

Taking the Reader “Someplace a Little Different”

RUSSIAN-NESS IN YOUNG ADULT FANTASY

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Summary

Young adult literature (YAL) has been growing in popularity since its conception in the mid-twentieth century. While young adult novels dominate the commercial literary market, academic scholarship on YAL is still limited. In recent years, there has been more and more demand for YAL that is diverse in its nature. The market has answered this demand to an extent and there have been a number of titles published with POC or LGBTQI+ characters and stories. This demand is not limited to contemporary young adult literature. Many novels in genres such as fantasy or science fiction have also become more diverse, whether this is in the settings or the cast of these novels. There is a growing amount of young adult fantasy fiction that is set in non-Western worlds, in both the high and low fantasy categories. These are Asian, Arabian, African and Latin inspired worlds. Yet, we can also see a different trend emerge. There have been a number of novels set in Russia or a world inspired by Russia within the last decade.

This thesis aims to explore this emergence of Russia as a setting and thematic background in young adult fantasy. To examine the role of Russian-ness in these young adult fantasy novels, Leerssen and Beller's theory of imagology will be employed. The novels that will be analysed in this thesis are *Shadow and Bone* (2012) by Leigh Bardugo, *The Bear and the Nightingale* (2017) by Katherine Arden, *The Crown's Game* (2016) by Evelyn Skye and *Wicked Saints* (2019) by Emily A. Duncan. A concept closely connected to imagology and national stereotype in this research is authenticity. The analyses of the four novels revealed different attitudes to Russian-ness, but also comparisons between the novels. There was also an interesting contrast between the role and adaptations of Russian-ness of low and high fantasy novels. These results have shed some light on the possible explanations for this on-going trend.

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Popularity of Young Adult literature

Young adult fiction is everywhere. Young adult literature (YAL or YA) has been around for over 50 years now and continues to expand not only its market share, but also its demographic. There is an “ongoing sales boom”¹, says Michael Cart, a prominent advocate and scholar of Young Adult fiction. This is not just because of its large adolescent audience, but also because of the “65 percent of YA book sales [that] are being driven by adults buying the books for themselves”². According to Cart, YAL is experiencing a second “golden age”³. YAL is not a genre but a demographic and, traditionally, caters to 12 to 18 years old. There are many different genres represented within this demographic, such as fantasy, science fiction, contemporary literature or suspense, amongst many others. While these genres have been around for a long time, the demographic of YAL is fairly new, more recent than either adult or children’s fiction.

In fact, the rise of youth fiction can be dated back to the emerging youth culture of the post-WWII era. What were first called ‘junior books’, novels aimed mostly at teenagers, with romances for girls and sport novels for boys, would become ‘young adult’ in the 1960s. The term ‘young adult’ was coined by the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA). It were novels like *The Outsiders* (1967) and *The Contender* (1967) which would set the tone for the contemporary realism aimed at teenagers that YA would come to represent. While YA has since branched out to include many more genres, it is this contemporary realism that “remained at its core”⁴. The 1970s were YA’s first ‘golden age’, with influential works like *The Chocolate War* (1974), which was the first YA novel that “trust[ed] teens with the sad

¹ Michael Cart, “Pedagogic, Not Didactic: Michael Cart on Young Adult Fiction,” interview by Jonathan Alexander, *Los Angeles Review of Books*, April 8, 2018, <http://www.lareviewofbooks.org/article/pedagogic-not-didactic-michael-cart-on-young-adult-fiction/#!>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Michael Cart, “Young Adult Literature: The State of a Restless Art,” *SLIS Connecting* 5, no. 1 (2016): 1, doi: 10.18785/slis.0501.07.

truth that not all endings are happy ones”⁵. While YA made strides with novels like these, a culture of paperback series also emerged and carried on into the 80s. It was the 1990s when “young adult literature [was found] to be in a bad way, near death many observers were solemnly pronouncing”⁶, but by the middle of the decade “young adult literature had made a miraculous recovery to become one of the most vital and innovative areas of publishing”⁷ and has only been growing since. The 90s also saw the first ‘big’ YA craze: *Harry Potter* (1997), which “single-handedly ushered in a new era of speculative fiction, which became the most important trend of the first 21st decade of the century”⁸. This trend is still popular to this very date. After *Harry Potter* came *Twilight* (2005) and after *Twilight* came the *Hunger Games* (2008), and the publishing market continues to capitalise on the popularity and offspring of popular YA novels. Contemporary realism is as strong as ever, and so is speculative, and in particular fantasy, fiction in YAL.

The growth of YAL is not only to be attributed to a growing teenage audience; adults too have contributed to a steady growth in sales. One of the biggest struggles YAL faces today is, in fact, catering to the *right* audience, YA novels are still being discussed in scholarly debates as ‘children’s fiction’ and some New Adult novels, novels aimed at twenty-somethings that have more explicit themes, are masquerading as YA ones. The demographical lines are very blurred. Ultimately, this is an industry problem. It is the adults that write these books, edit them and publish them. YA novels are also often marketed, reviewed and discussed by *adult* bloggers. The online book community (booktube, bookstagram; the social media platforms) loves to read YA novels and many of these ‘influencers’ are older than eighteen, older than the intended audience of 12-18. They appraise these books as adults, and the publishers try to get their novels into as many hands as possible, so they cater to this adult audience, and in the process these novels are no longer truly ‘young adult’ literature. In other

⁵ Michael Cart, “How “Young Adult” Fiction Blossomed With Teenage Culture in America,” *Smithsonian.com*, May 7, 2018, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-young-adult-fiction-blossomed-with-teenage-culture-in-america-180968967/>.

⁶ Cart, “Young Adult Literature,” 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.

words, “a huge amount of theoretically teenage publishing is churning out books that simply aren’t for teenagers at all”⁹.

Now, this is not necessarily a bad thing, because it seems that adults these days are actually interested in fiction aimed at ‘young adults’ because of the subject matter. YAL novels often centre around coming-of-age narratives. Our ever fluctuating lives and world has left adults to continue to come-of-age in a sense, which might be one reason adults are flocking to YA in the first place. The concept ‘young adult’ itself is in constant flux, “[y]oung adult literature, as we know it today, has been an exercise in evolution consonant with the evolution of the concept of the young adult itself”¹⁰. YA is also, again, a *demographic*, not a genre. Many genres exist within the demographic, and most readers read a specific genre, not a demographic. YAL also tackles important issues, contemporary issues, albeit through a young lens. “A good story is a good story”¹¹, whatever demographic it might be targeted at. Many YA contemporary novels, for instance, deal with issues of race, socio-economic issues. These are issues that not only have an impact on young adults, but also adults, albeit in different ways.

The reality is that YAL approaches genres and subjects in a different way and not without consequence. YAL has seen a substantial growth in the past give or take fifteen years, “[t]here were 8593 titles (including different/new/republished editions of titles) YA titles published between 2006 and 2016 in the UK”¹² alone, “with the number of titles being published each year more than doubling from 2006 to 2010”¹³. Its most fruitful years were between 2010 and 2014, with many popular YA novels also being adapted to the big screen.

⁹ Anthony McGowan, “Most YA fiction is grown-up fiction in disguise,” *The Guardian*, June 9, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2016/jun/09/most-ya-fiction-is-grown-up-fiction-in-disguise>.

¹⁰ Cart, “How “Young Adult”.

¹¹ Caroline Kitchener, “Why So Many Adults Love Young-Adult Literature,” *The Atlantic*, Dec. 1, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/12/why-so-many-adults-are-love-young-adult-literature/547334/>.

¹² Melanie Ramdarshan Bold, “The Eight Percent Problem: Authors of Colour in the British Young Adult Market (2006-2016),” *Publishing Research Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2018): 389.

¹³ *Ibid.*

YA has since, however, experienced a decrease in titles published in the UK¹⁴. Across the Atlantic the numbers differ, the Association of American Publishers (AAP), released its 2018 StatShot Annual Report noting that “[i]n the five years since 2013, publisher revenue for children’s and YA fiction has grown by 11.3 percent to \$3.67 billion”¹⁵. Allison Risbridger of NPD Books stated that across the industry as a whole “the compound annual growth rate (GAGR) of unit sales for juvenile and YA rose 3% from 2014–2017”¹⁶. Print book sales in general are increasing, a 2.5% change from 2017 to 2018. Young Adult fiction fell by 4.6%, however¹⁷. These numbers only covered January to September 2018, but current numbers also suggest a slight decrease¹⁸. The numbers for e-book and audiobook sales have actually been increasing¹⁹. Sales however do not always correlate to popularity and the numbers have a tendency to fluctuate from year to year and month to month. This is also where the problem of categorisation and demographic comes into play: what is classified as YA is not always YA, and what is classified as Children’s Literature is not always Children’s Literature. This is problematic because while YA sales fluctuate, Children’s Literature has been a “publishing

¹⁴ Ramdarshan Bold, “The Eight Percent Problem,” 389-90.

¹⁵ Porter Anderson, “StatShot Annual Publisher Survey Puts 2017 Estimated US Revenue at \$26.2 Billion,” *Publishing Perspectives*, July 23, 2018, <https://publishingperspectives.com/2018/07/us-statshot-publisher-survey-2017-estimates-revenue/>.

¹⁶ Judith Rosen, “Children’s Institute 2018: Children’s Books Remain Strong,” *Publishers Weekly*, Jun. 21, 2018, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/77304-children-s-institute-2018-children-s-books-remain-strong.html>.

¹⁷ Jim Milliot, “Print Unit Sales Up in 2018 to Date,” *Publishers Weekly*, Oct. 05, 2018, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/78257-print-unit-sales-up-in-2018-to-date.html>.

¹⁸ “Print Units Fell Again in Mid-February,” *Publishers Weekly*, Mar. 1, 2019, <https://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/industry-news/bookselling/article/79411-print-units-fell-again-in-mid-february.html>.

¹⁹ “Publisher Revenue for eBooks Increased in October,” *Association of American Publishers*, Dec. 6, 2018, <https://newsroom.publishers.org/publisher-revenue-for-ebooks-increased-in-october/>.

darling”²⁰. The larger trend we can however identify is that YA fiction has become a fixture in the literary market. This has also led to an increase in the scholarly debate surrounding YAL.

1.2 The Scholarly Debate on YAL

The fact that many YA novels are miscategorised is also reflected in the scholarly debates on YAL. First of all, it is hard to find a large corpus of articles and books in one place. YAL is discussed in periodicals and editions on Children’s Literature, but also in periodicals on ‘adult’ literature. The periodicals on Children’s Literature also often publish articles on a wide historical range of topics, from children’s literature of the nineteenth and twentieth century to the current debates surrounding YAL. The ‘adult’ periodicals are also often targeted at teachers or librarians when it concerns YAL. There are some dedicated YAL periodicals like *ALAN Review* and *Signal*, but these are not widely accessible through a database or backed by major academic publishers.

Hayn, Kaplan and Nolen stated in “Young Adult Literature Research in the 21st Century” that while “[w]e know much about what good books are available, but we know little about what actually happens when teens read young adult novels”²¹. The aim of their article was to assert that YAL research is a “rich field, worthy of investigation and study that is being largely ignored”²². The article is now over five years old and the field is changing quickly, but the authors saw the ‘newness’ of the genre as the main reason for this void in research. They also found out that “most articles come primarily from textual analysis”²³, which is still true until this day. As already mentioned, much scholarly debate on YAL is targeted at its use in the classroom; the article claims that “one-third of the articles looked at the attitudes of high school students when engaging with adolescent literature”²⁴. Aside from that they could also distinguish a number of studies focussed on teachers and teacher candidates and their relationship with YAL. Lastly, they noted that none of the articles that

²⁰ Judith Rosen, “Children’s Institute 2018”.

²¹ Judith A. Hayn, et al., “Young Adult Literature Research in the 21st Century,” *Theory Into Practice* 50, no. 3 (2011): 177.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*, 178.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

examine YAL use “sophisticated statistical analysis ... [a]ll remained at the descriptive level”²⁵.

If we look at examples of textual analysis, we can see that they are either very specific to one novel or one topic or they examine a certain very popular trend. For a while such a trend was YA dystopian novels, for instance. It is often the case in YAL that one ‘type’ of books seems to be very popular for a couple of years and the dystopian novel was soon to be swapped for the ‘fairy-tale retelling’, which subsequently also became a research topic for much of the scholarly debate surrounding YAL. If we turn back to the scholarly interest in dystopian novels, we can see that the topic was actually approached from both the dystopian angle and the Young Adult angle. Peter Hunt wrote an article about the “role of fantasy in the reading lives of the young”²⁶. It is an older article, dating back to 2005, but Hunt identifies that fantasy is becoming more and more popular, and as a result is written about more. This writing about is often a textual analysis, but these analyses do not necessarily reflect an understanding of “what is happening?”²⁷. Why these trends emerge, or why a certain topic or genre appeals to young readers is still quite an elusive thing. YAL continues to remain elusive at its core, perhaps. The unclear distinctions, demographic, and its role in the literature of today and tomorrow, do not herald a very conclusive research of the field.

What we can see is that current popular debates that are at the core of YAL right now, seem to carry on to the more scholarly research. One such topic or debate is, for instance, the matter of diversity, which has become important for the whole of the literary field, in ‘adult’ literature, popular literature, literary prizes, the literary market, or YAL. One example of this last category is the research mentioned by Bold, which also sparked some debate in the news when it was released²⁸. There was also a panel organised as part of the 2016 Children's Literature Association conference in Columbus, Ohio, by the Diversity Committee and the Membership Committee called “Needs of Minority Scholars”, which recognized that the field “can do more to incorporate and recognize the voices of scholars of color and Native

²⁵ Hayn, et al., “Young Adult Literature Research in the 21st Century,” 180.

²⁶ Peter Hunt, “Alternative Worlds in Fantasy Fiction—Revisited,” *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship* 11, no. 2 (2005): 163.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 164.

²⁸ Articles can a.o. be found on *The Guardian* and *The Daily Caller*.

scholars”²⁹. This is a debate that originated within the book community and has now made the transfer to scholarly research.

1.3 The Call for Diversity in YAL

One of the reasons why YA fiction has seen a strong growth over the years has been the equally growing online book community. One benefit of a large online community is that readers from many walks of life can come together and share their opinions. One of those opinions, at least in recent years, is a call for (more) diversity. This view is shared by readers, researchers and YA advocates alike.

We need more diversity in young adult literature. There are not nearly enough people of color in today’s YA or characters who represent different cultures, religions, ethnicities, sexual and gender identities, and more.³⁰

This diversity should not only be implemented in the subject matter and characters of the novels, but also in the publishing field, its editors, publishers, and writers. This is not a completely new phenomenon, “it is one that emerged during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s”, when a study of children’s literature by Nancy Larrick revealed that between 1952 and 1967 “only 6.7% of 5000 published featured African-American characters”³¹, but it has become “a buzzword in the Anglo-American book publishing industries”³² these days as well. While diversity is once again a ‘hot topic’ amongst the reading community, and especially amongst those who have a social media platform, “YA authors of colour are still not visible in the bestseller charts, prominent books festivals, and prestigious literary prizes”³³. There is, however, an ongoing movement promoting diversity in literature, with hashtags like ‘#ownvoices’, that target the inclusivity of disabled voices in young adult literature (or ‘kidlit’), and the broader movement *The We Need Diverse Books*, whose mission statement is “putting more books featuring diverse characters into the hands of all children”³⁴. The WNDB project defines diversity as “including (but not limited to) LGBTQIA, Native, people of color,

²⁹ Katharine Slater, "Introduction for #WeNeedDiverseScholars: A Forum," *The Lion and the Unicorn* 41, no. 1 (2017): 79-81. <https://muse.jhu.edu/> (accessed March 7, 2019).

³⁰ Cart, interview.

³¹ Ramdarshan Bold, “The Eight Percent Problem,” 386.

³² *Ibid.*, 285.

³³ *Ibid.*, 386.

³⁴ “About WNDB,” *Weneeddiversebooks.org*, <https://diversebooks.org/about-wndb/>.

gender diversity, people with disabilities*, and ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities”³⁵. They also organize a wide range of programs to establish their goals, amongst others, awards, grants and mentorships³⁶. These types of ‘grassroots movements’ all emerged from minority initiatives which is important because representation does not necessarily mean diversity as “there have been many cases of misrepresentation, cultural appropriation, and stereotyping in the past”³⁷.

Leaving the representation of minorities to the actual minorities seems an uphill battle, however. One of the main reasons why minorities have been represented by white writers thus far is supposedly a result of “not enough authors of colour writing”³⁸. At least, according to the publishing industry, “numerous authors of colour have countered this, saying that they have struggled to get agents or, if they do have agents, publishing deals”³⁹. If they then did manage to, they often felt pressured to write ‘inclusive books’ from a minority perspective, preferably “identity books—i.e. books that reflected their ethnic or cultural heritage or to draw upon cultural stereotypes”⁴⁰.

A study by Melanie Ramdarshan Bold investigated the claim that there is a lack of authors of colour being published in the UK publishing industry by providing statistical evidence. Ramdarshan Bold revealed that between 2006 and 2016 that “white, cis women authors dominate” with 58 percent and “8% ... of all of the YA authors were authors of colour and 90% ... were white”⁴¹. The study also found that “the representation of authors of colour has decreased since it peaked in 2007–2008, despite conversations about ‘diversity’ in the publishing industry, and the subsequent rise in ‘diversity’ initiatives”⁴². It should be noted that these numbers only represent the UK market; if we look at the numbers presented by *The Cooperative Children’s Book Center* (CCBC) we can however see a rise in the number of children's books by and about people of colour and First/Native Nations which they had received. The CCBC reported 3,400 such novels in 2016 and 3,700 in 2017, a 9% increase

³⁵ “About WNDB”.

³⁶ “Our Programs,” Weneeddiversebooks.org, <https://diversebooks.org/our-programs/>.

³⁷ Bold, “The Eight Percent Problem,” 386-387.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 387.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 398.

⁴² *Ibid.*

internationally⁴³. We can in fact see a rise in awareness about diversity in YAL in the English speaking world, with a recent study on diversity in young adult fiction on the Australian market by Emily Booth and Bhuva Narayan⁴⁴.

So despite decades of advocating for diversity in YAL, the market is still not there. We can see, however, that the initiatives are not dying down; they are in fact continuing. There is a similar trend in the titles becoming popular and the types of YAL that is gaining traction.

1.4 Diversity in YAL: the Update

Towards the end of 2018 Penguin Random House pledged £15,000 to help the #ReadtheOnePercent pop-up store in south London. The initiative of the bookstore is to “s[tock] children’s books with characters from diverse backgrounds”⁴⁵ and was launched by independent publisher Knights Of in October 2018. The founders wanted to raise £30,000 pounds via a crowdfunding campaign and ended up exceeding that amount, reflecting the need for more diverse books in the UK market. Across the pond we can see a similar need of diversity, although the US has a better track-record when it comes to diversity in YAL.

There is a growing number of YA titles that have gained popularity and are diverse. These are mostly titles that are *racially* and *ethnically* diverse or feature characters that are LGBTQI+. Their popularity can be observed in a number of ways. First of all, in 2018 we saw adaptations of *A Wrinkle in Time* (1962), *The Darkest Minds* (2012), *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* (2015), and *The Hate U Give* (2017). Notably, the first two were no diverse

⁴³ “Publishing Statistics on Children's Books about People of Color and First/Native Nations and by People of Color and First/Native Nations Authors and Illustrators,” *CCBC*, [Feb. 22, 2018, http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp](http://ccbc.education.wisc.edu/books/pcstats.asp). They published a separate statistic for books received by U.S. publishers only, which also signalled a 9% increase.

⁴⁴ Emily Booth and Bhuva Narayan, “Towards diversity in young adult fiction: Australian YA authors’ publishing experiences and its implications for YA librarians and readers’ advisory services,” *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association* 67, no. 3 (2018): pp. 195-211. doi: 10.1080/24750158.2018.1497349

⁴⁵ Allison Flood, “Penguin Random House pledges £15,000 to diverse children's bookshop,” *The Guardian*, Dec. 19, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/dec/19/readtheonepercent-bookshop-penguin-random-house>.

books, but had a POC cast for the adaptation. *Love, Simon*, the adaptation of *Simon vs. the Homo Sapiens Agenda* features around a coming-out narrative and *The Hate U Give* details a fictional account of police brutality against a black teenager. *The Hate U Give* in particular has been very popular since its release; the novel by Angie Thomas debuted at number one on The New York Times young adult best-seller list, where it remained for 50 weeks, it also won the William C. Morris Award for best debut book for teens, the Odyssey Award for best children's audiobook, the Coretta Scott King Award for the best novel by an African American author for children, and the Michael L. Printz Award for best novel for teens amongst others. Its film adaptation also did well at the box office, exceeding its original budget. *The Hate U Give* was not the only novel with a POC lead, writer or issue to gain popularity in 2018. If we turn to the 2018 National Book Awards Longlist in the Young People's Literature category we can for instance see *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo and *A Very Large Expanse of Sea* by Tahereh Mafi. Other popular titles in 2018 were *The Astonishing Color of After* by Emily X.R. Pan, *The Belles* by Dhonielle Clayton and *Reaper at the Gates* by Sabaa Tahir. These last two are interesting for another reason: they are both fantasies.

Fantasy is a very popular genre within YAL. One of the very first YA series that gained major traction and an international fan base was, of course, *Harry Potter*. Fan culture is still a big part of young adult readership and the online book-community. A current trend in YA Fantasy is something already attributed to contemporary YA: diversity. This is realised as more diverse casts, or more diverse settings altogether in either low or high fantasies. The past couple of years have seen a number of novels set in pan-asian worlds, such as *Forest of a Thousand Lanterns* (2017) *Empress of All Seasons* (2018), and *Girls of Paper and Fire* (2018). We also saw authors turn to Africa, *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018), or Pan-Arabia, *City of Brass* (2017), for inspiration. Another thing, besides the exotic settings, that these novels have in common is that the authors are all POC themselves.

The trend is not dying down soon and there are already a number of anticipated releases in 2019 to show for that. There is *The Girl King* by Mimi Yu, *Children of Virtue and Vengeance* by Tomi Adeyemi (the sequel to *Children of Blood and Bone*), *The Shadowglass* by Rin Chupeco, *The Everlasting Rose* by Dhonielle Clayton (another sequel), *Descendant of the Crane* by Joan He, and lastly *Nocturna*, inspired by Latin America, by Maya Motayne, just to name a few. The 'usual' inspired setting of high fantasy novels which is modelled after medieval Western Europe is being traded in for these more diverse worlds and narratives. While we do see a leaning towards these more diverse *global* settings, there also seems to be

interest in novels still set in a medieval Europe. Titles that will release in 2019 are, for example, *Enchantée* by Gita Trelease and *The Gilded Wolves* by Roshani Chokshi (both set in France) or *Kingsbane* by Claire LeGrand. There are also of course a number of high and low fantasies set in non-descript worlds, although these for the most part have always been inspired by the Middle Ages of Western Europe. The thing that sets these diverse worlds apart is that they feature magical systems, languages, geographies and cultures inspired by other parts of the world, thus representing other historical experiences, ones that other ethnicities might be able to relate to in the way that Westerners relate to their Middle Ages. Yet, there seems to be another setting that is quite popular, aside from the global, western or non-descript: Russia, or at least worlds inspired by Russia.

1.5 The Peculiar (Emergence of) Interest in Russia

When I was doing an initial review of potential topics for my research, I noticed how I had read two novels that were both set in Russia or a world inspired by Russia. I soon learned that these cases were not unique. *Winter of the Witch*, *King of Scars*, *Wicked Saints*, and *Romanov* are a few of the anticipated Russian-themed fantasy reads this year. The *Winter of the Witch* will be the conclusion to the Winternight trilogy by Katherine Arden and *King of Scars* is, albeit not YAL, the sixth instalment in Leigh Bardugo's YA 'grisha-verse'. Both of these have already been released against favourable reviews. These four titles represent the strange emergence of Russia as either a backdrop or inspiration for young adult fantasy novels that has been present for a number of years now. A trend already pointed out in a blog post by Jessica Lind on the YALSA website in 2014⁴⁶. Leigh Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone* (2012) is arguably the first high fantasy young adult novel in which the world is inspired by Russia. It is also a popular series with a Netflix adaptation in the works. Bardugo herself said that she "wanted to take readers someplace a little different"⁴⁷ when choosing Russia as a starting point for world-building and has since expanded her fantasy world beyond Ravka, her 'fictional Russia'.

⁴⁶ Jessica Lind, "Russia-Infused YA Lit," *YALSA The Hub*, April 9, 2014, <http://www.yalsa.ala.org/thehub/2014/04/09/russia-infused-ya-lit/>.

⁴⁷ Leigh Bardugo, "'Shadow and Bone': Author Leigh Bardugo talks her debut novel," interviewed by Breia Brissey, *Entertainment Weekly*, 29 Jun., 2012, ew.com/article/2012/06/29/shadow-and-bone-leigh-bardugo-qa.

A high fantasy is set in a completely fictional world, as opposed to a low fantasy which either incorporates the fantastical within the ‘real’ world or is only partially set in a fictional world and we can see the Russian theme also appearing in low-fantasy titles. There is *The Crown’s Game* (2016) and *The Bear and the Nightingale* (2017), which are both fantasies set in Russia. This last novel is the first instalment in the *Winternight* trilogy, which throughout its run has been met with positive reviews while *The Bear and the Nightingale* was Amazon’s pick of the year. Arden herself studied Russian and spent two years living in Moscow. She based her novel on a Russian folktale, before expanding it into a complete series. One reviewer notes that “[r]eal characters and events from history are combined seamlessly with Russian myths and fairy tales”⁴⁸.

Other ways that Russia is being used as inspiration can be observed as well. There are novels that revolve around a certain period in time, the Romanov dynasty (*Tsarina* (2014)) and related to that the Anastasia myth (*Romanov* (2019)); some even take place in the Communist era (*Sekret* (2014), these types of ‘historical fantasies’ are mostly low fantasies. There are also novels that take the trend of fairy-tale retelling and give it a Russian twist, such as *Deathless* (2011) or *Hunted* (2017). A quick internet search will yield over twenty young adult titles, the ones already published since and the ones with expected release dates this year. This is also not counting the many sequels, many of these novels are part of a series. What is striking is that almost all of these novels are fantasies.

Fairy tales are, of course, inherently fantastical, so any fairy tale retelling, like *Hunted*, is automatically a fantasy. Then there are titles that use Russian folktales, myth and believes in magic as a starting point such as the more direct adaptations as *The Bear and the Nightingale*, or an earlier novel *Egg & Spoon* (2014), and the high fantasy novels, such as Bardugo’s novels. Yet, the novels based on actual Russian history, *Tsarina* or *Romanov*, also all have a fantastical element. Bardugo also hit on her reasons for choosing Russia in particular: “I think there’s tremendous power in the images we associate with Russian culture and history, these extremes of beauty and brutality that lend themselves to fantasy”⁴⁹. There are many different ways that Russia is approached in both the use of its lore and culture, from

⁴⁸ “The Winter of the Witch by Katherine Arden mixes Russian history and myth,”

Borehamwood and Elstree Times, Jan. 25, 2019,

<https://www.borehamwoodtimes.co.uk/news/17385070.the-winter-of-the-witch-by-katherine-arden-mixes-russian-history-and-myth/>.

⁴⁹ Bardugo, interview.

placing a story within a historical Russia that readers may or may not be familiar with, to using it as a base and partially or fully abstracting it. *Egg & Spoon*, for instance, the folklore is based on, but not faithful to Russian lore, “the cultural and mythological references may be less recognizable to many readers”⁵⁰. There is, however, some essence of ‘Russia’ that all these novels seem to find intriguing enough to adapt to their own stories. Maybe there is something in Russia’s (perceived) culture and history that lends it extremely well for young adult fantasy.

1.6 The Aim of This Research

I have noticed that young adult fantasy is, at its core, quite formulaic. There is a threat or central conflict, an aspect of coming of age for the main characters, there is often learning involved of the magical system, characters finding ‘their people’, amongst others. These are in a way macroscopic representations of what it is to be a teenager, a young adult.

Adolescence is after all about growing up, learning who you are, finding out where you belong and also, rebelling. Preferably, an author would create a narrative that represents young adult struggles, if only through symbolism, and they would use worlds that lend itself for such narratives. Worlds that inherently work as a backdrop for these narratives about rebellion, change and struggle.

A thing that Russia is also quite well-known for in popular imagination. Russia is a land of rebellion, dictatorial rule, over-throwing these dictators, war, in other words: struggle. If we then also turn to the ingredients for world-building, religion, folklore, geographical location, architecture, culture, and politics, it can be observed that they are very pronounced in Russian culture, that of the past and the present, and also distinct from Western culture, especially from the Western perspective. Perhaps interesting to note in this context is also that religion, which is an important aspect for world-building, is also an important theme in both Katherine Arden’s trilogy, as well as Leigh Bardugo’s. Religion is also one dividing factor between the east and west of Europe. Western Europe is becoming less religious by the decade, with reports indicating that “70% of young people in the UK identify with no religion”⁵¹. Russia is, if we look at the numbers, not necessarily a very religious country. Yet,

⁵⁰ Leigh Bardugo, “Where the Wicked Things Are,” *The New York Times*, Aug. 22, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/24/books/review/egg-spoon-by-gregory-maguire.html>.

⁵¹ Harriet Sherwood, “‘Christianity as default is gone’: the rise of a non-Christian Europe,” *The Guardian*, March 21, 2018,

its more conservative attitude and Orthodox Christianity may give Westerners the ‘wrong idea’. This is just one aspect then, where Western beliefs and imaginations of Russia might diverge from the actual Russia, but these images are nonetheless attractive, perhaps because of the Western lack of and fantasy about ‘faith’.

Russia is also an interesting choice if we look at who are writing these novels: Western authors, some with a background in Russian studies, but also a majority who somehow made the decision to base their fantasies in and on Russia. In these last cases we can perhaps also signal a more Westernised view and imagination of Russia. In relation to this, we should also consider that many of these YA fantasies have a strong female lead. Russia still is a very conservative country, although we can see outliers in its history. How much of the Russia we are represented with in these novels is authentic? Authenticity does appear to be a point of contention, the public (western and Russian) receptions of the appropriation of Russian history and culture varies per title.

Even if it is a Westernised appropriation, the question of ‘why Russia?’ still remains. ‘Why’ and also ‘why now?’. One reason could be that Russia is very prominent in the news, especially if we look back at early 2010s. Russia was frequently in the news between 2011 and 2013 for the anti-government protests happening, for instance. These are speculations, however. There is no research on this phenomenon. What can be noted, however, is that this trend carries on alongside the trend of more diverse YA fantasy. Another speculation we could make is that Russia is the diversity for ‘white people’. Diversity in settings and backgrounds is not just about representation. The growing market simply needs diversification to remain relevant. Ultimately, it might be a number of things working together to produce this phenomenon, or it might be a complete random occurrence. Without any research neither can be validated. The question remains, however. Why is there this interest in Russia in young adult fantasy? Why now? And, how is it expressed?

To answer these questions I will examine the role of Russian-ness in four young adult fantasy novels by using imagology. My aim is to find out how Russian-ness is represented and used in these novels. This approach may shed some light on the interest in Russia that can be observed in young adult fantasy. The novels I will be analysing are *Shadow and Bone* (2012) by Leigh Bardugo, *The Bear and the Nightingale* (2017) by Katherine Arden, *The Crown’s Game* (2016) by Evelyn Skye and lastly, *Wicked Saints* (2019) by Emily A.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/21/christianity-non-christian-europe-young-people-survey-religion>.

Duncan⁵². I have chosen fantasy novels in particular, because we can see the diversification of setting and use of Russian-ness most in this genre.

⁵² I have included summaries of the novels in the appendix for reference.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Introduction

The novels that will be analysed in this thesis all present the reader with images of Russia or are inspired by such images. This is why the primary theory that will be employed in the analysis of these novels is that of imagology, in particular as it has been detailed in *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters* (2007). Imagology is the “critical analysis of national stereotypes in literature”⁵³ and this theory will help determine the image of Russian national identity as it exists in the western imagination. I will first outline the theory and history of imagology and key concepts that will be applied in this research. Then I will give a brief history of Russia as a nation and detail the characteristics of Russian national stereotype. The national stereotype of Russia as detailed in *Imagology* will be the foundation for this research. In addition, secondary sources will be used to give a brief overview of the Russian history and culture that characterize this nation. I will conclude the chapter by explaining my methodology for the analyses of the novels that will be discussed in this research.

Imagology “applies to research in the field of our mental images of the Other and of ourselves”⁵⁴. It does so by focusing on the discourse of national identity, rather than the society itself⁵⁵, in particular, the use of this discourse in the shaping of national identity through images which characterize both the “domestic identity (self-images or auto-images)”⁵⁶ and the ‘Other’ (“hetero-images”⁵⁷) and the dynamics between these two. This discourse is an *imagined discourse*, because “the typology of characterizations and attributes, with their currency and with their rhetorical deployment”⁵⁸ that are the focus of imagology, lie beyond the area of testable reports or statements of fact⁵⁹. The language that is used to form an image is not tangible in the real world. It is not empirical evidence, but rather

⁵³ Manfred Beller and Joep Leerssen, ed., *Imagology: The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters : A Critical Survey*, *Studia Imagologica*, 13. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): xiii.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, xiv.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

conceptualisation that creates and establishes these images. The imagined discourse “offers characterological explanations of cultural difference”⁶⁰. In other words, it is used to illustrate cultural difference through the use of character studies. Literary imagology “studies the origin and function of characteristics of other countries and peoples, as expressed textually”⁶¹.

Imagology defines “*image* as the mental silhouette of the other, who appears to be determined by the characteristics of family, group, tribe, people or race”⁶². Our attitudes towards these are culturally determined. The idea of nationhood, the belonging to “national collectives which could be defined in terms of territory, ethnicity, language, religion, history and tradition”⁶³, developed from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century in European countries. These countries were at first only separated by the dynasties that ruled them, but among various local and regional groups a sense of nationhood emerged. Literary image formation makes use of themes and characteristic typecasts that developed from this emergence of national awareness and its subsequent “political instrumentalization”⁶⁴. By studying the images of these nations, auto- and hetero-images, we can single out “the significantly active prejudices, stereotypes and clichés from the total complex of imaginary images”⁶⁵. These prejudices, stereotypes and clichés are locked in our subconscious imagination of the others and rise up in times of political tension and war⁶⁶.

The role of national image as a tool in nation formation and as a political instrument has also led to questioning the nature of these national images, whether they are “of an essential or fictional nature”⁶⁷ or, in other words, *authentic*. The concept of authenticity originates from philosophical thought, but has been adapted by many other fields of research.

⁶⁰ Beller and Leerssen, *Imagology*, xiv.

⁶¹ Manfred Beller, “Perception, Image, Imagology,” in *The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters : A Critical Survey*, ed. Joep Leerssen and Manfred Beller. *Studia Imagologica*, 13. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 7.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

This has meant that the exact definition and application of the concept varies per field⁶⁸. The term, however, in its weakest sense, means “‘faithful to an original’ or a ‘reliable, accurate representation’”⁶⁹. This ‘faithfulness’ or ‘reliability’ of the image has leverage, especially in the author-reader relationship that these novels have, novels that present a reader with an image of another, often, unfamiliar nation. The national image that is produced in these novels will be internalised by the reader, furthering a certain set of prejudices, stereotypes and clichés.

The practice of attributing “specific characteristics or even characters to different societies, races or ‘nations’ is very old and very widespread”⁷⁰ and stems from an ethnocentric world view, in which “anything that [deviates] from accustomed domestic patterns is ‘Othered’ as an oddity, an anomaly, a singularity”⁷¹. While these images of character and identity are historically imagined and stratified, imagology tries to show that they are not “mental representations which are conceived by nations about nations”⁷² but “articulated discursive constructs circulating through societies”⁷³ that are “constitutive of national identification patterns”⁷⁴ for both the self and the Other. Imagology aims to demonstrate that these “national stereotypes are first and most effectively formulated, perpetuated and disseminated”⁷⁵ in literature and the literary imagination. This is done by analysing images. It works from the notion that these images of national characterization are not the primary references “to empirical reality but to an intertext, a sounding-board, of other related textual

⁶⁸ This has also been detailed in a survey of the term authenticity called “Kinds of Authenticity,” by George E. Newman and Rosanna K. Smith in *Philosophy Compass* 11.10 (2016): 609–618, 10.1111/phc3.12343.

⁶⁹ “Authenticity,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 11 Sept., 2014, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/authenticity/>.

⁷⁰ Joep Leerssen, “Imagology: History and Method,” in *The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters : A Critical Survey*, ed. Joep Leerssen and Manfred Beller. *Studia Imagologica*, 13. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 16.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 26.

instances”⁷⁶. The auto-image is formed only by the existence of a hetero-image, and vice versa. It is this intertext of national discourse, the interplay between the ‘one’ and the ‘other’, that shapes the notion of national identity. The representation of national identity of ‘another’ is, therefore, used to shape ‘our own’. This is why, in order to understand the emergence of Russian-ness and Russia as an inspiration for the novels in this research, the role of Russian-ness in the novel deserves to be analysed.

2.2. Russia as a Nation

Russia has a long and complicated history and therefore it would be difficult to give a complete account of all of these historic events within the scope of this research. I will, however, highlight some key events, moments and times in Russian history that have shaped Russia as a nation in the western imagination. These historic events, together with Russia’s cultural legacy, have influenced the way not only the West sees it as a nation, but also how Russia sees itself as a nation.

Russia only emerged onto the European political scene and into the European imagination in the fifteenth century. Up until then, medieval Russia (Rus’, a territory around Kiev) had been largely unknown to the Western population, despite early Rus’ experiencing a ‘golden age’ from 1015 to 1125⁷⁷. We can already see the dynastical politics being central to this early Russia as it would be in centuries to come. It should also be noted that “[f]or most of the history of Rus’ there was no such thing as a Rus’ foreign policy”⁷⁸, which could account for its relative obscurity in Western Europe. This does not mean that they did not intermingle, but merely that the contact was not very impactful nor strategized as was the case with other European relationships. It is also during this time of Rus’ that Christianity, which was imported from the Byzantine empire, is established within its boundaries and becomes an important political and cultural force. It is in the mid-eleventh to early twelfth centuries that the “processes, the establishment of models and precedents which were to become the foundations of a Rus’ tradition”⁷⁹ start to emerge in part from its Christian culture.

⁷⁶ Leerssen, “Imagology: History and Method,” 26.

⁷⁷ Simon Franklin, “Kievan Rus’ (1015–1125),” in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. Maureen Perrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 73, doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521812276.005.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁷⁹ Franklin, “Kievan Rus’ (1015–1125),” 96.

There are two developments that led to Russia entering the imagination of the West. The first was the subjugation of East Slavic lordships by Muscovy and their subsequent unification in the struggle against the control of the Mongol-Tartars from Central Asia⁸⁰. The realm of Rus' and its dynastic territories spanned an area that reached to the Black Sea on one side and to the White Sea on the other, covering a large portion of modern day Russia, Eastern Europe and Finland. The Mongol invasions and ensuing Tatar rule, specifically the Golden Horde, took place between 1246 and 1359. "The Mongol invasion had a severe impact on the society and economy of north-eastern Russia"⁸¹, from its military campaigns that cost not only the lives of the common population but also those of their rulers, to the "Mongol khans' demands for human services"⁸². The Mongol invasion was not the only factor in the decline of the north-eastern Russian demographic, "[j]ust over a century after the Mongol invasion, the Black Death or bubonic plague reached the region"⁸³. These factors led to a shift in the demographic: many inhabitants fled the affected areas and established new towns and residences. This ultimately stimulated the economic growth and recovery of north-eastern Russia, which led to a continuing shift in power. The princes of Moscow (the Daniilovichi) were the ones that gained power during this century of Mongol invasion and the subjugation of the Russian lands to the Golden Horde in north-eastern Russia⁸⁴. The domination of the Muscovy princes over the Tatars took a long time to be established but towards the mid-fifteenth century the Muscovy rule grew stronger in part due to the support of the Church.

The Church had remained an important player throughout the Mongol conquest and Muscovy struggle for Russian lands. It was established that "[t]he grand princes of Moscow,

⁸⁰ Joep Leerssen and Bruno Naarden, "Russians," in *The Cultural Construction and Literary Representation of National Characters : A Critical Survey*, ed. Joep Leerssen and Manfred Beller. *Studia Imagologica*, 13. (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007): 226.

⁸¹ Janet Martin, "North-Eastern Russia and the Golden Horde (1246–1359)," in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. Maureen Perrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 129, doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521812276.007.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 130.

⁸³ Martin, "North-Eastern Russia," 131.

⁸⁴ Janet Martin, "The Emergence of Moscow (1359–1462)," in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. Maureen Perrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 158, doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521812276.008.

descended from St Vladimir”⁸⁵ and thus they were “blessed with divine favour and charged with the responsibility to defend the true Orthodox faith”⁸⁶, this was the basis for a claim to legitimacy and sovereignty as validated by the Orthodox Church. This brings us to the second development: the Muscovy lords claimed “imperial dignity”⁸⁷ after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. They asserted the title of ‘Tsar’ and the Russian sovereign would henceforth be seen “as the imperial protector of Orthodox Christendom, leading to a strong religious mystique in the self-image of the Russian empire or ‘Holy Russia’”⁸⁸.

This is a strong contrast with the image of Russia in the west. Russia was seen as “a backward, sparsely populated realm of nobles and serfs, with little political organization and no cultural or intellectual achievement”⁸⁹. The self-image of the Tsar as ‘divine ruler’, which has been a strategy to legitimize rule across Europe, was different from the view of the Westerner who saw him “either as a rough-hewn warlord or as an Asian-style despot”⁹⁰. This image was strengthened by the terror that Ivan IV (1530-1584), ‘the Terrible’, inflicted on Russian towns and noblemen in the sixteenth century in an attempt to conquer the Baltic coast with Tartar cavalry.

Russia became the “largest political entity in Eastern Europe”⁹¹ in the course of the seventeenth century. It expanded by “defeating Poland-Lithuania and annexing the Ukraine and by conquering the vast landmass of Siberia”⁹². There were “geopolitical frictions”⁹³ with neighbouring Sweden, but under the rule of Peter the Great they were decided “in favour of what was now becoming a European empire in the West and a colonial power in the Asian East”⁹⁴. Peter the Great (1682-1725) started the ambitious programme of Westernization, moving the capital from Moscow to St. Petersburg, and modernising and developing Russian culture. He was also known for implementing extensive reforms.

⁸⁵ Martin, “The Emergence of Moscow (1359–1462),” 186.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Leerssen and Naarden, “Russians,” 227.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Leerssen and Naarden, “Russians,” 227.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

A century later, under the “forceful”⁹⁵ rule of Catherine the Great (1762-1796), who played into “the current European ideal of Enlightened Despotism”⁹⁶, these projects are still continuing. As Peter the Great had done before her, Catherine II had reformative plans. Yet, she also had to take conservative opposition to her reforms in consideration. She is considered one of “the master diplomats of the time”⁹⁷. Enlightened despots “typically instituted administrative reform, religious toleration, and economic development but did not propose reforms that would undermine their sovereignty or disrupt the social order”⁹⁸. Catherine II had extended the Russian boundaries and power by the end of her reign and Russia had now expanded its hold onto the Baltic and Black Sea coasts⁹⁹. The attitude among the European onlookers had meanwhile become ambivalent; Russia was either ruled by “the oriental despotism of a native autocrat, or by the Enlightened despotism of a progressive monarch”¹⁰⁰. This ambivalence also pertained to the Russian modernisation in the eighteenth century. It was viewed with “a mixture of approval and apprehension”¹⁰¹.

Ultimately, Russia was left behind as the Industrial Revolution transformed Western Europe and “Russian backwardness became a more dominant trope in the nineteenth century, this time involving a mixture of disapproval and exoticism”¹⁰². Russia became known as “the transit zone ... between civilized Europe and the vast stagnation of Asia”¹⁰³. Its markers of ‘backwardness’ were “the lack of trade or industry, the reliance on serf labour for the gentry- and nobility-owned estates, and the lack of a middle class or public sphere”¹⁰⁴. The relationship was mutually cold, the Russians resented the presence of foreign diplomats acting as advisers and officials and “they were often represented as patronizing pedants”¹⁰⁵. Despite

⁹⁵ Leerssen and Naarden, “Russians,” 227.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 508.

⁹⁸ “Enlightened despotism,” Encyclopaedia Britannica,
<https://www.britannica.com/topic/enlightened-despotism>.

⁹⁹ Ragsdale, “Russian Foreign Policy,” 515.

¹⁰⁰ Leerssen and Naarden, “Russians,” 227.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

this animosity between Europe and Russia, they were in close entanglements for much of the nineteenth century, both in Russia's involvement with the Napoleonic wars, the dynastic intermarriages with European powers and its "geopolitical role while the power of the Ottoman empire dwindled"¹⁰⁶. Russia was, however, also a "hegemonic threat, given the tsar's continuing autocracy"¹⁰⁷ and continued its imperial enterprises, such as the Crimean War (1853-1856).

The nineteenth century also saw the emergence of Romanticism as the dominant artistic movement not just in Russia, but the whole of Europe. National issues and themes were important topics in Russian¹⁰⁸. Another important feature of Romanticism, one that could be found everywhere in Europe, was a "new appreciation of Slavic cultures"¹⁰⁹. The Russian self-image was in certain circles of Russian society, especially, more and more connected to not only a "symbolical guardianship of Orthodox Christendom, but also to a guiding role of an emerging Slavdom"¹¹⁰. This image was epitomized in a set of three principles: Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationality¹¹¹. The emphasis on nationality, which in practice meant "Russian-ness"¹¹², "led to an increasing intolerance vis-à-vis non-Russian cultures"¹¹³. This was not just limited to Western nations, it also extended to other Slavic nations, such as Poland, which became "hate figures"¹¹⁴ in Russian literature.

The celebration of national themes could be found across the board in Russian cultural enterprises, from its modern literature to the national Russian school of music that emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century. The appreciation of Russian culture in Western Europe "led to a turnaround in the country's reputation"¹¹⁵. The markers of 'backwardness', such as serfdom, were traded in for more refined images as they were represented by imperial court life, the novels of authors such as Tolstoi, Turgenev and Dostoevskii, and late-romantic

¹⁰⁶ Leerssen and Naarden, "Russians," 228.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

music and ballet performances¹¹⁶. This did not mean that old images of Russia were gone from the Western mind, they had simply become more “layered”¹¹⁷. Russia still represented the idea of ‘Oriental despotism’ in the European imagination, but despite a strong distrust of autocracy in Russia, a “more sentimental image”¹¹⁸, one in which “the natural submissiveness, meekness, endurance and patience of Russia’s Slavic population”¹¹⁹ also took hold of the Western imagery.

This image changed once again with Communist rule, which disrupted relations between Russia and Europe. Stalin’s dictatorship reverted the image of Russia grossly, recalling old images of “the full harshness of ‘Oriental despotism’”¹²⁰ and the imperial activities that had led to mistrust in the nineteenth century. This image was overturned again briefly in WW2 during the anti-Nazi alliance, but returned with the Cold War. Russia was seen as “a half-Asian autocracy bereft of culture: a formula of terror and oppression”¹²¹. Communist rule also activated another trope: that of the “long-suffering, patiently enduring Slav”¹²², one that resurfaced in the West through writing by Russian authors under Communist rule. The image of “a spiritually exalted Russia has survived the despotism and despotic reputation of the USSR”.

The twenty-first century has seen a politically aggressive Russia emerge again. Post-Communist Russia struggled amidst a reduction of national borders and a capitalist economic revolution, which “failed to be transformed into a full-scale political revolution”¹²³. “The recent reassertion of great power status under Putin and Medvedev appears retrogressive and nostalgic”¹²⁴ to Western eyes, but the growing centralisation of power under Putin’s administration and the “redefinition of the Russian state as a ‘great power’ in the older

¹¹⁶ Leerssen and Naarden, “Russians,” 228.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 228-29.

¹²⁰ Ibid. 229.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Paul B. Rich, “Russia as a Great Power,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20.2 (2009): 291, doi:10.1080/09592310902975398.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 277.

sense”¹²⁵ is one that “mainstream Russian public opinion finds relatively easy to understand”¹²⁶. Recent years saw growing political unrest (2011–2013 and 2017–2018) and the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula (2014).

Lastly, I will pay some attention to gender in the history of Russia. It is common usage to refer to Russia as ‘Mother Russia’ or as the motherland; depictions of Russia as the mother can also be found in national statues and monuments. It should be noted that in the eighteenth and nineteenth century women’s property rights were very progressive. Under Peter the Great’s rule property laws were expanded to give women a more active role and control over her property. “Women as a group engaged in the same range of property transactions as men”¹²⁷, such as the acquisition of serfs and estates. While the law of property as instated from 1753 “defined married women as autonomous agents and guaranteed them full control over any property in their possession”¹²⁸, “[c]ustom, family law and religious ideology unanimously prescribed women’s personal subjugation to their husbands”¹²⁹. Women’s legal status and rights were limited overall and “until 1917 women remained personally subject to male authority”¹³⁰. Women were expected to remain in the domestic sphere, even after the revolution of 1905 and “[p]atriarchal relations continued to serve as both metaphor and model for Russia’s political order”¹³¹, and “[w]ifehood and motherhood ... remained the aspiration of countless numbers of Russia’s women”¹³², despite the emergence of the new woman throughout the twentieth century.

¹²⁵ Rich, “Russia as a Great Power,” 276.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Michelle Marrese, “Gender and the Legal Order in Imperial Russia,” in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. by Dominic Lieven, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 329, doi:10.1017/CHOL9780521815291.018.

¹²⁸ Marrese, “Gender and the Legal Order,” 330.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 342.

¹³¹ Barbara Alpern Engel, “Women, the Family and Public Life,” in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. Dominic Lieven (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006): 325, <https://doi-org.ru.idm.oclc.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521815291.017>

¹³² Ibid.

2.3. Characteristics of the Russian Nation

On the basis of this brief history of Russia as nation, it can be observed that there are a number of notable characteristics that reoccur throughout its history. These characteristics, or images, are what can be used to analyse the 'Russian-ness' of a particular text. Imagology is concerned with the discourse of *imagined* identity, in which self-images and the images of the 'Other' are partially formed through their interaction. This inherently supposes that in the process of self- and hetero-images, 'othering' takes place.

Russia is often seen as an 'Other' in the history of Russian-European/Western relationships. This has a few identifiable historic origins, such as its initial obscurity and isolation up until the fifteenth century, its geography, which extends beyond the 'European' territory, and relationships with the East. Russia was the 'transit zone' between Europe and Asia and has been accused of 'Oriental despotism'. We can also see that Russia is in some ways exoticised. The image of the 'long-suffering, patiently enduring Slav' and the assumed 'backwardness' both engage with the idea that Russia in some way is more 'primitive' than the West. This idea is contested throughout the longstanding relationships between Europe and Russia, but it resurfaces often enough to have had a lasting impact. Russia, to this date, is still considered a more conservative country.

Russia has also been a threat to the West for a substantial part of its history. This is because of its history of imperialism and territorial turmoil. Russia has been a nation of conquest, both its victim and victor. There has been a fear of Russian expansion spanning centuries, and Russia has indeed expanded and decreased numerous times. This, coupled with the view of Russia as an 'oriental' power, a nation that has been very elusive in the Western imagination, has also lent itself to seeing Russia as a real and at times violent threat to Western civilization. The imperial practices of Russia have marked it as an important participant in global politics for many centuries. Political turmoil within the nation in the form of dynastical practices, revolution and invasion have left a strong impression on its national image, both externally and internally. Nationalism is an important component of the Russian self-image.

In addition to these broader aspects of Russian-ness, exoticism and nationalism, and its status as an imperial power, there are other contributing factors to its history and establishment that are worth to be pointing out. One aspect of Russian history that has had a long-lasting impact on its image is religion, in particular the Orthodox Church. The role of the Church in the establishment of a Russian nation is evident in its early history. There is, however, another side to religion in Russian history: the communist *atheist* rule. Both religion

and a lack of religion have shaped Russia as a nation. Another factor that has helped shape its history is geography. The Russian nation has always been a collective of varying territories, in terms of the geography (think Siberia versus the Crimea) and in terms of the accompanying ethnicities. Gender relations also point to a largely patriarchal society, despite the gendering of the nation as 'Mother Russia'.

In conclusion, the Russian national stereotype is both Occidental and Oriental in the views of the West. This duality has, to an extent, alienated Russia in the European eye. Russian policies and self-image are rooted in nationalism and imperialism, they are and want to be seen as a 'great power'. The Orthodox faith has had a strong influence over its history up until the twentieth century. Historically, its geography and demography are vast and varied, and its society patriarchal.

2.4. Methodology

The primary aim of this research is to establish the role of Russian-ness in young adult fantasy literature. Other interests, aside from the how, are why Russian-ness is employed and why this has been the case since the 2010s. The novels that will be analysed are *Shadow and Bone* (2012) by Leigh Bardugo, *The Bear and the Nightingale* (2017) by Katherine Arden, *The Crown's Game* (2016) by Evelyn Skye and *Wicked Saints* (2019) by Emily A. Duncan. Each novel will be the focus of a separate chapter. The chapter will open with a brief background to the novels; this includes the circumstances of its publication, relevant information on the author and the possible research they have done before writing the novel. It will also be explained why this novel is relevant for this research, whether that is because of its plot, its setting, or other factors. This brief background of the novel will be followed by its analysis and a discussion.

The analysis will establish the representations of Russian-ness. This will be done in two ways. First, I will look at overt representations of Russian-ness, such as language, aspects of culture or the identification of the setting as Russian, its geography and demography. Then I will examine the covert representations of Russian-ness. These are based on the aspects religion, state, war/conflict, and gender. These have been chosen because Russian-ness is also marked by them in its history and national image. As these are all fantasy novels, the relation between Russian-ness and the particular magic system in place will also be taken into consideration. The concept of authenticity, as I have detailed in this chapter, will also be discussed in these analyses, but only for the novels *The Bear and the Nightingale* and *The Crown's Game*. This is because they are low-fantasies and as such take place in the 'real

world'. They both narrate actual historical events and persons, which means that in analysing the representation of Russian-ness in these two novels will involve also looking at the authenticity of the authors' accounts. The analysis will be followed by a discussion of the role of Russian-ness in the particular novel. The function of Russian-ness will be examined; it could, for instance, be that it is an active part of the plot, or perhaps just setting. This identification of overt and covert representations and their role in the text should reveal how and why Russian-ness is used in the novel. The results per novel will then be compared and evaluated in the conclusion, to, perhaps, also find a common aim or reason for the emergence of Russian-ness within the genre.

3. *Shadow and Bone* (2012) by Leigh Bardugo

3.1. Introduction

Leigh Bardugo's first instalment in the *Shadow and Bone* trilogy, *Shadow and Bone*, was first published in 2012 by MacMillan Publishers. *Shadow and Bone* is a best-selling high fantasy novel about a young woman named Alina who learns she has great power. A sequel series is currently being published, with *King of Scars* having released in 2019. It was recently announced that the trilogy will be adapted as a television series on the streaming service Netflix. The series will be eight episodes long and will comprise the storyline of both the original trilogy and the *Six of Crows* duology, which is also set in Bardugo's 'Grisha-verse'. It is not surprising that the series has been picked up for the small screen, as it has had favourable reviews over the years, and Bardugo has amassed a faithful fan base.

The series is set in a country very similar to Russia. Bardugo mentions in her acknowledgements that "[m]any books helped to inspire Ravka and bring it to life"¹³³, such as *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, *Land of the Firebird: The Beauty of Old Russia*, and *Russian Folk Belief*. She has talked about why she drew a lot of inspiration from Russian history and culture, saying that she "wanted to build atop something other than the familiar high fantasy bedrock of Medieval England"¹³⁴. "[T]he choice seem[ed] obvious"¹³⁵ to her when browsing through a Russian Imperial atlas. She saw "a kingdom on the brink of collapse, an incompetent monarchy squandering its resources, the failure to industrialize, an ill-equipped army of conscripted serfs"¹³⁶, which became the foundation for the world she was about to create.

Obviously, these themes are prevalent throughout Medieval England as well. Alternatively, she might also have chosen to go with a non-European country for her inspiration. Using Russia, however, and evoking Russian-ness, appears to have served the plot particularly well. That is why I will examine which representations of Russian-ness are present in the text and what their use in the narrative is.

¹³³ Leigh Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone* (New York: Macmillan, 2012): 358.

¹³⁴ Leigh Bardugo, "The Big Idea: Leigh Bardugo," *Whatever: This Machine Mocks Fascists*, June 4, 2012, <https://whatever.scalzi.com/2012/06/04/the-big-idea-leigh-bardugo/>.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

3.2. Analysis

The analysis of *Shadow and Bone* is two-fold. First, I will identify any overt and covert representations of Russian-ness in the text. The overt representations of Russian-ness will be determined by looking at similarities between the world that Bardugo has created and historical Russia, insofar as they can be compared to one another. When identifying covert representations of Russian-ness, I will be using certain categories to draw comparison between the world of the text and Russia. These categories are religion, state, war/conflict, gender, geography and demography. These aspects have been chosen because Russian-ness is also marked by them in its history and national image. I will also look at the magic-system in place and how it relates to the plot and Russian-ness within the section of covert representations. Secondly, I will discuss how these representations function in the novel to identify the role of Russian-ness in the overall plot.

3.2.1. Overt Representations

The overt representations of Russian-ness, such as language, aspects of culture or the identification of the setting as Russian, are present in the text, but they are adaptations and not faithful reproductions. Sometimes Russian (sounding) words are used in the text, often italicised, but they are not always used correctly or they are made up words or concepts. An example is the word *kvas*. The Ravkan *kvas* is a strong alcoholic drink, similar to beer, while the Russian *kvas* is classified as a non-alcoholic drink in Russia because the alcohol content from fermentation is usually very low. There is also *malenchki*¹³⁷, which is translated in the text as ‘little ghosts’, or *otkazat’sya*¹³⁸, which means ‘the abandoned’; both have no linguistic relation to the Russian language, they only look like Russian. There are also English words which have been made to look Russian, like *tsifil*¹³⁹, which is similar to syphilis. The syntax of the language is also not faithful to Russian, which can already be seen in the last name of Alina, Starkov, which should have been Starkova.

There are, however, also instances where Bardugo does use actual Russian, such as the use of ‘da’ for yes, or ‘kapitan’, or in the use of ‘moi tsar’ or ‘moya tsaritsa’. A number of references to Russian culture can be seen as well. Alina mentions seeing a “little church with

¹³⁷ Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone*, 1.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 149.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 22.

its whitewashed wall and gleaming onion domes [...] in surprisingly good repair”¹⁴⁰ in Kribirsk, which is similar to the style of Russian domed Orthodox churches. There is also mention of *sarafans*, which is traditional Russian dress for women, or the *balalaika*, which is a traditional Russian musical instrument. The *banya* is also mentioned many times; this is the name for a bathhouse in Russia. There is also the use of the term *oprichniki*, which references the order of the Oprichnina under Ivan the Terrible. Lastly, many characters have Russian names, such as Alexei, Ivan, Mikhael, or Zoya. Ravka has a feudal system in place, with peasants, lords and serfs. The rule is also dynastical, with mentions of lineage.

The complete map of the Grisha-verse¹⁴¹ shows how Ravka is situated in the world between seas, permafrost and two large countries, Shu Han and Fjerda, which could respectively represent the Eastern Asia borders of Russia and its Western Scandinavian borders. The permafrost which is located in an area called Tsibeya is reminiscent of the permafrost found in Siberia and like the Russian Siberia, Tsibeya also hosts a number of work camps and outposts. From the description in the novel there is also the sense that the nature of Ravka is as varied as that of Russia, because it spans such a large area. There are, for instance, the “rolling fields and abandoned farms of the Tula valley”¹⁴² near the Fold, “the wealthy port cities on Ravka’s western coast”¹⁴³, and “the snow-blanketed countryside surrounding Os Alta”¹⁴⁴, Ravka’s capital. When Alina and Mal travel to the outpost in Chernast, near the permafrost, Alina remarks that “[t]is far north, snow was common well into spring”¹⁴⁵.

3.2.2. Covert Representations

If we look at para-textual material we can see one of the most suggestive references to the covert representations of Russian-ness in *Shadow and Bone*. The tagline of the novel is ‘Soldier, Summoner, Saint’, evoking three of the most central themes of the novel. There are three plots set-up in this first instalment of the *Shadow and Bone* series: war, magic and religion. The first is the plot of the Ravkan war. The readers learns that Ravka has been involved in a centuries long conflict with the neighbouring nations Shu Han and Fjerda. The

¹⁴⁰ Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone*, 16-17.

¹⁴¹ Figure 1, Appendix E.

¹⁴² Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone*, 8.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 188.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 295.

Ravkan war also plays an important role in the novel. It is by being a soldier in the First Army that Alina first comes into contact with the Darkling. It is also the Darkling that uses the conflicts with surrounding nations and its impact on Ravka as a way to justify his plans and ulterior motives. A striking resemblance between Ravka and Russia is that they are both large nations that have been under siege by neighbouring nations. Especially Shu Han, in this case, can be seen as a reference to the Mongolian rule over Russia in its early nationhood, as the name might remind the audience of a real-world Asian counterpart. The Darkling also tries to unite the people for his cause to get rid of the Shu and Fjerdan threat, similar to how early Muskovy lords rallied the Slavic people together to fight Mongolian rule.

The second plot revolves around the fantasy aspect of this novel. ‘Summoner’ refers to the magic system that is in place in this world. The people who are gifted with the Small Science, the name for magic in Ravka, are called Grisha and all Grisha belong to a separate order of the Second Army (the division of the army that is Grisha). There are corporalki, the order of the living and the dead, etherealki, the order of the summoners (which Alina and the Darkling belong to) and materialki, the order of the fabrikators. Each of these also have subcategories depending on the specific power a Grisha has. Alina’s title as summoner is an important plot element because she is a very rare type of summoner, a Sun summoner, and she is possibly the only one who will be able to erase the Fold, which was created by the Darkling and his power, which is opposite to hers. When the Grisha first come to test Alina and Mal as children there is an exchange between an examiner and Mal that shows the precarious position of the Grisha in this society. The examiner asks Mal whether he knows who they are and Mal blurts out that they are “witches”¹⁴⁶. This upsets the Grisha and she asks Alina and Mal’s guardian, Ana Kuya, if they only teach “[s]uperstition and lies”¹⁴⁷ at her school. The Grisha tell the children that they are “practitioners of the Small Science”¹⁴⁸ and the ones who keep this country and this kingdom safe”¹⁴⁹. The Small Science is likened to nature and Grisha could “[manipulate] matter at its most fundamental levels”¹⁵⁰. It is mentioned several times in the text that the Grisha, while having a good position in Ravka, are hunted and prosecuted in the rest of the world. Many foreign Grisha have therefore fled to

¹⁴⁶ Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone*, 5.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 148.

Ravka, which is why there are many non-Ravkan Grisha in the Second Army. The Darkling remarks that he “didn’t have to gather [the Grisha] ... [t]hey came to [him]”¹⁵¹. He explains to Alina that the Fjerdans “burn [them] as witches, and the Kerch sell [them] as slaves”, while the “Shu Han carve [them] up seeking the source of [their] power”¹⁵². It is not surprising, then, that the Grisha are so loyal to the Darkling and are willing to overthrow the King and his army for him. The fate of the Grisha is also reminiscent of the fate of the Slavs, and their representation in the Russian national image. Themes of refuge and union to fight an oppressor are important for understanding Russian-ness.

There is a clash for power not just coming from foreign lands, but also from within Ravka. There are many players in this game: Shu Han and Fjerda, the King, the Darkling, but also those who stand up for the people. When the Darkling tells Alina the story of the Black Heretic and how the Darkling himself has to try and undo his ancestors wrongs, Alina makes the remarks that while “[t]he Black Heretic’s descendants had suffered for his ambition ... [she] couldn’t help but think that it was Ravka that had been made to pay in blood”¹⁵³. The tagline of the book which signals Alina’s three roles, ‘Soldier, Summoner, Saint’, also showcases the three powers in Ravka: the King, the Darkling, and Faith. Yet, these roles are strongly connected to one another, they each represent a pillar, autocracy (soldier), nationality (summoner) and orthodoxy (saint), but these could also be interchanged.

Religion is the third plot of the novel and it interweaves with the other two. The Apparat points out to Alina that “[t]here is something more powerful than any army ... [s]omething strong enough to topple kings, and even Darklings... Faith”¹⁵⁴. He also tells her that “in some of the border villages, they are making altars to [her]”¹⁵⁵. The people of Ravka are strong believers, we see soldiers “clutching their icons, praying to their Saints”¹⁵⁶ before they embark on the journey through the folds. There are many mentions of cathedrals and churches. Faith and superstition are very important for the people, the peasants. This is interesting because religion has played an important role in the formation of Russia and its dynastical rule. The support of the people and their faith is important to retain a stable nation.

¹⁵¹ Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone*, 80.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 21.

This can be seen as an important theme in both historical Russia, but also the world of *Shadow and Bone*. This is a world, however, on the verge of change. The revelation of Alina as the Sun summoner gives the King, the Darkling and the people hope that change is on the horizon, however different their needs for change are.

There is a danger in this threefold of power. This world surrounding Ravka is also changing rapidly. The Darkling alludes many times to the threat that the Grisha fear from the countries outside of Ravka. They are developing weapons that are much more advanced than muskets and rifles, “[t]he age of Grisha power is coming to an end”¹⁵⁷. The Appar, too, observes that while the “[p]easants loves their Saints”¹⁵⁸ and “hunger for the miraculous”¹⁵⁹, “they do not love the Grisha”¹⁶⁰. The king of Ravka is also not very involved and the First Army is neglected, only armed with these muskets, rifles, crossbow and knives. They are no match for these foreign forces or the Grisha. Alina believes that a “divided Ravka won’t survive the new age”¹⁶¹. That is also why it is interesting that she is all three: soldier, summoner and saint. She might be the persons to unite a divided Ravka by invoking all three aspects of the state.

The world of *Shadow and Bone* is on the brink of change, of modernisation. If it were to be dated in our own world, it would be set in about the mid-nineteenth century. Mal references that the “Fjerdans have a breech-loading rifle that can fire twenty-eight rounds per minute”¹⁶², an invention in the real world that dates back to the American civil war. Nineteenth century Russia was at a similar point in history as Ravka: on the brink of modern times. As with Russia, Ravka is also afraid of being left behind. The nineteenth century is also a point in Russian history where its national image is cemented. The three pillars of autocracy, orthodoxy, and nationality are also represented in the image of Ravka. Autocracy is found in the struggle for power between the Darkling and the King, orthodoxy in the superstitions and beliefs that Ravkans hold and nationality in the people of Ravka who are the unheard backbone of this country. In many ways Ravka stands with one foot on each shore: there are many modern things about the country, but also many backward things, just as it was the case

¹⁵⁷ Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone*, 81.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, 283.

in Russia. One example is the position of women in both historical Russia and Ravka. Russia has known varying degrees of female independence, as I recounted in the first chapter. Women of the higher classes could, for instance, hold property, but they were also legally subject to the men of their family. This ambivalent status in society of women can also be seen in Ravka. Alina and many other women are allowed to participate in working society as members of the army, both First and Second. They can be teachers like Ana Kuya. Yet, we also learn that women should “be careful ... of powerful men”¹⁶³. A woman like Alina’s friend Genya is at the mercy of men such as the Darkling or the King and has to go with their whims in order to survive in this world. Another example would be the organisation of state. The King is on the one hand represented as an autocrat, but it is also mentioned that he has ministers, and both the Apparatus and the Darkling have their own power over the King’s rule. This, again, is similar to the despotism that could be observed in nineteenth century Russia. Rulers like Catherine and Peter the Great had to take other powerful people into consideration.

3.3. Role of Russian-ness

The function of these representations of Russian-ness is varied. The overt representations are mostly there to signal to the audience that they are indeed in a Russian-like country. The references are perhaps not accurate, but they are specific enough to create this link between Russia and Ravka. There is no systematic adaptation of either Russian language and/or culture: some things are taken from Russian language and culture and some things are completely fabricated. The geography and demographic of Ravka play a semi-active role. They enable certain plot-points and moves to be executed, but the scenery and feudal system do not necessarily drive the plot. There are no examples of actual adaptation of any Russian folktales. The magic system is relatively generic and does not need ‘Russian-ness’ to function. According to Bardugo the word ‘Grisha’ comes from the Russian diminutive of Gregory, Grigori, which means ‘watchful’, as she explains in the accompanying question section to the book, but that is where any involvement of Russian-ness in the magic ends. She has been inspired by historical Russia, but does not attempt to faithfully reproduce Russian-ness, at least not overtly.

The covert representations involve Russian-ness much more intensely. The positioning of Ravka in time is evocative of a particular time in Russian history and some elements from

¹⁶³ Bardugo, *Shadow and Bone*, 209.

the plot are inspired in that manner. These parts of the plot that have a root in Russian history are essential to the narrative. The story is about struggles for power and the bringing together of people to fight for independence, which are to an extent generic themes, but here they are closely linked to the Russian national image and Russia's history. *Shadow and Bone* is set in a world experiencing great change. The Darkling, who represents an ancient power, but also one that wants to change the status quo, is a representative of deception. Sometimes modernisation can in fact bring prosperity and sometimes it will not. The King represents a tradition that is failing to hold strong and Alina represents a reluctant change that is needed but difficult to achieve. These struggles in moving a nation forward have been present in the history of Russia. Sometimes new rule has pushed the nation onwards, and at times it has pulled it back. These are also the different paths the nation of Ravka can take. This same contest between tradition and innovation can be seen throughout many aspects of the text, whether it is the role of women in Ravkan society or the weaponry that is changing the war. Russian-ness is not used as window dressing in the deeper plot and themes of the novel. The inspiration that Bardugo drew from Imperial Russia has created these opportunities of exploration for the various plots and topics that are central in *Shadow and Bone*.

These thematic explorations are based on Russian history and culture, but are only represented covertly. Russian-ness is used as an inspiration, but because the novel is high fantasy and can therefore opt not to claim any actual Russian-ness, its role remains only that. Russian-ness is used overtly to signal that this novel is different from other high fantasy novels in its setting, but it is not wholly adapted so as to not have to justify any alterations. Covertly, the representations of Russian-ness are used as inspirations and starting points for the novel and the world of the author to take off.

4. *The Bear and the Nightingale* (2017) by Katherine Arden

4.1. Introduction

The Winter of the Witch, the conclusion to the *Winternight* trilogy, was published in early 2019. The trilogy by Katherine Arden has gained favourable reviews over the last three years, starting with the first instalment *The Bear and the Nightingale*, which was published in 2017 by Del Rey, an imprint of Ebury Publishing. *The Bear and the Nightingale* sets up the story of Vasilisa, Vasya, a young girl living near the wilderness of early Rus', who learns that sorcery, folklore and tales of old magic are more real than people like to believe. This coming of age story sees her not only grow up but also try to save her people from the darkness that lurks in the woods.

The author, Katherine Arden, lived and studied in Moscow for a year. She also studied at Middlebury College in Vermont where she specialised in French and Russian literature. *The Bear and the Nightingale* is her debut novel and she has written three more since. *The Bear and the Nightingale* is set in fourteenth century Russia and Arden mentions in the "Author's Note" that she has "tried to be as faithful as possible to a poorly documented time period"¹⁶⁴. She also mentioned in an interview that the inspiration for her *Winternight* trilogy came from the Russian fairytale "King Frost". She recounts that she retold the story in the first chapter of the book and that "the rest of the book became a riff on the themes present in the retelling of the fairytale"¹⁶⁵. She also added in another interview that she chose medieval Russia "to ground the book a bit more ... [s]o it would seem like a real place instead of just like a Russian-looking fantasy world"¹⁶⁶.

The author chose this setting for specific reasons. She got her inspiration from a Russian folktale and she wanted a world that would seem like a real place, a real Russia. I will analyse the representations of Russian-ness present in the text in this chapter and examine what their role is in the narrative. I will look at both the overt representations that denote this

¹⁶⁴ Katherine Arden, "Author's Note," in *The Bear and the Nightingale* (London: Del Rey, 2017): 412.

¹⁶⁵ Katherine Arden, "Firsts: A Q&A with Katherine Arden," interview by Rosie Ninesling, *Austin Monthly*, January 7, 2019, <http://www.austinmonthly.com/Austin-Amplified/January-2019/FIRSTS-A-Q-A-with-Katherine-Arden/>.

¹⁶⁶ Katherine Arden, "Katherine Arden: It's a Great Time for Female Fantasy Writers," interview by Nicholas Tufnell, *CNET*, January 24, 2018, <https://www.cnet.com/news/katherine-arden-the-girl-in-the-tower-female-fantasy-writers/>.

place as Russia but also the covert representations of Russian-ness that are evoked. Subsequently, I will explore the role of Russian-ness in the novel.

4.2. Analysis

The Bear and the Nightingale overtly claims its setting as Russia almost immediately. That is why in this analysis of the novel I will first determine in how far Russian-ness is claimed and overtly presented in the text. The novel is a historical low fantasy so I expect that the overt representation will be quite strong. The novel also has a number of more covert references to the Russia it is set in and the culture and history that are involved, which will be discussed in the section on covert representations. The magic of the novel is rooted in Russian folklore. This will also be discussed as a covert representation because it has a certain role in the text. Where needed, I will provide background information on the themes or stories of Russian folklore that are referenced and utilised.

4.2.1. Overt Representations

The story opens with the phrase “[i]t was late winter in northern Rus’”¹⁶⁷, immediately signalling a time and place for the setting of *The Bear and the Nightingale*. As was mentioned in chapter one, Rus’ is the medieval territory around Kiev that would later evolve into Russia. Not every reader will be familiar with Rus’ but if they are they will be aware of certain cultural historical developments touched upon by the narrator. It should be noted that Arden has included a glossary at the back of the novel, explaining a number of words, concepts and the developments that she discusses in the narration. If the reader is not familiar with Rus’ before this novel, they will be after reading it. There is plenty of explanation of actual historical events and people, the references to cultural artefacts are also detailed and the setting of Rus’ is not just signalled by calling it Rus’ but also by describing it as such.

There are multiple references to Moscow and the Muscovy rule. It is revealed that Marina, Vasya’s mother, is a daughter of Ivan I, ‘the Terrible, and her mother supposedly emerged from the woods one day¹⁶⁸. While Dunya tells the children a folktale, Pyotr reminisces about his wife’s origins and the reader is presented with a short summary of early Rus’ politics. The narrator recounts that “Ivan Kalita was a hard prince, eaten with ambition,

¹⁶⁷ Arden, Katherine Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale* (London: Del Rey, 2017): 3.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 15.

cold and clever and grasping”¹⁶⁹, because “Moscow killed her princes quickly”¹⁷⁰. This is a direct reference to the tradition of succession in Rus’ while it was still under indirect rule by the Khan. A Muscovy lord could only remain in power if they had the support of the Khan¹⁷¹. Marina’s origin story is weaved through actual practices of the court in early Rus’. She might be a fictive character, but Ivan I is not. The narrator also accounts for her marriage to Pyotr, telling the reader that “Rus’ had been Christian ever since Vladimir baptized all of Kiev in the Dneiper and dragged the old gods through the streets”¹⁷², but that “[f]ive hundred years after the monks came to Kiev, Rus’ still teemed with unknown powers [which] [t]he Church did not like”¹⁷³. Marina is sent away because she resembles her mother, a presumed witch, too much. Later in the novel Ivan II, Ivan I’s son and Marina’s half-brother, is also introduced. The narrator talks some more about the succession, telling the reader that “Ivan II was styled Ivan Krasnii, or Ivan the Fair”¹⁷⁴ and that “[h]is elder brother Semyon had ruled before him, but Semyon and his issue had all died of plague in one bitter summer”¹⁷⁵. This too has actually happened. It should be noted that Arden accounts for her deviations from historical Rus’ in the “Author’s Note”. Explaining that whenever she did take “liberties with the historical record ... it was for dramatic purposes”¹⁷⁶. That said, the references to early Rus’ are quite accurate and where Arden deviates, it is never in such a way that the history is altered beyond recognition. These references to the succession of Ivan I also date the story of the novel to the fourteenth century.

As touched upon earlier, the Church is very important in fourteenth century Russia. This is also seen in the novel, both on a micro and macro-level. On the macro-level we can see how the Metropolitan of Moscow, Aleksei, is involved in the politics of succession, advising both Ivan I and ruling as regent when he dies. Aleksei is the one who tells Ivan I to

¹⁶⁹ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 15.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ The Khan provided legitimacy for the claim of the grand prince via ‘patent’, see the chapter “North-eastern Russia and the Golden Horde”, by Janet Martin in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, volume 1.

¹⁷² Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 16.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ Arden, “Author’s Note,” 412.

marry Anna and Vladimir into Pyotr's family and the one who decides to ... Sasha into to monestary to protect Dmitrii. Aleksei is introduced as the "Metropolitan of Moscow, the highest prelate in Rus', ordained by the Patriarch of Constantinople himself, [and] charged with teaching [Dmitrii] letters and statecraft"¹⁷⁷. This short sentence tells the reader a number of things about the role of the Church in early Rus': the Metropolitan is an important member of the government, the church is the Orthodox Church and the Church is responsible for not only the general education of Grand Princes, but also the education on how they should govern. It is true that the metropolitan priests had a strong influence over the rulers of Rus' and it was only when their validation of the rule of a Grand Prince was not given, that a prince would turn to khan of the Golden Horde for endorsement. This need for affirmation by the Khan is also referenced by the narrator: "[Dmitrii] himself sent to Sarai to beg the Khan's indulgence"¹⁷⁸. The influence of the Church and religion are also noticeable on the micro-level. The settlement of Pyotr, a boyar, is on the edge of the wild, but here too the Church is prominent. Despite their pagan ways, people go to Church and the priest has an advisory role to the boyar. The people pray and have icons in their homes. This can be observed quite early on in the novel when Sasha "went to kneel before the icons in the corner opposite the door ... crossed himself, stood, and kissed the image of the Virgin"¹⁷⁹.

As mentioned, Arden explains some of her choices of the adaptation of Rus' for her story in the "Author's Note". Another aspect she touches upon is her choices for adapting Russian to the text of the novel. She states that she "wanted these Russian words to be reasonably pronounceable and aesthetically pleasing to speakers of English"¹⁸⁰ and that is why she has not adapted some of the Russian concepts and words faithfully. She also remarks that the only exception to her alterations is in the word Rus', because its "spelling with the apostrophe in historiography has made it the most familiar of any to English-speaking readers"¹⁸¹. It is notable to mention this para-textual material because the Russian words and concepts do connote Russian-ness. They signal to the reader a certain culture and it is the reader who then implements their own notions of Russian-ness onto the text because they have been signalled that this is appropriate. It is also interesting to see that Arden has also

¹⁷⁷ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 56.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸⁰ Arden, "Author's Note," 412.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*

included a glossary for these concepts and words. One will often see a glossary attached to an edition of an older authentic text or translation, with which the audience is often not familiar. This use of the glossary then signals the understanding that the audience is not familiar with this culture, but also implies a certain degree of authenticity of the history and culture presented in this novel. This can be seen as a way of othering the audience from the culture. The representation of the culture as something that has to be learned is a means of defining an us and them.

This glossary does not just explain some Russian words, it also explains Russian cultural artefacts, such as the sarafan. The reader is never told what a sarafan is in the text, only in the glossary. Those who are familiar with Russian culture will recognise some of the more veiled overt references to Russian culture, such as the tradition of baking honeycakes. The honeycakes are not named ‘honeycakes’ at first. The reader is presented with a passage about Vasya entering the winter kitchen and looking into the hearthstone where she discovers the cakes, which Dunya was “scooping ... from the ashes”¹⁸². The narrator then states that “[t]he whole house smelled of honey”¹⁸³. It is only a couple of pages later that the cake is called “honeycake”¹⁸⁴. This way the narrator and the reader who knows about this tradition are on a different footing than the narrator and the reader who does not know. This too is a form of including and excluding the reader as part of a group.

There is a similar othering happening with the use of folklore in the novel. There are many references to Russian folktales, as early as the first chapter in which the children suggest a number of stories to Dunya, shouting out tales such as “Finist the Falcon ... Ivan and the Gray Wolf [and the] Firebird”¹⁸⁵. Those who are familiar with these tales will recognise that they are also referenced elsewhere in the novel. This is, for instance, the case with the story of *Ivan and the Gray Wolf*, which also involves the *Firebird*. Ivan takes a cage he is not supposed to touch because he is afraid the wolf will eat the firebird if it is not caged. He takes the cage and is apprehended. *The Bear and the Nightingale* also has a theme of cages and incarceration, which I will return to. These overt representations of Russian-ness are multi-layered. On the one hand they are obvious references to Russia and Russian culture and

¹⁸² Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 22.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid., 24.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., 4.

language but on the other hand they often have functions or references in the text that are only accessible to those who are familiar with this culture, language and history.

4.2.2. Covert Representations

There are many overt representations of Russian-ness in the novel and these representations seem to have an active function. The overt representations have more covert depths at times and also allude to the covert representations of Russian-ness that can be observed in *The Bear and the Nightingale*. I already alluded to the relationship and struggle between the Christian and pagan traditions on the micro-level by referencing the passage in which Sasha prays to the Virgin Mary. Sasha is depicted as a “self-consciously devout child”¹⁸⁶ and his story-arc sees him entering a monastery in his young adulthood. There is much tension between Sasha’s devotion to the Church and Christianity, and his family’s relationship with the religion. Sasha’s kissing of and praying to the Virgin Mary is openly mocked by his brother Kolya who says “[p]raying again, Sasha? ... with cheerful malice”¹⁸⁷. Kolya is not interested in religion because he is much more concerned with the here and now. He tells Sasha to “[p]ray the snow comes gently, and Father not catch cold”¹⁸⁸. Sasha’s own relationship with the Church is also ambivalent: he remarks that “[i]n Moscow, priests are in love with their standing ... [t]hey eat fat meat and preach poverty to the miserable”¹⁸⁹. The simplicity and piety he observes in the monastery is the kind of religion he wants to practise. Before the arrival of Konstatin, the people of Lesnaya Zemlya rely on their pagan beliefs to serve them. They leave offerings for the *chtyerti* (the spirits) and the settlement seems at peace and harmony with the wild surrounding them. Once Konstatin arrives, however, they are scared into abandoning their pagan rituals. This ultimately results in the awakening of Medved who almost consumes the people. The balance between religion and paganism is thin on the outskirts of Rus’ territory. The Church is also mainly concerned with matters of government and succession. This aspect of Russian religious history can be observed in the novel. The involvement of the Christian Churches in medieval times is uncommon, what makes Russia stand out is the power that the Golden Horde has.

¹⁸⁶ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 4.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 49.

These matters of succession, that are essential to the understanding of dynastical medieval Russia, are often referenced in the novel. They, however, only influence the main plot indirectly, this is why they are covert, rather than overt. The succession of Ivan II is a subplot in the *Bear and the Nightingale* that is played out more in the background, involving characters from the main plot but not its main characters. Vasya only becomes involved with the on-goings in Moscow in the sequel *The Girl in the Tower*. While it is only a subplot in the first novel, these references to the rule in Moscow and the bonds with the Golden Horde also tell the reader more about what life is like for the settlement and boyar family that Vasya belongs to. Rus' has a feudal system in place. Boyars are lords that are part of the Kievan aristocracy and they are the vassals to the Grand Princes. Pyotr refers to the Golden Horde when he is in Moscow. He wants to sell to a merchant of Sarai, the capital of the Mongol empire; in doing so he cites not only the "court of the Khan"¹⁹⁰ but also "the princes of Byzantium"¹⁹¹ further south and calls them "the conquerors"¹⁹². This shows that Pyotr is aware of the power struggles that surround the Muscovy rule. The match he makes for Olga is also a manner of protecting his children. Pyotr tells Olga that "[Vladimir] will have a high place when Ivan Krasnii is dead"¹⁹³ and that "[she] will be a great lady"¹⁹⁴. Vasya finds a monk wandering the forest one day and it is revealed that he was sent by Alexandr to ask Pyotr for his allegiance. The monk, Brother Rodion, tells Pyotr that "[t]he prince and his councillors have asked themselves why [they] should pay tribute anymore, or bend the knee to a pagan king"¹⁹⁵ and that after the murder of the last Khan, his Horde is in disarray. The monk tells him that they want him to fight against Sarai if he is asked to do so and Pyotr calls it "war"¹⁹⁶, to which Rodion responds "freedom"¹⁹⁷. Freedom of the "good Christians"¹⁹⁸. Pyotr remarks, however, that "[he'd] rather [his] sons living, and [his] daughter safe, than a chance at glory

¹⁹⁰ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 48.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid., 49.

¹⁹³ Ibid., 95.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., 244.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 245.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 244.

for unborn descendants”¹⁹⁹. The boyar is not interested in the conflicts surrounding the Muscovy rule, he is occupied by his own family and people and their prosperity. It shows the reader that the story is much more about a local Rus’ and not the state of Rus’, focussing on the Russian people, rather than the Russian monarchy. The image of Russian-ness is also often that of a suffering or revolutionary people, the ‘long suffering Slav’ or the many tribes that banded together to overthrow a foreign lord.

Local Rus’ is much more pagan. Myths, legends and folktales are an integrated part of the reality of these people. Tales from Russian folklore inform not only the people of Rus’ but also the reader of this novel. Characters from folklore come to life in this story, much as they were alive in early Rus’. The novel opens with Dunya telling stories. The children offer her a number of choices, but it is Marina, their mother, who decided which one is told. She tells Dunya to “[t]ell the story of Frost ... the frost-demon, the winter-king Karachun”²⁰⁰. It is explained to the reader that in Russian, “Frost was called Morozko, the demon of winter ... [b]ut long ago, the people called him Karachun, the death-god”²⁰¹. It is Morozka and his brother Medved, that play an important role in Vasya’s story but also signify the paganism that is still alive in Rus’. Medved deceives Konstatin, making him believe that Medved is God. When Medved is revealed not to be God, Konstatin calls him the Devil. There are two systems in place: paganism and Christianity. These systems each represent a version of reality in Rus’. The interplay between these realities is, again, not only a characteristic of medieval Rus’, nor is the folkloric belief exclusively Russian. Yet, the dichotomy between paganism and religion is an aspect of Russian-ness. Russian-ness is seemingly ‘back-ward’ and an important theme in Russian history is the failure of modernisation. These are images that can be connected to the feudal system of historical Russia and its nineteenth century reform policies, which inspired a change in the Western imagination of Russian-ness. Portraying these people as pagans and showcasing their struggles with the ‘new’ or ‘modern’ religion invokes these ideas.

Another theme in Russian history is the treatment of women, something which is very important in this novel. The want of freedom that these women experience can be seen as an exploration of what women may have felt in historical Russia. The women in the novel are at the mercy of their male relatives and should either be married or secluded in a convent. As

¹⁹⁹ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 246.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

Vasya remarks: “I was born for a cage, after all: convent or house, what else is there?”²⁰², This treatment of women is not unique to Rus’. Most medieval societies treated women this way. Women’s rights also only evolved in Russia towards and during the nineteenth century and this novel’s story can be dated to the fourteenth. It is marked, however, that Dunya believes that the child Marina is carrying, Vasya, could be “a girl or a prince or a prophet of old”²⁰³. It is a woman who embodies the three pillars of Russian-ness, nationality, autocracy and orthodoxy, here. This feminises the image of Russian-ness in this novel.

4.3. Role of Russian-ness

Perhaps the reason why the role of women in society is addressed against the backdrop of a fourteenth century Russia is that much of the novel centres around the negotiation of the past and its traditions and modernisation. This is also subtly echoed in a remark that Vasya makes on the chyerti, which “cannot come into churches; they are creatures of this world, and church is for the next”²⁰⁴. Vasya is vocal about her need for freedom. She tells her brother that “[a]lways someone else must decide for [her] ... [b]ut this [time she] will decide for [herself]”²⁰⁵. Vasya also represents to the other characters something that is wild. Many of them want to cage her and make her behave as is expected of a woman, but many are also sad to see her restricted. Konstatin and Roidon have an exchange about Vasya’s fate. Roidon hopes that someone will marry Vasya because he thinks she would not last long in a convent, saying that “[w]ild birds die in cages”²⁰⁶. Vasya represents the old pagan ways but at the same time she also wants something as modern as female independence. Religion represents a turn to a more civilised society. Yet, this society that the reader is presented with, is very restrictive and harms the people much more than it helps them.

Russian-ness itself both has connotations of this need for modernisation but also a prevailing backwardness. The novel does not necessarily present this backwardness as something negative. It is Vasya who saves the people of Lesnaya Zemlya by holding up the traditions that the Church makes them abandon. The state of the chyerti has a direct influence

²⁰² Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 205.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 259.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 317.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

on the state of the people in the village where “[t]empers .. grew short”²⁰⁷ when “[a]lmost no one made offerings”²⁰⁸. The novel certainly makes a case for the restoration of these traditions, which ultimately also happens. Before tradition is reinstated, however, the people are almost driven to the brink of extinction. It is interesting that the awakening of Medved coincides with the people’s turn to religion. He also regains full strength once he has the representative of religion, Konstatin, in his grips. Medved uses the modernisation as a way to destroy, while its intention is only to make things better. That is, at least, what Konstatin hoped to achieve. The spirits of the past are seen as devils that need to be exorcised. Vasya remarks, however, that “[s]ome [of these devils] wicked, and some were kind, and some were mischievous [and] [a]ll were as human in their way as the folk they guarded”²⁰⁹. She is frightened not of these spirits but “of her own people”²¹⁰. They are enraptured by Konstatin and the fear he has spread and they ignore the old ways. Vasya is the only one who seems to notice how detrimental this is.

Vasya is aware of these changes. She recounts that she does not know her people, “[t]hey [weep] before the icons while the domovoi [starve]”²¹¹ She no longer knows them as she did and states that [t]hey have changed and [she has] not”²¹². Yet, Vasya, who seems to embody Russian-ness, is ultimately the saviour of these people. Her backwardness is what saves them, but her forwardness is what saves the chyerti. She alone cares for them, calls for them beyond their houses and interacts with them like no before her. Vasya represents both the past and the future. She successfully negotiates both and solves the failure of modernisation that is central to Russian-ness.

²⁰⁷ Arden, *The Bear and the Nightingale*, 156.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., 155.

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 152.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Ibid., 176.

²¹² Ibid.

5. *The Crown's Game* (2016) by Evelyn Skye

5.1. Introduction

The Crown's Game was published in 2016 by Balzer and Bray, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers. The novel is Evelyn Skye's first and also the first in the duology, which was concluded with *The Crown's Fate* in 2017. This low fantasy novel is set in 1825 and tells the tale of an alternate imperial Russia in which the imperial Romanov family employs an enchanter to protect the nation and the royal family. These enchanters can wield the magic of Russia and are born when another enchanter dies. It is not often that two enchanters are born at the same time, but when it does happen these two have to fight to the death in the Crown's Game. This is the case for the enchanters Vika and Nikolai, who play out their game in the imperial capital of Saint Petersburg. As the game progresses, however, the two enchanters realise they do not want to compete against one another. While the enchanters grow closer both to each other and to the royal family, turmoil is brewing within, at and beyond the borders of the Russian empire.

Evelyn Skye has a bachelor's degree in Russian literature and history from Stanford University. She explains in her "Author's Note" that "[m]uch of the research for this book was actually done while [she] was in college"²¹³, but that she did consult textbooks such as "Orlando Figes's *Natasha's Dance* and Martha Brill Olcott's *The Kazakhs*"²¹⁴. Many of the settings of her novel were inspired by her stays in Russia; her rendition, in particular, of Saint Petersburg is based on the actual city. She states, regarding the historicity of the novel, that while it is "a work of historical fantasy set in an alternate Imperial Russia"²¹⁵, "its foundation is based on true events and places"²¹⁶. Skye asks her readers whether they "believe in what [they] cannot see"²¹⁷ when it comes to the existence of the magic, but this question of truth and fiction also filters down into the realness of her text and the historical Russia that she has created. She admits to having taken artistic licence with the historical details of the novel, "[melding] fact with fiction"²¹⁸. This begs the question why she does this. To what extent do

²¹³ Evelyn Skye, "The Author's Note," in *The Crown's Game* (New York: Balzer and Bray, 2016).

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Ibid.

²¹⁸ Ibid.

her changes to and liberties with historical Russia influence the representation of Russian-ness in the novel?

5.2. Analysis

To answer this question I will look at the overt and covert representations of Russian-ness in the novel. *The Crown's Game* is explicitly set in 1825 and the westernised city of Saint Petersburg. While the author has indicated that her novel presents an 'alternate' imperial Russia, to an extent the overt representations should still resemble historical Russia, as it is a low fantasy. The magical system is limited to only a certain set of characters and moves in the Game. It also does not have any roots in Russian folklore, but it is related to certain historical development in Russia and will therefore be discussed among the covert representations. The historical events are placed here as well, mainly because they are only mentioned indirectly and do not affect the plot overtly. The overt representations are marked because the novel is set in a very particular westernised time of Russian history. These representations of Russian-ness will be discussed first, followed by the covert representations. I will then relate them to the role of Russian-ness in the novel.

5.2.1. Overt Representations

The overt representations of the novel can for the most part be found in the descriptions of the vast territory that Russia spans, its capital and its culture. This is because the *The Crown's Game* is mainly set in Saint Petersburg in 1825. Saint Petersburg was founded by Peter the Great in 1703 and it served as the capital of Imperial Russia between 1713–1728 and 1732–1918. It was first conceived to give Russia a large seaport to be able to trade with the rest of Europe. Peter the Great moved the capital from Moscow to Saint Petersburg in 1712. Much of the city's architecture was planned and designed by European building masters. The architecture of Saint Petersburg plays an important role in the novel. The enchanters, Nikolai and Vika, change or add to the appearance of the city when playing the game. Some of these alterations to the city can actually be found in the real Saint Petersburg. One example is the pastel-coloured facades of buildings that are created by Nikolai in the novel. They appear along "the visible length of Nevsky Prospect, where the buildings ... were built right up against one another, and every single facade seemed a part of a candy wonderland"²¹⁹. The city is described at length, from its cobblestoned streets, grand mansions, "the city's many

²¹⁹ Evelyn Skye, *The Crown's Game* (New York: Balzer and Bray, 2016): 108.

canals—which had earned Saint Petersburg its nickname as the “Venice of the North”—and [its] grand squares empty of everything but bronze statues protecting the night”²²⁰. These descriptions also point out an important European presence in the city and how some of its structures and buildings resemble European ones, such as the Winter Palace, which with “its green, gold, and white facade [looked] like a Russian version of Versailles”²²¹. Or, how “[t]here were more bridges in Saint Petersburg than in Venice”²²². Yet, the Neva River, an important waterway in the history of Saint Petersburg, also has a prominent role in the enchantments that the main characters conjure up in their game.

While the novel spends most of its time in Saint Petersburg, there are many references to the rest of the vast empire and its surroundings. Vika, for instance, grew up on the imaginary Ovchinin Island, which could be a stand-in for any of the islands along the Neva Bay and Nikolai was born on the Kazakh steppe, “the border between Asia and the Russian Empire”²²³. There are mentions of the Kamchatna Peninsula²²⁴, Crimea and Siberia, amongst others. There is also a lengthy description of Moscow when Vita visits the many ‘dream benches’ that Nikolai has created. She visits the “the Arbat, the main thoroughfare of Moscow”²²⁵ and describes the city, how its “Corinthian columns and intricate mahogany veneers adorned the houses”²²⁶. She also recalls some of Moscow’s history here, recounting that “[t]he entire city had been rebuilt after its citizens had burned it down to prevent Napoleon from pillaging it”²²⁷. She describes how she walks towards the Red Square, “marveled at the white Kremlin walls and paused to admire the red brick and the cupolas of St. Basil’s Cathedral”²²⁸, but decides to leave when she “had gotten her fill of churches and monuments and squares”²²⁹. Moscow is not the only dream that Nikolai has conjured up. There are Kostroma and Kazan and both city’s highlights are described. Kostroma, for

²²⁰ Skye, *The Crown’s Game*, 20.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²²² *Ibid.*, 119.

²²³ *Ibid.*, 16.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 141.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 263.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*

²²⁷ *Ibid.*

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

²²⁹ *Ibid.*

instance, is “a small city at the junction of the Volga and Kostroma Rivers, and famous for the venerable Ipatievsky Monastery and the Trinity Cathedral, both beloved by the tsars”²³⁰ and Kazan is “[t]he largest city in the land of the Tatars, where mosques and Orthodox churches [coexist], and where the tsar had recently founded the Kazan Imperial University”²³¹. Both descriptions give some insight into the history and expanse of Imperial Russia, but also the monuments of Russian culture. Vika follows the benches: “[a]fter Kazan came Samara, then Nizhny Novgorod, seat of the medieval princes, followed by Yekaterinburg on the Ural Mountains, the border of the European and Asian sides of the empire”²³². It is also not just cities: there are also benches for “the crystal clear waters at Lake Baikal in Siberia, the glacier-capped Mount Elbrus in the Caucasus Mountains, and the Valley of Geysers on the Kamchatka Peninsula”²³³. She realises that all these benches represent “a dream tour of the wonders of Russia”²³⁴.

Aside from architectural and cultural wonders, there are a number of cultural artefacts that reappear throughout the novel. One is food. Vika is close friends with a baker on Ovchinin Island who also joins her in Saint Petersburg, Ludmila. Vika’s father, Sergei, loves eating traditional Russian bread and foods, such as “buckwheat kasha with mushrooms and fresh butter”²³⁵, “borodinski loaf”²³⁶ and “borscht”²³⁷. Other traditional Russian foods and beverages mentioned are “oreshki cookies”²³⁸, “blini crepes, fizzy malty kvass”²³⁹ and “vodka”²⁴⁰. Russia’s imperial court in the nineteenth century was, however, more inclined towards French culture. Vika remarks early on in the novel that “[s]he [speaks] in Russian, unlike the aristocrats in Saint Petersburg, who [prefer] the “more sophisticated” French”²⁴¹.

²³⁰ Skye, *The Crown’s Game*, 264.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 265.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ *Ibid.*

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 98.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

She says that her father “wanted [her] to grow up truly Russian—hiking through birch forests, playing the balalaika...”²⁴². This is also why they live on Ovchinin Island: it “kept them closer to the heart of their country”²⁴³.

This juxtaposition between ‘true’ Russia and the imperial seat echoes throughout the novel. The grandness of Saint Petersburg is contrasted with other regions of the nation, such as the island and the Kazakh steppe. Outside of Saint Petersburg there are “izbas, small log houses”²⁴⁴ and “yurts”²⁴⁵. Nikolai also remembers how at a dinner party his mentor “had served a feast of soups and oysters and roasted pheasant, so different from the sparse helpings of tough mutton [he] had grown up on”²⁴⁶. Artefacts we consider typically Russian in modern times belong to the French culture of the court. This is especially true for the dances that feature in the novel. There is “the music from the ballet *Zéphire et Flore*”²⁴⁷ during one of the moves in the Game. Or, the dances of the masquerade ball, “a quadrille ... a polonaise ... a cotillion and a gavotte”²⁴⁸. The only Slavic dance, however, the “mazurka”²⁴⁹ has a much more prominent role in the narrative itself. There is also mention of Russian lullabies, such as the one Gavina sings to Sergei or the “wistful lullaby that their mother had sung to them when they were children”²⁵⁰.

5.2.2. Covert Representations

The Crown’s Game is an old one, older than the tsardom itself. It began long ago, in the age of Rurik, Prince of Novgorod, when Russia was still a cluster of tribes, wild and lawless and young. As the country matured over the centuries, so, too, did the game. But always, always it retained its untamed fierceness.

For the winner of the game, there would be unimaginable power.

For the defeated, desolate oblivion.

²⁴² Skye, *The Crown’s Game*, 2.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., 93.

²⁴⁵ Ibid., 145.

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 100.

²⁴⁷ Ibid., 158.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 225.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 216.

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 231.

The Crown's Game was not one to lose.²⁵¹

This is the opening passage to *The Crown's Game*. It does not just set-up the main plot of the narrative, it also gives a glimpse into Russia's history and struggle. Most strikingly, it highlights key aspects of the covert representations of Russian-ness in the novel.

First of all, it describes the history of early Rus' and Russia. Descriptions of the political peril and developments that surrounded and permeated Russia in the eighteenth and nineteenth century are often recalled and discussed in the novel. It is a subtle history lesson for those who are not familiar with important events that indirectly play a role in the novel. One of the largest threats to the tsardom of the Romanovs in the novel is the uprising of Kazakhs under the leadership of a man called Qasim. Tsar Alexander mentions that he "abolished their khanate"²⁵² and that "the Kazakhs attacked [their] Cossack detachments earlier this year"²⁵³. His son Pasha tells him that the "Kazakhs are incredibly unhappy with [their] reforms"²⁵⁴, mainly because "they're nomads and believe [they] are forcing [their] culture down their throats"²⁵⁵. The unrest is strengthened by the fact that "the Ottomans are rising again in the south"²⁵⁶. The tsar believes that the "peace [they]'ve known since Napoleon's end will soon be no more"²⁵⁷ and this is why he initiates the 'Crown's Game'. These upheavals continue to be mentioned by Yuliana in particular, as she tries to make Pasha take his duties more seriously. At one point she tells him that "Missolonghi is at a crisis point"²⁵⁸, referring to the Greek city which was under siege by the Ottoman army. She tries to make Pasha see "rising threat to Russia"²⁵⁹ that the Ottomans are, but he is preoccupied by the Game. These are real examples of unrest that were present during tsar Alexander's reign, as is also recounted in the "Author's Note".

²⁵¹ Skye, *The Crown's Game*, vii.

²⁵² Ibid., 32.

²⁵³ Ibid.

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 34.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 37.

²⁵⁷ Ibid.

²⁵⁸ Ibid., 116.

²⁵⁹ Ibid.

The Game is meant to choose an enchanter who will “serve the tsar”²⁶⁰ and “protect the empire from its enemies”²⁶¹. To do so, however, “the Imperial Enchanter will need all of Russia’s magic”²⁶² and because there are two enchanters, one needs to die so the other can absorb all the power. An important remark that is made about this magic, which resides in the “Bolshebnio Duplo”²⁶³, is that it is “no longer as potent as it was when the people of [Russia] still adhered to the old ways”²⁶⁴. Magic seems to be dying. As Vika says, “[m]ost of the world had forgotten about magic, and so enchanters had grown rarer”²⁶⁵. One of the reasons why magic is disappearing is because the “Russian Orthodox Church had quashed magic as superstition and heresy centuries ago”²⁶⁶.

It is interesting that the Church is not often referenced in the novel. The few times it is mentioned, it is either in a passing remark, such as the description of the Imperial Library where, among other materials, Pasha finds “old Church documents sealed in airtight cases”²⁶⁷ or in relation to magic, “for the Church had ordered any materials on magic destroyed centuries ago”²⁶⁸. Nikolai says at one point that he is not surprised that the Russians in Saint Petersburg do not notice the enchantments brought about by the Game. He accounts for their ignorance by pointing out that “[f]or a people who were so religious, Russians had an awfully difficult time seeing the otherworldly even when it was laid out before their eyes”²⁶⁹. Magic “faded away because people either started fearing it or stopped believing in it”²⁷⁰ and magical creatures “died out from neglect and disbelief”²⁷¹. Pasha learns about magic from reading books in the palace library, where he finds books like “*Vodyanoi*, *The Catfish King* and *The*

²⁶⁰ Skye, *The Crown’s Game*, 65.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Ibid.

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 9.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 53.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 59.

²⁶⁸ Ibid.

²⁶⁹ Ibid., 113.

²⁷⁰ Ibid., 131.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 132.

*Death of Koschei the Immortal...*²⁷² and a collection containing the forgotten history of magic in Russia, comprising of the chapters “*Mysticism in Ancient Russia ... Mystics, Enchanters, and Faith Healers ... Extinction of Nymphs and Faeries [and] Power, the Wellspring, and the Crown’s Game*”²⁷³. Magic is only alive in books for the non-magical people of Russia. The only historical figures that know about magic are tsar Alexander and tsarina Elizabeth. The other characters that come into contact with magic do not truly exist in historical Russia. Magic is what kills the tsar. It is “Death” who takes both the tsar and the tsarina, but Death is represented here as a god of the old ways. The one who Aizhana negotiates her and Nikolai’s life with. It is also Aizhana who uses her magic to kill the tsar.

The tsar’s duties are contested throughout the novel. Pasha is reluctant to follow in his father’s footsteps. He sees his role as a tsar differently. He does not hate his position as a tsar, he “hates the formality of it”²⁷⁴ and while “he has great respect for the tsardom and the people of the empire”²⁷⁵, he wishes it would come with “less pomp and ceremony”²⁷⁶. Vika once remarks that after learning the tsar’s name he becomes more to her than just “the heaven-appointed ruler of an empire”²⁷⁷ and Nikolai asks Pasha to not become a “warmonger”²⁷⁸. There is a lot of negotiation surrounding the role of the tsar as a leader. The tsardom has indeed changed a lot from the days of the conquering “Prince of Novgorod, when Russia was still a cluster of tribes”²⁷⁹. The country is not just in upheaval due to the rebellions at its border regions and the threat of the Ottoman army, it is also suffering the uprising of an unsatisfied people within its borders. There are “farmers whose crops had been damaged by blight”²⁸⁰ and “Pavel Pestel ... [t]he agitator who has been calling for democracy”²⁸¹. The tsar and Pasha are accosted by a man who yells “[y]ou sit on your gilded thrones while our people

²⁷² Skye, *The Crown’s Game*, 60.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, 61.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 205.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 302.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 361.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, vii.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 39.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

toil to their deaths in the fields!”²⁸². Elsewhere Nikolai and Pasha hear the demands for equality which was promised by the tsar if the people “fought side by side with [his] noblemen against Napoleon”²⁸³. The agitator at the tavern tells the crowd that they have rights and that “[t]he tsar must know he cannot continue to treat the people like vermin”²⁸⁴. He wants a “revolution”²⁸⁵. The people are hungry for a new Russia, something we will see come to fruition in the twentieth century. Yet, this Russia is still very centred around those who have power. Renata remarks at the ball that “[s]ervants are interchangeable”²⁸⁶ and that the nobility does not “keep track of [them]”²⁸⁷. It was Alexander who abolished the serf-system, but it is interesting to see that those who serve for a living are still as unheard and unseen by the nobility.

5.3. Role of Russian-ness

Both the overt and the covert representations show a Russia that is balancing between two extremes. It struggles to adhere to either the old ways or the new. There is a rift between the expression of Russian culture by the people and European culture by the nobility. The nation is also experiencing threats from outside and inside the country. It is a fine balance that the novel presents. The people want to move forward, but moving forward is also not always presented as beneficial. This can be observed, for instance, in the awakening of Aizhana, Nikolai’s mother. When she returns to the village she realises that her son has been sold by the village women to Galina. She tells them that they “were supposed to mother him in [her] stead”, because “[t]hat is how a village works”²⁸⁸. The abandonment of the old ways is paid with a hefty price; Aizhana kills the women. It shows that leaving behind tradition for a more modern individualist society is not without dangers.

As was explained in early chapters as well, historical Russia is a country that has often attempted at modernisation but never truly managed to realise it. Here we find ourselves at the end of an era. The modern state as the tsar intended it, is being attacked from all sides.

²⁸² Skye, *The Crown’s Game*, 195.

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

Perhaps, sticking to the old, ‘backward’, ways would have been wiser. That, at least, runs true for the Kazakh village. The novel is filled with juxtapositions: old against new, Russian pitted against European, people against rulers. Nikolai and Pasha often visit a tavern in Saint Petersburg, the Magpie and the Fox; at such a tavern, “one [toasts] in Russian, not French”²⁸⁹. A character like Nikolai represents all of these opposites: he is the son of a faith-healer but also a human, the son of a peasant Kazakh but also Russian through his father, who is the tsar. Nikolai is also the enchanter who dies at the end. Or at least, it seems he has for now. The city of Saint Petersburg is also contrasted with the ‘wilderness’ of Ovchinin Island or the Kazakh steppe and the enchanter’s magic represent an older world, a place that is now hidden. It is as if those who live with a foot on each side are bound to disappear or have to choose. Pasha who wants to do away with his father’s type of tsardom, eventually does exactly as was expected from him. Yet, Yuliana, who has always been like her father, and who has instigated the Game, can never be a ruler because she is a woman. There is no moving forward on either side.

It is interesting that when magic is revealed to the tsarina, Vika remarks that her expression is filled with “innocent wonderment at the existence of “otherness” in [a] previously ordinary world”²⁹⁰. Otherness is what divides people within the borders of this Russia. There are many factors that cause a person to be othered in this imperial Russia. Whether it is the traditions they do or do not adhere to, the language they speak, the place they live in or the status they have, the Russians of *The Crown’s Game* are dealing with balancing different identities. Historical Russia is filled with people of all sorts of ethnicities, but the law makes a strict difference between Russians and non-Russians²⁹¹. *The Crown’s Game* also shows how Russia is both Occidental and Oriental, but it often ascribes these distinctions to particular groups in society. There are the westernised nobility, the common Russian people who are the bridge between, and the Kazakh’s who are firmly in the East. This supports the image of Russian-ness as straddling both West and East and existing in both simultaneously. Yet, as readers we are not presented with the experiences of the people or the Kazakh’s. Russian-ness is never truly represented on that level. The only experience that is

²⁸⁹ Skye, *The Crown’s Game*, 130.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 302.

²⁹¹ More on this topic can be read in the chapter “Managing empire: tsarist nationalities policy,” by Theodore R. Weeks in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, vol. 2.

recounted is that of the people at the westernised court. References to Russian-ness are not part of the main plot.

Russian-ness is, however, in this way much negotiated in the novel. Cultural artefacts can both belong and not belong to the culture at any given time, depending on who practices or witnesses such an artefact. Russia has been renowned for its ballet, but the only ballet that is present in the novel is French. The mazurka, a traditional Slavic dance, however, plays a key role in mimicking the way the Game is played. The structure of the novel too, mimics the alternation of dance steps and game moves, with its short multiple points of view chapters. This echoes the political games that are played in this novel but also have been of great influence for Russian-ness. Historical Russia was also constantly changing and shifting, adapting to the moves of other nations and rulers. This is an authentic representation that the author also supports in her author's note. She clearly points out which parts of her novel are rooted in history and are reliable representations, but she also dismisses some parts as fiction. This way she both claims and denies the authenticity of her account. This, however, does strengthen her own position of reliability, as she clearly demarcates the aspect of authenticity. She absolves her own 'mistakes' by explaining her choices for possible diversions. It can then be expected that those elements that she does not treat as fiction are in fact authentic. The author establishes a pact with her audience, telling them that she will be honest about what is true and what is not.

6. *Wicked Saints* (2019) by Emily A. Duncan

6.1. Introduction

Wicked Saints was published in 2019 by Wednesday Books. This is Emily A. Duncan's first novel. This high fantasy novel is the first in a planned trilogy called *Something Dark and Holy* and a sequel is already being written. It is a story about the fictional nations of Kalyazin and Tranavia which have been at war with each other for nearly a century. Nadezhda Lapteva, Nadya, is the only remaining cleric, a person who is able to wield the power of the gods. She is a weapon in a holy war against Tranavian blood mages, heretics, who have rejected the gods. Together with a rag-tag band of Akolans and a Tranavian she sets out to kill the tsar of Tranavia to have the gods win. The story also follows the High Prince of Tranavia, who learns that his father wants to kill him to become a god. Both characters are followed from the mountains of Kalyazin to the capital of Tranavia as they try to stop the king and end the war.

Emily A. Duncan is a youth services librarian and received a master's degree in library science from Kent State University. Most of her research for the novel comprised of going through obscure Slavic folklore texts that she found through interlibrary loan systems. She states in her "Acknowledgements" that she thanks Leigh Bardugo for "supporting an earnest young writer on Tumblr and for all the timely, sage advice"²⁹². A book reviewer in the UCSD Guardian states that *Wicked Saints* "[set] itself apart by delving into what so many young fantasy novels seem to shy away from — religion"²⁹³. Duncan stated in an interview with The Barnes and Noble YA podcast that her initial inspiration for *Wicked Saints* came from playing "videogames"²⁹⁴ during university and that she was at this time also "super into Russian folklore and Eastern European folklore"²⁹⁵. She took the atmospheric background she found in the videogames and infused it with folklore.

²⁹² Emily A. Duncan, "Acknowledgments," in *Wicked Saints* (New York: Wednesday Books, 2019): 384

²⁹³ Tanya Nguyen, "Book Review: "Wicked Saints" by Emily A. Duncan," *The UCSD Guardian*, 5 May, 2019, <http://ucsdguardian.org/2019/05/05/book-review-wicked-saints-emily-duncan/>.

²⁹⁴ Emily A. Duncan, "The B&N YA Podcast: Emily A. Duncan Communes with the Gods," interview by Melissa Albert, *Barnes and Noble YA Podcast*, 18 April, 2019, <https://www.barnesandnoble.com/blog/teen/the-bn-ya-podcast-emily-a-duncan-communes-with-the-gods/>.

²⁹⁵ Duncan, "The B&N YA Podcast: Emily A. Duncan Communes with the Gods".

There are a few elements here that are interesting for an analysis of Russian-ness. First, Duncan cites Leigh Bardugo as a supporter of her work. Bardugo has written high fantasy novels inspired by Russia herself, which makes this an interesting connection. Then there is the theme of religion that is so prominent in the text, a theme that is also important if we look at Russia's complicated history with power, rule and religion. Lastly, Duncan points to Russia as an inspiration herself for her world-building. I argue, however, that this novel probably has the most loosely-based version of Russia that can be found among the four case studies. To understand how Russian-ness is employed in this novel, whether it is even employed and how Russian-ness may be represented, I will be analysing the overt and covert representations of Russian-ness.

6.2. Analysis

Wicked Saints is a high fantasy novel. This means that the representations of Russian-ness are mostly adaptations that are not faithful, but similar to the representations of Russian-ness. Overt representations can, however, be found in the comparison of the languages used in the novel to Russian, of certain cultural artefacts that are presented, the geography of the multiple nations that have been constructed, seen as a whole, and in the references to the political system and religion that are presented in the text. These last two are, however, also have a covert dimension, which will be discussed more at length in regards to the covert representations, where I will also discuss the magic system that is in place in this novel. I will, especially, pay attention to many of the juxtapositions that are presented in the novel, such as the contrast between the secular Tranavian state and the theistic Kalyazi. These juxtapositions will then be expanded upon in the segment on the role of Russian-ness in this text. It may seem that some of the boundaries between what I categorise as overt or covert are somewhat blurry. The overt representations of Russian-ness in this chapter, will be used to discuss images of Russian-ness that are for the most part material, among these are, for instance, language, geography and cultural artefacts. The covert representations will cover aspects such as state and institutions, more immaterial aspects of a culture.

6.2.1. Overt Representations

There are a number of elements in *Wicked Saints* that are overt representations of Russian-ness, albeit altered. We can see an example of modified Russian-ness in, for instance, the fictional languages spoken in the world of the text. Names such as Nadezhda, Anna and Konstantin are of Russian origin and are also conjugated as Russian names would be. Other

names such as Malachiasz, Serefin and Kacper have Slavic origins. These too, however, are conjugated per Russian tradition, but not always anglicised correctly. Other words appear to be Russian but are made up, such as “*venyashk*—a short sword”²⁹⁶, “*voryen*”²⁹⁷, or “*noven’ya*”²⁹⁸. Actual Russian words are more often used for Russian artefacts such as “*kokoshniks*”²⁹⁹, but this is not always the case. Nadya, for instance, talks about how a woman in the monastery, Marina, gave her “*probov*—flat, but tasty, flour cakes—when no one was looking”³⁰⁰. There are no *probov* cakes in Russian cuisine, however. It should be noted that there are multiple languages presented in the text and that these sound different and use different words, although they are all seemingly taken from a Russian root. There is also an explanation about how the languages sound. Malachiazs tell Nadya that her Kolyazi is “soft”³⁰¹. He says her “words are mush”³⁰² and that “Tranavian is hard”³⁰³. Russia covering a large part of Europe and also Asia, means that there are also many languages present and coexisting with Russian. There are also the characters Rashid and Rashid and Parijahan who have Arabic names. The inconsistency of adaptation here, however, signals an unreliable representation of Russian-ness. Having both truly Russian and fictive Russian presented undistinguishably alongside one another leads to an inaccurate representation of Russian-ness.

The notion of an expansive Russia that covers a large and varied terrain is very much represented in the text. This can be seen in the para-textual map³⁰⁴, which may be found in the novel, but also the descriptions in the novel itself. The novel’s narrative begins in Kalyazin in “a secluded monastery in the mountains”³⁰⁵. The reader learns that “[i]t [snows] most nights—and days—on the top of the Baikkle Mountains”³⁰⁶ and that “[s]now from the night

²⁹⁶ Emily A. Duncan, *Wicked Saints* (New York: Wednesday Books, 2019): 5.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

³⁰² *Ibid.*

³⁰³ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁴ Figure 2, Appendix E.

³⁰⁵ Duncan, *Wicked Saints*, 3.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

before piled on the ground and the air was frigid”³⁰⁷. This mountain range is “in the heart of Kalyazin”³⁰⁸. It is also explained that , relatively speaking, Kalyazin lies in the west in this country and that “[n]o one had ever expected the war to push this far west”. The war “was supposed to stay on the eastern border where Kalyazin and Tranavia met, just north of the border on Akola”³⁰⁹. These countries are all very diverse in their geography and climate. Kalyazin is very cold, a place where “melt season [feels] cold”³¹⁰ and where only “snow and frost and forests” can be found³¹¹. Akola is very hot, and “a land of deserts”³¹² and the people “[are] known for favoring Tranavia simply because of the warmer climate”³¹³. Tranavia is, not just warmer, but also very wet, the “country is practically under water as it is”³¹⁴, with “[a] few lakes ... [a]nd swamps ... [s]o many ponds ... [and] [b]ordered by an ocean on the north and the east”³¹⁵. There are also rather infamous “Salt Mines”³¹⁶ near the capital of Tranavia, reminiscent of the salt mines of Yekatarinaburg. While the geography of these countries may not exactly be the same as Russia, it does evoke Russian-ness in the sense that many different climates and regions can be found in Russia itself. The fact that the story is about multiple countries in this area, however, is a strong diversion from Russian-ness. After all, it is the one large expanse of Russia that covers these territories and not a collective of separate nations.

There are a few references to what the cities in these countries are like. Serefin describes his arrival at the capital, which is “lavish”³¹⁷, and when he sees the Palace, which is located there, he notices “[s]pires twisted up into the sky, their hundreds of windows reflecting such a glare that [he] had to lower his gaze”³¹⁸. Grazyk is the seat of power, not only for the tsar, but also for the Vultures, the blood-magic cult of Tranavia. The tsar’s son,

³⁰⁷ Duncan, *Wicked Saints*, 7.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 25.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*

³¹² *Ibid.*, 81.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, 37.

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 74.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 122.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

Serefin, is the “High Prince of Tranavia”³¹⁹. Both of these, tsar and High Prince, are positions of power that have been cornerstones in Russian history. They are part of actual Russian political hierarchy. The court of Kalyazi, the Silver Court, is also described by Nadya, she talks about the “*dolzena* with their *kokoshniks* and the *voivodes*”³²⁰. The *kokoshnik* is a traditional Russian headdress and the *voivodes* refers to a Slavic rank of nobility.

What is most interesting, however, about the descriptions of court life and the way that these nations are ruled, is the role of religion in them. I will be explaining this in more detail once I turn to the covert representations of Russian-ness in this text. There are, however, also a number of overt references to religion and a religious system that can be likened to Orthodoxy and the Church. The most conspicuous difference from the Orthodox religion is the polytheistic nature of Kalyazin’s belief system. The reader learns about the different gods in the pantheon by reading the small quotations from the ‘Codex of the Divine’ that head a number of the chapters. What is interesting is that the fragments from this codex are similar to Bible verses, denoted by a psalm-verse structure such as in the first chapter, where the fragment is taken from “Codex of the Divine, 2:18”³²¹. The codex is not the only holy book that fragments are taken from. The other one is the ‘Vasiliev’s Book of Saints’, which details the lives of various saints and/or former clerics. Some of these saints are even dated to particular years, for instance “1213”³²², but as this is a high fantasy, these should not necessarily be used to place the novel in actual history. It does show, however, that this book of saints, like many of the real-world books of saints, can be dated back to medieval times.

Despite the religion differing in nature from real-world Orthodoxy and Christianity, the novel does use concepts and elements of the Church that the reader associates with these. This can be seen in early descriptions of Nadya’s life in the monastery. She describes times of prayer at the monastery, stating that “[i]t was late afternoon, just before Vespers, a time where psalms to the gods were given up in an effortless chorus”³²³. She also describes church hierarchy. The monastery is led by “Father Alexei”³²⁴ and “Anna—as an ordained priestess—

³¹⁹ Duncan, *Wicked Saints*, 30.

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, 131.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

³²² *Ibid.*, 94.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 1.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

outranked Nadya”³²⁵. Nadya also has a “prayer necklace around her neck”³²⁶, which is beaded. Symbols representing the gods are carved on the wooden beads and when Nadya prays to a god she holds the bead that represents them. There are also lengthy descriptions of the appearance of the monastery by Serefin, who recounts that there were “[p]aintings of haloed saints and forests stretched over them”³²⁷ on the ceiling. He also sees “[i]cons ... placed along the walls of the sanctuary, depictions of more saints”³²⁸. He notices that the windows have clear glass, unlike the “stained glass like the abandoned chapels of Tranavia”³²⁹. Nadya also described the church she hides in as “a large, ramshackle church”³³⁰ and that “[i]t looked like whoever built it had planned for it to rival the Church of Adrian, the Martyr in Khavirsk, but got distracted”³³¹. The church is “made entirely of wood—even the round onion domes—and there [is] unfinished red paint peeling from the bottom of the walls”³³². She also finds precious icons in it, made by a martyr. The description of the church evokes the image of Russian onion-domed churches and the concepts of martyrs, saints and icons are important Christian concepts. Nadya, herself, is called a ‘cleric’, and “when she [prays] the gods [listen] ... miracles [happen], magic”³³³. Here we see how the concept of miracles is used to explain Nadya’s magic. Religion, power and magic are closely intertwined in this novel, and this is what lays at the heart of the covert representation of Russian-ness in *Wicked Saints*.

6.2.2. Covert Representations

Tranavia’s “marshlands were perpetually dark”³³⁴ and are home to the legendary “Dziwożona, the marsh hag, or the flesh eating rusalka”³³⁵. These creatures were taken from Slavic and

³²⁵ Duncan, *Wicked Saints*, 6.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 50.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*, 50.

³²⁹ *Ibid.*

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, 58.

³³¹ *Ibid.*

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ *Ibid.*, 6.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 96.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

Russian folklore, albeit not mentioned or involved any more in the plot than just as a reference. There is an exchange between Malachiasz and Nadya about “an omen”³³⁶ and Malachiasz remarks that Nadya is “superstitious”³³⁷. She responds that if he pushes her father she will send “a leshy”³³⁸ after him. Folklore is not the main focus of either the culture or magic that is presented in the text, even though it is mentioned at times in the novel. Nadya remarks that to the people of Kalyazin she will always be “a soldier, nothing more, a holy relic, a symbol, perhaps”³³⁹. These three all denote a different aspect of the novel’s covert representation of Russian-ness. There is war, or conflict, in her being a soldier. A soldier of a holy war, a war between theism and atheism, godly magic and man-made heresy. She is a holy relic, a vehicle of godly magic, magic that is given by a higher power and that should not be taken by a human for themselves. She is also a symbol, a symbol of religion, a cleric. Nadya is a representative of an integral part of her nation’s belief system, but also a threat to the atheistic nation that they are at war with.

The war between Kalyazin and Tranavia is important from the first chapter onwards. It is a fundamental part of life for the people of these nations. War and conflict have also permeated Russian history. Historical Russia has invaded and been invaded many times throughout its history and its tumultuous relationship with neighbouring nations has created a very diverse nation. Nadya states that “[c]annons were a sound every child of Kalyazin knew intimately ... [i]t was what they grew up with, their lullabies mixed with firing in the distance”³⁴⁰ and that “[w]ar was their constant companion”³⁴¹. It is a “holy war that has raged for near a century”³⁴² between Kalyazin and Tranavia because the Tranavians use blood magic which “[profanes] the gods”³⁴³. This war “had never reached farther than the Kalyazin border ... [u]ntil now”³⁴⁴. The Kalyazi wage war with the Tranavians because the latter are

³³⁶ Duncan, *Wicked Saints*, 179.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 180.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*

³³⁹ *Ibid.*, 123.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴¹ *Ibid.*

³⁴² *Ibid.*, 30.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

“heretics”³⁴⁵. The Tranavians on the other hand, wage war with the Kalyazi because they “wished to choose [their] own destiny”³⁴⁶ and not have their lives dictated by the whims of the gods. Their magic is created by using blood and spell books. Nadya claims that “[her] power is divine”³⁴⁷, yet she is not. She requires the “constant approval from the gods”³⁴⁸ as Malachiasz tells her. The text is rife with these types of discussions about the purpose of the war and relationship that these nations have with magic.

There is strong juxtaposition between Kalyazin and Tranavia and aspects of state that are represented by these two countries. Tranavia, for instance, considers itself a secular state. Their magic, which has replaced religion, is represented by the Vultures, “[b]lood mages so twisted by their heretical magic they [are] no longer human, nothing more than violent monsters”³⁴⁹ who have “filled in the gaps left behind by the church”³⁵⁰. The Vultures are confined to “Grazyk or Kyętri, the two cities that [house] the cult’s leaders”³⁵¹ and are employed to “train the royal children to harness their magic as well as maintain a certain level of security in Grazyk”³⁵². They also act as advisors to the tsar, “but their authority only [extends] to the realm of magic”³⁵³. It is revealed that the Vultures have started to infiltrate the ranks of the court more and more and Malachiasz tells Nadya that it is as if the clerics would acts as guards to the Kalyazi tsar. The Vultures are “not supposed to be so deeply connected to the secular throne”³⁵⁴. Nadya responds, however, to this that “religion is interwoven into [their] government ... [i]t’s not a thing to be shoved aside”³⁵⁵. The gods are the moral backbone of the state. The belief in these gods dictates everything for the people, “[c]reation, morality, day-to-day interactions, their own thoughts”³⁵⁶. This juxtaposition of an atheistic

³⁴⁵ Duncan, *Wicked Saints*, 30.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 65.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 64.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 66.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*

³⁵² *Ibid.*

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 172.

secular state, in which belief is vested in a much more abstract concept such as magic, with a non-secular state, in which religious leaders have much influence and where the culture and tradition has its base in religious belief, represents an interesting contrast in Russian history as well. Historical Russia has been both the state built on and by the practices of Christianity and the Church, but has also broken with that tradition rigorously by adopting Communism.

There is a lot of discourse between the characters surrounding the future of both nations and the future of magic in it. Nadya knows that the ‘heretics’ are “winning the war”³⁵⁷ and her plan is to reintroduce the gods into Tranavia. She believes that the events that are unfolding have “an element of divine providence”³⁵⁸ to them. Throughout the narrative, she tries to stay faithful to her traditions and the gods. This becomes more difficult when she traverses the borders and is more dependent on the blood magic of Malachiasz and later her newly found access to the godly magic. Serefin remarks early on that “the war [is] about more than just religion”³⁵⁹, but he does recognise that religion and magic play enormous roles in this war. He believes that the “[t]he future [is] magic, it [is] power, it [is] mankind stepping out of the shadows and finding out the world had been kept in the dark by these gods”³⁶⁰. It is tradition, the “rules and rigors kept in place by men of the church”³⁶¹ that has kept these nations from moving forward.

The opposition of theism and atheism is at the root of the conflict. Malachiasz says that both countries are “dying”³⁶² at the hand of these forces. This discourse is about moving forward and breaking with tradition and the consequences of doing so. This conflict with modernisation is a representation of Russian-ness. Yet, the text seems to suggest that breaking with tradition is moving forward, but perhaps not by completely removing theism from the equation. Tranavia’s tsar is perverted in his want to become a god and he sacrifices his own son to transcend and become more powerful. Meanwhile, the gods’ origins are also questioned. The only one who remains ‘clean’ in a sense, awarded by a halo at the end, is Nadya, who has tapped into the godly power on her own but has not resorted to blood magic.

³⁵⁷ Duncan, *Wicked Saints*, 6.

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 132.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² *Ibid.*, 173.

6.3. Role of Russian-ness

While on the surface there may be a number of images that can be linked to representations of Russian-ness, I believe these are extremely surface-level. There are a number of overt representations such as the use of language, the mentioning of Russian cultural artefacts, the description of the lands, climates, and geographies of this world and, lastly, the representations of the religion that is practised. Yet, these all are heavily altered. While the author has certainly used Christian and Orthodox religion as a base in her world-building and magic system, the way it is presented in the text is not necessarily representative of Russian-ness. Key elements of the role of religion in historical Russia are the strong influence of clerical tradition on the national culture and the political presence in the dynastical rule. The actual rule of Kalyazin, which supposedly is not secular, is never truly explained. The role of the cult of the Vultures is much more central in this novel, but they cannot be related back to Russian-ness. While comparisons can be drawn between the fact that the Vultures and blood magic have filled the gap that the church and religion have left behind, much like the ideology of Communism did in twentieth century Russia, this is a rather long stretch to make.

Russia is spread out over a vast and immensely varied region and during its imperial conquest it has added many countries, peoples and cultures to its make-up. Russia is, however, only one nation and that is very important in its national image. This novel also covers a varied territory, but divides it up into separate states. The representations of Russian-ness do not venture beyond just setting a scene, creating an ambiance or making sure the text has the 'feel' of Russian-ness. The map that accompanies the text is wildly different from an actual map of Russia, be it historical or contemporary. Much more this novel feels as a mood-board of Russian landscapes, which extends into the use of architectural references.

The covert representations revolve around the themes of war and conflict and the discourse surrounding the future of these nations. Obviously, most nations have had to deal with wars and conflicts in their history. Yet, the trope of Russia as the conquered and conqueror is much less represented elsewhere. The novel, however, does not venture into this thematic territory. The conflict is about religion, and the imperial acts of Tranavia are motivated by 'enlightened' ideology, rather than with a conquering motive. So, while it does use this aspect of Russian-ness, a constant state of turmoil, I would not say it is a representation of Russian-ness

This is different from the use of Russian-ness in the discourse surrounding the future path of these nations. The text presents the reader with a very complicated debate around religion, secularity and tradition, a discourse that once changed Russia drastically. It is again a

discourse of modernisation and an evident struggle with tradition and modernity. I believe that the novel uses Russian-ness to make a point in this discourse. To centre the discourse around religion evokes the changes that Russia underwent in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

7. Conclusion

7.1. Introduction

I started this research after finding out that two young adult fantasy novels I had read were both set in or inspired by Russia. I was intrigued to find out they were not the only ones.

Especially, when I considered that many young adult fantasy novels and series have been set in non-European medieval settings for the past few years. Among all of these more 'exotic' settings, such as African, Arabic, Asian and, most recently, Southern-American worlds, that featured ethnically diverse characters, there were also a number of novels set in medieval and historical Russia. I found this occurrence to be very marked; why would these authors use Russia as the foundation for their narrative? And, why were these authors all American? As I researched this topic more and more, other questions began to form as well. Some of the authors whose work I analysed in this research had studied Russian literature and/or culture, and some were only crediting historical Russia or Russian folklore as an inspiration.

Interestingly, those who had studied the culture both opted for a low fantasy story, while the authors who stated Russia as an inspiration produced high fantasy novels. Another interesting factor was that the low fantasy authors both had included an author's note, explain or defending any diversions from actual Russian history or culture that they had made in their texts. This was not the case for the high fantasy authors. I wanted to know why these authors employ Russian-ness, and why in these novels, but also why now? Was there a reason that these novels were published around the same time there is a strong increase in the demand for non-Anglo European settings? This is why I decided to examine the role of Russian-ness in these four young adult novels. In this conclusion I will discuss my findings of this question. I will first detail the different results that I found per novel, and I will relate and compare these findings to one another. Then I will explain how these findings answer my research question. I will conclude this thesis by suggesting some avenues for further research.

7.2. Findings of the Individual Analyses

The first novel I analysed was Leigh Bardugo's *Shadow and Bone*, which was published in 2012 and has since prompted a number of sequels and sequel series. Bardugo's novel is set in a Russian-inspired country named Ravka. Bardugo stated that she wanted to present the reader with a world that was similar but different to Medieval England, which is why she chose Russia as her inspiration. Historical Russia had similar themes and topics that she wanted to explore and that would help her build a world to set her story in. The novel does indeed signal that Ravka is related to or modelled after Russia and Russian culture and

history. The language and cultural artefacts are either taken straight from the source material or the fictive concepts have a similar 'look'. These elements are, however, not very important to the plot. They merely function as sign posts or images that will draw an audience in. It is in particular the history of Russia that has an important function in the plot. Politics and conflicts that are essential to understanding imperial Russia are adapted for the novel. These are, for instance, the threats of foreign nations, or the oppression of a people that unites to overthrow their oppressor. Themes of Russian-ness are also themes of the novel. The struggles between the leaders, beliefs and people of Ravka are what drive the plot of the novel. These are also representative of the pillars of the Russian national image: autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality. These pillars are also represented by the main character Alina who is 'Soldier, Summoner, Saint'. The novel, however, diverts from its source material in many formal ways and does not attempt to claim any authentic Russian-ness. The role of Russian-ness in this novel is mostly used to explore specific themes and to offer the reader a world that is exotic enough to be exciting and different from the other high fantasy novels in circulation.

The Bear and the Nightingale by Katherine Arden was published in 2017, five years after *Shadow and Bone*. The fact that this is a low fantasy novel makes this a very different case. Arden, who has studied Russian language and culture at university, has chosen to set her story in medieval Russia. She is bound by a particular historical Russia, its customs and events. Her story is about a young girl growing up in a time of great cultural change. Folk culture is more and more being regarded as 'backward' and the Church's power is growing even in remote areas of Russia. Arden uses this historical movement to tell her story and she engages with this movement in her narrative. The story of *The Bear and the Nightingale* is a story about change and the struggles between tradition and modernisation. This is a theme that is also present in *Shadow and Bone*, but in *The Bear and the Nightingale* it is much more linked to historical Russia. The reader is told that they are in "northern Rus'" from the moment they start the first chapter. Arden represents the culture and language faithfully throughout the text and while she does insert fictional characters in historical events, she never impedes on the history. She actually tells the history through her fictional story and also defends her use of history in her author's note. Arden has also included a glossary for Russian concepts, words and cultural artefacts. The amount of explanation and justification show that Arden tries to claim a sense of authenticity, in other words, she posits her account of Russian-ness as faithful and/or reliable. The role of Russian-ness in this novel is much more pronounced and used to drive the plot. The struggle of modernisation that is present

throughout Russian history and the position of Russia between the Occident and Orient is central to the narrative of both the main character and the sub-plots of the novel.

I opted for a non-chronological order in discussing the novels. This was mainly because the first two novels, *Shadow and Bone* and *The Bear and the Nightingale*, were the novels that had originally informed me of this Russian theme in young adult literature. These two novels are also thematically very similar, yet also different. They are both stories about young women who discover they have powers and these powers are used to save their respective nations. Both women are by the end of the novel orphaned. Both have roles that are exclaimed in three-fold: Alina is ‘Soldier, Summoner, Saint’ and Vasya is “a girl or a prince or a prophet of old”. Both of these creeds evoke similar roles: state (soldier/prince), people (summoner, girl) and religion (saint, prophet of old). These also relate to the pillars of Russian national image: state is autocracy, people is nationality and religion is orthodoxy. These roles are also very interwoven in both novels. Yet, *The Bear and the Nightingale* engages Russian-ness on all fronts much more than *Shadow and Bone*. Russian-ness is also presented as authentic in *The Bear and the Nightingale* and Arden claims a sense of reliability in her account of Russian history and culture. Bardugo only uses Russian-ness as an inspiration and does not claim any authenticity in doing so.

Similarly to *The Bear and the Nightingale*, *The Crown’s Game* also has an author’s note in which the author explains any inaccuracies of her historical timeline. Unlike the 2017 novel, *The Crown’s Game* has also fictionalised characters that were present in historical Russia. The novel is also set in a westernised metropolitan nineteenth century St. Petersburg, in contrast to the fourteenth century rural Rus’ of *The Bear and the Nightingale*. The result is that these two novels represent a very different era of Russian history and Russian-ness. Both novels deal with changes and threats to the Russian state, but *The Crown’s Game* engages much more with the macro-level of matters of state, and not so much with the micro-levels, the people in the state. Conversely, *The Bear and The Nightingale* investigates the effects of decisions by higher echelons of the state on the people who actually live in that nation or area. The discontent of the people are only experienced indirectly in *The Crown’s Game*. This is also the case for the history, culture and geography of Russia in this novel. The reader is told about certain events or threats to the nation, but there is no immediate danger. Russian culture is also not central to the lives of the Enchanters. St. Petersburg is at this time in history very westernised. While the reader travels beyond the city, to the islands and Siberia and the Kazakh steppe, the narrative is centralised around St. Petersburg. Readers have to engage with Russian-ness much less in this novel than in a novel like *The Bear and the Nightingale*,

because Russian-ness is the foil in the background, to the westernised characters that are fronted. Interestingly, this way ‘otherness’ becomes more pronounced, albeit the ‘otherness’ that is admittedly altered by the author. The differences between the West and Russia are more pronounced. Russian-ness in *The Crown’s Game* is used to showcase the change of a culture when it is under pressure. There is a great deal of ambiguity in the culture the reader is presented with and the author claims reliability on the one hand, but also points out that some aspects of her text are altered.

We can see different degrees of authenticity quite clearly on display. *Shadow and Bone* cites imperial Russia specifically as an inspiration, not claiming any authenticity or reliability, but still using the ‘idea’ of Russian-ness to set her novel apart. *The Bear and the Nightingale* claims both authenticity and reliability and Russian-ness is important both in the back- and foreground. *The Crown’s Game* claims an authentic account of some elements, but also points out the fictions of her text and uses underlying themes in Russian history to base her plot on. This is different from *Wicked Saints* in which Russian-ness is not faithfully reproduced in any manner, but that of a veneer. The image of Russian-ness is created only on the surface and even here it is easily dismissed. The author cites Russian folklore as an inspiration, yet the Russian folklore only features in the novel as folklore. Overt representations such as language and cultural artefacts are mostly fictive, with a few authentic images scattered throughout. The geography of the lands is reminiscent of Russia, but only in the choice of weather or geographical elements. The story also focusses on multiple distinct nations in conflict with each other and not a nation similar to Russia that experiences conflict from within or outside. Russian-ness here seems primarily a marketing strategy, not an actual inspiration or a part of the plot.

7.3. Overall Conclusion

Russian-ness is used in many ways in these novels. There are, however, some themes that reoccur throughout all novels. These themes are change, opposition and modernisation. Historical Russia has been a nation in which great change has always played a big role. Revolution and the overthrowing of power are important themes in not only Russian history but also these fictional nations. The opposition between the past and the present, backward and modern, Occident and Orient are central to Russian-ness and also permeate these texts. Modernisation has been difficult to fully achieve in a nation that has been balancing many worlds at the same time and these novels engage with the struggle of modernisation. Some

authors give a tentative solution to this struggle and in all novels the good and the bad of moving forward is strongly present.

My conclusion is that one of the reasons that we can see Russian-ness in young adult fantasy: the themes of Russian history and characteristics of Russian-ness are about change and its consequences. These are issues that are at the forefront in today's world. These are also issues that young adults, specifically, have to deal with. They are making the change from child to adult and have to negotiate what that means for their developing identity. Growing up and maturing is central to the young adult narrative. Russia is historically rife with great change and conflict and I believe this naturally facilitates narratives about growing up, hardship, conflict and rebellion.

Russia to this day is an elusive nation to the West. Yet, while Russia may feel alien and remote, they are still part of the Western world. They have been the 'other' in many historical conflicts. They are also a country perceived as both very traditional yet also part of the modern world. These novels were published in an era in which Russia has displayed economic and imperial power over the Western world. Russia has been accused of tampering with Western elections and has annexed the Crimea. Since the end of communism, Russia has also experienced much turmoil within. This image of Russian-ness is historical and contemporary, with Russia being both familiar and exotic. This works well in a landscape of young adult fantasy that is choosing more and more non-Western cultures and worlds to explore. Russian-ness intrinsically offers themes that young adult literature explores and Russian-ness is just far enough beyond the familiar to be innovative and exotic.

It is through the use of imagology that Russian-ness can be examined in these texts. Imagology offers images of Russian-ness that can be analysed in these novels. It is interesting to explore these themes and images in young adult literature, especially because the authors are western themselves and the Russian-ness that they present their reader with is their own internalised idea of Russian-ness. Researching literature in which national stereotypes are implicitly constructed and presented can inform us much more on the mainstream conception of a national stereotype. In this research, imagology has offered a framework of national stereotype that also connects with a concept such as authenticity, which produced additional insights to the research. Authors who engage with Russian-ness much more directly are prone to rectifying any choices they make in deviating from the source material. The only problem with the theoretical framework that I encountered is that analysing novels that only present the reader with one particular national stereotype (in this case Russian-ness), means that there is no textual other to compare the stereotype with. The reader is the other, presumably. It

would, therefore, be interesting to explore young adult fantasy that includes more distinct national stereotypes. That said, imagology provided me with a conceptualisation of Russian-ness that I could investigate in these novels. Dividing the analysis of the images in overt and covert representations helped me identify particular differences between the low and high fantasy novels and the levels on which Russian-ness is employed in these.

7.4. Further Research

What struck me most during the initial research of my topic, was the lack of research on young adult literature. This was in part because the articles and research that are produced are often printed in periodicals that are not very accessible to a larger audience. Despite a rapidly increasing body of literature, it is still difficult to find research that connects theories such as imagology to trends in young adult literature. Young adult literature has permeated the market and appeals both to its target demographic of teenagers and young adults (ages 12-18) and also to many adults. Many young adult novels are being adapted to the small and big screen because they have strong transmedia appeal. They often have large fan bases that are based mostly on the internet. It is here, on these internet fora and social media platforms, that important debates have also emerged. These were debates on diversity in (young adult) literature which have, if we look at the sheer amount of ‘diverse’ young adult literature that has been produced over the past few years, actually caused a change.

In my view it would be very interesting to see more research on young adult literature. Whether its articles about particular themes or trends, I think it is worth analysing this type of literature. The young adults of today are the adults of tomorrow and it is important to see what type of literature this generation is growing up on; which themes and topics matter. I am especially interested in this trend of diverse fantasy worlds. There have been so many new young adult fantasy novels set in a non-Western (medieval) world that I think it is important to explore which themes, topics and debates are being explored. It would also be interesting to see how these novels cater to (perhaps) different audience and what role the demand for diversity has played in the developments in the literary field.

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9. Appendix

A. Synopsis *Shadow and Bone* (2012) by Leigh Bardugo

Shadow and Bone tells the story of Alina Starkov. Alina's story begins as a young orphan living at Duke Keramsov's estate. Here she meets another orphan named Malyen Oretsev, Mal, and they grow a close friendship. When Alina and Mal are about eight years old the Grisha examiners come to the estate to test them. Alina and Mal do not test positive for the Grisha powers and are left at the estate. Growing up Alina is a weak and sickly child, this continues into her young adulthood. Both Alina and Mal leave the estate to enlist in the First Army, or the King's Army. Alina becomes a cartographer assistant and Mal a tracker.

The story begins when Alina and Mal are stationed at Kribirsk, a land-port city located near the Unsea. The Unsea, or rather the Fold, is a vast darkness separating West and East Ravka, the fictional country Alina and Mal live in, which is teeming with dangerous bird-like creatures called the Volcra. Alina and Mal are expected to sail on sand-skiffs through the Fold to reach the True Sea, which is a very perilous expedition. Once they have arrived at Kribirsk, they learn that the Darkling and his Grisha will be present on this mission. The Darkling is the most powerful Grisha and has lived for many decades. An ancestor of the Darkling, called the Black Heretic, originally created the Fold, through the use of their power of calling darkness.

When the company embarks on the journey they are attacked by Volcra almost immediately and many die. Alina and Mal are also attacked but somehow they survive. The remaining company manages to escape the fold and back in Kribirsk Alina, who had become unconscious, is brought before the Darkling. It turns out that Alina saved everyone by emitting a bright light, scaring away the Volcra. According to the Darkling, she is the Sun Summoner, a Grisha equal to him in power but very rare. He believes she can destroy the Fold and that is why he takes her back to the Grisha headquarters in the capital Os Alta. Mal is found to be alive, much to Alina's relief, but is not allowed to join her.

Once in the capital, Alina starts a new life in the Little Palace, the place that the Grisha live and train in, which is right next to the Big Palace where the King of Ravka lives. Alina encounters many people here, such as other Grisha, the royal family and a priest called the Apparat, who informs her that the people have started to pray to her as if she were a saint. Alina is forced through training, both combat and to master her Grisha power. She is, however, still very weak and she cannot call her power without help from the Darkling or her teacher Baghra. During her stay at the Little Palace Alina often writes to Mal but he does not write back. The Darkling suggests getting Alina an *amplifier*. The devices are often made from a special animal the Grisha kills and strengthen a Grisha's power when worn on the

body. The Darkling has sent trackers to find the legendary Morozova herd, the antlers of Morozova stag would be able to increase Alina's powers.

Alina is still frustrated with Mal, but also experiences great homesickness. A sudden realisation about her childhood gives her the power to unlock her Grisha ability on her own. Her newfound power is also noticed by the Darkling and soon he presses his advances towards her. After a presentation of the Grisha and their powers at court, the Darkling asks her to leave her door unlocked for him. That night, as Alina makes her way back to the Little Palace, she has an encounter with Mal, who had been in the unit tracking the M... herd and was now reporting to the Darkling. They get into an argument and he leaves. Alina is awoken that night not by the Darkling coming to her but Baghra. Baghra tells her that she is actually the Darkling's mother, and he is more ancient than people think. In fact, he is the Black Heretic. Baghra urges Alina to flee and sets up an escape plan.

Although sceptic of this tale at first, Alina recognizes that the Darkling has been deceptive and she escapes as Baghra told her to. She manages to disappear for some time but gets found out by a group of soldiers after an altercation. She is lucky enough to find Mal is part of the search team and he helps her escape once again. They travel together, albeit not without trouble on the way, but instead of trying to escape Ravka, they decided to find the herd together. They manage to do so, but Alina refuses to kill the stag out of compassion for the animal. At the same time the Darkling arrives and after a brief scuffle he kills the stag and binds Alina with a necklace made out of the antlers.

The Darkling takes both Alina and Mal to the Fold, with the promise of using Alina's powers to protect himself from Volcra whilst expanding the Fold and he plans to leave Mal to be killed by Volcra. His plan almost comes to fruition. He manages to expand the Fold across Kribirsk but Alina takes control over the antlers and escapes into the Fold with Mal. They are later shown to have made it across the Unsea and are now trying to leave Ravka. The Darkling and his plans of world domination are, however, still alive.

B. Synopsis *The Bear and the Nightingale* (2016) by Katherine Arden

The Bear and the Nightingale is the story of Vasilisa Petronovna: her childhood and entrance into adulthood, but also her coming into her unusual powers. The story begins with her mother Marina telling her husband Pyotr Vladimirovich, a rich boyar in Northern Rus', that she is pregnant, after a night's hard work. Pyotr responds with hesitancy, he is afraid Marina will die in childbirth, but she is adamant in delivering the baby, because this child will be like her mother. Marina is the daughter of a Grand Prince of Moscow and a mysterious woman who rode out of the woods and was presumed to be a witch. The couple already have three children, Nikolai (Kolya), Alexandr (Sasha), Olga and Alyosha (Lyoska). Pyotr was right to be afraid: Marina does die shortly after giving birth.

Vasilisa, Vasya, is mainly brought up by her mother's nurse Dunya and her older sister Olga. She is a wild girl, a child always looking for adventure. She is often called a forest sprite because she spends so much time in the forest and by the lake. Vasya also learns that she can communicate with the household spirits living in her house and around her village, Lesnaya Zemly. This is, however, not a gift shared by many and she soon learns to hide her abilities. One day, when she is about six years old, Vasya is lost in the woods and encounters Medved, a mythological demon, near an oak tree in a seemingly other part of the forest. Medved tries to lure her in but she is saved by the frost-demon Morozko. Pyotr is afraid for Vasya's upbringing without a mother and decides to go to Moscow to find himself a new wife and a husband for his daughter Olga.

Pyotr leaves for Moscow accompanied by his sons Kolya and Sasha. Pyotr decides to enter the court of Ivan Krasnii, his late wife's half-brother and Grand Prince of Moscow. Pyotr and Kolya go around the trading markets, Pyotr looks for a wife and a husband for his daughter and Sasha becomes enthralled with the tales of a monk. Sasha asks his father for permission to visit the monastery, which is granted. Meanwhile, the reader learns that Ivan wants to marry off his son's friend Vladimir, who is also a grandson of Ivan Kalita, the previous Grand Prince. Vladimir would have a stronger claim to the throne if he were to marry a highborn lady. Ivan also worries about his daughter Anna Ivanovna who is believed to be mad because she sees demons and wants to go into a convent. Ivan and the Metropolitan of Moscow, Aleksei, decide to marry Anna to Pyotr and his daughter Olga to Vladimir.

Pyotr is notified of these decisions and cannot do otherwise than accept them. Sasha has been to the monastery and longs to become a monk there, but Pyotr makes him promise to think about it before he leaves his family and inheritance. Pyotr, too, meets Morozko. Kolya is drunk and harasses Morozko, who then puts a knife to his throat. Morozko makes Pyotr

promise to give a necklace to Vasya and never talk about where it came from, or otherwise he will kill Kolya. They stay in the city for six more weeks before leaving with Anna.

Once he is home, Pyotr gives the necklace to Dunya to give to Vasya. Dunya, however, keeps it herself, because she recognises its power as a talisman and wants to protect Vasya from it. She is haunted by Morozko in a dream but strikes a deal that she will keep the talisman for now and will give it to Vasya when she comes of age. Anna, meanwhile, is miserable in Lesnaya Zemlya. She still sees the demons and they stare at her. She believed she would be safe of them if she were in a convent and was unhappy with her father's choice. She tries to find refuge in the church.

Kolya and Olga both marry and Olga leaves. Vasya is really sad because she wants to go with her sister but is not allowed. Olga promises her she can visit when she is grown. The ruler, Ivan, has grown very sick and the monk who Sasha admired, Sergei, and Aleksei decide to have Sasha come and protect Dmitrii, Ivan's son and heir. Pyotr acquiesces to the request to let Sasha leave but in turn Sasha has to forego all his claims to his father's lands. He does so and leaves and once again Vasya is left behind. Vasya's relationships with the house spirits, *the domovoi*, grows and she also meets new spirits in the forest. Anna, her stepmother, notices that Vasya can also see the demons and punishes her for engaging with them. This only makes Vasya visit with the spirits in secret. She also learns to talk to horses thanks to the stable spirits. Anna and Pyotr have a child named Irina.

The Metropolitan of Moscow, Aleksei, fears the rise of another priest, Konstatin, who has gained the favour of the people. He is afraid Konstatin will be more liked than Dmitrii. Konstatin is a painter of icons and himself very pleasing to the people because of his skills and looks. Aleksei learns that the priest in Lesnaya Zemlya has died and sends Konstatin to replace him, against Konstatin's wishes. Once in Lesnaya Zemlya Konstatin is fascinated by the wild Vasya who helps him find dyes on morning. Anna appeals to Konstatin to exorcise the demons, a task he gladly accepts. Konstatin has the people of Lesnaya Zemlya fear for their sins and forbids them to leave offerings for the spirits. Vasya is the only one who remains taking care of the spirits and she often questions Konstatin. Her relationship with Anna grows worse and she ventures out into the woods more and more.

Despite Vasya's efforts, the hearth spirits (*the domovoi*) start to die and disappear. The winter is harsh and people in the village die. Dunya continues to keep the talisman from Vasya, even though Morozko urges her to give it to Vasya. Meanwhile, Medved is awakening and feeding off of the fear of the people. Spring comes around and Vasya learns to ride. Konstatin is almost killed by a chyerti, but Vasya rescues him. He is in awe of her but also

knows he needs to convert her. His esteem for Vasya worries Anna and she presses Pyotr to marry her off.

This and the notion that Morozko is also after Vasya worry Pyotr and he decides to marry Vasya to a neighbouring boyar. Konstatin hears the voice of Medved speaking to him one night and believes it is God and starts to do his bidding. When Vasya's suitor comes to the village to marry her she is appalled by him. Her nephew rides on a horse which is spooked and she saves him by jumping on her suitor's horse. He sees this as a great offence and the wedding is called off. Anna suggests putting Vasya in a convent and plans for this are made. Meanwhile, the Muscovy rule is also changing and Alexandr asks his father to fight in a war if needed.

The situation in the area surrounding the village becomes worse and other villages are also affected. Medved's grip on Konstatin strengthens and he is able to appear in church, which scares both Anna and Vasya. People die and get sick, among whom Dunya who finally gives Vasya the talisman before passing away. The dead awaken and Vasya and her brother Alyosha have to kill and upyr. Dunya too is resurrected as an upyr by Medved. Pyotr and Kolya leave to help another village. Anna and Konstatin try to send Vasya away to a convent early, but she runs away to the forest.

In the forest Vasya encounters Morozko and he takes care of her in his house. He even gives her flowers which she can give to her halfsister Irina to gain Anna's favour. Vasya is also gifted a horse, Solovey, the nightingale. Konstatin discovers that the voice he heard is not God but Medved. Medved tells him that he can only save the people if he sacrifices a witch. Konstatin leaves Anna with him. Vasya returns home to discover what has happened and returns once again to the forest to save her sister's mother, but finds her dead.

A battle between Vasya, her brother and Morozko and Medved and his allies ensues. Medved needs to be bound or otherwise he will consume the village and beyond. Vasya unites the hearth spirits against him and saves Dunya from being an upyr. Morozko, who is also the king of Death, helps Dunya cross over. When he is away Medved almost wins, but Pyotr is lured to the forest by Morozko and dies fighting Medved. This death then binds Medved.

Vasya and Morozko scare Konstatin into leaving the village after the funeral of Pyotr and Anna. Alyosha takes over the responsibilities of his father. Vasya tells her brother and sister that she must leave because people think she is a witch. She promises to Irina that she will come back one day. Vasya leaves on the back of Solovey and enters Morozko's house.

C. Synopsis *The Crown's Game* (2017) by Evelyn Skye

The novel opens with Vika Andreyev practising her enchanter skills in the forest of Ovchinin Island, her home. Nikolai Karimov, the other enchanter, is also practising his skills and is on an assignment by his mentor Galina in Saint Petersburg. Both enchanters expect to be summoned by the tsar to serve him and Russia, but are unaware of the other one's existence. Pasha, or Pavel Romanov, the crown prince of Russia and a close friend of Nikolai's returns home from an excursion to the steppes of Kazakh. There he has learned that the locals are unhappy with the Russian reforms, which his sister Yuliana makes him tell the tsar. The people are preparing a revolt and Yuliana asks her father to initiate the Crown's Game to choose an Imperial Enchanter. The tsar, pressured by other threats as well, agrees.

Meanwhile, Nikolai and Pasha go on a hunting trip to Ovchinin Island and there they witness Vika practising her skills. Nikolai realises she is the other enchanter. Sergei, Vika's father, is also informed of the Game and learns that his sister Galina did not tell him she too had a pupil to mentor. Nikolai and Pasha return home and Nikolai reminisces about the time one of the servants of his household, Renata, read his leaves which told him death follows him. At the same time, Pasha is trying to figure out what he witnessed in the forest and he goes to research magic in the royal library. Sergei tells Vika about the impending Game and both enchanters start preparing for it.

Vika and Sergei and Nikolai and Galina travel to Bolshebnoie Duplo, the heart of magic in Russia. Both enchanters have hid their appearance with magic. Vika manages to catch a glimpse of Nikolai's true appearance by touching him. The tsar explains the rules of the game and Vika and Nikolai take their oaths. Flaming scars of crossed wands appear on their chests, the scars burning will indicate their turn. Both their mentors give them a parting gift before being banished to Siberia. The tsar wants them to impress Pasha for his birthday as their theme for the Game. The one who impresses the tsar most will win, but if they do not make any moves the Game will burn them alive. This way there will always be one winner.

The enchanters leave for Saint Petersburg. In the meantime, Nikolai's mother, who was a faith-healer, raises from the death. Pasha returns to the island to investigate Vika and meets Ludmilla, a baker. She tells him Vika's identity. Back in Saint Petersburg it is Nikolai's first turn and he changes the facades of buildings on the Nevsky Prospect, the main thoroughfare. Vika awakes to her scar burning and sees Nikolai has changed the buildings. He has added small stone birds, which attack Vika once she steps outside. She summons real birds in defence kills the stone birds.

While the royal family is touring the city for Pasha's birthday festivities, a man yells at the group and is struck by a guard. Pasha asks for medical attention and his pardon. His father realizes he will need an Imperial Enchanter now more than ever. Vika enchants all the city waterways for her first task as a response to Nikolai. Crowds gather to watch the impressive fountains. She has the water grab Nikolai and almost drown him but he survives. Pasha discusses the odd happenings with Nikolai, who confirms magic exists. Pasha exposes his plans to invite Vika to his birthday ball. Sergei and Galina are sequestered at a cabin in Siberia. They argue and Galina reveals she knows Vika is not Sergei's biological daughter.

Aizhana walks into a village and asks the women where her child is. She looks and smells like a corpse. No one recognizes her, so she tells them about a faith healer from their tribe who fell in love with a Russian soldier. He leaves without a goodbye and she later bears his son. He almost dies at birth, but she saves his life by syphoning her own energy into him. She almost dies but is put into an ante-death state for years. Her son was taken away 11 years ago by a Russian aristocrat because his power was too strong. Aizhana kills the women as retribution and uses their energy to strengthen herself.

Vika is lonely in Saint Petersburg and invites Ludmila to stay with her. Ludmila reveals that she has known about Vika's magic all along. Two boxes delivered in front of the palace contain a life-size jack-in-the-box and ballerina. They come out and dance around the square and Vika and Ludmila go and watch. Vika is trapped in the ballerina's box, but she changes the walls to steam and vaporizes the box. As a response to the attack she conjures up a storm the following night, but Nikolai shields himself. Even though Vika conjures up lighting she does not hurt him because he looks sad.

Pasha tries to find Vika in the city and encounters Ludmila in the pumpkin-shaped bakery she has opened. He reveals his true identity to her. He asks about Vika and sends an invitation with Ludmila to the royal ball. Renata starts working at the pumpkin bakery and she tells Nikolai about the encounter. Two huge armoires are delivered that evening. One is at the tailor shop and if you insert an old outfit, a new one will come out for the masquerade ball that has been planned for Pasha's birthday. A similar armoire sits outside Vika's apartment. A note from Nikolai appears explaining it is an Imagination Box, which can carve her thoughts and words on the front door. She decides it's not safe to interact with it anymore because Nikolai is her enemy. Ludmila tells her how Pasha's been searching for her. They agree to go to the ball.

Nikolai arrives at the ball and looks for Vika and Pasha. Renata is working as a servant to help with surveillance, but Nikolai magically changes her clothes, and they dance

together. Pasha sneaks up and cuts in. Pasha joins his family and enters the ball as the guest of honor. Vika arrives in a gown of ice and snow and Pasha asks for a dance. Nikolai, dressed as a harlequin, cuts in. Vika does not know how to dance but Nikolai enchants her. They dance at a maddening pace. He speeds up the orchestra to accommodate them. They bond.

Sergei and Galina are still in Siberia, but Sergei is growing weak and sick. He reveals to Galina that the parting gift for Vika, a charmed bracelet, is channelling his energy to Vika. Nikolai slept a whole day after draining his energy at the ball and awakes to his scar burning. A beautiful island has been created. Nikolai goes to meet Pasha there. He tells Nikolai that Vika slipped and said there are two enchanters. Nikolai feels Vika is inviting him to collaborate with her on the island and he creates structures and benches on the island,

Renata has set up a stand next to Ludmila's bakery to sell tea and read leaves. Vika asks for tea and a reading. Renata sees love will always come with suffering for Vika and death by a knife is near. She only tells her the latter. Meanwhile, Aizhana is lurking in the bridge below the girls. She hears their whole exchange. She learns her son is in a contest in which only one enchanter will live and so she vows to kill the tsar. Vika awakes to her scar burning. She evanesces to the island because her magic has been stronger. She sees Nikolai's creations and sits down on one of the magical benches. It transports her to Moscow. All the benches are wonders of Russia. She finds a bench dedicated to Ovchinin Island. She then approaches the last bench and finds Nikolai sleeping on it. They bond again over his childhood memories.

Pasha's parents are heading south for the winter because of his mother's health. She asks Pasha to take care of his sister and the realm in their absence. He goes to the island that night to try the benches while nobody is there. He is pleased to find Vika there. He tries to make a move on her. She says she is not in a position for a relationship. The tsarina is very sick and cannot travel, so the tsar asks Vika and Nikolai for a solution. Vika transports the tsar and tsarina but in doing so she takes all of Sergei's energy. Before he dies he asks Galina to tell Vika the truth about him and that he loved her. Vika passes out while walking back with Nikolai. He brings her to his house and wakes her. Aizhana in the meantime hears of the tsar's departure and heads to him.

Vika receives a letter from Galina about of Sergei's death and his dying wish. He was her adopted father. He found her on a volcano, abandoned by a nymph. She becomes very sad and feels guilty. Pasha shows Nikolai the book describing the Game. He tells Nikolai he likes Vika, almost kissed her, and wants to help her win the competition. Nikolai is jealous but says Pasha cannot interfere with the competition. Pasha learns of Vika's father's death and tries to

cheer her up. They ride in a carriage together and when she falls asleep he sees her scar. He now knows the Game is real. He tells this to Nikolai who reveals he is the other enchanter. Pasha feels betrayed. Both admit their love for Vika. Pasha says he wants nothing to do with Nikolai or magic ever again.

Vika is still sad and is furious the Game caused Sergei to die. For her fourth task, she sends rats, cats, and moths into Galina's house to destroy everything and then kill Nikolai. She realizes he's just a pawn in the Game, too, and admits her feelings for him. She calls the creatures back and doesn't complete the task. Nikolai returns home hungover and injured after a night of drinking and brawling to find the house in disarray. He knows whose work it is and attempts to repair the damage.

Aizhana is in the tsar's tent. He doesn't recognize her. She reminds him who she is and says Nikolai is their son. Aizhana kisses the tsar and transfers typhus to him. He soon dies. The tsarina passes shortly after. Pasha and Yuliana are in mourning and Pasha is now tsar. Pasha ignores Nikolai's every attempt to contact him. Yuliana asks him to end the game and he acquiesces. The enchanters are summoned and they have to fight to the death on the island. Vika is ignoring Nikolai. Nikolai is approached by his mother but makes her leave.

Nikolai arrives on the island and finds Renata and Ludmila in cages. Vika sees Nikolai kiss Renata as she arrives. They go to the other side of the island for the duel. Vika asks about the kiss, but Nikolai says Renata is only a friend. For his fifth move he stabs himself, because he loves Vika. The magical knife he received from Galina transfers the wound to Vika's chest, however, and Nikolai siphons his energy to Vika. He disintegrates. Pasha learns that Vika is the winner. Pasha holds an elaborate memorial service for Nikolai. Vika does not attend. She still feels Nikolai's magic lingering and goes to the bench of his home. Pasha joins her in this vision, but she makes him leave. After Pasha leaves, Vika sees a shadowy figure on a horse off in the distance. The rider is Nikolai.

D. Synopsis *Wicked Saints* (2019) by Emily A. Duncan

The novel opens with an attack on the monastery in Kalyazin where Nadezha Lapteva, Nadya, is in training and seclusion. She is the last cleric, a person who is blessed by the Gods and can use their powers. Nadya is the only cleric in decades to have appeared and unlike most clerics, she can wield the powers of almost all the gods in the pantheon. Nadya has to flee the monastery because the High Prince of Tranavia, their enemy, has come to kill her. She and her friend Konstatin, Kostya, and a priestess named Anna try to escape. Nadya and Anna get away but Kostya is taken prisoner. He gives Nadya a pendant. Nadya travels into the woods and believes that Kostya has been killed.

Meanwhile the High Prince, Serefin Meleski, has entered the monastery with his troops and they are looking for the cleric. They learn she has fled and question the remaining members of the monastery. They kill Kostya's brother and father Alexei. In the forest Nadya and Anna encounter a group of Tranavian soldiers but Nadya manages to kill most of them by requesting darkness from a God who proceeds to take away all the stars in the sky for fifteen minutes. Nadya notices there are other people near aside from the soldiers. A squabble between Nadya and Anna and this group leads to them banding together. They are two Akolans, Rashid and Parijahan, and a Tranavian blood mage named Malachiasz. Blood mages have denounced the power of the gods in Tranavia and make magic by letting blood and ripping pages out of spell books.

The group decides to stay together and Nadya and Anna are led to an abandoned church which serves as a hide-out for the Akolans and Tranavian. Here the group concocts a plan to kill the Tranavian tsar to end the war. Serefin learns that he has to go back home for a special tradition to choose him a bride in the meantime. He is told that the Vulture, a blood mage cult, will be going after the cleric instead. The Vultures arrive and attack the church, but Nadya and Malachiasz manage to evade them and lure them away. They come upon Serefin and his associates but he does not see them. They learn of the festivities in the capital and decide it will be the perfect cover for their plan

Serefin believes his father wants to kill him and use the festivities as a guise. He has noticed changes and decided to head home to investigate his claim. Both Nadya's and Serefin's groups head to Tranavia, but Nadya leaves Anna behind. Nadya and Malachiasz bond during their travels. She learns more about the blood magic and the vultures. She decided she will end the war by bringing back the gods to Tranavia.

Once at court both groups try to blend in. Nadya poses as a highborn lady who partakes in the competition to become Serefin's wife and in the meantime she tries to find a

way to kill the tsar. Serefin tries to find out his father's plans and visits his mother and her witch. The witch tells him of a prophecy to stop the war and the tsar. Vultures are increasingly present at court and are kidnapping potential wives. They are harnessing magic for the tsar. Both groups discover that the king wants to become a god by killing his son and performing a ritual devised by the Black Vulture, the leader of the cult. Nadya falls in love with Malachiasz. She also learns that her powers do not need the approval of the gods.

Nadya is hunted by the Vultures but she manages to escape. She is brought to the witch by Malachiasz and Serefin finds them there. They learn that Malachiasz is the Black Vulture, but that he wants to stop the king. They come up with a plan to lure the king into the cathedral. Serefin is captured and killed for the ritual. Malachiasz turns out to have played everyone and the king is made into a god. Serefin is mysteriously revived. He goes to the cathedral to stop his father and the Black Vulture. Nadya taps into the powers of the gods and opens the doors to Tranavia again, together with Serefin she defeats the tsar. Malachiasz becomes grotesque and flees. He loses his memory. The novel ends open-ended.

E. Figures



Figure 1. The Grishaverse map.



Figure 2. The map of the world of *Wicked Saints*.