

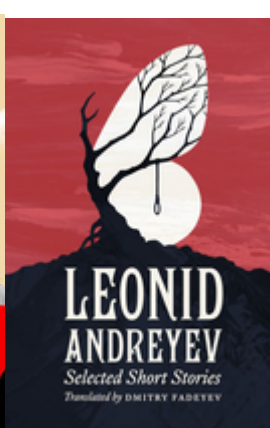
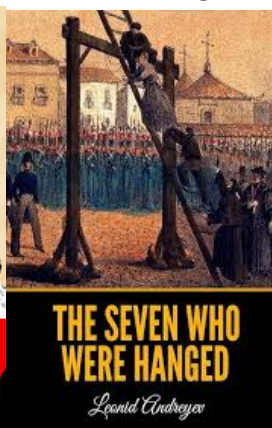


Darkly Amusing Slavic/Eastern European Fiction and Folklore Fantasy

I created this list for a patron who was looking for weirdly funny dark Slavic fiction. She was open to more general fiction as well as folklore fantasy. She had enjoyed Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita* and Andrzej Sapkowski's *Witcher* series. She was open to some romance but didn't want to read books with heavy themes of sexual assault and/or domestic abuse or books with frustratingly naive/dense female protagonists. I omitted a lot of Slavic-inspired books for teens due to their relatively lightness and heavy romantic emphasis.

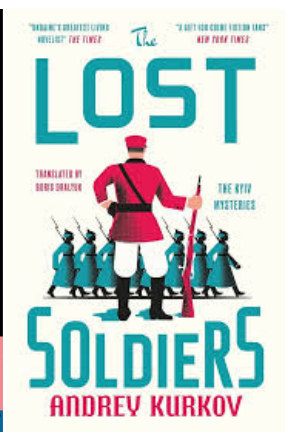
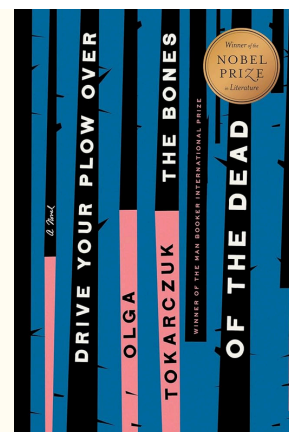
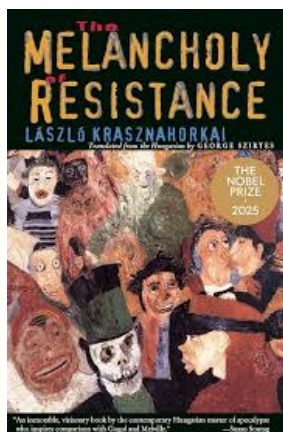
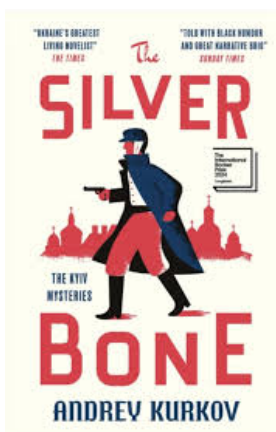
General Slavic/Eastern European Fiction

- **More Mikhail Bulgakov.** The king of Russian surrealist literature. His unique, whimsical, humorous, and wildly inventive work is heavily satirical. Underneath the eccentric surface lies pointed critiques of the Soviet system, so much so most of his work was not released until after his death.
 - ***The Heart of a Dog* (also translated as *A Dog's Heart*).** In this sendup of the Russian Revolution, a professor's wild experiments create a hybrid human dog who's unleashed on Moscow and quickly gains political power.
 - ***Diaboliad*.** A clerk for a match factory contends with Soviet-style chaos in this satirical short story.
 - ***The Fatal Eggs*.** This satirical science fiction novella follows another "successful" but ill-advised experiment, this one involving artificially enlarging animals. Giant, aggressive poultry and reptiles quickly overtake the Soviet Union.
- **Leonid Andrejev's work.** Andrejev was writing his strikingly weird short stories, novellas, and plays before the Revolution, and his morbid, vivid tales about insanity and murder shocked polite society. He is frequently called the Russian Edgar Allan Poe.
 - ***Lazarus*.** Andrejev reimagines the Biblical story of Lazarus as a zombie story.
 - ***Dilemma*.** An unbalanced, jealous physician plots murder.
 - ***The Red Laugh*.** This disturbing, surreal short story, a reaction to the Russo-Japanese War, is often said to foreshadow nuclear warfare.
 - ***The Seven Who Were Hanged*.** This novella follows seven revolutionaries condemned to death.





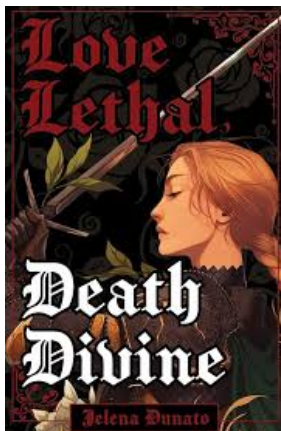
- **Andrey Kurkov's *The Kyiv Mysteries* series.** Ukrainian writer Kurkov is highly influenced by Bulgakov and shares his penchant for the darkly humorous and the absurd. This entertaining historical mystery series follows Samson, a likable, ordinary man who stumbles into becoming a detective during the chaotic early years of the Russian Civil War in Kyiv. Kurkov relies on actual Soviet case files for the gloriously weird mysteries in this historically accurate, dryly funny series full of interesting, eccentric characters. In a touch of matter-of-fact absurdity, Samson can still hear from an ear that was cut off in an attack, and he uses this in both his personal and professional life to his advantage. There is also a charming romantic subplot.
- **Olga Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead*.** A reclusive, eccentric Polish woman with an interest in astrology and poetry becomes intrigued by a spate of recent unusual deaths in her village and inserts herself into the investigation with her own bizarre theories in this humorous, quirky, magical realism-ish novel that is equal parts literary thriller and fairy tale.
- **Nikolai Gogol's work.** 19th century writer Gogol is the father of surrealistic, satirical Russian literature and was a strong influence on both Andreyev and Bulgakov. He wrote scathing critiques of the Russian Empire in his tales of ordinary people trapped in comedically bizarre situations.
 - "Viy." Gogol claimed this eerie short story about a priest haunted by a witch whose corpse he is supposed to watch was inspired by folklore, but modern scholars believe he made that up.
 - "The Nose." A government official develops an extremely large nose.
 - "Diary of a Madman." A government official matter-of-factly chronicles his descent into insanity.
 - "The Overcoat." The search for an overcoat takes a dark turn.
- **László Krasznahorkai's *The Melancholy of Resistance*.** Technically not Slavic but funny Eastern European surrealism highly influenced by Gogol. A small Hungarian village prepares to welcome a circus that features the largest taxidermized whale body in the world, but rumors about the circus start to swirl and cause widespread panic and madness.





Slavic Folklore-Inspired Folklore Fantasy

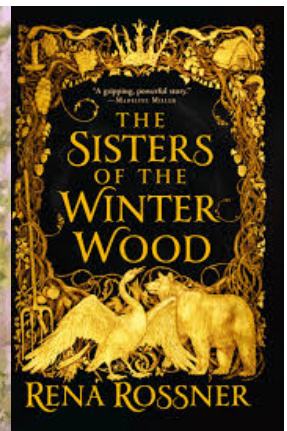
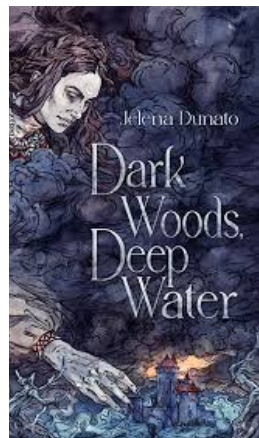
- **Jelena Dunato's work.** Dunato is a Croatian writer whose fantasy work is all set in a world inspired by her country's history and mythology. However, Dunato prefers to term her worldbuilding Eastern Adriatic to better convey the diverse history of this culture, which includes ancient Greek and Roman, Illyrian, Byzantine, Venetian, and Austro-Hungarian influences, in addition to Croatian. Each book is a different fantasy subgenre.
 - ***Dark Woods, Deep Water.*** In an enchanted forest, a castle preys on unsuspecting passersby, who are sacrificed to a dark goddess. One night, three very different people find themselves trapped in the castle—a spoiled heiress fleeing her marriage, a servant to a warrior prince, and an enterprising, intelligent con artist who desperately wants a better life. One of them must die in this atmospheric, bleak, gothic dark fantasy/fairy tale. **Note: The book does have sexual assault in it, though not graphic and more frequently alluded to than actually shown.**
 - ***Ghost Apparent.*** This moody, atmospheric standalone prequel novella to *Dark Woods* focuses on a deposed princess who summons the Croatian gods to help her win back her throne from the uncle who has killed her father and seized power. This dark political fantasy blends Dunato's rich Eastern Adriatic worldbuilding with the violent, scheming political intrigue of a Renaissance court.
 - ***Love Lethal, Death Divine.*** This is a dark, bittersweet fantasy romance set in the same Eastern Adriatic fantasy world. When a woman learns her prince husband has died, she makes a bargain with the gods to bring him back. They agree but only if she goes back in time and can make him fall in love with her again. However, once she has gone back, she discovers she has been tricked.
 - **Rena Rossner's *Sisters of the Winter Wood.*** This atmospheric historical fantasy is set in a small Jewish village on the border of Moldova and Ukraine during the early 20th century pogroms and features Eastern European Jewish folklore. When Liba's parents leave to go on a journey, they tell her they are both shapeshifters, a bear and a swan. They also warn her not to tell her sister Laya, but when Laya becomes entranced with a group of strange visitors and dark forces threaten from the woods, Liba may have to rely on her magical heritage to save her sister and their village.



The Viy

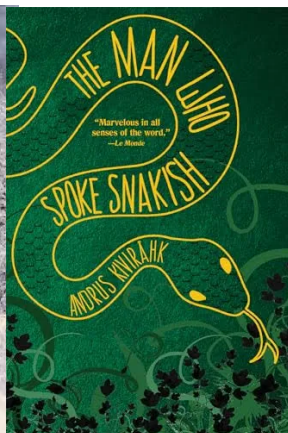


NIKOLAI GOGOL





- **Leena Likitalo's *The Waning Moon Duology*.** This unusual, atmospheric series from a Finnish author blends early 20th century Russian history with steampunk infused with dark magic. Based on the lives of the ill-fated imperial Romanov sisters, it features a Rasputin-ish figure who claims he can predict the future with a mysterious machine and the 5 imperial "Daughters of the Moon," the eldest of whom will inherit the throne. *The Five Daughters of the Moon* is based on the Russian Revolution while its sequel *The Sisters of the Crescent Empress* is based on the Russian Civil War.
- **Andrus Kivirähk's *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*.** This inventive, imaginative novel is not Slavic but instead draws vividly on Estonian folklore. Set in a fantastical medieval Estonia during early Christianization, it follows a young boy named Leemet, who lives in the woods and is the last to speak snakish, a language that allows people to communicate with and control animals. He tries to preserve ancient traditions as others move out of the forest into villages to farm and worship a different deity than the ancient forest gods. An often humorous and violent magical realism-infused fairy tale, the book features lots of bizarre characters, including a goat-sized pet louse, a flying frog, and a lovesick bear.
- **A.B. Poranek's *Where The Dark Stands Still*.** This atmospheric, gothic fantasy novel is the only YA book on this list. It features a romantic subplot and has often been compared to Miyazaki's work and called a combination of *Howl's Moving Castle* and Polish folklore. Liska was raised to believe that magic and its practitioners are monstrous, until she herself manifests magical abilities. She is eventually caught by the Leszy, the demon warden of the spirit wood outside her village, and must serve a year-long indenturehood with him. She soon learns, however, that nobody else who has struck this bargain has ever been seen again.
- **Anna Kovatcheva's *She Made Herself a Monster*.** Darkly atmospheric literary historical fiction drawn from Bulgarian folklore about a con artist who works as a "vampire hunter" who comes to a cursed village and tries to save a girl from a forced marriage to her guardian. **Note: There are some elements of sexual assault in the book, but it is not graphically described.**





- **C.J. Cherryh's *Rusalka* (part of the Russian Stories series).** This is part of a trilogy, but we only have the first book in the system. I included it, though, because it is one of the earliest examples of Slavic fantasy for American readers and the author is known for her immersive and well-researched worldbuilding. Released in the 1980s, this slow-paced, atmospheric, dark horror/mythological fantasy novel depicts the Rusalka myth, a vengeful ghost of a murdered girl. In the novel, two travelers find themselves in the woods. Pyotr the fugitive mocks Sasha's fear and superstitions, until they take shelter in a wizard's remote cabin.

Not in the System But Possibly of Interest

- **Jasper Kent's *The Danilov Quintet* series.** Vampires meet Russian history in this gritty, dark, slow-paced five-book series that blends historical fiction with dark fantasy horror. The books span over 100 years, from the Napoleonic Era through the Russian Revolution and includes critical points in Russian history, like the Napoleonic Invasion, the Decembrist Uprising, the Crimean War, and the revolutionary group People's Will. These are not romantic glamorous vampires. They are terrifying, bloodthirsty villains.

