

A Memory of Lies – a novel by Johnnie Gallop 2019 Synopsis

A story of family love; a dynastic epic in a Russian tradition. Across five decades, they weave a path for survival through the moral maze of war-torn Europe and emerging Africa.

Beginning in January 1945 in Berlin but flashing back to late 1930s Soviet Russia, the story is told by Pasha and Tanya Zayky. The novel tracks their journey, with daughter Sophia, westward across Europe, to arrive in London in 1946. The plot moves to Kenya where the family become enmeshed in the Mau Mau emergency. Returning to London in the early 1960s grandson Misha is born and raised by his baboushka Tanya.

Misha takes over as narrator and moves to Moscow after the fall of communism in the early 1990s. He makes a pilgrimage south, back to where the story began so that the wheel turns a full circle. It ends with a chance meeting in the Russian city of Krasnodar leaving the reader hungry for the second novel.

Inspired by true events, this is a vast and powerful saga but told with a lightness of touch.

The reader cares deeply for the family, appreciates the subtleties and nuances of their characters, and is drawn into the fear they experience. The Zaykys are confronted with enormous moral dilemmas and the reader will empathise and consider how the instinct to survive blends with love and morality within a family unit.

Whilst liking and respecting Pasha and Tanya the reader cannot help but feel distaste at their collaboration with the enemy, their willingness to sell out to the authorities, and particularly engagement with, or knowledge of, ethnic cleansing and slavery. Pasha and Tanya regard their actions as justified and ultimately for the benefit of their daughter but the reader will be less certain, particularly given that, at various points, the Zaykys seem to thrive rather than just merely survive. Nevertheless, the reader's empathy overcomes modern sensibilities and political correctness, to question what they might do under similar circumstances.

The story weaves significant historical events not well covered elsewhere, notably the anti-Soviet feelings of the Kuban Cossacks, the fear felt as a foreigner in post-war London, and the horror of late British colonial rule. There is a comparison of the terrors of 1930s Soviet Russia, with 1940s Nazi concentration camps, alongside the internment camps and villagisation schemes of 1950s British Colonial Kenya. The similarities are made plain.

In the end the reader is left considering how the presentation of history morphs over time in light of whichever is the prevailing dogma. How many 'true' memories are merely lies?

'A Memory of Lies' draws influence from Pasternak's 'Zhivago', Archer's 'Kane and Abel', Makine's 'A Life's Music', and Orwell's 'Down and Out in Paris and London'.