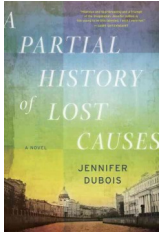


A partial history of lost causes

A Partial History of Lost Causes



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There aren't many good novels about chess. A Partial History of Lost Causes is a fabulously good one. In Jennifer Dubois's debut novel, two chess players from different countries alternate telling their stories until their paths cross in Russia in 2006.

The first, Aleksandr Bezetov, a child prodigy, moves to St. Petersburg to attend an elite chess school while he is still a teenager. Exceedingly naïve and innocent, he's assigned to a boarding house where prostitutes and a crazy assortment of other Russians live.

On his first day, while attending a celebration honoring Stalin's memory, he meets two young dissidents who invite him to their gathering spot, Café Saigon. Soon Aleksandr is drawn into a world of *samizdat* and far-left causes.

In fact, the book's title comes from the typed and mimeographed rag that Aleksandr's friend Ivan produces. "The lost causes" are the men and women that the Soviet rulers are exiling, imprisoning or killing outright for disagreeing with the government or just because they would consider questioning the regime.

Because Aleksandr is incredibly gifted at chess, officials trace his moves but do not harm him. They try to entice him with a nice apartment and/or a dacha where he can bring home women. They also try to bribe his loyalty with other rewards. But Aleksandr is crazy enough to enjoy life in his apartment where he's fallen for the beautiful hooker Elizabeta who dresses only in black. The apartment descriptions are a hoot. They seem to authentically paint this period of Russian history: a bathroom and kitchen with women's undies hanging from every surface to dry; hideous cabbage smells wafting through the hallways. Elizabeta complains to the super about worms inching out of the hot water pipe. Yet, Aleksandr stubbornly says he enjoys living there.

Meanwhile, the second major story features Irina back in the States. She has just turned thirty and has known for ten years that she will succumb to Huntington's Disease just as her father did but not before losing her mind first. The target date for these horrible symptoms to begin is when she turns 31. All through her 20s she manages to steer clear of long-term relationships with men. What would the point be? She would hate to have her love be forced to care for her during a long and horrible decline as she did for her own father.

But that year she falls for a man who comes to a Boston park to watch her play chess against the old but wise Lars, a former world traveler. Meanwhile, her father dies and she finds a letter that he, an avid chess-player and Russianophile, wrote to Aleksandr in the 80s when the chess player had ascended to being world champ. Irina's father basically asked him how he would proceed if he knew he was losing a very important tournament, "if you were scraping against the edges of your own self?"

Chess, love, politics, intrigue, illness, mortality--these all provide interesting threads that combine to make this a compelling read. Despite several dark subjects, it's a surprisingly affirmative

book. The chess-master decides to run against Putin, and Irina asks her father's question in person. A wonderful book not to be missed.

For other books about chess, consider The King's Gambit: a Son, a Father and the World's Most Dangerous Game and Endgame: Bobby Fischer's Remarkable Rise and Fall.

Posted by Dory L. on April 16, 2012

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