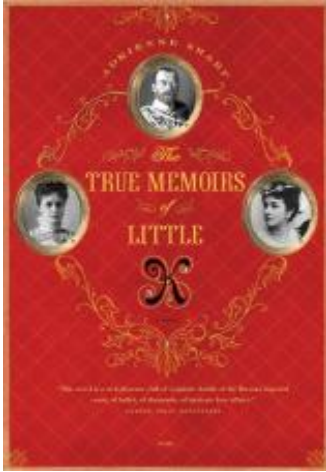


# The True Memoirs of Little K

by Adrienne Sharp



## About the Book

She is a legend throughout Europe: the most dazzling star to dance with the Russian Imperial Ballet; a beauty who enchanted power brokers, including the last tsar, her beloved Nicholas II; a shrewd survivor who escaped the revolution with her jewels and her dignity intact, living out her days in the comfort of French society. Now, at the age of 99, she has decided to record an intimate account of her mythic life, revealing once and for all the paternity of her son and taking readers to a lost world of untold grandeur. She is Mathilde Kschessinska, the narrator of Adrienne Sharp's haunting novel, which captures the crescendo and horrific coda of the Romanov dynasty.

Inspired by the true Mathilde Kschessinska, Sharp's fictional account brims with intriguing what-ifs, reimagining an astonishingly gifted young girl and her spectacular rise in an era when art and aristocracy produced a level of opulence never to be matched. Sharp brings sparkling insight to this epic tale of love and survival.

## Discussion Guide

1. The novel's title claims these are Mathilde's true memoirs. Is any memoir entirely true? What aspects of his or her life might a memoirist attempt to conceal --- or rewrite? What is illuminating about reading a fictionalized account of someone's life as opposed to an autobiography or a biography?
2. In what ways did Mathilde's affair with Nicholas give her both more power and less? Consider her position both in the theater and in society. How did this affair empower her or limit her in these realms? How did other prominent women, such as the empress dowager, the empress, and the wife of Grand Duke Vladimir, exert power in a society that denied official status to women?
3. The love between Nicholas and Mathilde was affected from the start by the knowledge that they could never be husband and wife. How did this knowledge define their relationship early on, and how did their expectations of each

other change over time as their relationship continued?

**4.** How does Alix's experience of mothering the frail Alexei mirror Mathilde's experience as a mother? In what ways does this suffocating mothering infantilize both boys? Was it this --- or the disruption of the revolution --- that tied Mathilde to her son, who remained her caregiver later in life instead of marrying and creating a life of his own? How might Alexei's relationship with his mother, had he lived, have mirrored that of Vova?

**5.** What do Vova's father figures teach him about being a man and being a leader? When both Sergei and Nicholas encourage him to impersonate the tsarevich, what does this promise him? How is Vova's attitude about himself irrevocably shaped by this impersonation and by his induction into the imperial family in the latter part of the novel?

**6.** Under the Romanovs, the art of ballet experienced its greatest flowering. What circumstances contributed to this? Consider the wealth of the Romanovs; the interconnection between the various theaters, schools, and conservatories in St. Petersburg, and therefore between composers, choreographers, set designers, and the theater, opera, and ballet; and the social relationships between the court and the theater. In what ways did being the daughter of an Honored Artist of the Imperial Theater's benefit Mathilde? What pressures did it exert on both her and her siblings? What were Mathilde's strengths and weaknesses on the stage?

**7.** Discuss Rasputin's role in the Romanov family. Why did Alix obstinately ignore the furor that surrounded Rasputin, a furor that became one of the incendiary factors in the people's anger against their sovereigns? In what ways did Rasputin's murder foreshadow the revolution and the strike at the crown two months later?

**8.** What advantage does Mathilde have over Nicholas, imprisoned at Tsarskoye Selo, when she makes her decision to retrieve her son before the family is moved to Siberia? What future does Nicholas envision for himself and his family at that point, the summer of 1917 --- and what future does Mathilde see ahead for them?

**9.** Which of Mathilde's history lessons surprised you the most? What aspects of the Russian revolution had you been unaware of? Was a violent revolution, resulting in a brutal police state, the only way the suffering of the lower classes could have been resolved in that society? What kept the Romanovs, and members of their circle such as Mathilde, from addressing the demands for change that came from all levels of society --- from the workers, the peasants, the intelligentsia, even from members of the aristocracy itself?

**10.** Sergei was one of the dozens of Romanovs who did not survive the revolution, along with many other members of the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie. What does *The True Memoirs of Little K* reveal about the nature of survival?

**11.** Once Mathilde and the Romanovs find themselves in exile, they attempt to re-create their former lives --- but the rules that formerly governed that society have loosened, enabling Mathilde's marriage to Andrei. What did each of them gain from this marriage --- and in what ways did it help to legitimize Vova's place in Russian society in exile? How effectively were Vova and his parents able to establish a place for their son?

**12.** In 2008, DNA evidence confirmed that no members of Tsar Nicholas's immediate family escaped execution by the Bolsheviks. In fact, Sokolov's theories about how the imperial family's bodies were burned to ash were found not to be true. How might Mathilde's dreams of the imperial family be changed if she knew their bones lay in the mud beneath a wooden bridge in the forest near Ekaterinburg? If she knew their bones had been returned to St. Petersburg and interred

in the tombs at Peter and Paul?

**13.** In the novel's closing pages, Mathilde is proud that her name appears in the genealogy charts of European and Russian royalty, though she expresses disappointment that her name is not included next to Nicholas's and that her son's name does not appear at all. Does she, after all, find the sacrifices she made and her exclusion from a place in normal society and normal family life worth this status?

## Author Bio

Adrienne Sharp is the critically acclaimed author of the story collection *WHITE SWAN, BLACK SWAN*, a Barnes & Noble Discover Book and a national bestseller; and the novels *THE SLEEPING BEAUTY*, named one of Booklist's 10 best first novels of 2005; and *THE TRUE MEMOIRS OF LITTLE K*, which was a finalist for the California Book Award and a Historical Novel Review Editors' Choice, and was translated into six languages.

## Critical Praise

"Mistress of grand dukes and Russia's last tsar, Mathilde Kschessinska was the fabled prima ballerina assoluta of St. Petersburg's Maryinsky Ballet during the empire's last decades. In **The True Memoirs of Little K**, novelist Adrienne Sharp reveals the passion, greed, and lust for life behind the fairy tale of the ballerina's real memoirs, and the secret about her son's paternity that is easy to believe just might be true."

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