

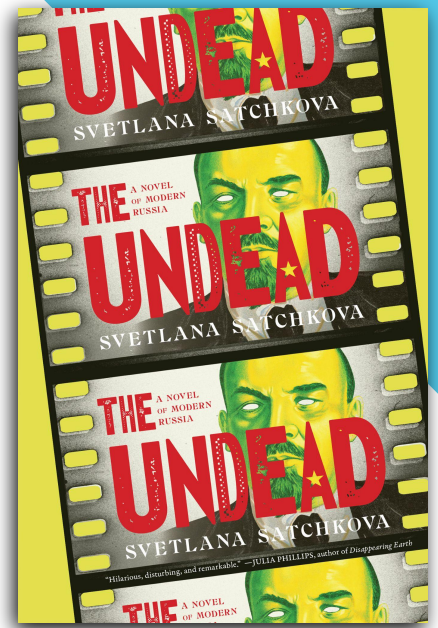
# THE UNDEAD

A Novel of Modern Russia

Svetlana Satchkova

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“With all the absurdity of our current reality, *The Undead* is the story of a campy horror movie director who gets caught in the monstrous maw of the state. This novel, hilarious, disturbing, and remarkable, shows us Russia and America, the personal and the political, what's happening now and what's waiting in the darkness ahead. Get ready for the ghouls to grab you and not let go.”  
—Julia Phillips, author of *Disappearing Earth* and *Bear*

“There is nothing supernatural about the zombies in Svetlana Satchkova's savvy, frightening novel. They are all of us, wherever we are, who keep looking away when authoritarian forces crush expression. Witty and unsettling, *The Undead* is a cautionary tale about, among other things, never quite admitting where the danger lies until it's too late.”  
—Sam Lipsyte, author of *No One Left to Come Looking for You* and *The Ask*

## INTRODUCTION

In this gripping tale of contemporary Russia, a young filmmaker and her friends run afoul of a government that ruthlessly oppresses artists who dare to satirize the regime ...

When Maya, a young Russian filmmaker, makes a low-budget horror movie with her friends, it seems like a promising start to a career in indie film. Little does she know that her jokey lo-fi film will soon attract the attention of the autocratic censors at the highest levels of the Russian police state.

What follows is a propulsive narrative of an artist being crushed by state power, and the choices that one makes within a system where free expression is literally illegal. Written with the undeniable voice of an emigre from Putin's Russia, *The Undead* is a tense, piercing story that serves as a parable, and a warning, about political oppression.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Early on, the readers learn that Maya didn't allow herself to pursue her dream of filmmaking until her mid-thirties. What role did her upbringing play in this delay? Why do her parents still view her work as unimportant and frivolous?
2. Maya initially believes she's been blessed with "staggering good luck" when a producer signs her straight out of the film program. How does this early break make her vulnerable? Can early success actually set someone up for failure?

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3. Throughout the novel, Maya struggles with whether she's capable of creating truly original art and repeatedly confronts the limits of her talent. Ultimately, she realizes she isn't as gifted as others led her to believe. How does she handle this realization? Is there a way to grow from it?
4. Maya watches as her former classmates' careers soar while hers stalls dramatically. What role does professional jealousy play in her life, and can it ever be a healthy emotion?
5. At the beginning of the novel, Maya is apolitical, focused only on making her film and ignoring what's happening in her city and country. How does the author show that this stance is untenable, especially for an artist?
6. Fear operates as a powerful undercurrent in the novel. At first, Maya is terrified of her stalker ex-boyfriend, the mysterious late-night doorbell, and the threatening letter, all of it intensified by the countless horror movies she's consumed, but none of these turn out to be the real danger. What does this reveal?
7. What different strategies do creative people use to survive in an authoritarian society? Small compromises eventually lead to larger acts of conformity. At what point, if ever, does compromise turn into betrayal?
8. Complicity and self-deception are major themes in the novel: characters rationalize, both privately and publicly, why they stay silent, collaborate, or look away. The novel asks who becomes "undead," alive physically but morally numbed. In the author's view, is the "undead" primarily a political, moral, or psychological category?
9. Midway through the novel, Maya realizes that the most important relationship in her life may be her friendship with Lena—only to watch it fall apart. Why does this happen?
10. Maya's political trial is modeled on a recent real-life case in Russia, highlighting the absurdity of its proceedings. How does an authoritarian regime get people to accept absurdity and perform their roles with straight faces despite grotesque accusations and evidence?
11. Maya chooses to collaborate with the regime to avoid prison. What do you think of this choice?
12. How is Maya transformed by the end of the novel? What kind of person does she ultimately become?



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Svetlana Satchkova** is a Russian-born journalist and writer who immigrated to the United States in 2016. She is an established arts journalist with bylines in the *Rumpus*, *Newsweek*, *LARB*, and others. She is currently a research fellow at the Jordan Center for the Advanced Study of Russia at New York University, has an MFA from Brooklyn College, and lives in Brooklyn. *The Undead* is her first novel in English.

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