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Red Winter: A Novel



Synopsis

Delivering harrowing adventure and suspense set against an unforgiving landscape, the new novel by Dan Smith will leave you chilled to the bone . . . 1920, central Russia. The Red Terror tightens its hold. Kolya has deserted his Red Army unit and returns home to bury his brother and reunite with his wife and sons. But he finds the village silent and empty. The men have been massacred in the forest. The women and children have disappeared. In this remote, rural Russian community the folk tales that mothers tell their children by candlelight take on powerful significance, and the terrifying legend of Koschei, The Deathless One, begins to feel very real. Kolya sets out on a journey through dense, haunting forests and across vast plains against the bitter winter, in the desperate hope he will find his wife and two boysâ and find them alive. But there are very dark things in Kolya's past. And, as he strives to find his family, there's someoneâ or somethingâ following his trail . . .

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Customer Reviews

In November 1920, Kolya, a bedraggled army deserter, has grown tired of bloodshed and decides to return home. When he reaches his village, it is deserted, except for a raving woman and her dead husband, whose mutilated body lies in the forest. Kolya's wife, Marianna, and their two sons, Misha and Pavel, have vanished. Kolya subsequently hears a rumor that a soldier nicknamed Koschei, "the Deathless One," has been torturing and murdering his victims before branding them with a red star. Koschei leaves death and devastation in his wake, but some have reported that he takes women and children as prisoners. Kolya decides to follow this butcher's trail, hoping that it will

eventually lead him to his missing family. "Red Winter," by Dan Smith, is a melancholy and bloody tale of a country torn apart by civil war. The Bolsheviks promised better lives for their compatriots. Instead, the revolution brought the opposite: repression, terror, starvation, and chaos. Kolya, who has little food, a few weapons, and a loyal horse named Kashtan, endures many hardships as he heads north. Along the way, he meets a few goodhearted people and others who are dangerous and predatory. As Kolya attempts to survive against formidable odds, he guiltily ponders how he can atone for his past misdeeds. This story is rich in history and atmosphere. Smith captures the bitter cold of a Russian winter, the desperation of individuals who are perpetually hungry, and the madness that can descend upon those who experience unbearable losses. This lengthy and gloomy book is, unfortunately, weighed down by excessive description and repetitious passages. Still, we grow to care about its flawed but intrepid hero and the other compelling characters that Smith creates.

1920, central Russia. It is bleak, cold, dark, it is densely forested and there is a murderer roaming freely, executing locals and branding them with a red star. It is a time when the country is in turmoil, no-one can be trusted, no-one is giving anything away. All the factions, whether Red or any colour of the rainbow are fighting each other, changing sides and being duplicitous - it's a scary and uncertain world, with a very uncertain future. Russia is a country that has suffered years of "confiscation and requisition". Much of the feel of this book is reminiscent of *The Road*, by Cormac McCarthy, as people wander in search of meagre food rations and shelter; the devastation of the surroundings is palpable. This is a country on the edge, the inhabitants living on adrenaline, looking out for the next danger, and the next attack. It is a bleak and stark landscape. Nikolai Levitsky, known as Kolya, has deserted from the army, and has brought his mortally wounded brother Alek to the family izba, where he anticipates finding his wife Marianna and his two boys. But their home is deserted. Galina, their neighbour is in hiding, and is distraught at the brutal murder of her husband, so much so that she takes her own life in front of Kolya by walking into the nearby lake and drowning herself. Gradually, it becomes evident that a watery death is a common occurrence amongst the women victims. The name of Koshei starts to be thrown about, linked to the gory deaths - he is a mythical figure of terror, a legend, a nebulous character from old fables, yet he seems all too real in the terror he is visiting upon the people of Central Russia. He seems particularly focussed upon Kolya.

Red Winter is a historical thriller set in Russia in the aftermath of The Great War, the time of the

Russian Civil War and the time of The Red Terror when the Bolshevik secret police, the Cheka, carried out mass killings, torture and suppressions of the various groups that sought to resist the revolution. Kolya is returning home with his brother who has died on their trip. Tired from too long spent fighting, first against the Germans, now against the enemies of the revolution. He hopes to find his wife and sons, to bury his brother next to their parents, to live a quiet life. Only when he arrives the village is empty, as if everyone simply walked out. Desperate and unsure if he is dreaming or losing his mind, he comes across the sole surviving member of the village, so malnourished and raving that he does not recognise her at first. When he tries to ask about what has happened to the villagers and his family, all she will talk about is Koschei, and how it was his doing. Koschei the Deathless, a fairytale bogeyman of Russian myth. Kolya begins to think her insane until she shows him the forest. What follows is a journey across a country and a culture being torn apart by violence and mistrust. A journey to discover if Koschei is real, if Kolya's family are alive. I had heard of Koschei the Deathless, but I didn't know his tale. Smith, through Kolya, retells the tale (or one of them) and is ingeniously vague about the outcome. I think Smith does a good job of balancing the tension between the outcome of the fairytale and the outcome of Kolya's story. I found Red Winter to be deceptively well paced. It's related in the first person.

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