

# VIKING READERS GUIDE

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## THE ROMANOV BRIDE

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### AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ROMANOV BRIDE

At the turn of the century, Russia finds itself embroiled in a growing class battle. The long-standing rule of the elite Romanov dynasty is challenged by the common people, those whose lives are marked by poverty, illness, and unemployment. Once a peaceful demonstration goes horribly awry, rebellion takes hold of the country, turning hopes of change and communication into calls for violent protest and retribution. Swept away by the political current, Elisavyeta, a beautiful Romanov Grand Duchess, and Pavel, a worker turned rebel leader, see their lives drastically altered by the events that surround them.

Based on the true story of the life and death of Grand Duchess Elisavyeta Fyodorovna, Robert Alexander's *The Romanov Bride* is a gripping and emotional journey through one of the most turbulent times in Russian history. Alexander fuses a talent for quick-paced, clear-eyed prose with an uncanny ability to understand the mind of the worker as well as the aristocrat. Alternating between Elisavyeta's and Pavel's competing yet complementary perspectives, he presents an honest view of the Revolutionary experience from both sides of the social divide. Although they are worlds apart, Elisavyeta and Pavel have more in common than they realize; both love their country and their countrymen, are committed to their beliefs, and—most importantly—have lost the love of their lives. These heartbreaking losses inspire Elisavyeta and Pavel to work, in their own ways, for the good of the common man. She abandons her life of privilege to serve the poor as the founding abbess of the Marfo-Marinski convent, while Pavel works to overthrow the monarchy and bring power to the people. Although Elisavyeta rejects the aristocratic life, she cannot escape her Romanov heritage; she is soon taken to Siberia as prisoner of the revolutionaries. Once there, she comes face to face with the man whose life has been so irrevocably intertwined with hers—it is Pavel who holds her future in his hands.

Alexander writes of a country fractured by political chaos, where good intentions have unintended consequences and redemption is found in the most unlikely of places. Drawing on years of experience with Russian culture and history, he creates a compelling portrait of two people caught in a political crossfire that both have helped create and neither can control. Alexander's novels are known for their addictive blend of truth and fiction, and his latest work is no exception. Filled with rich detail, *The Romanov Bride* is a story of politics and passion, faith and forgiveness, and it will continue to haunt readers long after they have turned the last page.

### A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERT ALEXANDER

*1. The research necessary in preparing this novel must have been immense. Could you walk us through the process from inspiration to finished work?*

Whenever a person sits down to write a book, he uses so much more than the bits and pieces of words and research to create a novel. Namely, he reaches inside himself and draws upon all the

interesting life experiences, issues, and crises to inform character, plot, and story. All of which is to say that I've been studying Russian language, history, and culture for so long, not to mention my thirty-plus years of traveling to Russia, that without knowing it, I began preparing to write my Russian historical novels even before I began to write! And that begs the question, Why didn't I try to get college credit for all those times I spent drinking vodka and talking of life with my Russian friends in Leningrad?

I'm really happy and fortunate to say that I'm writing about a period of time that truly and deeply fascinates me. I'm also an experienced enough writer to know that when you get one book that is popular, like *The Kitchen Boy*, readers, bookstores, and editors start asking for another book just like the previous one. In other words: a series. That was how I came upon writing *Rasputin's Daughter* as a second book in my quasi-series of Russian historicals, because I needed a second book and I do think Rasputin was such an incredibly interesting and controversial figure. And though it may sound crass, that was how I found Grand Duchess Elisavyeta, simply by casting about for an idea for a third book. I was looking about, and there she was, Grand Duchess Elisavyeta, the sister of the Empress. Upon first look Elisavyeta seemed interesting and tragic and heroic enough to be able to carry the weight, per se, of a novel; and then before I knew it I fell in love with her. And what I fell in love with was not so much her striking beauty and glorious life, but her compassion and inner search for the spiritual meaning of life and particularly the way she made these qualities the focus of her life. Of all the people I've researched, Grand Duchess Elisavyeta was the most inspiring, and in this inspiration I found fuel aplenty to keep me writing. For me personally, this book was a true pleasure and honor to work on, and I only hope that shows.

Of course, then there was a lot of research to do, but actually that was fun, reading diaries and letters and so on. I was greatly aided, too, by a number of interesting factors. First and perhaps most of all, most of Elisavyeta's letters, diaries, and other writings have survived the Revolution. Second, although she was born a German princess, she was a granddaughter of Queen Victoria and so she actually had two primary languages, German and English, and all of her letters back and forth to her brother-in-law and sister (Nicholas and Alexandra) were written in English. I do speak and read Russian, but having my primary source material in a style of English that was unique to that time and, especially, that class, made it possible to capture the mannerisms of her true voice.

Then after absorbing her life as best I could it was simply a matter of wrapping or laying a story upon the dramatic days her life. Needless to say, her tragic circumstances and events provided, really, the plot points of my book.

*2. You're obviously very knowledgeable about Russian history, but when did you first encounter the story of Grand Duchess Elisavyeta? What prompted you to turn it into a novel?*

I first encountered Grand Duchess Elisavyeta years and years ago when I was first reading about the fall of the Romanovs. She both was and was not a key figure in the Russian Revolution, for while she had the ear of "Dear Alicky" (her younger sister, the Tsaritsa) and "Dearest Nicky" (the Tsar), she had no real power. Yet she was most definitely a prominent part of that Ruling House, not, as was said, "the rose thereof," but her sister nonetheless. But that's the way the Romanovs ruled, as a non-elected governing body—a House, a Dynasty, with all the family members truly believing that God had charged them with the care and welfare of Russia. It went beyond any kind of cavalier "noblesse oblige," beyond a simple sense that with all the wealth came some kind of social responsibility, to an obligation of duty to Motherland and Tsar.

What fascinates as much as saddens me is that Russia nearly made it. Not only did it nearly emerge from its centuries of horrible inequity into, at the very least, a constitutional monarchy, its slumbering economy was on the very cusp of bursting into an economic powerhouse. The arts were thriving, industries booming, and her agriculture output surging. And then came World War I, which brought so many sacrifices and highlighted, really, the great weaknesses of an autocracy—so much power in one pair of hands!—that it was the last straw that drove Russia right to the brink, and then beyond.

In all of this, no one better than Grand Duchess Elisavyeta illustrates the dedication and sense of obligation that the House of Romanov felt toward its people. Indeed, she was the only Romanov and one of the few royals ever (one other being her ancestress and namesake, St. Elizabeth of Hungary) to follow the Christly command: “Go, sell whatsoever thou hast and give to the poor.” And with the brutal assassination of her husband, Grand Duke Sergei, Elisavyeta did exactly that, disposing of her immense worldly riches and dedicating the remainder of her life to the poor and needy. That, of course, is the stuff of great stories.

*3. The historical period you discuss in The Romanov Bride is fascinating in part because of its stark class divide and the repercussions of that stratified society. What is Russian society like today? Do similar class structures still exist?*

Yes, Russian society during the tsarist era was horribly stratified. Of the roughly 150 million Russian subjects in 1900, the nobility, who held the vast, vast amount of wealth, represented only one to two percent of the population, and the merchant class about twenty percent. The rest, nearly eighty percent, were peasants, and the majority of this population had been serfs, meaning that upwards of sixty million people had lived little better than slaves until the Liberation of 1861.

Further dividing and emphasizing the classes was the Table of Ranks, or the *Chin*, which divided the nobility into fourteen ranks. It was a complicated but very specific system of ranking that reinforced the belief that nobles were of superior birth and therefore superior leaders. What this meant of course was that the higher rank one had, the closer one was to the throne and the source of power; therefore everyone of every class was acutely conscious of rank and placement in society, and there was considerable jockeying for a higher rank. Unfortunately, as author Lindsey Hughes has written, even with the fall of the tsarist system “consciousness of rank and striving for promotion and honors left a deep imprint on Russian society and culture.”

Of course there is no formal class structure today in Russia, yet everyone is still very much aware that the Kremlin is the source of power, and that the higher up one is, well, the better. It’s quite common, for example, for business people to spend all their money on new cars and new clothes so that they are perceived as successful even if they’re not, and I’ve heard more than one person say, “If I don’t dress in expensive clothes people will not take me seriously.”

In Soviet times you lived better not by working hard, but if you had *blat*, or good connections, and this *blat* was how you procured better education for your children, meat, even toilet paper. And the higher up you were in the Communist Party, the better *blat* you had. In a very real way, that was a carryover from tsarist times, and in so many ways that has carried over to the post-communist era. Fortunately, that is beginning to change, Russians are finally learning that to get ahead you don’t need to connive, but achieve.

*4. Having spent thirty years traveling and working in Russia, you must have witnessed many cultural miscommunications between Russians and Americans. What are the most common misconceptions each group has of the other? What are your favorite aspects of Russian culture?*

In 1976, when I first went to the USSR to study at Leningrad University, people would often just stare at me, stating that it was as if I'd fallen off the moon because they thought they'd never see, let alone meet and talk to an American. The most popular song in the USSR was ABBA's "Money, Money, Money," which more or less decried capitalism, and Russians were surprised by everything from the "good quality" of my teeth to my blue jeans and that I could travel freely across Europe without governmental permission. They also had a hard time believing that meat was not in shortage but abundant in stores, that you could readily buy oranges year round, and they were shocked to hear about Social Security, Medicare, and so on. And we were surprised how cold a Russian could be on the street yet so incredibly warm and fun loving inside their own home. In other words, we were overwhelmed by their warmth and the depth of their friendship, not to mention their sweet ability to separate a person from politics. They were not judgmental but curious and hungry, hungry to learn anything and everything about us, our lives, and the West.

Russia is an incredibly interesting and wonderful place to visit. I'm fascinated and taken aback by the richness of its history, its music, its museums, even its graphic art. And most of all I love the people and the way they so deeply cherish friendship, really above all else. With the losses they have experienced in their revolutions and wars and, of course, during the Stalinist period (when somewhere between twenty and forty million people died), they are anything but a superficial people.

*5. Your work has been very well received in the U.S. What response have you had from Russian readers and critics?*

That's an interesting question, and to that I will say: Whereas my mysteries have been translated into Russian, my historical novels about the Russian Revolution have not. And that's just fine with me, because I see my historical novels as a way for Americans to develop interest in Russia, not for me to teach Russians something about their own country. Simply, Russia and her culture are so complex and rich, and I have so much left to learn about that wonderful country, that I would be greatly mistaken to think I could bring profound insights of Russia to Russians. Actually, this is all a touchy area for me because I hate it, for example, when an English person or Australian attempts to write from an American point of view—there's always something just a tad off that keeps me from getting into the heart of the story. I just read a brilliant book by an English author who had obviously spent a lot of time in the States, yet he made several stereotypical observations that nearly ruined the book for me. So essentially, I view my historicals not as something potentially insightful for Russian readers but as a bridge for American readers to cross to more complex books and subjects about Russia.

That said, the House of Romanov, while obviously Russian, was also extremely worldly and in some kind of weird way not entirely Russian. All the members of the Ruling House traveled extensively abroad and were in fact related by marriage to royals all across Europe. Nicholas and Alexandra, for example, conversed and wrote to each other not in Russian but English (the language of her grandmother, Queen Victoria, who was also the grandmother of his first cousin, the future King George), and their son, Tsarevich Aleksei, was by blood only 1/256th Russian. They were very much an international family, and that was how I approached them.

Also, it's quite true that Russians are still coming to terms with their tsarist past, for during the communist era the only information they could get about the Romanovs was pure and simple propaganda. We have to remember that the Russian Revolution didn't really end in 1918 or 1921, but in 1991 when the so-called "great" experiment finally and at long last collapsed. To this day the Soviet archives are still

opening up, and there are many things that I know about the Russian royal family and their revolution that many Russians still don't know simply because that information was kept from them.

So perhaps I just contradicted myself . . . perhaps I do have a few things to pass on to Russians. Regardless, I do think it's very tricky for a foreigner to write about Russia from a Russian point of view, which is why I rely so heavily on my research and also have my books proofread in Russia.

6. As a writer of historical fiction, what do you believe are the potential pitfalls or common missteps in basing novels on true events? How does one achieve a balance between historical accuracy and engaging plot?

Authors of historical fiction have to be honest to the period they are writing about—readers understand and appreciate that integrity, and are, well, too smart to value anything but. Simply speaking, you couldn't write a book about the sinking of the Titanic and set it in the Pacific Ocean or write a novel about the assassination of President Kennedy and set it in New Orleans, just as you couldn't write about the Russian Revolution taking place in 1930. You have to accept and appreciate the parameters of the historical events you're writing about and stay within that framework. It sounds easy but you'd be surprised how many writers stray too far into their imaginations.

I also think basing a novel on true events requires an incredible amount of research to the point that you know that period as if you had been there. And then you just have to forget about everything you learned and simply write a good story as if you were an eyewitness and not a researcher because nothing sinks a book more quickly than too many stupid little facts dolled out too heavily. As in cooking, too little salt and the food is dull and uninteresting, too much and it's inedible, but just the right touch and it brings out all the flavors.

I should say, too, that I do love what Matisse said: "Exactitude is not truth." In other words, if you were to paint a picture of a chair, you might better capture the way it looked in the sunlight on that beautiful spring day by painting it not brown, its real color, but a brilliant, overwhelming blue because that better captures the essence of the gorgeous moment. So I think it's okay to create and use your imagination to its fullest as long as it's respectful to the actual events. In *The Kitchen Boy* I had to be very specific about what happened on this day or that in 1918 because so very many know exactly what happened during the last days of Nicholas and Alexandra. But I could—and I did—write about their youngest servant, the real kitchen boy, surviving because, well, he did . . . and yet who knows what happened to him after July 17th, 1918?

Simply, you can't change the facts just to make a story "better." However, there's an awful lot of space between the facts, and that area is a wonderful and fun place for a fiction writer to swim. It helps, too, if you're writing about fascinating people in a drama-filled period such as the Russian Revolution.

7. *You manage to present multifaceted, sympathetic characters on both sides of this political divide. Was it difficult for you to give equal time to both Elisavyeta and Pavel? Did you find you sympathized more with one than the other?*

There's always a root cause to a revolution, and it's usually because the majority of a population isn't given a place at the table, in other words a forum for their grievances to be heard. And prior to the revolution the vast majority of Russians had no voice whatsoever and were demanding things that any American now takes for granted, such as equality for all before the eyes of justice, a 40 hour work week, child labor laws, and so on. The Russian Revolution had been brewing for at least 150 years—Pugachev led a peasant revolt in 1773, there was the Decembrist Uprising in 1825, and a number of other peasant

revolts as well—and it’s a tragedy that rather than deal with the real causes of unrest when they happened, the tsarist regimes of those days dealt with them by forceful suppression. So I have a great deal of sympathy for the discontent that permeated Russia in the early 1900s—though I fully realize that the flames of the Russian Revolution were fanned to a huge degree not by truths but revolutionary propaganda.

Obviously, I have a great deal of sympathy for Elisavyeta as well as, for that matter, all the other Romanovs. Yes, the entire Ruling House benefited absurdly from tsardom, but they inherited not just a style of government—autocracy—that was grossly outdated, but a heap of problems that those before them had not addressed. And yet all you have to do is read the numerous diaries and letters left behind to understand that the Romanovs as a whole ultimately wanted was what was best for Russia. They just didn’t know how and/or have the leadership skills to make that transition. None of the nearly 70 members of the House of Romanov, however, worked harder to address the needs of the poor and needy than Grand Duchess Elisavyeta, and I have immeasurable respect for her and the very way she put her good intentions into actual good deeds.

So it was not difficult at all for me to give equal time to Elisavyeta and Pavel. In fact it was really interesting, and creating the story was rather like watching a car accident from above—if only he put on the brake here, or she swerved there, then this great mess wouldn’t have happened. Yes, the Russian Revolution was one of the greatest tragedies in world history not only because so many millions perished, but because the whole damned thing didn’t need to have happened in the first place, it could have been avoided, and very nearly was.

But in the end, though Pavel was so terribly misled (just as were so many revolutionaries), I sympathized infinitely more with Elisavyeta because she died true to her remarkable integrity and beliefs.

*8. Pavel uses extremely violent means in overthrowing the Romanov rulers; at various moments, the revolutionaries resort to assassinating leaders, distributing propaganda, and inciting riots. Do you see any parallels in today’s political climate? Were you concerned that Pavel’s participation in such acts would prevent readers from identifying with him?*

The Russian political stage in 1917 was set something like this: a huge disenfranchised population that was incited to violence by slanted information and misinformation created by a desperate, conniving few. So, yes, the parallels to today’s political climate are all too many. But then again, history tends to repeat itself, and it’s only the gifted leaders that appreciate and recognize that and are able to truly advance the world.

I do believe, though, that people are born essentially good and that it’s only events and/or situations that corrupt and darken the soul. And that’s what I tried to do with Pavel, not create a character whose violent acts the reader might or might not condone, but create a character, who despite his earnest (and understandable) search for betterment makes a number of tragic and dark decisions, which ultimately lead to his own demise, and who, because of that, becomes a sympathetic character.

*9. At one point in the story, Pavel refers to Lenin as a traitor. Was this disillusionment common among the revolutionaries? When did these feelings develop and why?*

With the rapid demise and abdication of Nicholas II, Russia was a great ship with no one at the rudder, an empire utterly adrift in a tumultuous political sea. Without a tsar to head the government, what

and who was there? The main question wasn't simply who was running the government, but what type of government was now going to run Russia—a constitutional monarchy, democratic, socialist, communist, or? There were dozens of splinter groups, but only two things that were absolutely certain, that the days of autocracy were over and that the Germans, with whom Russia was at war, were the sworn enemies of the Russian Motherland.

Therefore, when it was leaked that Lenin had actually been slipped back into Russia by the Germans (who hoped that the revolutionaries would weaken Russia), well, many in Russia began to see Lenin not as a patriot but as a ruthless schemer willing to betray his fellow countryman for the sake of his own political ambitions. In other words: a traitor. Disillusionment with Lenin and Bolshevism further grew with his creation of the secret police, the Cheka, and the commencement of The Red Terror, which suppressed all dissent with violent brutality. It was an incredible murder spree—stories abounded of hundreds of thousands hacked, tortured, burned, and shot to death, as well as drowned and buried alive. Utterly unbelievable.

*10. Both Elisavyeta and Pavel are characters of passionate devotion—Elisavyeta to her husband and her religion, and Pavel to his wife and his politics. What connections do you draw between romantic, religious, and political fervor?*

Passion and devotion are a volatile cocktail, a blinding one at that. And when one can't see the way, isn't it easy to get lost, to lose all perspective? Frankly, this is all scary territory for me. Romantic fervor turns into blind love, religious fervor turns into blind faith, and political fervor, well, at the least it spells intolerance and at the worst dictatorship. In a way all of these things speak to the human need or want to find one truth and one person who will show you the way along one path. And that's wonderful as long as it's not exclusionary, as long as it doesn't come at the expense or detriment of others. In other words, all of that is fine as long as tolerance is cherished above all.

One of the most interesting things to me about the Soviet Union was that this supposedly great nation and social experiment was the least tolerant country and political system of all. There was no room for political discussion, no tolerance for other parties. You either went along with the Party line...or you were, all too often, killed. That meant that the Soviet Union was a fake, a fragile superpower that could only exist in a vacuum of dissent and a vacuum of information. But once that vacuum was pierced—initially by student, cultural, and business exchanges—there was this great flood of information that came whooshing into the USSR, which enabled even the average Soviet citizen to imagine a different and potentially better way of living. I think the beginning of the end of the Soviet Union began with the first cultural exchange in 1958, and the beginning of the end of communist China began with that first ping pong match. We'll see if the beginning of the end of North Korea just started with the recent performance there by an American Orchestra.

*11. How do you see this novel in relation to The Kitchen Boy and Rasputin's Daughter? Are there particular themes or issues you are consistently drawn to?*

I think there are many truths in life, not just one. For example, all too often the spoken truth and the unspoken truth aren't one and the same. In other words, there are many layers to life and it takes a heck

of a lot of work to peel away those layers. It's like peeling an onion, often it can make you cry, but it's the most important thing in life, getting to that core, that brilliant gem of truth. And to understand that gem and appreciate all the dimensions of its beauty, you have to look at it from any number of angles. In simplistic terms, to understand what happened in a crime—a murder, for example—you want to talk to multiple eyewitnesses, because even though they witnessed the same crime they all saw different things. And each of those things are different truths, which combined create a full picture, or understanding, of what really happened.

So I guess that's what I'm trying to do in writing historical novels about the Russian Revolution, explore the many truths of the key players, such as Nicholas and Alexandra, Rasputin, and of important eyewitnesses, such as Grand Duchess Elisavyeta. They were all there at the heart of the Revolution, "witnessing" the same events but from different perspectives, and struggling attempt find the correct and best path for their beloved country.

## QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How did your sympathies toward Pavel and Elisavyeta change through the course of the novel? What similarities can you find between each character's fate at the end of the novel?
2. Pavel steals money so that he and his wife can travel to Moscow, and he continues to do so whenever he deems it necessary. How does this theft affect our understanding of his actions later in the novel? What do these actions suggest about the social and moral climate at the time?
3. Pavel and the other members of the revolution believe that desperate times call for desperate measures. Do you agree with this philosophy? When, if ever, is violence an appropriate political response?
4. Although Pavel describes his violent intentions and desire for revenge, when presented with an opportunity to assassinate Sergei, he doesn't take action. What does this tell us about his character?
5. What do you see as the major flaws of a political system governed by a monarchy such as the Romanovs? What are the flaws of the system Pavel is trying to bring about? Is it possible to have a perfect political system?
6. Elisavyeta and Pavel lose their spouses. It can be argued, however, that each is complicit in the other's loss. Why? What similarities do we see in each character's immediate reaction to his or her loved one's death?
7. Elisavyeta is an immensely kind and patient character—as a wife, a ruler, and a nun. What are the three most striking examples of her capacity for forgiveness?
8. *The Romanov Bride* alternates between Pavel's and Elisavyeta's perspectives. What effect did this narrative technique have on you? How did this influence the content of the story?
9. The central elements of the plot could be characterized a number of ways. For example, the book could be read as an argument between the old and new political systems, or between crimes of passion and acts of forgiveness. How would you describe the conflict at the core of the book?
10. Based on the experiences of Elisavyeta, Dora, and Shura, what conclusions can you draw about



women's status and social situation in Russia at this time? Do any patterns emerge?

11. Have you read any of Robert Alexander's previous novels? Are you familiar with any classic Russian literature such as *Anna Karenina*? What connections can you find between *The Romanov Bride* and these other works?

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Robert Alexander is the bestselling author of *Rasputin's Daughter* and *The Kitchen Boy*. Born and raised in Chicago, he studied at Leningrad University and graduated from Michigan State University. Since then, he has traveled throughout Russia, working for the U.S. government as well as in the private sector. His previous novels have been acclaimed by critics and readers alike for their historical accuracy as well as their engaging prose. In addition, Mr. Alexander has published numerous mystery novels under his own name, R.D. Zimmerman; this body of work includes *Hostage*, *Outburst*, and *Innuendo: A Todd Mills Mystery*. He lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota.