

Broken Glass Park

By Alina Bronsky

Synopsis

Sascha Naimann was born in Moscow, but now lives in Berlin with her two younger siblings and, until recently, her mother. She is precocious, independent, street-wise, and, since her stepfather murdered her mother several months ago, an orphan. Unlike most of her companions, she doesn't dream of escaping from the tough housing project where they live. Sascha's dreams are different: she longs to write a novel about her beautiful but naïve mother and she wants to end the life of Vadim, the man who brutally murdered her. Sascha's story is that of a young woman consumed by two competing impulses, one celebrative and redemptive, the other murderous. In a voice that is candid and self-confident, at times childlike and at others all too mature, Sascha relates the struggle between those forces that can destroy us, and those that lead us out of sorrow and pain back to life.

1. "I thought I was already old..."

Sascha is as if torn between adulthood and what remains of her childhood. Caught in a moment balanced between youth and maturity, Sascha is perhaps not so different from others her age. While an American seventeen-year-old may be forced to drop out of school and provide for his family, an Israeli teen prepares to sacrifice two years of her life to the army, and in many parts of the world young people are forced to face the horrors of war, the tribulations of social unrest, or the damages wrought by domestic violence, both physical and psychological. *When does a child become an adult? And does this passage from childhood and adulthood occur more or less at the same age despite one's circumstances? Can Broken Glass Park be described as a coming-of-age novel? Can childhood survive difficult and damaging experiences, or do these necessarily make of one an adult? Does preserving a child's innocence necessarily mean shielding him or her from life's dark side? What are the effects of a childhood cut short?*

2. Her mistress's voice.

Much of the success of *Broken Glass Park* has been attributed to the first person narrator's intoxicating and compelling voice. *What makes this voice so distinctive and appealing? Are we witness to an act of literary ventriloquism or do you think that main character's voice probably is that of the author herself?*

3. Family...they'll %&£, you up!

How accurate a picture of family life, albeit it a tragic one, is Bronsky's Broken Glass Park? Sascha loves her mother deeply, but is also furious with her for what she sees as her mother's stupidity. Has Sascha made peace with the ghost of her mother by the end of the novel?

4. "Because things are the way they are, things will not stay the way they are."

Delia Lloyd writes in her *Huffington Post* review of *The Elegance of the Hedgehog* (Europa 2008), "Growing up is about being open to change," and maturity is found when you discover "that something you thought was closed off to you is actually within reach." *Does Broken Glass Park depict this kind of gathering of strength? Does adulthood bring maturity, or are the two things different? Do you agree with Lloyd's description of maturity: not the death of innocence and purity, but a gathering of the strength necessary to change and to reach for what you want?*

An Interview with Alina Bronsky

From *La Repubblica* (Italy)

The Old Testament reads: "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth." Sascha, a seventeen-year-old Russian immigrant in Germany has two dreams: to kill her stepfather Vadim, and to write a book about her murdered mother. She navigates the Russian ghetto where she lives and contemporary Berlin with both the cynical savvy of a streetwise adult and the fragility of a child, moving midst cultures caught between impending modernity, obsolete traditions, and social inequities. She faces life headfirst, protecting her loved ones, looking for a ray of light, all the while mired in hardships. She longs for something to "touch her closely," to caress her soul. In a style that is powerful and clear, the Russian-born Alina Bronsky gives us Sascha's story, a deeply touching story that cuts like a diamond; the story of a young woman facing a bitter present and an uncertain future.

You interrupted your studies in medicine in order to write, and become a copyeditor. How did that happen?

Truth is, I'm still asking myself why I started studying medicine in the first place. I've always wanted to write books. I wrote my first short story when I was five, and I haven't stopped writing since. Nonetheless, I tried, wholeheartedly, to enter what I thought was a serious profession: medicine. I've always been drawn to the natural sciences. But I quit after a short stint, and began doing something that was a bit closer to creative writing: I began working as a journalist and a copywriter.

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5. Jailhouse Conversion?

"I still love her. I wish I could tell her. I'm writing her a letter...I'm ashamed to face my children. I'm also terribly sorry for the young man who also had to die."—Vadim (p. 51) In the last chapter of the book, Sascha sees among Vadim's belongings photos of her mother, her siblings, and herself. *Is Vadim sincere in his love, shame and regret? Is it possible that he has reformed? Or is a bad egg always a bad egg? How do you feel about prison changes of heart?*

6. "A friend who changes when I change and who nods when I nod..."

We are introduced to Anna on the first page of the book and given the idea that there is intimacy and friendship between her and Sascha. By the end of the book, however, it becomes clear that Anna is just another character in the Emerald roster. *Does Sascha have any true connections with other people? Is this the story of a true loner? With whom does she have the most meaningful relationship?*

7. What is normal?

Broken Glass Park is unique in that it employs no stock characters; each character is instead distinctive and struggles with his or her own individual demons. Sascha's struggle bears the name Vadim, and is naturally the struggle that receives the most attention in the book. But closer examination reveals that every character has his own version of Vadim. Jobst-Ulrich Brandt, in his review of *Broken Glass Park* published in *Focus* (Germany), wrote that Alina Bronsky had achieved her goal of writing a story that was "rooted in life." *Does characters' refusal to be type-cast, to conform to stereotypes and/or archetypes make forming conclusions about their stories difficult? Is there such a thing as a "normal" literary character? What is normal?*

8. "I mean, we've already established you're not into sex and drugs."

Throughout *Broken Glass Park*, Sascha places, and finds herself, in situations where sex is overwhelmingly present. Each sexually charged event is both similar to the others, and fundamentally different; their unusual nature, same but different, invites the reader to find a common thread that connects the episodes. *How does Sascha see sex, and how does she use it?*

9. City Within a City

Another seemingly prominent theme is that of the clash of cultures; in this book, it is the Russians versus the Germans. The Emerald is Berlin's own Little Russia. The tenants of the Emerald, such as Maria, see it as a haven—a retreat back into what is comfortable. They do not go out; they do not learn the language. The physical distance a character travels from the Emerald is directly proportionate to his or her willingness to merge with new surroundings. *How is this comparable to the situation in other urban immigrant centers? Are there characteristics of Bronsky's*

I've heard that you submitted your manuscript by post and received positive responses after only a week. What was your reaction to these responses?

I was so happy. I couldn't believe it. I felt like Cinderella when she is invited to the ball. At first, I didn't tell anyone about it because I thought I was only dreaming.

Are there similarities between you and Sascha?

Some people think so. They say I talk like Sascha sometimes. But I can't see it. Sascha has much more courage and more ambitions than I. I would like to have her strength and also some other characteristics of hers, but under better circumstances of course.

I love Sascha's personality: she's so proud and skeptical, yet innocent and fragile. So determined to assure herself a better future, so courageous. She's a real heroine, isn't she? Which is a rarity nowadays.

Thank you. I like her very much, too. And you are completely right; she is also a very ambivalent person. But I don't think she is a rarity. I've met real girls who are no less courageous than her.

She hates men, but at the same time she is mesmerized by Volker and Felix, which demonstrates her ability to adapt to their circumstances and the world around her, an adult work that is also a fragile, childlike one at the same time. You can't really consider her a bad girl, not at all! She is self-destructive and hurtful at times, eager for protection at others, and this is not a contradiction in her very broad personality.

Well, sometimes she really is a bad girl—at least, she certainly likes to behave like one.

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portrait of Russians in Germany that are specific to that context, or could her portrait of an immigrant “ghetto” apply to any urban immigrant community? Is the desire among immigrants to aggregate in specific neighborhoods, to stick together, more a form of self-protection or of denial?

10. The Emerald Scent

In his conversation with Sascha, young Volker asserts that the Russians are degenerates who will delete themselves by drinking themselves to death, killing each other, or rotting in prison. *Is there a real tendency towards self-destruction among immigrant communities? With reference to the previous question, how are we inclined to feel towards the immigrant populations in our country, and how do we view “their” neighborhoods?*

11. This is the End...Revenge is (bitter) sweet

What is Sascha’s mental response to the news about Volker that reaches her at the book’s conclusion? Does Sascha get her revenge? For much of her life, she has been focused on two things: killing Vadim and writing her mother’s story. Does the denouement grant her a full release from her obsessions? Is she free now to want something out of life for herself?



About the Author

Alina Bronsky was born in Yekaterinburg, an industrial town at the foot of the Ural Mountains in central Russia. She moved to Germany when she was thirteen. *Broken Glass Park*, nominated for one of Europe’s most prestigious literary awards, the Ingeborg Bachmann Prize, is her first novel. Alina Bronsky is a pseudonym.

Sometimes she is arrogant and she knows very well how to hurt other people's feelings. I was expecting some German readers not to like her because of her dark sides. But most of them seem to forgive her everything. I not sure I completely understand it.

Concerning the theme of immigration/emigration, is that really so difficult for a Russian to find a human dimension in Germany?

I'm afraid it is, at least for some immigrants. Emigration is very hard and stressful sometimes, especially for older people or for a teenager who is growing up under such catastrophic conditions.

Were you aware of any particular literary influences, or did you draw inspiration from any particular sources while you were working? Do you have any ideas for your next book?

I read a lot, there are plenty of books and authors I admire but I am not aware of any explicit influence on my novel.

I just finished my second novel; it’s about a very special woman, a grandmother who spends her life moving between three different cultures.