautiful to look at: a model! And when she mentions that she can sew and sits down at the machine, Sima offers her a job.

Timna not only does alterations for the customers, she also attends to them and has a knack for sales. The women are religious women who spend well on their undergarments. Between Sima and Timna, a woman never leaves the shop with only one bra or panty. Somehow she ends up with sets in pink, beige, and always a set in black. These girls and women do not just carry away undergarments in a bag, but more importantly, they take with them an appreciation of their bodies. They do not leave feeling ashamed of what they possess, but feel proud to walk out well-fitted underneath.

Up a flight of seven steps and you are into Sima's kitchen. Timna goes up soon after she comes to work each morning to get a cup

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