

Reading Guide

Hotel Moscow

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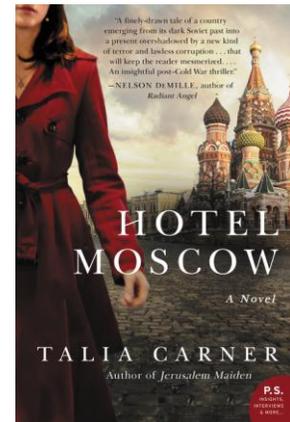
Introduction

Brooke Fielding, a thirty-eight year old New York investment manager and daughter of Jewish Holocaust survivors, finds her life suddenly upended in late September 1993 when her job is unexpectedly put in jeopardy. Brooke accepts an invitation to join a friend on a mission to Moscow to teach entrepreneurial skills to Russian business women, which will also give her a chance to gain expertise in the new, vast emerging Russian market. Though excited by the opportunity to save her job and be one of the first Americans to visit Russia after the fall of communism, she also wonders what awaits her in the country that persecuted her mother just a generation ago.

Inspired by the women she meets, Brooke becomes committed to helping them investigate the crime that threatens their businesses. But as the uprising of the Russian parliament against President Boris Yeltsin turns Moscow into a volatile war zone, Brooke will find that her involvement comes at a high cost. For in a city where “capitalism” is still a dirty word, where neighbors spy on neighbors and the new economy is in the hands of a few dangerous men, nothing Brooke does goes unnoticed—and a mistake in her past may now compromise her future.

Questions for Discussion

1. When Brooke first decides to go to Moscow, her goal is to gain expertise about the new market in order to save her job. Discuss the change in her goals once she arrives at the Gorbachevskaya Street Factory.
2. It's widely believed that friendship can transcend cultures. Can it really? Discuss Brooke's relationship with the Russian women she meets in light of her realization of their anti-Semitic past (Olga) or present (Svetlana).
3. How has escaping her sad home and the legacy of the Holocaust affected Brooke? Did she gain the freedom she sought?
4. With the fall of communism Russian women lost their rights and the safety nets of social services. Discuss what legal rights they had that women in the United States did not have and what rights we had that they sorely needed.



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5. Corruption in 1993 Russia seems to have pervaded every sphere of life. Discuss what you've learned from the novel, what feeds it, and what, you believe, are the ways to rein it. Is it different from what we know of corruption in our own political, economic, or social systems?
 6. In the novel, we get a glimpse of the living conditions of most Russians during communism when we visit Svetlana's and Vera's apartments. What, if anything, did you find surprising? In what other ways did you see the Russian government's indifference to its people?
 7. Judd becomes Brooke's love interest, but it takes her time to trust him. Discuss your take on the development of their relationship. What is unique to them and where do you foresee it heading?
 8. Brooke carries with her two secrets that threaten to destroy her career. Yet she is thrilled when one of those secrets is exposed. Does it have the potential to destroy her the way the other might? Are they viewed differently in the context of our current mores? What about your own social environment?
 9. Svetlana commiserates with Brooke upon learning that Brooke works long hours, and believes that "they make you work so hard." Discuss the differences in career choices and work lifestyle for people living under these the two superpowers.
 10. In spite of her high education, Olga is ignorant about the most basic business principals. The concept of capitalism is both revered and loathed. Discuss how a government controlled market economy is different from an open market economy—research, pricing, distribution, promotion. Do you believe that government should stay completely out of the game or impose some regulations and controls?
 11. When President Yeltsin was frustrated in his attempts to reform the old system and to pass new democratic laws, he fired the entire Duma, the Russian parliament whose members had been elected through a democratic process. (Or had they used their former power to be elected?) He eventually used the army to force them to leave the building and to subdue their sympathizers. What were his options before, during, and after the crisis? From what you know about Russia today, how have things changed?
 12. Brooke is looking forward to meeting her powerful host, Sidorov, until she meets him. Discuss his character. What was his motivation in inviting the group?
 13. Jenny is a colorful character who has taken control of her life and makes sure to be noticed. How is she perceived by her fellow American travelers and by the Russian women? What is her real motivation when she speaks with Sidorov?
 14. The Russian male characters vary. Compare Aleksandr, Sidorov, Viktor, and Belgorov. What typifies each and what motivates each?
 15. Judd tells Brooke about his father. How had Judd—a third generation survivor of the Holocaust—been affected by his family history?

16. Brooke does not want her Judaism to be defined by the Holocaust or by anti-Semitism. Yet, has she found an answer at the end of this short visit to Russia? Did the past twenty years of running away from her legacy help her find a new way? What makes her Jewish?

17. Judaism in our open, mostly secular Jewish society is seeking new definitions, new grooves. Discuss what it means to you to be Jewish. If you are a non-practicing Christian, what defines your Christianity?

18. When Svetlana expresses anti-Semitic opinions, Brooke's instinct to correct her is always pushed aside by more urgent issues. At the end, in spite of Svetlana's repeated remarks, Brooke does everything to save her. Discuss what this means in terms of Brooke's Jewish values.

19. Russian women seem to have strong opinions about femininity. What does the notion of femininity mean to them, and how much is it the same or different in your social milieu?

20. Olga gives Brooke a matryoshka doll. Discuss the symbolism of these nesting dolls both in the context of the novel and your own life.