

SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2020

DISCUSSION GUIDE

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL 
BOOK CLUB
DISCUSSION
GUIDE



GOOD CITIZENS NEED NOT FEAR

BY MARIA REVA

RECOMMENDED BY TYLER HELLARD



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WELCOME

Amnesty Book Club members

Welcome back to another guide with another fabulous book; *Good Citizens Need Not Fear* by Maria Reva. This brilliant and biting funny novel-in-stories, set in and around a single crumbling apartment building in Soviet-era Ukraine, heralds the arrival of a major new talent.

A cast of unforgettable characters—citizens of the small industrial town of Kirovka—populate Maria Reva’s ingeniously entwined tales that span the chaotic years leading up to and immediately following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1989. Weaving the strands of the narrative together is an unforgettable, chameleon-like young woman named Zaya, an orphan turned beauty-pageant crasher, who survives the extraordinary circumstances of her childhood through a compelling combination of ferocity, intelligence, stubbornness and wit.

Good Citizens Need Not Fear takes us from paranoia to tenderness and back again, exploring what it is to be an individual amid the roiling forces of history. Inspired by her family’s own experiences in Ukraine, Reva brings the dark absurdity of early Gary Shteyngart, the empathy of Miriam Toews, and the sly interconnectedness of Anthony Marra’s *The Tsar of Love and Techno* to a sparkling work of fiction that is as clever as it is heartfelt.

Thank you for being part of the great Amnesty International Book Club community. We hope you stay safe during this pandemic, we appreciate your interest, and we welcome your questions, suggestions, and or comments. Feel free to send us an email at bookclub@amnesty.ca.

About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than seven million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person’s voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

For more information about Amnesty International visit www.amnesty.ca or write to us at: Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.

About this month's author, **Maria Reva**

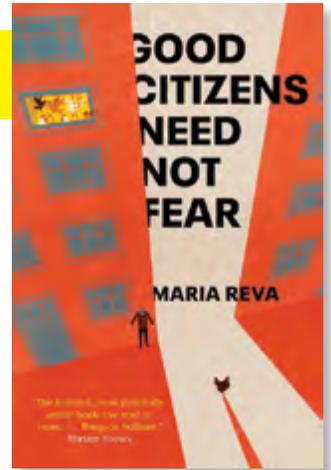


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Maria Reva writes fiction and opera libretti. Her stories have appeared in *The Atlantic*, *McSweeney's*, *Granta*, *The Journey Prize Stories*, *The Best American Short Stories*, and elsewhere. She won the Writers' Trust of Canada's RBC Bronwen Wallace Award in 2018 and a National Magazine Award in 2019.

Her musical collaborations include an opera libretto for ERATO Ensemble, texts for Vancouver International Song Institute's Art Song Lab, and a script for City Opera Vancouver. In March 2017, musica intima vocal ensemble premiered *Uta's Escape*, a commission by Canadian composer Jennifer Butler based on one of Maria's stories.

Maria was born in Ukraine and grew up in Vancouver, British Columbia. She received her MFA from the Michener Center for Writers at the University of Texas and is at work on an opera and a novel.

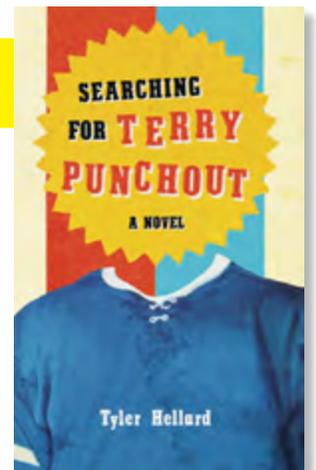


About this month's guest reader, **Tyler Hellard**



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Tyler Hellard is a Calgary-based copywriter, technology critic and author. His debut novel, *Searching For Terry Punchout*, was shortlisted for the 2019 Amazon Canada First Novel Award and the Kobo Emerging Writer Prize.



Tyler Hellard's Reflection on *Good Citizens Need Not Fear*



“ Maybe nature isn't a circle of life, but a circle of abandonment.”



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When I was asked to pick a title for this book club, the world was a very different place. This was all the way back in January, before I owned a half-dozen masks (one for every occasion, not that there are so many occasions to be had) and my four-year-old daughter couldn't pronounce "quarantine" properly (and really didn't have cause to). The truth is that *Good Citizens Need Not Fear* wasn't my first choice, because I hadn't read it yet, but it turned out the book I had in mind had already been covered the month before and my back-up pick had been a selection back in 2017. I chose Maria Reva's collection of stories based on the write-up on my advance reading copy and the recommendation of a friend.

A couple months later, the world stopped. Or rather some of us stopped in it, stuck at home with nothing but endless, anxiety-filled time, watching as people panicked about their health, their families, their jobs and their supply of toilet paper. But the deeper we got into the COVID-19 era, the more relevant *Good Citizens* became. This pandemic has exposed our systems unlike anything else. We can see the way those systems are designed and how they respond, and we see how people fit into them. Reva's book, similarly, is about systems, the space we occupy in them and what happens when they break down. Some characters rail against these systems, some delude themselves about their place, and some accept it all and live their lives within those boundaries.

The book begins with a clerical error that removes a very real building from government records (this Schrödinger dichotomy around the nature of existence comes up a lot—like Mikhail Ivanovich says, "Uncertainty contains an infinite number of

certainties"), preventing its residents from getting heat and introducing us to a bureaucracy so sprawling, Kafka might blush. It's a genuinely funny beginning, but the light touches come and go as we move between the people living at 1933 Ivansk Street. These stories are filled with amusing moments, certainly, but also grim realities. There is love, but also despair. Maria Reva's skill is in how she blends these things, bringing people together through bizarre or tragic (or both) circumstances.

What really makes this book one for our times is the way it walks the thin line between the absurd and the grotesque. In addition to knowing the word "quarantine," my daughter is heading off to kindergarten where she and her friends and their teacher will wear masks and stay as far from each other as possible in a small classroom. On any given day, I'm as likely to laugh at this situation as I am to cry about it. But that gives me a special appreciation for the people in this book, like the girl helping to package and sell her own trauma to rich, vapid assholes, or the grieving grandparents left caring for a designer cockroach.

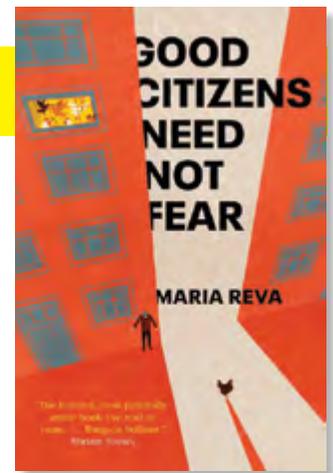
It is all wonderfully ridiculous. It is all terribly heartbreaking.

My favourite books have always been about the makeshift communities we build for ourselves through necessity or simple proximity. This pandemic has reminded me of something all the characters in *Good Citizens Need Not Fear* are acutely aware of: history always happens. But in the midst of history, most of us are just trying to get through our own days, and it's ultimately the people around us that we need to count on.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS FROM AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL BOOK CLUB

1. What are the relationships between the citizens and the government before the collapse?
2. How do these relationships change after the collapse?
3. What is the social contract when society itself is in flux?
4. What are the similarities in the liminal space the characters live in before and after the fall of the Soviet Union and our own liminal space in the midst of this pandemic?
5. What control do we have over the systems that run our world? What control do those systems have over us?



BACKGROUND



Police detain peaceful protester in Moscow, 27 July 2019.

Understanding freedom of expression, peaceful assembly and association in today's Russian Federation

This month's reading selection sparks an essential conversation about the Russian government's ongoing attack on human rights. The authorities are continuing to crack down on freedom of expression, freedom of peaceful assembly, and freedom of association. Anyone exercising those rights may find themselves harassed, arrested, ill-treated by the police, heavily fined, or prosecuted and imprisoned. Laws against "foreign agents" and "undesirable organizations" are used to target human rights defenders and NGOs. The excuse of counterterrorism is used as a tactic to target any opposition to the government.

Growing disconnect between the authorities and public, caused street protest to be on the rise, over political but also increasingly over local economic, social, or environmental issues, such as waste disposal, and other wider political demands. The authorities often respond by refusing approval for public assemblies, breaking up peaceful gatherings, and charging organisers and participants in criminal courts.

In particular, the year of Vladimir Putin's 20th anniversary as Russia's leader in 2019, was marked by growing political tensions and social displeasure, underpinned by generally sliding standards of living and growing popular distrust in the ruling United Russia

party. Corruption, environmental concerns, depreciating and ill-considered urban planning and worsening human rights prompted protests across the country.

Thousands of protesters and bystanders flooded the streets in June 2019. The demonstrations were peaceful, up until when the police and National Guard officers forcibly intervened, detained more than 2,600 people and issued unfounded fines. Protest leaders were unnecessarily detained for between 10 and 30 days, often on multiple occasions. The authorities opened criminal investigations against several participants - most of whom had not done anything remotely violent - using at least four different articles of the Criminal Code. These included the totally unfounded charge of "mass disorders", as there were no mass disorders, and some were charged with using violence against police officers.

Some victims of police violence included random bystanders, like jogger Konstantin Konovalov who was stopped before the protest on 27 July had even began and thrown on the pavement. A police officer allegedly stamped on his leg and broke it.

Despite numerous reports of wrongful arrests, excessive force and ill-treatment of protesters by the officers, none were known to have been investigated.

TAKE ACTION



Russian prisoner of conscience Konstantin Kotov detained by police in Moscow.

Take action for prisoner of conscience Konstanin Kotov

Konstanin Kotov was one of those detained in 2019. On September 5, Kotov was convicted of participation in “unsanctioned” protest rallies and sentenced to four years in prison. During Kotov’s trial, the judge refused to hear from most defence witnesses or watch video footage of Kotov’s supposed “crime”. Rather, on October 14, Moscow City Court instead upheld Konstantin Kotov’s conviction and sentence.

Kotov’s case was then once again reviewed by Moscow City Court, after the Constitutional Court of Russia ruled that his case should be reconsidered. Unfortunately, they had upheld his conviction on April 20, 2020, but reduced his prison sentence to a year-and-a-half. Kotov’s lawyers are preparing to appeal against this decision.

Unless Kotov’s conviction is cleared, a new and dangerous standard will have been set by which an

activist is imprisoned for merely participating in peaceful protest. It may well lead to many others being jailed. And it will definitely have a chilling effect on the right to freedom of peaceful assembly in Russia.

KONSTANTIN KOTOV is a prisoner of conscience and he should be immediately and unconditionally released.

CLICK THE LINK BELOW TO DOWNLOAD THE UA FOR FURTHER DETAILS ON HOW TO TAKE ACTION

<https://www.amnestyusa.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/uaa08220.pdf>

Stay tuned! Our book selections for 2021 will be announced by December 15th