

REVIEW

Leaps of Passion and Perseverance — A Review of Juhea Kim’s “City of Night Birds”

by Andrea Färber



Juhea Kim is a rising star in the literary sky. Her first published novel *Beasts of a Little Land* (Ecco, 2021) became an international bestseller and won the 2024 Yasnaya Polyana award. She was also a guest editor for *Tint Journal's* anthology *Tinted Trails* (Forum Stadtpark, 2023). In her newest release *City of Night Birds* (Ecco, 2024), she captures her passion for ballet while soaring even higher in her literary journey.

City of Night Birds follows Natalia Leonova, a former prima ballerina who struggles with various relationships in her life — her relationship to ballet, to her family, her friends, and love. Two years after an accident has left her unable to dance, she returns from Paris to her hometown St. Petersburg, depressed and dependent on the drugs that dampen both her chronic pain and tumultuous emotions. After her arrival, she is haunted by the ghosts of her past that urge her to return to the stage.

Juhea's method of unraveling Natalia's story is intricate and riveting. The novel begins on an airplane as it descends upon St. Petersburg and traces Natalia's arrival in the city. She meets an old acquaintance who invites her to take on the role of Giselle at Mariinsky Theatre after her two year break. Although unwilling to participate and doubting her ability to dance due to her injury, Natalia is drawn to the theatre. From here onward, time no longer progresses linearly in the novel: The narrative jumps between past and present, oftentimes only indicated by the beginning of a new paragraph. These shifts add an interesting dynamic to the novel, although it sometimes takes a moment to realize to which point in Natalia's life the story has moved. Events of the past are slowly being untangled that explain Natalia's character in the present.



"City of Night Birds" by Juhea Kim

Flashes of the past trace the ballerina's professional career. A child from a poor background, Natalia possesses a gift for ballet and lives for nothing else after being accepted at a prestigious ballet school. Starting at the Vaganova Ballet Academy and Mariinsky theater, she will move on to the world-famous Bolshoi theatre in Moscow and end her career in Paris. Unsurprisingly, the novel focuses on numerous aspects that are intricate to the world of ballet but might be unfamiliar to a reader who is new to the topic: in depth descriptions of

ballets, musings about the roles and their challenges for the dancers such as in *Giselle* or *Don Quixote*, grueling training and a competitive and spiteful environment. Natalia never seems to struggle with the challenges that ballet throws at her growing up and, even as a reader with no knowledge about this world, it did make me wonder if her success might not have been too easy to achieve.

Her stressful but prolific professional life is warped by her private life: a rocky relationship with her mother, an absent father, and a sense of loneliness as friendships with her peers seem to be difficult for her. Natalia, in my opinion, isn't a character that comes across as necessarily *likeable* — she is not the kind of person that I could imagine befriending — but there is something vulnerable about her that elicits empathy. From the outside, she is a person that appears to have it all: a gift for dancing, a successful career, fame, and lots of money. Her insecurities are only revealed in her uncertainty of how to approach other people, and it's these moments that make the character feel truly human.

Juhea Kim © Nola Logan

One of the strengths of Juhea's writing is her descriptive style.

Juhea Kim © Nola Logan

She manages to capture moments so vividly in her description in this novel that the images she paints made me feel as if I

was experiencing these things through the eyes of Natalia. And this is not an exaggeration. There were a couple of scenes in which I came across these descriptions of things that I had experienced in my own life but never knew how to put that feeling they elicited in me into actual words to portray them accurately. Judging by the amount of descriptive language in this novel, it is safe to assume that Juhea knows that this is one of her strong suits as well. However, there are some instances in which her descriptiveness is over-the-top, such as when she describes a character's hair as framing his face "like corn silk" (245). It is examples like these that read a bit odd in comparison to Juhea's usually skilled way of setting the scene and disrupt the immersion.

All in all, *City of Night Birds* is a love letter from Juhea Kim to ballet that does not shy away from addressing its dark side as well. The novel is by no means an easy read — the themes are dark and the shifting of narrative times requires a reader to pay attention. Plot points aren't easily resolved and oftentimes the reader might not agree with Natalia. But all of this is what makes this novel so compelling. It is challenging, but the way it unravels in the end makes the bitter journey all the sweeter.