

Title: En/gendering the Muse

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Lara Vapnyar's short story collections, *There Are Jews in My House* (2003) and *Broccoli and Other Tales of Food and Love* (2008), as well as her 2006 novel *Memoirs of a Muse* have been reviewed (Pinsker, Furman, Wanner, Munson) in the context—and as representative—of the young generation of Russian immigrant writers, such as Gary Shteyngart and David Bezmozgis. In spite of the similarities in establishing a writer's identity in an adapted language, Vapnyar's narratives are distinguished from those of her fellow male writers by the way in which she de- and re-constructs her heroine's identifying features of gender, nationality, and vocation, and *Memoirs of a Muse* offers particularly fruitful material for examining the permutations of this problematic symbiosis (gender/nationality/vocation). The protagonist of this *Bildungsroman*, Tania Rumer, seems to freely choose her identity as muse to a male writer. Within a larger cultural context, however, Tania's desire is shaped by the perennial Russian dyad of mother/widow (Goscilo, Lanoux): both her mother and grandmother are widows, whose interactions with the masculine are realized in their devotion to the great men of Russian literature. The mother/widow binary determines the paradigm for Tania's subsequent interactions—she fashions herself as a nurturer of a male writer into greatness, but in the process she authors the memoirs, as did famous Russian widows. While the mothers/widows provide Vapnyar with the memoirs model, there is also an un-acknowledged presence of the fathers for this young émigré writer. The literary fathers to Vapnyar's narratives about the Russian immigrant experience in New York City are Sergei Dovlatov and Eduard Limonov, whose narratives were the first to explore the drama of de- and re-constructing the identity of a modern Russian writer in an Anglophone environment. Vapnyar's protagonist retraces—literally and metaphorically—several of Limonov's itineraries detailed in *It's Me, Eddie* (1976) and in *His Butler's Story* (1982).