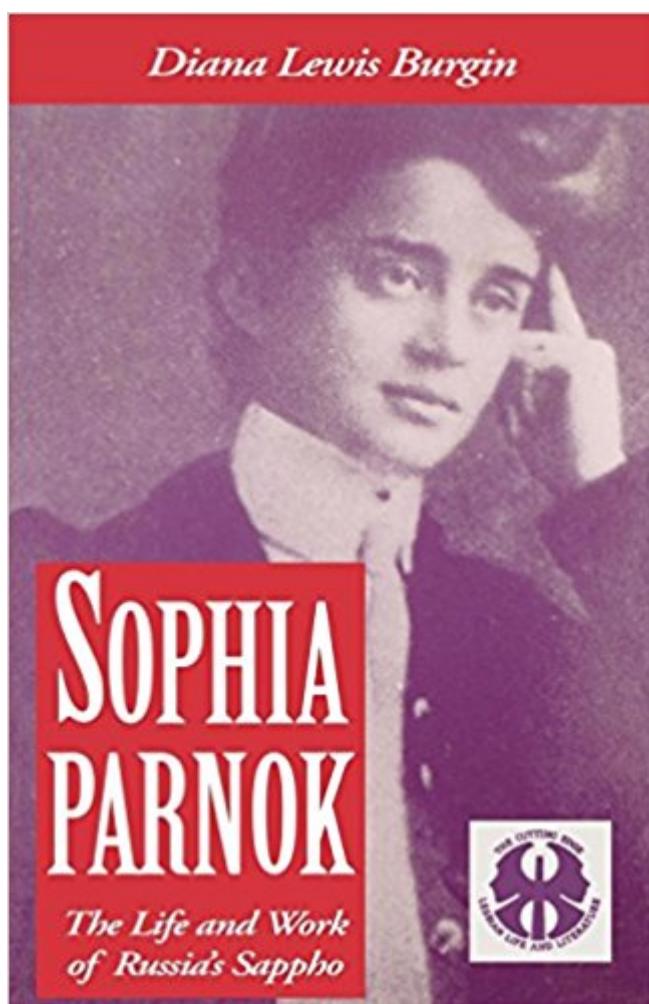


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Sophia Parnok: The Life And Work Of Russia's Sappho (The Cutting Edge: Lesbian Life And Literature Series)



Synopsis

The weather in Moscow is good, there's no cholera, there's also no lesbian love...Brrr! Remembering those persons of whom you write me makes me nauseous as if I'd eaten a rotten sardine. Moscow doesn't have them--and that's marvellous."—Anton Chekhov, writing to his publisher in 1895 Chekhov's barbed comment suggests the climate in which Sophia Parnok was writing, and is an added testament to the strength and confidence with which she pursued both her personal and artistic life. Author of five volumes of poetry, and lover of Marina Tsvetaeva, Sophia Parnok was the only openly lesbian voice in Russian poetry during the Silver Age of Russian letters. Despite her unique contribution to modern Russian lyricism however, Parnok's life and work have essentially been forgotten. Parnok was not a political activist, and she had no engagement with the feminism vogueish in young Russian intellectual circles. From a young age, however, she deplored all forms of male posturing and condescension and felt alienated from what she called patriarchal virtues. Parnok's approach to her sexuality was equally forthright. Accepting lesbianism as her natural disposition, Parnok acknowledged her relationships with women, both sexual and non-sexual, to be the centre of her creative existence. Diana Burgin's extensively researched life of Parnok is deliberately woven around the poet's own account, visible in her writings. The book is divided into seven chapters, which reflect seven natural divisions in Parnok's life. This lends Burgin's work a particular poetic resonance, owing to its structural affinity with one of Parnok's last and greatest poetic achievements, the cycle of love lyrics *Ursa Major*. Dedicated to her last lover, Parnok refers to this cycle as a seven-star of verses, after the seven stars that make up the constellation. Parnok's poems, translated here for the first time in English, added to a wealth of biographical material, make this book a fascinating and lyrical account of an important Russian poet. Burgin's work is essential reading for students of Russian literature, lesbian history and women's studies.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Critical biographies run the risk of advancing more criticism than biography, of illuminating an author's work while shedding only shadows on her daily experience. Part of a series titled *The Cutting Edge: Lesbian Life and Literature*, Burgin's study of ``the only openly lesbian voice in Russian poetry'' is no exception. While Burgin's affectionate intelligence succeeds in its goal of enlivening Parnok's soulful lyrics for Western readers, she lacks either resource or inclination to introduce Parnok as a flesh-and-blood being making her way through the actual world. Not until Parnok reaches her twenties do we learn that she has suffered since childhood with Grave's disease, and never do we learn the full clinical consequences to Parnok's health. About the poet's appearance there is equally little, and of her actions in pre-Revolutionary and Stalinist Russia, there are too many phrases like ``something apparently did come up.'' Parnok comes across as a melodramatic, needy person whose tormented yearnings and unconventional sexuality produced a provocative if insubstantial body of work. Though Burgin's thoughts about translation make for interesting reading, her assumption that Parnok's poems are autobiographical remains woefully unexamined. Still, her efforts to meld the poet's works and passions will awaken sympathy for this neglected lesbian artist while never quite justifying the series editor's claim that Parnok was ``brilliant.'' Copyright 1994 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Parnok (1885-1933) was the only avowed lesbian poet during the "silver age of Russian poets" (1893-1917). She published in her lifetime, overcoming obstacles thrown in her path by a sexist and homophobic society. Burgin's (Russian, Univ. of Massachusetts) study is shaped not so much by historical record (which contains many gaps) as by the poetry itself. The poet's life is chronicled, sometimes on a day-by-day basis, by interpretations of her emotional and physical state as depicted in her work. Although Parnok wrote during the revolution and subsequent civil strife, relatively little space is given to describing how events (including her arrest in 1921) might have affected her

poetry. Instead, Burgin's rendering is almost entirely personal, with lengthy descriptions of her relationships. Nonetheless, this is a valuable study of a little-known but important literary talent. Recommended for Russian literature and women's studies collections. Diane Gardner Premo, SILS, SUNY at BuffaloCopyright 1994 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Her name was forgotten for several decades. During the Soviet era it was unthinkable to mention the name of that close friend of Akhmatova and Tsvetaeva, their poetic rival and lover. There is special tenderness and a trait of decadent fragility in her verses, as well as in her life. I liked the way Diana tells us about Parnok - one can guess that she had the same feeling and substantially the same life experience.

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