

# DAUGHTERS OF A DEAD EMPIRE

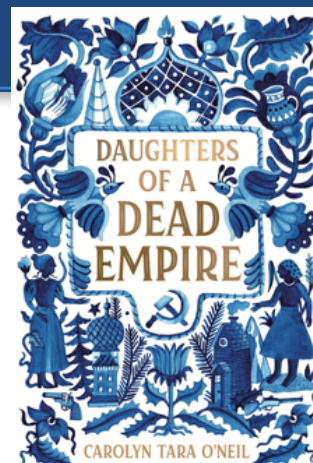
BY CAROLYN TARA O'NEIL

## Book Club Kit

*Daughters of a Dead Empire*

Roaring Brook Press | Hardcover, 336 pages | February 2022

\$18.99 | 9781250755537 | Ages 14-18



## About this Book

A thrilling Anastasia retelling set during the Russian Revolution that addresses class inequality and friendship across social divides. *Daughters of a Dead Empire* is a fast-paced alternate history that follows two young women as they flee from the Red Army at the height of the Russian Revolution—one a peasant and proud member of the Bolshevik party and the other a battered, bourgeoisie girl who's harboring a secret that could cost them their lives.

*Content Warnings: Graphic violence, torture, strong language.*

## About the Author



Carolyn Tara O'Neil grew up in a tiny New York City apartment filled with thousands of books. Every Friday she went to the public library for even more reading material. She now lives in a slightly smaller NYC apartment with slightly fewer books, and still goes to the library every week.

In between then and now, Carolyn has lived in France, Spain, and Japan, and has dedicated her career to youth civic engagement. She loves to travel, study languages, and spend endless hours discussing TV, books, great hiking trails, and how we can work together to build a more equal society.

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## Discussion Questions

1. Over the course of the novel, Anna and Evgenia learn to care for each other despite their different backgrounds and political beliefs. Do any of your friends disagree with you on important issues? How do you have conversations with them about it?
2. Are there any beliefs someone could have that would prevent you from being friends with them? Are there any beliefs *you* have that might prevent someone from wanting to be friends with you?
3. Why is this story told in dual-POV? How would it be different if we only had Anna's or Evgenia's POV? Which POV did you prefer?
4. Why does Evgenia rescue Anna from the fire in Pavlovo? What are the consequences of this decision? How does it change the course of their lives?
5. How is Evgenia's experience of poverty different from or similar to how millions of poor Americans experience poverty today?
6. How was the treatment of peasants in Russia different from or similar to the treatment of marginalized groups in America today?
7. How do Evgenia's political beliefs differ from Yurovsky's, her brother Kostya's, or her mother's beliefs?
8. What are the different political ideologies presented in this book? What terminology would we use to refer to them today? E.g. communist, socialist, capitalist, democratic, authoritarian, autocratic, etc?
9. Compare the role of religion for Evgenia vs. Anna. How do their beliefs dovetail with Tsarist vs. Communist beliefs about religion?
10. Why is this titled *Daughters of a Dead Empire*? What is the empire, and why is it dead? What other empires might it refer to?

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11. Consider this exchange from page 271:

*"But,"* I narrowed my eyes at her, "I prefer a peaceful revolution."  
She shook her head.  
*"There's no such thing."*

Can revolutions be peaceful? Mao Zedong once said, "Revolution is not a dinner party." Consider examples like the French or American Revolutions, in contrast to the Indian Independence Movement or the American Civil Rights movement – were they all revolutions? Were any of them peaceful?

12. Why do you think Anna gave up her jewels at the end? Do you think this was in-character? Why do you think Evgenia tells Anna to keep a few jewels at the end? Do you think this was in-character?

13. Why do you think the Czech soldiers refuse to help Anna at the end?

14. What do Anna and Evgenia owe each other, given their backgrounds? Do they bear any responsibility for the actions of their parents, friends, or allies?

- James Baldwin once said, "it is the innocence which constitutes the crime." Does that apply here?

15. What is communism? How do Evgenia and Anton's understandings of communism differ from how we understand it today? Can there be communism and democracy at the same time?

16. What does the Bolshevik Party represent for women and girls like Evgenia? How were their lives limited under the imperial or local governments?

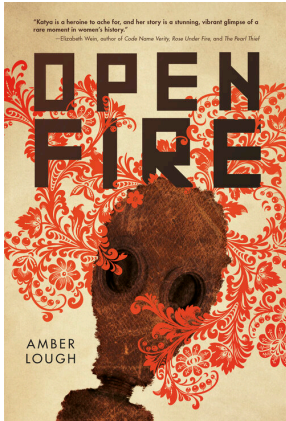
17. Do revolutions work? Why are some revolutions successful and lasting, while others lead to new forms of tyranny? If not revolution, how else can we combat oppression and tyranny? How can we defeat it? And how many lives is such a victory worth?

18. What do we owe to our fellow citizens and neighbors who may disagree with us on important issues?

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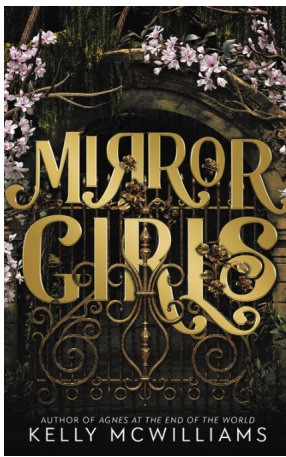
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## What to Read Next



In 1917, Russia is losing the war with Germany, soldiers are deserting in droves, and food shortages on the home front are pushing people to the brink of revolution. Seventeen-year-old Katya is politically conflicted, but she wants Russia to win the war. Working at a munitions factory seems like the most she can do to serve her country—until the government begins recruiting an all-female army battalion. Inspired, Katya enlists.

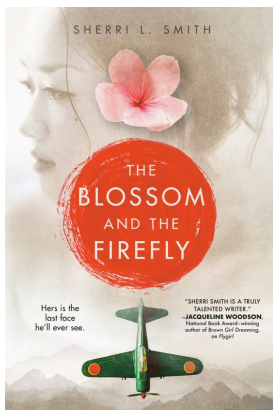
Training with other brave women, she finds camaraderie and a deep sense of purpose. But when the women's battalion heads to the front, Katya has to confront the horrifying realities of war. Faced with heartbreak and disillusionment, she must reevaluate her commitment and decide where she stands.



As infants, twin sisters Charlie Yates and Magnolia Heathwood were secretly separated after the brutal lynching of their parents, who died for loving across the color line. Now, at the dawn of the Civil Rights Movement, Charlie is a young Black organizer in Harlem, while white-passing Magnolia is the heiress to a cotton plantation in rural Georgia.

When Magnolia learns the truth of her racial heritage, her reflection mysteriously disappears from mirrors—the sign of a terrible curse. Meanwhile, in Harlem, Charlie's beloved grandmother falls ill. Her final wish is to be buried back home in Georgia. So Charlie travels into the Deep South, confronting her nightmares—and Jim Crow segregation.

The sisters reunite in the deeply haunted town of Eureka, Georgia, where ghosts linger and dangers lurk behind every mirror. They couldn't be more different, but they will need each other to put the hauntings of the past to rest—and to discover the meaning of sisterhood in a racially divided land.



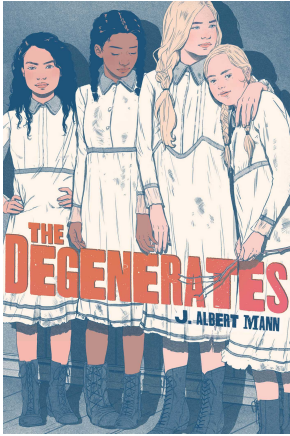
Japan 1945. Taro is a talented violinist and a kamikaze pilot in the days before his first and only mission. He believes he is ready to die for his country . . . until he meets Hana.

Hana hasn't been the same since the day she was buried alive in a collapsed trench during a bomb raid. She wonders if it would have been better to have died that day . . . until she meets Taro.

A song will bring them together. The war will tear them apart. Is it possible to live an entire lifetime in eight short days?

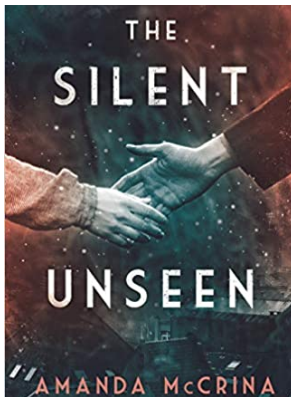
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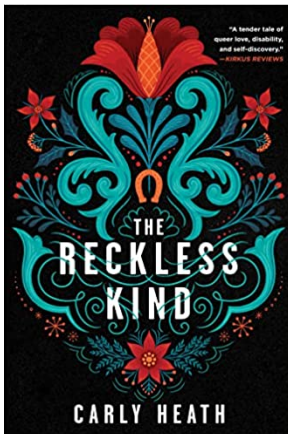
The Massachusetts School for the Feeble-Minded is not a happy place. The young women who are already there certainly don't think so.

Not Maxine, who is doing everything she can to protect her younger sister Rose in an institution where vicious attendants and bullying older girls treat them as the morons, imbeciles, and idiots the doctors have deemed them to be. Not Alice, either, who was left there when her brother couldn't bring himself to support a sister with a club foot. And not London, who has just been dragged there from the best foster situation she's ever had, thanks to one unexpected, life altering moment. Each girl is determined to change her fate, no matter what it takes.



Poland, July 1944. Sixteen-year-old Maria is making her way home after years of forced labor in Nazi Germany, only to find her village destroyed and her parents killed in a war between the Polish Resistance and Ukrainian nationalists. To Maria's shock, the local Resistance unit is commanded by her older brother, Tomek—who she thought was dead. He is now a "Silent Unseen," a special-operations agent with an audacious plan to resist a new and even more dangerous enemy sweeping in from the East.

When Tomek disappears, Maria is determined to find him, but the only person who might be able to help is a young Ukrainian prisoner and the last person Maria trusts—even as she feels a growing connection to him that she can't resist.



It's Norway 1904, and Asta Hedstrom doesn't want to marry her odious betrothed, Nils—even though a domestic future is all her mother believes she's suited for, on account of her single-sided deafness, unconventional appearance, and even stranger notions. Asta would rather spend her life performing in the village theater with her friends and fellow outcasts: her best friend Gunnar Fuglestad and his secret boyfriend, wealthy Erlend Fournier.

But the situation takes a dire turn when Nils lashes out in jealousy—gravely injuring Gunnar. Shunning marriage for good, Asta moves with Gunnar and Erlend to their secluded cabin above town. With few ties left with their families, they have one shot at gaining enough kroner to secure their way of life: win the village's annual horse race.



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## Author Interview

### **What was the original inspiration for this novel?**

I spent a year reading about the Russian Revolution before I started writing. The topic fascinated me – I'd never studied it in school, and the events of the revolution and civil war were dramatic, epic, and tragic. I credit Orlando Figes' *A People's Tragedy* for piquing my interest in the first place, and Robert K. Massie's *Romanovs: the Final Chapter* for launching the story idea into my brain.

Although I chose to write about the legend of Anastasia, it was the story of the everyday people in Russia that excited me the most. I wanted to explore the suffering they experienced under the Tsar's rule, the hope and idealism around the revolution, and the severe disillusionment that followed.

The extremes of income inequality that existed then – echoes of America today – also motivated me to tackle this time period. My own, biracial family comes from opposite ends of our socioeconomic spectrum, and as a child I attended both public and private schools. I've seen the extremes of income inequality close-up my entire life, and I felt that the Russian Revolution provided a useful point of comparison for our lives today.

### **Why did you decide to include the perspective of Evgenia, rather than telling this story entirely from Anastasia's point of view?**

From my historical reading I knew that Ekaterinburg was a Soviet stronghold at this time. It struck me that Anastasia, had she escaped, would have been surrounded by communists. Who would take pity on her and offer her aid? What kind of person – what kind of communist – would be willing to help a traumatized bourgeois girl?

Evgenia sprang to my mind fully-formed. The urgency of her need to save her brother, and the utter desperation of her circumstances, proved to be as primal as Anna's quest for safety. Since we were traveling in her territory, and since she dominated so many of the action scenes, she was also a useful narrator. Plus she's loud and insistent so she wouldn't let me go!

The heart of this novel is two girls from opposite extremes coming together to love and support each other. Both of them bring their traumas to the relationship – the sudden, violent loss of Anna's family, and the long-term pain of Evgenia's poverty. Both have friends and allies who contributed to the other's suffering. I don't think I could have told this story without letting them each have their say.

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## **As an alternate history, how did you weave together fact and fiction to create this story?**

This was tricky. My only exposure to the legend came from history books and the 1997 animated film, which I loved as a child (and still love today)! There was so much to invent – about Anna, and the entirety of Evgenia's life. I drew from my favorite popular histories and from classic Russian literature to create the rough shape of my world, and to fill in many details on daily life. In addition to doing my own research, I consulted with amateur and professional historians, and worked with a couple of authenticity readers to make sure I was handling Russian culture respectfully.

Aside from that? I let my imagination run wild. I meant this to be a very accessible, entertaining read, and so I privileged story over perfect accuracy.

## **What do you hope readers take away from the ending?**

Honestly, I can't wait to hear from readers what they take away from the book. I'm sure it will be different for every reader. The most exciting part about publishing a book is knowing that readers will pick it up, hopefully enjoy it, and make it their own.

That said, this book has a lot of personal meaning for me. I teach civics to middle schoolers and high schoolers, and I see firsthand how passionate young people can be about social issues and advocating for change. I enjoyed having my 16-year-old and 17-year-old protagonists engage in political arguments and talk about their dreams for the country. I know that's what teens do today, and I'm sure they did it 100 years ago, too.

In this novel I also wrestled with a lot of questions that I don't have answers to: what is the ideal form of government? How do you make change nonviolently? How long should people tolerate oppression before rising up? At the end of the day, I can't answer these questions. But I hope that my novel speaks to the underlying truth that, no matter what, we are all human, and a respect for human life can foster friendship, forgiveness, and positive change.