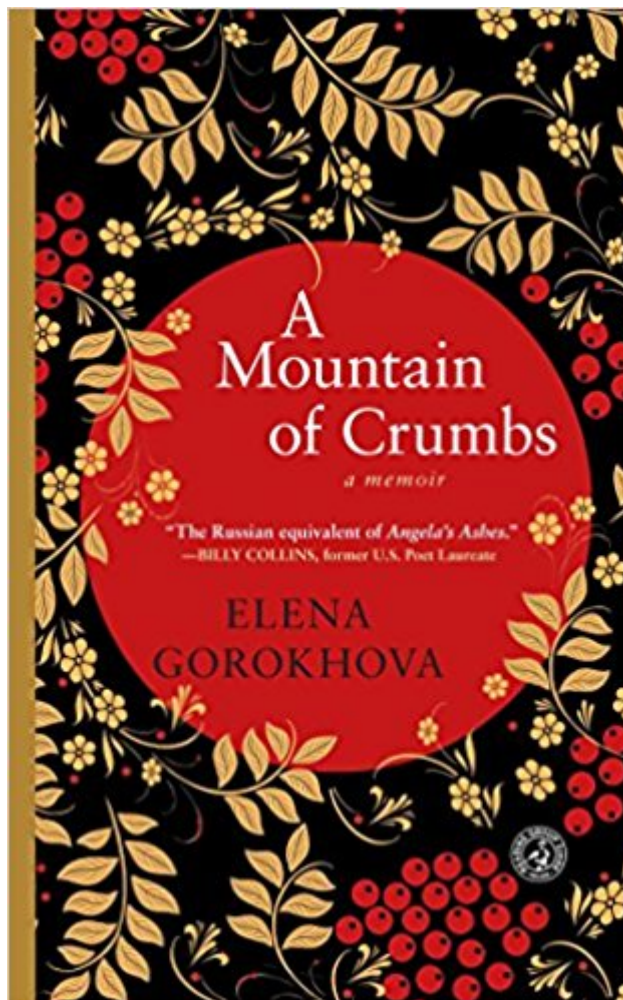


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# A Mountain Of Crumbs: A Memoir



## Synopsis

Elena Gorokhova's *A Mountain of Crumbs* is the moving story of a Soviet girl who discovers the truths adults are hiding from her and the lies her homeland lives by. Elena's country is no longer the majestic Russia of literature or the tsars, but a nation struggling to retain its power and its pride. Born with a desire to explore the world beyond her borders, Elena finds her passion in the complexity of the English language—but in the Soviet Union of the 1960s such a passion verges on the subversive. Elena is controlled by the state the same way she is controlled by her mother, a mirror image of her motherland: overbearing, protective, difficult to leave. In the battle between a strong-willed daughter and her authoritarian mother, the daughter, in the end, must break free and leave in order to survive. Through Elena's captivating voice, we learn not only the stories of Russian family life in the second half of the twentieth century, but also the story of one rebellious citizen whose curiosity and determination finally transport her to a new world. It is an elegy to the lost country of childhood, where those who leave can never return.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Growing up during the cold war in Leningrad, Ellen gets in trouble for not following the rules, and her wry, present-tense narrative, both comic and anguished, is not about political intrigues but about the daily detail of her struggle at home and at school. Of course, the government parallels are always there. As her overbearing, protective mother explains, the official rules are simple: "they lie to us, we know they're lying, they know we know . . ." Within the very specific context of the cold war Soviet Union, Gorokhova effectively dramatizes universal teen conflicts. Are

duty and personal happiness always mutually exclusive? Or can it be true what Ellen's aunt says: you can be useful and still care for the beauty of your nails. Eventually Ellen marries an American to get out, and looking back now from her home in New Jersey, her dual perspective is at the heart of the drama, ironic but never cold or simple. There is no word for privacy in Russian, but there is one for isolation. --Hazel Rochman --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

"Elena Gorokhova has written the Russian equivalent of Angela's Ashes, an intimate story of growing up into young womanhood told with equal grace and humor." -- Billy Collins, former U.S. Poet Laureate "What is it about *A Mountain of Crumbs* that makes it so damn readable? Is it the setting -- the Soviet Union in the second half of the last century on the verge of disintegration? Is it the author's way with the English language? This is a rich experience -- a personal journey paralleled by huge national changes and ending in a deeply satisfying portrait of peace in America. Those who have traveled from another place to America will find themselves in this rich memoir." -- Frank McCourt, Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *Angela's Ashes* "An honest, captivating story of a girl from a middle-class Soviet family, growing into a young woman, searching for her identity and unable to find it...In the spirit of Dostoyevsky, it is also an endlessly Russian quest for self-redemption...I advise you to read the book. It will give you pleasure." -- Sergei Khrushchev, son of former Soviet Prime Minister Nikita Khrushchev "The story of a young person of sparkling intelligence, full of curiosity about the world, struggling to grow and blossom under a duplicitous, censorious, and unremittingly mean-minded social system. Elena Gorokhova conveys all the ugliness of daily life in Soviet Russia, as well as its humiliations, but is awake to its strangled, submerged poetry too. An enthralling read." -- J. M. Coetzee, winner of the 2003 Nobel Prize in Literature and author of *Summertime* "[An] exquisitely wrought, tender memoir of growing up in the Soviet Union. . . . *A Mountain of Crumbs* could be taught as a master class in memoir writing. . . Gorokhova writes about her life with a novelist's gift for threading motives around the heart of a story . . . Each chapter distills a new revelation in poetic prose . . . This moving memoir made me cry . . . Powerful. • Elena Lappin, *The New York Times Book Review* "A *Mountain of Crumbs* vividly, devastatingly conveys what it was like growing up in the shabby disillusion of the Brezhnev-era Soviet Union • and also swooningly indulges the nostalgia for place and landscape that's seemingly steeped into every Russian soul. . . . Marvelous reminiscence. • Ben Dickinson, *Elle* "Elena Gorokhova has written an endearing, sensitive story of her early years in the USSR. Her memoir is proof that the human spirit

can triumph even in the most repressive of times." -- Edward Hower, author of *The New Life Hotel* and *The Storms of May*"*A Mountain of Crumbs* is an extraordinary memoir. Elena Gorokhova's writing -- gorgeous and evocative -- is enriched by her connection to two languages, Russian and English. Brilliant and moving." -- Ursula Hegi, author of *Stones from the River*"This is a diamond of a memoir. Elena Gorokhova captures the essence of a vanished world with a poet's eye, taking the reader on an unforgettable journey, where every detail transcends the commonplace and every page bears witness to the deepest longings of the human heart. This memoir offers a rare glimpse of life in the former Soviet Union, and also of the universal search for love and autonomy that binds us all together, regardless of time and place." -- Carlos Eire, author of *Waiting for Snow in Havana*"Almost painful in its authenticity, this hypnotically readable memoir has the sweep and power of a great Russian novel." -- Bruce Jay Friedman, Academy Award-nominated screenwriter and author of *A Father's Kisses* and *Stern*"An instant classic...[A] deeply affecting memoir . . . recalled with spare, lyrical beauty and wry humor.Ã¢â¬â¢ Carmela Ciuraru, *More*Ã¢â¬â¢ "A smart, spirited tale about growing up in the colorless Soviet Union of the 1960s.Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "PeopleÃ¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "Elena Gorokhova doesn't use broad strokes to paint a picture of daily life in Brezhnev-era Soviet Union. Vivid memories . . . brightly dot the harsh, gray background of everyday life in Gorokhova's native Leningrad. . . . Her spare lyricism delicately captures a vanished world.Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "Korina Lopez, *USA Today*Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "[L]eavened with wistful humor . . . This memoir offers valuable insight into those bleak years bracketed by Khrushchev and Afghanistan . . . [R]endered with sharp detail . . . Gorokhova is attuned to the inherent absurdities of a society that, while aspiring to a supposedly common idealÃ¢â¬â¢ Ã¢â¬â¢ . . . cannot care for its citizens on the most rudimentary level.Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "Alexander Nazaryan, *Christian Science Monitor*Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "GorokhovaÃ¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "s engaging, beautifully written memoir depicts her childhood in 1960s Leningrad and her restless dissatisfaction with life behind the Iron Curtain.Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "Donna Marchetti, *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland)Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "[*A Mountain of Crumbs* is] as sweet and earthy as sugar and brown bread. It's a mesmerizing story of an intelligent, adventurous, curious girl and a country with a rich past and lumbering social constraints, both finding the way to a new future.Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "Peggy McMullen, *The Oregonian*Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "Endearing, a collection of well-sculptured memories . . . Lovely . . . Evocative . . . A minor-key coming-of-age story.Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "Dwight Garner, *The New York Times*Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "Gorokhova has the reader in the palms of her hands. . . . Stellar . . . This compelling and unusual tale . . . is inherently captivating.Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "Christine Thomas, *The Miami Herald*Ã¢â¬â¢ "Ã¢â¬â¢ "[A] witty, illuminating book . . . with telling detail, and a winning balance of affection, insight

and satiric bite. — Misha Berson, *The Seattle Times* — “Elena Gorokhova reveals with beautiful writing the panic of growing up inside the secrecy of Brezhnev’s Soviet Union. . . . Even if Elena Gorokhova weren’t such a gorgeous writer, her memoir, *A Mountain of Crumbs*, would be a terrific read. . . . She writes with irony and subtlety about the “bright future” of the Soviet Union, even as she plans her exodus. What makes this book so remarkable, though, is Gorokhova’s evocative and sensuous writing. — Laurie Hertz, *The Star-Tribune* (Minneapolis-St. Paul) — “A moving memoir about one woman’s journey from the Soviet Union . . . Captivating. (The Daily Beast) — “Artful memoir about the angst and joys of growing up behind the Iron Curtain. . . . Articulate, touching and hopeful. — Kirkus Reviews — “Extraordinarily rich in sensory and emotional detail . . . An engrossing portrait of a very lively, intelligent girl coming of emotional and intellectual age in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. — Bookpage — “Wry . . . both comic and anguished . . . but never cold or simple. — Booklist — “Three pages into this beautifully crafted memoir and you know that Gorokhova has always been a writer. . . . the kind that envelops and transports you and every so often leaves you breathless. . . . Recounted in shimmering detail. — Bill Ervolino, *The Bergen Record* (New Jersey) — “Gorokhova has the reader in the palms of her hands. . . . Stellar . . . This compelling and unusual tale . . . is inherently captivating. — Christine Thomas, *The Miami Herald* — “Exquisitely lyrical . . . Every page of Elena Gorokhova’s coming-of-age-in-the-Soviet-bloc memoir unveils the magic of her origins. . . . Stunning. — Anne Grant, *Providence Journal-Bulletin* (RI) — “A dream ride . . . A delight . . . with pitch-perfect lyricism, tremendous power of recall, and disarming wit. — Kapka Kassabova, *The Guardian* (UK) — “*A Mountain of Crumbs* is . . . a stunning memoir: subtle, yet brimming with depth and detail. — Viv Groskop, *The Daily Telegraph* (UK) — “Brimming with an elegiac emotion and sensuality which even Turgenev, in his own European exile, might have envied. — Charlotte Hobson, *The Spectator* (UK) — “Remarkable . . . beautiful and evocative and worth your attention. — Nathan Thornburgh, *DadWagon.com* — “Her richly detailed story explores the reality of her politically subversive passions for language and freedom in a fearful, failing society that distrusted its citizens and repressed individuality. — Saga (UK) — “Gorokhova is a lush and beautiful writer. Her tidy, witty descriptions of characters keep the book moving along at a good clip . . . the rich political milieu of the former Soviet Union sets this book apart. You really do get the feeling of what it smelled, tasted and felt like to grow up in that

particular place and time. • Ellen Silva, senior editor, NPR „All Things Considered“ “An exquisitely moving memoir detailing Gorokhova’s experiences of growing up behind the Iron Curtain. Her story of oppression and hope is described in distinctive poetical prose. • Marie Claire (UK) “Despite the specificity of the memoir, the themes and characters have universality - a domineering mother, a rebellious child, finding passion and beauty in surprising places. A celebration of the triumph of the human spirit over adversity and oppression. • Easy Living (UK) “Combining Gorokhova’s fantastic eye for an image with her acute sense for the absurd, *A Mountain of Crumbs* elegantly dramatizes the bewildering chasm between the projected, glittering idealism of the Soviet Union and its drab, quotidian reality. • Claire Allfree, Metro (UK) “In this gently delightful memoir, Elena Gorokhova recounts her coming of age in Russia during 1960s and 1970s . . . There’s a wonderful cozy intimacy to her writing; her use of the present tense keeps it fresh and unburdened . . . I loved reading *A Mountain of Crumbs*. Gorokhova is a fine writer with a delicate, sensitive touch, whose voice is nonetheless fearless and clarion. I hope there’s a sequel. After coming of age comes surely that other great memoir, coming to America. • Wendell Steavenson, The Sunday Times (UK) “It takes talent to write a good memoir and Gorokhova has more than most. Fascinating anecdotes show us her mother’s youth, and her own recollections spring to life with an artist’s eye for those details that can conjure a mood or a moment. The privations, oppressions and joys are all described with shining curiosity in this captivating book. • Waterstone’s Books Quarterly

I found this book very interesting for I’ve been a student of Russian culture and politics since high school. It has proved what I know about Russian, from 19th century and serfdom forward. The personal experience depicted is interesting ’cause it reflects my own youth in another similar environment, post communist China in the 1980’s. And it’s from a woman’s perspective, through a family’s not long ago history, only three generations. That suits my interest too. I can see why it’s confusing and dull to some readers who are not familiar with Soviet past and not being a woman growing up with similar experience. As come to age story as this book is, why should it be interesting to a man of stark different age and background? For people who don’t speak Russian the quoted Russian phrases in phonetics would be distracting too. So if you’re not into this book I totally understand why. But I like this book. It’s a page turner and fun to read.

Reading mountain of crumbs brought my beloved late husband Valodia back to life for me. So many parallels - Val was born in 1998 and became separated from his family in 1941 spending the next 5 years as a son of the regiment during WW II. His home was Leningrad, his mother the daughter of a rabbi and he eventually became the youngest senior professor at the University of Leningrad (English Literature was his Master) PhD was educational psychology. He worked as an interpreter for visiting international groups and eventually became a refusenik traveling to the USA in 1979. His story is intense and needs to be told. Elena would be perfect for this task. I was sorry to see her stories end.

What a lovely story of growing up red. Writer is very easy to relate and the story is raw. Definitely recommend.

This important book tells us, through the eyes of a young girl, what it was like to grow up behind the Iron Curtain: in the playgrounds, in the classrooms, in cramped living quarters, and even at the dental clinic. The author portrays that drab world with telling details of shortages and long lines for everything, a monotonous diet, and skilful fingers that cut up an old coat, turned it inside out and made it into 'new' skirt. At an early age Elena Gorokhova came to despise the modus operandi of the communist world: "The game is called vranyo... We all pretend to do something, and those who watch us pretend that they are seriously watching us and don't know we are only pretending". Seduced by the "decadent sound of the English language", she developed a fierce desire to escape this repressive regime, and it was her fluency in English that eventually opened the door to the West for her. I bought this memoir partly because a review suggested that it had much in common with my own recently published memoir. And there is indeed an astonishing overlap between this story, set in the post-war communist society of Leningrad, and my story of growing up in the pre-war working-class culture of Coin Street in London. It is as if Elena Gorokhova and I grew up in parallel universes, twenty years and thirteen hundred miles apart! We each had a fierce, much-married mother, suffered the early loss of a book-loving father, and had very limited resources throughout our childhoods. Finally, for both of us, the escape route out of our dreary, restrictive worlds was provided by education. A great read! I strongly recommend this book to social historians and to anyone interested in how a child thinks and struggles to understand the world of adults--and learns how to deal with that world.

So vivid, so descriptive and yet filled with emotion. In addition, it is not often that we get to read

about this period of Russia's history other than in a propaganda context. Many books have been written about tsars and gulags, but growing up and studying during the Cold War era in very unusual, and the author does it in such a way that the reader feels part of her family and friends. Thanks to Ms. Gorokhova we enter the world of her mother's education and upbringing which allows us to understand better not only some of her actions and attitudes, but those of her generation. A must read.

Reading her mother's history was interesting but once she got on with her Young Life it was boring and the stories did not hold my interest. Stopped reading on page 79.

Interesting perspective of an independent thinking young woman who grew up in post-war USSR. I made a trip to Leningrad in the mid-1980s and enjoyed recalling my impressions of the places/situations she wrote about. References to "crumbs" throughout the book fleshed out the meaning of her title. Enjoyed the photos.

When you are blessed to live in two worlds, eventually you come to realize that those two worlds also live in you. You will long for the other world, no matter where you are at the moment.

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