

Title: The Erotic Charm of Russianness: Lara Vapnyar's *Memoirs of a Muse* and Irina Reyn's *What Happened to Anna K.*

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Lara Vapnyar and Irina Reyn both belong to a growing number of Russian immigrants who have become successful American novelists writing in English. This paper explores how their debut novels *Memoirs of a Muse* (Pantheon Books, 2006) and *What Happened to Anna K.* (Simon & Schuster, 2008) exploit their heroines' Russianness as a strategy of seduction. The protagonists of both novels are young Russian women living in New York who combine the immigrant dream of social ascent with the fantasy of becoming the heroine of a novel. In pursuit of that dream, both of them become the "muses" of mediocre American writers who are intrigued by the allure of their immigrant chic and alleged Slavic sensuality. Russian literature is implicated in both novelistic plots in a literal and symbolic manner. Superficial conversations about Dostoevsky provide the "pick-up lines" that set both romances in motion. At the same time, both heroines enact a literary script: Vapnyar's protagonist Tanya Rumer sees herself as Dostoevsky's femme fatale Apollinaria Suslova, while Anna K. re-enacts the plot of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. Like Tolstoy's heroine, she is an avid reader who confuses reality and fiction. Her narcissist desire to play the tragic heroine in a drama of her own making is motivated by her status as an immigrant. In this sense, Anna's (and Tanya's) attempts at seducing Americans with their Russian "authenticity" self-parody the situation of an immigrant author who is striving to capture the attention of the American reading public. Both Vapnyar and Reyn posit the practice of *Alltagsgeschichte* as a prosaic counter-model to the auto-exoticism and romanticizing of the "Russian Soul." In Reyn's book, the father of Anna's lover is a history professor who acts as a sort of *raisonneur*. In Vapnyar's book, the heroine herself becomes a professional historian of Russian daily life, which can be read as a symbolic representation of Vapnyar's own role as a Russian-American novelist and cultural mediator.