



The Hidden Letters of Velta B.

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From a critically acclaimed fiction writer comes the moving story of a boy with extraordinary ears who — with the help of a cache of his great-grandmother's letters — brings healing to a town burdened by the sins of its past.

Young Maris has been summoned to his mother's bedside as she nears the end of her life; she feels she must tell him her version of their family history, the story of his early life, and the ways in which he changed the lives of others. Maris was born with what some might call a blessing and others might deem a curse: his very large, very special ears enable him to hear the secrets of the dead, as well as the memories that haunt his Latvian hometown. Nestled in the woodlands on the banks of the Aiviekste River, their town suffered the ravages of war, then the cold shock of independence. As a boy, Maris found himself heir to an odd assortment of hidden letters; a school project provided the chance to share them, forcing the town to hear the truth from the past and face what it meant for their future. With "luminous writing [and] affection for her characters" (*New York Times*), Gina Ochsner creates an intimate, hopeful portrait of a fascinating town in all its complications and charm. She shows us how, despite years of distrust, a community can come through love and loss to the joy of understanding — enabled by a great-grandmother's legacy, a flood, and a boy with very special ears.

The Hidden Letters of Velta B. Details

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Author : Gina Ochsner

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From Reader Review The Hidden Letters of Velta B. for online ebook

Adele says

Gina Ochsner's second novel, THE HIDDEN LETTERS OF VELTA B., is a captivating, tragicomic story about family and community relationships in a contemporary Latvian town. A dying mother, Inara, recalls her life and family history to her enormous-eared son, whose heightened sense of hearing allows him to hear both the living and the dead.

The lyrical, non-chronological "ruminations of [Inara's] internal landscape" include fragments of secret letters by her grandmother, who lived through World War II. She longs to equip Maris, her beloved son, to bear witness to both sorrow and joy. As she shares her reflections, she realizes that the work of witnessing cannot be done alone or ever truly finished on this earth.

I absolutely loved this novel. Ochsner has a gift for making the practical mythical, so that the simplest scenes of everyday tasks and quiet moments surge forward with fable-like energy. I alternated between the print book and audiobook, which was a very enjoyable way to savour its lyrical, layered prose. You can my full review here: <http://bit.ly/2eGfI2n>

Heather Goodman says

Magical and mythical in all the best ways. Also melodic. (I didn't mean that alliteration, but there it is.)

Aaron Guest says

"This is the power of word worked through the body." This a book so humble and delicate in voice, strong and rich in idea, wonder-filled and gritty in setting and character. Tale after tale of a Latvian family and village sinks into the marrow.

Humor is tricky in fiction. But this book pierces the gut. From the slight humors that indelibly press these many characters upon us -- the little uninventable details about "pulling out your eyes" and how you "can't fart any wider than your ass". And the slapstick humor (Dr. N and his floating barn and anything involving Uncle Maris). You will chuckle, laugh aloud, shake your head and smile.

It's a challenging structure-- Oracular?-- woven by a desire to tell familial stories through a dying narrator. But it pays off for the reader as Ochsner teaches us how to read it. Short musings on life and death, stars and stories; accounts of villagers past and present. A master raconteur is at work and it just sings. I read many of the sections as if the white space breaks were a da capo.

There is more muscle in this novel than you can ever hope for. More beauty and grace and joy and delight, too.

Marilyn McEntyre says

This unusual and haunting novel takes you into the intimate history of a Latvian town through the stories a dying grandmother tells her grandson--a young man born with exceptionally large ears that enable him to hear what is subtle and hidden--the secrets of the dead, the sounds of the earth, words behind words. It is a story about the losses of war, distrust between neighbors, forgiveness, and a sturdy, practical love that survives all of those.

Lauma Lapa says

Well-spent four hours.

The book is.. bitter-sweet in taste, grotesque in places, humorous and quite non-linear. By which i would like to say that there are moments when it is not clear whether the author has decided to use artistic licence, or just confused the timeline, as some of the things just could not happen when they happened in the book.

That aside, admirable narrative indeed. It has everything Latvian: graveyards, peculiar kinds of Christianity, songs, obscure quotes, living backwards, moments of communion with the nature, silences longer than lives, multitudes of nationalities that make up what Latvian is today, singing in and out of time, memories of war and Siberia, unhealthy nationalism, confusions, fatherless children, childrenless fathers, the jewish question, alcohol, extra-strong women, silent men, and dying in style. And did i mention mushrooms and fishing? The eels though somehow remind me of the Irish myths. Khm.

What this book told me, me personally being, well, a latvian... that maybe it is right that an alien tells the story from time to time: this way all the weight of memory becomes focussed and visible, and a little bit clearer. Yes, Latvians live in the forest and eat mushrooms, but they also embrace huge bits of history in small little lives, and carry it without knowing how heavy that is.

And the best bits were the bits about what the young man heard. Because sound is touch indeed.

Beautiful book. With hidden beauty.

Penny (Literary Hoarders) says

This is going to be (another) **DNF** for me (my 2nd this year). Many of my thoughts have been summed up rather nicely by Jen here on Goodreads: <https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>

I'm just finding this to be a rambling stream of conciousness about the mother's memories, that often are confusing as to when she is narrating them to her son with big fuzzy ears (is he young, sometimes he sounds like he's in his middle age?). There has nary been a mention of Velta or these letters - what I imagined the crux of this novel to be based on. The threads are so loosely hanging here - so many threads, introductions of a son with "magical" gigantic ears - not really, a grandmother with hidden letters and secrets? Haven't heard about that much, in brief, extremely brief passing somewhere in the rambling. Sadly, it isn't holding my attention and only causing me frustration, so I'm just going to let this one go. :-(

Jen says

My thanks to NetGalley and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt for an eARC copy of this book to read and review.

The summary makes this seem like a book told from the POV of a young boy with abnormally large and furry ears as he goes through life, able to hear the whispered secrets around him and how he uses it to gain acceptance and help people to heal old wounds.

The first 34% or roughly 119 pages of this were not that. I took a quick peek at the end and it didn't seem like it changed then either.

I can only speak for the first 34%, as that is where I DNF'd this bad boy.

In the first 34%, we get stream of consciousness from the mother of the boy with the abnormally large and furry ears when he is an adult, as she is dying of cancer. She is telling him about his family history, his grandparents, great-grandparents and her life as a young woman. It's boring. There is really no plot and I wasn't that into the characters to want to learn about their lives. Well, I was interested in the boy with the abnormally large and furry ears, but you don't get much of him. Nothing from his POV at all, which is what I was expecting. I think I would have enjoyed it too.

Now, this isn't a bad book, it's just incredibly boring to me and I didn't like any of the characters. It's a very gentle flowing read, and I needed a bit more oompha to the book. It was TOO gentle. It meandered and it didn't seem to have a concrete direction, other than the eventual death of the narrator. Which wasn't happening fast enough for me.

Two stars, because while it wasn't a good fit for me, I am sure it is a good fit for someone else. I didn't hate it. It just left me meh.

E. Ozols says

Let's start with the good! (which there was plenty of despite my star rating)... This book had some absolutely beautiful passages. Seriously, often the page was alive with poetry (Ochsner would have found a more creatively moving and less clichéd way of saying that). Ochsner also does a fabulous job conveying the personalities of her various characters, which was lovely. And it was pretty cool reading a Western author's novel about my ancestral home. I have no complaints there; lady did her research and I think she did a solid job, though I've never actually lived in Latvia, let alone during the time period in question, so I guess she may have mischaracterized the vibe of that time and place and I wouldn't really know.

All that being said, while the beautiful passages and unique characters caused me to teeter on the edge of scoring this 3 stars (neutral), the truth is I still just didn't like this book, despite really wanting to. Maybe my brain is just getting lazier as I get older, but honestly, I just found it really confusing. I assume that someone who doesn't know much about Latvia (so, almost everyone in the world) would be infinitely more confused. At times it was tough to figure out what the hell was going on. The narrator is supposedly telling a story to her son from her deathbed, but there wasn't actually any story that I could pick out. Also, for a character who is supposed to be too dumb to get into school, she sure is damn articulate! Her son apparently has some sort of superpowers, I think might even be the second coming of the Latvian folk hero Lacplesis (which, again,

the majority of people reading will totally not get), but this whole concept just seems half-baked and I couldn't figure out where we were supposed to be going with it. The whole book may have worked better if we just stuck with a single timeline, or if it was clearer who/what in the story we are supposed to be caring about, or what the main conflict is.

It hurts me to pan this book because you can tell that the author is quite gifted and put a lot of love into researching and crafting these characters and their world. But I just could not get into it. :(

Helen Marquis says

Set in Latvia, Maris, a young boy with abnormally large furry ears, is at his dying mother's bedside, from where he learns the wonderful history of his family, including his mother's wayward and unpredictable uncle after whom he is named.

She shares with him the lives, loves and losses of their family,

While this is by no means a perfect novel, the story at its heart really delighted me. At several points it felt like some of the subplots were superfluous and actually distracted from and jarred with the main narrative. However, I'm still giving this five stars as I loved the story SO much.

The characters are so beautifully imagined that they come to life off the page. From curmudgeons to teenagers, from rich to poor, from Russian to Jewish to Latvian, the rich characters that Ochsner creates really are a joy to get to know. I particularly like the richer understanding of regional proverbs that I garnered (eg don't fart wider than your ass).

There are also a rich tapestry of emotions to engage with - from moments of joy to heartbreaking tragedies, from the terrors of the past still having ripple effects in the present, from toe-curling cringes to genuine laugh out loud humour... There really is so much in this book to love. Highly recommended.

Janet says

A dying woman tells tales of family and village life, closely interwoven with Latvian legends, to her super-eared son in this captivating novel of secrets, love, and memory. *The Hidden Letters of Velta B.* binds the poignance of human dreams to accidents of circumstance creating the tragicomedy of unintended results that is life itself.

As in her stunning first novel, *The Russian Dreambook of Color and Flight*, Ochsner now weaves magic from a contemporary Latvia of muddy roads and financially strapped dreamers, plotters, eccentrics, gypsies, failed dancers, chessmasters and philosophers--who, despite cell phones and bus service, could have lived in eons past--the same village feuds, the struggle with food and laundry, uncles who drink and sulky sisters-in-law.

When the new-to-town entrepreneurial cemetery owner decides to build a 'Riviera' on the shores of the river and the site of the old burial ground and move the bodies to a new location, the excavation becomes the perfect metaphor of buried memories in a history-haunted land. Ochsner's storytelling shimmers with the mythic behind and among the sheds and stones and scrubbed wood floors, and builds to a masterful conclusion. Due for Release: July 2016.

Carol says

Wonderful book! I want to reread it and pass to others.

It's a mesmerizing account of a narrator facing death who passes on her family and local lore and wisdom to her oddball son. It's set in the small Baltic country of Latvia. It's a country that more often than not been ruled by foreigners, most recently Russia. Yet the Latvian nation kept its identity through its language and music. As a result of the Soviet occupation, it's large number of ethnic Russians, a few of whom figure in this novel.

I loved the poetic interior look, made with wit, metaphor, and song at characters in a place of impoverishment and unresolved trauma. Through tenacity and faith these rag-tag, diverse individuals rummage their ways and relations in means both bracing and achingly beautiful. An individual and then a family find ways to transcend and find wholeness even while their environment and economy worsens. Many times I wanted to take highlighter to certain sentences or paragraphs, but restrained myself to small dots and Facebook postings.

Here's a few fine lines from p. 51, "Why am I telling you in such detail about what might seem like irrelevant conversations that happened before you were born? The short answer: it's a way to keep our loved ones alive, if only in our embroidered fictions...A story is a garment made of many threads, sewn by many needles. Our story is a cloak thicker and more knotted than we suppose. "like a tapestry," I said the other day. You said, "no, it's more like lace." We hold up lace and marvel at the beauty of the light shining through it. But that beauty is only possible because of the knots anchoring the empty space. 'Our story is like that, you said, made as much of silence and emptiness as it is of the knots, those anchors of known fact, people. Who are the knots holding us in place?"

The book then mentions two names of people I wasn't yet acquainted with, but in the rest of the book we see the impact of the somewhat crazed and definitely eccentric uncle and of rich survivors (and beneficiaries) of an earlier war. This is a book that I need to chew on and keep its rich nuggets in my own consciousness as I purvey my own web of relations.

Kate says

I thought this book was beautiful in so many ways. From WWII to current day, it walks us through tragedies and some short lived happiness in a small Latvian town. Along the way, we learn one family's history and the importance of stories and how they relate to our identity. This book has so many themes, so many metaphors-all brilliantly done. It's more of a slice of life book-but just felt magically written to me.

Tonya says

From a critically acclaimed fiction writer comes the moving story of a boy with extraordinary ears who — with the help of a cache of his great-grandmother's letters — brings healing to a town burdened by the sins of its past.

Young Maris has been summoned to his mother's bedside as she nears the end of her life; she feels she must

tell him her version of their family history, the story of his early life, and the ways in which he changed the lives of others. Maris was born with what some might call a blessing and others might deem a curse: his very large, very special ears enable him to hear the secrets of the dead, as well as the memories that haunt his Latvian hometown. Nestled in the woodlands on the banks of the Aiviekste River, their town suffered the ravages of war, then the cold shock of independence. As a boy, Maris found himself heir to an odd assortment of hidden letters; a school project provided the chance to share them, forcing the town to hear the truth from the past and face what it meant for their future. With "luminous writing [and] affection for her characters" (New York Times), Gina Ochsner creates an intimate, hopeful portrait of a fascinating town in all its complications and charm. She shows us how, despite years of distrust, a community can come through love and loss to the joy of understanding — enabled by a great-grandmother's legacy, a flood, and a boy with very special ears.

--My thoughts. Well I wanted to like this book so much. I stuck with it, but I am not sure why. I didn't connect with any character, and the whole time it was just so-so. I adore the cover, I loved the blurb but it just dragged for me. Descriptions of the area are what got me, I LOVE that. Words like that I gobble up every time. I wish I had liked this book more, but it wasn't for me.

Christina "6 word reviewer" Lake says

Latvian families woven together through stories. Robinson + Erdrich + Faulkner = this book requires a little patience but is well worth it. Learn how the different characters are related to each other and then sink into the beautiful prose.

Valerie Ihsan says

You should totally read this book for the charming Latvian stories about neighbors and family, and Oschner's gorgeous and magical words. It's uniquely told in 2nd person by a dying mother telling her son the family stories. There's folk tales, magical realism, love, and pain. Worth reading!
