

The Madonnas of Leningrad by Debra Dean
Fourth Estate 2006

This is the sort of first novel that makes readers hungry for more, as well as full of admiration for a sparkling new talent.

The Madonnas of Leningrad is a beautiful story, sparely told, set in two periods and two different countries. In America, former Russian immigrants Marina and Dimitri prepare to go to their grand-daughter's wedding; in Leningrad in 1941, Marina as a young woman struggles to save her sanity, as well as the Hermitage where she works as a guide, from the Nazi onslaught on the city.

As the story unfolds, however, it becomes clear with painful poignancy that Marina is succumbing to Alzheimer's disease, and that while she fails to make connections with what is happening in her present, the details of her past, the pain and loss and suffering of the war years, is extraordinarily fresh, precise and vivid, and it is where she retreats while the world around her swirls with increasing lack of comprehension.

Debra Dean adds to the distress inherent in Marina's condition by detailing its impact on her devoted, but old, husband, Dimitri, and on her two American children, facing the challenge of what to do with their mother, and how best to look after their father.

This is a marvellous novel, easy to read in one sitting but impossible to forget.

I hope it receives some sort of wide recognition for its quality - it certainly deserves to.

Rabbi Dr Charles H Middleburgh