ALUMNI BOOKS

For years, Daphne Kalotay tinkered with an unwieldy short story. But the notion of a novel intimidated her, despite critical acclaim for her short fiction collection *Calamity and Other Stories* (Doubleday, 2005). *Calamity*, which includes stories from *Missouri Review, Michigan Quarterly Review, Good Housekeeping, Agni, The Literary Review,* and *Prairie Schooner,* was short-listed for the 2005 Story Prize.

The story that confounded Kalotay (GRS’94, UNI’98) ultimately became the wise, deftly interwoven *Russian Winter,* to be published by HarperCollins in September. It is the story of a Bolshoi ballerina as both a young idealistic woman in Stalin’s Russia and as a brittle octogenarian in contemporary Boston. With a cast of finely drawn characters past and present, Kalotay leads us to poignant revelations that explain the characters’ wounds and loyalties. Her characters’ courage is shared by their author, whose novel turns on the fine points of subjects she knew little or nothing about — auction houses, the streets of Moscow, the professional ballet world. She set out to educate herself, and the reader reaps the rewards.

*Bostonia* spoke with Kalotay, who earned a master’s in creative writing and a doctorate in modern and contemporary literature from BU. She has taught here and at Middlebury College and has received numerous fellowships, including from the Christopher Isherwood Foundation, the Seaside Institute, the Helene Wurlitzer Foundation, and the Fondation de La Napoule.

**Bostonia:** Who were your mentors at BU?

**Kalotay:** The very first year I came here — in 1993, for the master’s program in creative writing — my teachers were Leslie Epstein and Margot Livesey, and they continue to mentor me now.

**Are you teaching these days?**

Not currently. I was a full-time professor in the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences Creative Writing Program but resigned in 2006 to finish this book. Since then I’ve taken on some part-time positions, but BU continues to be my favorite place to teach. The undergraduate population is a little more on the ball, more mature and independent than students in smaller colleges. And the grad students in the Creative Writing Program are just astoundingly good.

Your descriptions of how it feels to be on stage as a ballet dancer struck me as pitch-perfect. Are you a dancer?

I always danced when I was younger, and my mother taught dance at Drew University when I was growing up. At BU I continued to take classes through my graduate years with Micki Taylor-Pinney, dance coordinator in the department of physical education, recreation, and dance. I
think the book’s description of how it feels to dance professionally was a combination of my imagination and my knowledge of being on stage, in college plays or for a reading. And though I never danced in any serious way, I have read so many dancers’ memoirs. One that was particularly helpful was I, Maya Plisetskaya. She’s just a fascinating, powerful personality — she’s still alive — and the reader admires her so much.

One of the two alternating stories in Russian Winter is based in Stalin-era Moscow, which you describe in lush sensory detail. Did you go to Russia for research? I went to Russia after I knew the book was pretty much done. Moscow has changed so much since the period I was writing about, so I was worried that if I went to contemporary Moscow, it would really throw me off. I loved it. It was May and June, and people were really helpful. I felt how incredibly large the city is, and I was able to find some of the streets and buildings I’d written about.

Will the book be published in Russia? The Russian translation is being done through a publisher in Ukraine. The book rights have been sold in many other countries, but the actual Russian publishing houses weren’t excited about the topic. Why would they want to read about this horrible time?

Are you of Russian descent? I’m Hungarian. I have family in Hungary, but my father fled to Canada after the failed revolution of 1956. It’s one of those stories you sense he doesn’t want to talk about. As a child I was curious and asked questions, but I really didn’t comprehend what he’d been through. Then, some time in my adulthood I was with my father somewhere, flipping TV channels, and there was a scene of people running through the woods to get over a border, and I saw my father’s face, and he said, “Oh, that’s what we did.”

The characters are so well formed. I loved the octogenarian dancer, Nina, and was especially intrigued by the character of Grigori, the rumpled, old-world immigrant professor and widower whom fate surprises. Is he based on someone you know? With almost every character I write, there’s someone I may not know, but I’ve glimpsed. I don’t know where Grigori came from. I started writing him as a much older, more curmudgeonly character. But I realized I didn’t want him to be that person, so I renegotiated his qualities. I will say that the character Zoltan is based on an actual poet I know. And the old Nina is based on my Hungarian grandmother and in some ways is exactly like her.

How long did it take to write Russian Winter? The actual focused reading, writing, and thinking about it was six years. I wrote a story about this in the summer of 2000. It was much too long, messy, and complicated to be a story, but I tried for three years to force it into story form. Then in the fall of 2003, when I was putting my story collection together, someone said this one should be a novel, and I knew it was true.

What writers influence you? Tolstoy is my favorite novelist, and I love the stories of Chekhov. I tend to love British women writers, including Hilary Mantel, Iris Murdoch, Muriel Spark. Two of my favorite novels of the last few years are The Known World by Edward P. Jones, and The Inheritance of Loss by Kiran Desai.

Russian Winter would make a wonderful movie. Any interest in that? I did get some communication about a movie. We’re looking into it.