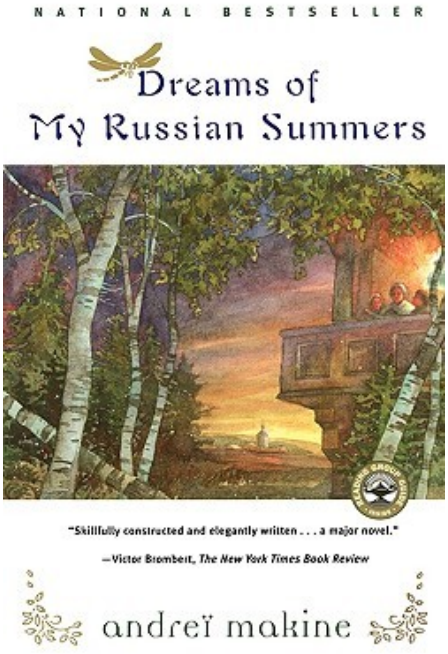

Dreams of My Russian Summers

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Dreams of My Russian Summers, tells the poignant story of a boy growing up amid the harsh realities of Soviet life in the 1960s and '70s, and of his extraordinary love for an elegant Frenchwoman, Charlotte Lemonnier, who is his grandmother.

Every summer he visits his grandmother in a dusty village overlooking the vast steppes. Here, during the warm evenings, they sit on Charlotte's narrow, flower-covered bacony and listen to tales from another time, another place: Paris at the turn of the century. She who used to see Proust playing tennis in Neuilly captivates the children with stories of Tsar Nicholas's visit to Paris in 1896, of the great Paris flood of 1910, of the death of French president Felix Faure in the arms of his mistress.

But from Charlotte the boy also learns of a Russia he has never known, of famine and misery, of brutal injustice, of the hopeless chaos of war. He follows her as she travels by foot from Moscow half the way to Siberia; suffers with her as she tells of her husband - his grandfather - a victim of Stalin's purges; shudders as she describes her own capture by bandits, who brutalize her and left her for dead. Could all this pain and suffering really have happened to his gentle, beloved Charlotte? Mesmerized, the boy weaves Charlotte's stories into his own secret universe of memory and dream. Yet, despite all the deprivations and injustices of the Soviet world, he like many Russians still feels a strong affinity with and "an indestructible love" for his homeland.

Dreams of My Russian Summers Details

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From Reader Review Dreams of My Russian Summers for online ebook

Bettie? says

[Bettie's Books

The rating, any status updates, and those bookshelves, indicate my feelings for this book.
(hide spoiler)]

Hana says

On a flower-covered balcony, cooled by Siberia's dusty summer breezes, a grandmother tells stories to her grandson, the narrator, and granddaughter. But she is not just any grandmother, nor are these just any times. The grandmother is a Frenchwoman and these are the 1960s in the Soviet Union. Yet on that balcony, the USSR disappears and the children are immersed in another reality—the reality of memories of things and worlds past. They speak in French, and the language, the words, become part of the magic, incantations for summoning mood and memory.

> The choice of events was more or less subjective. Their sequence was chiefly governed by our feverish desire to know, by our random questions…for us the exact chronology mattered little! Time in Atlantis knew only the marvelous simultaneity of the present.
>
> …still in this present, which never passed away, we came upon a quiet little bistro, the name of which Charlotte spelled out to us, smilingly, as she recalled it: Au Ratafia de Neuilly. "This ratafia," she would elaborate, "the patron served it in silver scallop dishes…."
>
> We were discovering that a meal, yes, the simple intake of food, could become a theatrical production, a liturgy, an art....
>
> In truth, we were beginning to lose our heads: the Louvre; *Le Cid* at the Comédie-Française; the deputies in a boat; and the comet; and the chandeliers, falling one after the other; and the Niagara of wines; and the president's last embrace…And the frogs disturbed in their winter sleep! We were up against a people with a fabulous multiplicity of sentiments, attitudes, and viewpoints, as well as manners of speaking, creating, and loving.

Behind the glittering, shifting, ever-present, never-changing France-Atlantis, Charlotte holds other memories at bay and these the narrator learns only indirectly, eavesdropping on adult conversations over the winter, as his parents and their friends and relatives gather to smoke and drink vodka and talk of the Frenchwoman who chose to live alone in Siberia.

These darker, winter stories coalesce into another narrative in which Charlotte cares for the wounded of the Great War; lives through the horrors of the famines in Stalin's Soviet Union; the constant hunger kept at bay with watery soup made from dried plants—or worse things, of which Charlotte knows, but does not partake; the last train for the east amid German bombing; and the 'wrong' suitcase—the one that holds memories,

clippings of old newspapers, not biscuits.

Only the narrator and his grandmother emerge fully shaped from the shining fragments of memory, and only Charlotte is likable. But the sense of places and times are vivid, even in broken pieces, like the Beaux-Art cherubs knocked off Charlotte's balcony by Soviet workmen eager to erase the decadent past. One of the cherubs shatters in a thousand pieces on the sidewalk below, but the second of the pair lands in a bed of dahlias and is rescued and preserved by the children.

In the book's third section, the narrator is entering adolescence and feels somehow an alien in his own being (as most adolescents do at times). Estranged from his French self he finds himself drawn to the Russian side of his identity and as he does so the tone and tempo of the book, even the sentence structure changes becoming for a time simpler and more linear.

> For at last I was coming back to life. Living in the happy simplicity of orderly actions: shooting, marching in file, eating millet kasha from aluminum mess tins. Letting oneself be carried along in a collective movement directed by others, by those who knew the supreme objective, who generously relieved us of all the burden of responsibility, making us light, transparent, clear.

And then comes a crisis, a first awkward encounter with a girl, and the narrator flees from his embarrassment—runs away to Charlotte to stand with her again on the balcony, talk of poetry and find, in one last summer with her, a calm center for his soul. Even in that summer's terrible moments—a scene in which we encounter a group of quadruple amputees—Charlotte seems to have a gift for finding and bestowing peace. Now at last we learn the narrator's name, Alyosha. In Charlotte's presence, "All at once I saw! Or rather I felt, with all my being, the luminous tie that linked this moment full of iridescent reflections to other moments I had inhabited in the past…Linked together thus, these moments formed a singular universe, with its own rhythm, its particular air and sun….A planet where the death of this woman with her big grey eyes became inconceivable."

In truth, I wish the book had ended with that summer, for Alyosha without Charlotte is not an easy person to be with--solitary, self-absorbed, and often incoherent. In the book's fourth section, some 20 years later, Alyosha has been living in the west, on the edge of destitution and perhaps insanity, and finds his way to Paris. His only moments of clarity come from memories of Charlotte and her Paris life, and from the hope that he might bring her to live with him. These final 30 pages contain a couple of interesting twists, but I think the story would have been stronger without them.

Three and a half stars, rounded up because I loved Charlotte. This is not a book that everyone will enjoy nor is it without flaws; it is too fragmented and often rather too full of itself and its literary antecedents (mostly Proust, it would seem). Yet I am very glad to have met Charlotte and to have glimpsed, in tiny glittering shards, her many lives and worlds.

Content rating PG for two brief sexual encounters (not particularly graphic) and several wartime and Soviet era scenes of very graphic horror.

Fionnuala says

Several of the books I have been reading recently have been about *place*.
Together they show how the history of a community and the geography of a region can be combined and recorded so that they remain alive and vibrant rather than gathering dust in the archives.
In Cosmopolitan Europe: A Strasbourg Self-Portrait, the geographer John Western records the history and geography of the city of Strasbourg on the French/German border through wonderfully immediate interviews with its citizens; the reader actually hears the people's voices.
In Island: Collected Stories, Alastair MacLeod describes Cape Breton as faithfully as any geographer might but although it is fiction, the reader comes to believe that his stories are the true and very poetic account of people and places he knew and loved.
In Passing the Time in Ballymenone, Henry Glassie sets out the story of a tiny community in Northern Ireland. Like Western, he listens carefully to what the people say but what he emphasises is less factual and more story oriented. Like MacLeod, Glassie demonstrates how history can easily become story and how story eventually becomes myth.

History becoming myth is also the theme of Russian writer Andrei Makine's Le Testament Français. Makine is particularly preoccupied with how memories become distorted in the telling and how the transmitting of them to others can radically change the lives of those others. During the course of this novel, the narrator recounts the evolution of his own thinking about his grandmother's stories of her youth in France. His reactions vary from passionate interest in every detail of her stories while he was a child, to a cooler and more clinical study of everything French as a teenager and then towards a radical rejection of his French roots as a young adult before veering right back again to the initial obsessive state in middle age when the original stories have finally become myths. A major turning point occurs when he realises that history which doesn't come alive, which is not infused with poetry and the voices of the participants, is a dry dead thing. Makine clearly believes in honouring the spirit of the original possessor of the memory and the passages in which Charlotte the narrator's French grandmother feature are the most beautiful in this book.

Alongside this unique examination of memory and place, Makine weaves a second story of family secrets and the brutal choices that were necessary in order to stay alive in Stalinist Russia. In order to successfully combine these two themes, Makine allows the action of the novel to revolve around two separate points, following a series of elliptical orbits around these points, sometimes straying quite near one, more often following a wide arc away from it but closer to the other so that the reader almost forgets that the first point exists.
Very deftly handled.

Jim Fonseca says

The story is of a young Russian boy and his older sister who have a French-born grandmother living on the edge of the steppe in Siberia. They live a distance away and visit her only in summers. From her old time stories, her reading of poetry and ancient newspaper articles, their perusal of newspaper and family pictures, she teaches them the language and imbues in them a love of French culture.

The grandmother's life spanned years from the tsars through Stalin and WW II to the modern era, so we get quite a dose of Russian history as well. A main touchpoint in the story is that the grandmother was alive in 1896 when the tsar and his family visited Paris in a glamorous celebration of royalty, riches and grandeur. At the other extreme we get a dose of the horrors and starvation the Russians endured in WW II.

The young boy becomes obsessed with French culture to the point where his Russian schoolmates shun and bully him, thinking him an oddity. After his mother dies, an aunt moves in with her entire family to care for the two children. In contrast to the elegant French culture he dreams of, these folks are tough rural survivors and now the boy gets a heavy dose of "real Russian culture." And, with required military training at school, he become a militant pro-fatherland Russian. He dreams of driving a tank and looks back at his French culture phase, wondering what all that foolishness was about. He achieves some resolution in his later years when he himself live in Paris and dreams of bringing his grandmother back there. Yet he realizes that her glamorous Paris, like her language, no longer exists.

There's a lot about language and how it changes – both French, as it changed from the language the grandmother knew as a child, and Russian, as it changed, Orwell-like, with the burgeoning, insidious communist bureaucracy. There are many references to literature, especially Proust and Madame Bovary.

Here's a passage that illustrates the author's style:

"Yes, the building was a faint replica of the fashion of the turn of the century. It was as if all the sinuosities, twists and curves of that architecture had flowed in a stream from its European source and, diluted and partly effaced, had reached the depths of Russia. And in the icy wind of the steppes this flow had become frozen into an apartment block with strange oval bull's-eye windows and ornamental rose stems around the doorways…"

Quotes I liked:

"Four masters of the Kremlin: Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev…all had one quality in common: at their sides a feminine presence, let alone an amorous one, was inconceivable."

"Her body contained a perfumed warmth, a disturbing fragrance, made up of the throbbing of her blood, the polish of her skin, that alluring languor of her speech."

"Life, in fact, was an endless rough draft, in which events, badly organized, encroached on one another, in which the characters were too numerous and prevented one another from speaking, suffering, being loved or hated individually."

"Literature was now revealed as being perpetual amazement at the flow of words into which the world dissolved."

"…the translator of prose is the slave of the author, and the translator of poetry is his rival."

Translated from the French, this book won the Prix Goncourt in 1995 and made several book-of-the-year lists in the US. Makine is a Russian who came to France on a teacher exchange program and claimed exile.

A very good, very literary book. A bit slow at times, as you would expect from any book with "dreams" in the title!

Painting of Tsar Nicholas II's visit to Paris in 1896 from lookandlearn.com
Photo from pbslearningmedia.org

Alexandra Anghel says

O frumuse?e. Pa?ii evoc?rii se ivesc la fiecare col? al povestirii.

Jim says

It's a French novel. It's a Russian novel. It's a French novel about Russia. It's a Russian novel about France. It's all of those things. As a Hungarian-American, I am almost never unaware of my own dual nature. So too is Alyosha, the narrator of this tale of his encounters in Saranza, Western Siberia, with his French grandmother, Charlotte Lemonnier.

Andrei Makine's **Dreams of My Russian Summers** is a wonderful autobiographical novel about never quite being a unified whole, but part of a centrifugal multiple entity that alternately fascinates and repels one.

Jill says

This is such a wonderful book that my words could never do it justice. The reflections on time, memories and his grandmother are beautifully written and almost poetic. I would love to know how much of this book is autobiography. The main character's trajectory seems to closely line up with what I have read about the author, but I would love to know if these are true memories of his grandmother. One of my favorite books.

Lavinia says

Marcel, we need a date asap.

Rowena says

"So I saw things differently; was it an advantage? Or a handicap, a blemish?... I understood that this second view of things would have to be hidden for it could only provoke mockery from others."- Andrei Makïne, *Dreams of my Russian Summers*

One of my interests in recent years has been in reading books about, and talking to people with cross-cultural upbringings, and it amazes me how much is similar between people who were, like me, brought up in this way. It's even more interesting to encounter a person like this in a literary setting because I think there's so much more we can get down on paper about our lives and inner struggles with identity than we can say in a conversation.

Makine introduces us to a French-Russian boy in this great coming of age story in which the young boy, our narrator, tries to come to grips with his cultural identity through stories, papers, and historical artifacts found in his grandmother's trunk, his observations and experiences. He finds himself shifting identities constantly. Is he French? Is he Russian? Is he both? How much of each is he? Before I'd even properly read the synopsis, I sensed a Proustian quality in Makine's words. Not surprisingly, Proust was mentioned more than a few times in this book. His French Proust-like grandmother is central to the confusion the boy feels about his identity; she represents a romantic, democratic France, which is in stark contrast to a colder, harsher Russia devoid of beautiful architecture because of the wars and Stalinist regime, a Russia still reeling from the atrocities of war.

Ultimately, for those of us with this sort of upbringing, we are on our own journey to find our way. Speaking to others, I've heard of the many ways they've reconciled their identity, for example through music, art, writing, and even sports. I related to our protagonists' journey because of my love of history so I can understand the route the boy chose to learn about himself.

I find it interesting how the narrator not only mythologized France, but also how he finally understood who he was and why he was thus. Makine is a great writer and this is one of my top reads of the year for good reason.

"So that was it, the key to our Atlantis! Language, that mysterious substance, invisible and omnipresent, whose sonorous essence reached into every corner of the universe we were in the process of exploring. This language that shaped men, moulded objects, rippled in verse, bellowed in streets invaded by crowds, caused a young tsarina who had come from the other end of the world to smile...But above all throbbed within us, like a magical graft implanted in our hearts, already bringing forth leaves and flowers, bearing within it the fruit of a whole civilization. Yes, this implant, the French language."

Marie says

C'est ma deuxième lecture du merveilleux roman d'Andreï Makine. Ce roman se mérite les prix Gongourt, Médicis et Gongourt des lycéens. Quel plaisir de relire ce roman qui décrit la relation d'un jeune garçon russe dont l'identité est forgé en partie par sa grand-mère française qui vit dans un village isolée de la Sibérie. Les relations, les vies et les choix se révèlent plus complexes et tragiques que ce que le garçon avait pressenti. Une écriture riche et juste. Des paysages et des vies à la grandeur des grands espaces.

Inderjit Sanghera says

Andrei Makine’s beautifully dappled style, the conflagration of colours which leap from the page and the obsession with memory and the past recalls Proust (who makes an appearance in the novel); Makine lacks Proust’s genius, yet ‘Dreams of My Russian Summers’ reverberates with beauty and pathos.

The story follows the story of a young Russian who is torn between the exoticism, grace and individuality of French culture, as represented by his French grandmother, Charlotte, and the autocracy and brutality of Soviet Russia, which sought to do away with individualism in favour of collectivism-gone was the idiosyncratic genius of Tolstoy and Chekhov, in its place was the cruelty of the Soviet state and the promotion of the collective will and shallow populism. The narrator's French grandmother, Charlotte, is the light with which he is able to gain his sense identity outside of the shackles of the Soviet state.

The narrator coalesces photos and anecdotes of his grandmother with the vibrancy of his own imagination, to re-imagine France as his grandmother would have experienced it; from the libidinous President to the picture of three mysterious women, his re-imagining of his grandmother's past is they key to unlocking his own sense of individuality, of re-discovering something outside of the mundaneness of his life;

"The second memory was do distant that it could not be dated. There was not even a precise me in its nebulousness. Just the intense sensation of light, the aromatic scent of plants and silvery lines crossing the blue density of air, which many years later I would identify as gossamer threads….for in my grandmother's stories I was to rediscover all the elements of this memory; the autumn sun of a journey she made to Provence, the scent of those fields of lavender and even those gossamers floating in perfumed air."

The narrator eventually moves to France, his search for his grandmother's past becomes fully realised as a journey of self-discovery as he finds the France of his imagination does not correspond to the reality, that it was not France, or Russia or any other tangible object that he was seeking, but rather the wonders of the imagination and memory which allow him to recreate and re-live the past of his grandmother.

Clay Olmstead says

Fascinating view into the series of accidents that come together to form a person's identity. I learned a little bit of what it is to be Russian, a little of what it means to be French, and something about the historical attraction that the Russians have had for French culture - I always thought that was odd, but I understand it a little more now. Well worth the read. I spite of the title, it's all in English, except for an occasional word of French or Russian; most of those are explained in the preface, but Google Translate takes care of the rest.

UChicagoLaw says

To me, it is the most poetic, original and beautifully written book about a search for an identity and a life between two cultures. It is a special book for me given my own attempt to embrace an American life yet retain all that is Finnish in me. Still, I trust that Makine's delicate yet powerful story will captivate everyone. - Anu Bradford

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Kalliope says

The **Goncourt** prize in France seems to be drawn to Russian writers who can write French better than many French natives.

In 1938 it was awarded to Henri Troyat (né Lev Aslanovitch Tarasov) for his *L'Araigne*. He later became a

Member of *L'Académie Française*. In 1956 and again in 1975 it was awarded to Romain Gary (né Roman Kacew). And more recently, in 1995, André Makine (a.k.a. Gabriel Osmonde) received this prestigious prize.

Had Nabokov been the son not of an Anglophile but of a Francophile, we would probably have another example.

Le Testament français is my first novel by Makine. It is also his first novel. I am grateful to **Fionnuala** who drew it to my attention.

This book is autobiographical in a roundabout way since it is in the narration of his own early life that the narrator focuses on the account of someone else's life, the life of his grandmother. And it is in so doing that the narrator can eventually find himself.

This book has appealed to me in many ways. First and foremost there is its language. *Le testament* is one of those books that leave a taste in your mouth because its language is so beautiful that you want to detain its words for a little while longer and savor them. The tale is that Makine, when seeking to publish his work in France, had to invent a fictional translator because editors could not believe that such splendid writing in French could be authored by a foreigner.

The second appeal is that ever since I read in my teens, and reread later on, Le Grand Meaulnes by Alain-Forunier, I have developed a weakness for stories narrated by a young person in the French provinces and taking place either just before WWI or during the interwar period. They embody for me, fully, the meaning of the word nostalgia, even if this perfect nostalgia is extraneous to me since neither the period nor the geography belong to my lived experiences.

And finally there is the added theme of the mixed nationalities as a determinant in the formation of the self. These correspond to two countries standing at opposite cultural poles, and yet with many historical links. The young narrator is torn between the dreamed France with its scenes of sophisticated and exquisite Salons and cultural cafés or delicious countryside, and the tangible and rough Russia in the process of transforming itself into a Stalinist state, with its harsh scenes of severe poverty, disturbing cruelty and inhospitable steppes.

In this search for the self through the memories of someone else, the young narrator will try to collect cues from all possible sources and gradually finish the puzzle of his existence, even if some of these hints insist, like it so often happens with old photographs, to remain stubbornly mute.

Le testament français is a cherishable read and I recommended it to any lovers of Proust. Not only is Marcel Proust mentioned twice in the novel as the epitome of the dreamed refined Paris, but the Proustian themes of memories and self searching are consciously explored here again. This time they are given the new element of the divergent pull from both the Russian and French cultures. It is as if this novel were a deliberate tribute to Proust and his French writing, as felt by a Russian soul.

Wonderful.

It has been translated into English (truly)as Dreams of My Russian Summers. It is noteworthy that they have chosen the other cultural pole, the Russian not the French, for the English title. I find that this translated title

is too prosaic and has lost the evocative power of the original. I hope the rest of the translation has captured the original lyrical tone.

Quo says

How one comes to maturity can involve a long but disconnected procession of events, many of which are elusive and in Andrei Makine's excellent novel, *Dreams of My Russian Summers*, the detailed memories involve fragments rather than clear & specific moments of recollection. Piecing the fragments together to form a tapestry that causes the story to become lucid is the task on the novel's narrator but also that of the reader. I found the novel to resemble a Proustian journey of very gradual enlightenment that might frustrate some readers but which I enjoyed very much.

How identity or sense of self is determined in the lives of each of us can involve more than a little mystery but especially so for someone whose life & identity straddles 2 countries, 2 different languages & an influential but "hybrid" grandmother, Charlotte Lemonnier, a woman with one foot in Russia, the country where she has lived for ages, enveloped in an odd sort of cocoon & the other in the long-ago France of her youth.

"Beyond the dates & anecdotes of family legend, we could hear life welling up in all of its sorrowful beauty. The France of our grandmother, like a misty Atlantis, was emerging from the waves." Charlotte Lemonnier, age 11 in 1914 in France at the onset of WWI and age 20 in post-revolutionary Russia in 1923 wanders through time & space, eventually becoming "not entirely a Russian *babushka*" & enduring extreme hardship en route. The Makine novel involves a process of reclamation as the French narrator listens to his grandmother's stories & deciphers the contents of her "Siberian suitcase" while spending summers with her in Russia. The contents of her duffel involve various newspapers, photos & other ephemera that document Charlotte's life but also are ultimately grafted on to the identity of the narrator. Over several summers of encampment with Charlotte Lemonnier in the Russian village of Saranza, the narrator not only pieces together his grandmother's life but also begins to confront just who he is:

> I had to recreate the topography of its high places & holy places through the thick fog of the past. But the greatest initiation was to understand how one could be French. Charlotte had imprisoned me in this fantasy world of the past while I cast absent-minded glances back at my real life. I no longer belonged either to my time or my country. On this little nocturnal circus & I felt wonderfully foreign to Russia & like a bear after a long winter was awakening within myself. The woman brought with her a ponderous & powerful breath of Russian life--a strange amalgam of cruelty, compassion, drunkenness, anarchy, invincible *joie de vivre*, tears, willing slavery, stupid obstinacy, & unexpected delicacy....With growing astonishment, I discovered a universe previously eclipsed by Charlotte's France.

Makine's prose is eloquent in reframing the past & merging it with the narrator's present life; his description of Charlotte's horrible wartime experiences & her gradual recognition of her long-absent husband, twice declared dead, as they walked toward each other on a country road is stunningly projected. A similar tableau is cast when the ravaged Charlotte is kept alive on a frigid night by the warmth of a dying *saiga* (antelope), shot & like Charlotte left for dead on a desolate stretch of land.

In reading Makine's novel a 2nd time & recalling very little about my initial encounter with it a decade or more before, I began to consider more fully the importance of language in shaping not only one's memories

but one's life experiences; the bifurcation or divergence between French & Russian causes the narrator to become adrift during his time with Charlotte. I recalled for example that Proust's magnum opus is usually translated as a "Remembrance of Times Past" in English but as "Times Lost" in French. The narrator becomes caught up not only in an attempt to recapture the past with Charlotte but almost to become a participant in it, something he terms a "Franco-Russian curse". Charlotte's lost Atlantis had ensnared him but also enabled him "to glimpse the mysterious consonance of eternal moments." And he declares that "through the silent work of memory, I must learn the notation of these moments--learn to preserve their timelessness amid the routine of everyday actions, live conscious of this timelessness."

Toward the end of *Dreams of My Russian Summers* Andrei Makine's narrator spends several days in a delirium stumbling into the midst of an old cemetery vault in Paris belonging to the Bevals & Castelots, families with whom he has no connection, something that recalled an epileptic seizure described by Dostoyevsky. This occurs following his last visit to Charlotte Lemonnier, though the narrator had been planning another, also hoping to allow Charlotte to revisit her French roots, only to be informed of her death. At the point of his delirium, the narrator had an altered sense of reality, where "time had acquired an extraordinary density for me. Despite living in Charlotte's past, it seemed that I had never experienced the present so intensely."

Makine's novel is hardly an "action book" but rather one that examines with great finesse interior spaces & the role of memory in our lives.
