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Reading Group Gold

The Imperial Wife

Irina Reyn

ABOUT THE BOOK

"The Imperial Wife is a smart, engaging novel that parallels two fascinating worlds and two singular women. Irina Reyn writes beautifully of immigrants, art and the vagaries of love." —Jess Walter, National Book Award finalist and author of the *New York Times* bestseller, *Beautiful Ruins*

Two women's lives collide when a priceless Russian artifact comes to light.

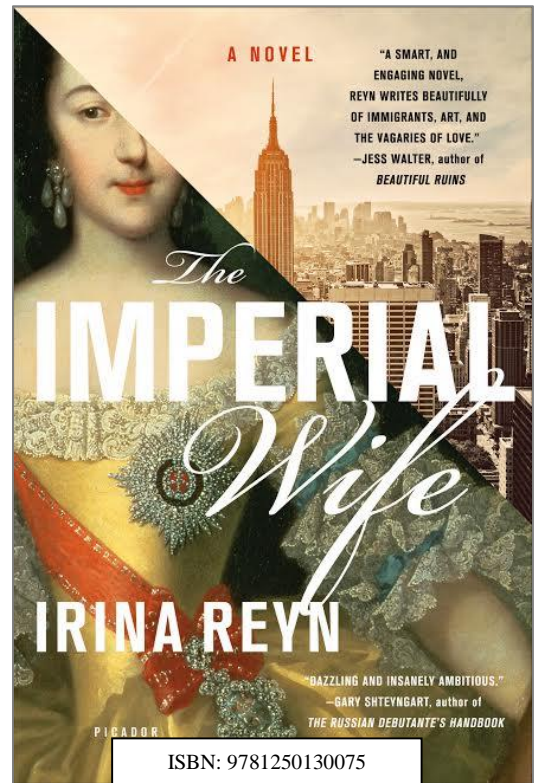
Tanya Kagan, a rising specialist in Russian art at a top New York auction house, is trying to entice Russia's wealthy oligarchs to bid on the biggest sale of her career, The Order of Saint Catherine, while making sense of the sudden and unexplained departure of her husband.

As questions arise over the provenance of the Order and auction fever kicks in, Reyn takes us into the dazzling world of Catherine the Great, the infamous 18th-century empress, who may have owned the priceless artifact, and who, it turns out, faced many of the same issues Tanya wrestles with in her own life.

Suspenseful and beautifully written, *The Imperial Wife* asks whether we view female ambition any differently today than we did in the past. Can a contemporary marriage withstand an "Imperial Wife"?

QUESTIONS AND TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Tanya and Catherine are both ambitious women struggling to make sense of this aspect of their personalities. How does the way we view professional ambition in women changed from the time of Catherine the Great?
2. The oligarch Sasha Medovsky says there is no such thing as a true marriage of equals. Do you agree? Can a contemporary marriage thrive when a wife is more ambitious or successful than her husband or do we still have a problem with this dynamic?
3. An immigration story plays an important role in both Tanya and Catherine's lives. How does it inform the choices they make? In what ways do they feel they have a different set of expectations imposed on them?



4. This book depicts multiple tensions between the two main women and the environments in which they find themselves: Tanya and her co-workers and clients at Worthington's as well as her Vandermatter in-laws, Catherine and the foreign, disapproving court. What are the challenges but also potential benefits of being planted outside of one's comfort zone?
5. Why doesn't Tanya want Carl to see the Order? How does she go about moving beyond the past in the marriage? Should either Tanya or Carl have acted differently when the Order of St. Catherine exposed recent wounds? Do Tanya's friend Alla's words— that the first years of marriage are the hardest— ring true?
6. "When would I finally be satisfied with what I've achieved? At each juncture, there was always more to want, more to strive for," Tanya thinks. Do you think American contemporary work culture endorses this point of view? Do we ever achieve a point of satisfaction with our successes?
7. This novel contains many instances of gifting, re-gifting, taking and stealing. The Order is given to Catherine, taken away from Catherine, returned to Catherine. Later, it is sold by Bolsheviks and auctioned off to Russian oligarchs. Tanya has a history of shoplifting, and the stealing of the Order becomes a final chance to save her marriage. What role do you think this theme plays in the book?
8. The epigraph to the book is a quote from Catherine the Great that asserts her unique right to rule because of essentially male characteristics. ("If I may dare to use such terms, I take the liberty to assert on my own behalf that I was an honest and loyal knight, whose mind was infinitely more male than female.") Later this is the subject of Carl's paper at Ditmas College. Do you think we still value or reject traditionally "male" qualities in our female "rulers"?
9. Both women in the novel have complicated relationships to the homes they left. "If only they knew that I'm neither us nor them; unlike Nadia Kudrina at Christie's, I'm no insider among the oligarchs and unlike Carl, I'll never be truly American. What they don't know is that I exist in a third space," Tanya says. What is this third space? How has the contemporary global world changed the notion of "home"?
10. Do you think Tanya's manipulation of the auction is wrong? Why or why not?
11. What do you make of the ending? Do you think it is an ending of reunion? Do you think Tanya and Carl will pull through and go on to have a happy marriage?



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