



The Age of Ice

J.M. Sidorova

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The Empress Anna Ioannovna has issued her latest eccentric order: construct a palace out of ice blocks. Inside its walls her slaves build a wedding chamber, a canopy bed on a dais, heavy drapes cascading to the floor--all made of ice. Sealed inside are a disgraced nobleman and a deformed female jester. On the empress's command--for her entertainment--these two are to be married, the union consummated inside this frozen prison. In the morning, guards enter to find them half-dead. Nine months later, two boys are born.

Surrounded by servants and animals, Prince Alexander Velitzyn and his twin brother, Andrei, have an idyllic childhood on the family's large country estate. But as they approach manhood, stark differences coalesce. Andrei is daring and ambitious; Alexander is tentative and adrift. One frigid winter night on the road between St. Petersburg and Moscow, as he flees his army post, Alexander comes to a horrifying revelation: his body is immune to cold.

J. M. Sidorova's boldly original and genre-bending novel takes readers from the grisly fields of the Napoleonic Wars to the blazing heat of Afghanistan, from the outer reaches of Siberia to the cacophonous streets of nineteenth-century Paris. The adventures of its protagonist, Prince Alexander Velitzyn--on a lifelong quest for the truth behind his strange physiology--will span three continents and two centuries and bring him into contact with a range of real historical figures, from Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*, to the licentious Russian empress Elizaveta and Arctic explorer Joseph Billings.

The Age of Ice Details

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From Reader Review The Age of Ice for online ebook

Meg - A Bookish Affair says

I was initially intrigued by "The Age of Ice" as it sounded like it would be a good mash-up of historical fiction and magical realism, two of my bookish favorites. This book initially started out well for me. We get a good story about the main character, Alexander and his brother's origins. They are almost mythological, which I really liked. Eventually, this book sort of petered out for me.

I did really enjoy the setting. I've been craving fiction about Russia recently and I really enjoyed reading about Imperial Russia. The description of the various places that Alexander went were really good. The descriptions of St. Petersburg were also very good. You really get a good feeling for Alexander's world.

The story itself is where the book sort fell flat for me. As the book goes on and Alexander continues to live on into the 20th century, the book got a little more confusing. Most of the book is focused on Alexander's life during the 1700s but we get glimpses (and they are really only glimpses) into his life as the book continued to speed up towards the end. I found myself wishing that the book would slow down and give more detail to give the ending a little more weight. I just found myself sort of let down by the end of the book.

David V. says

Received as an ARC from the publisher. Started it on 6-17-13. I couldn't get into this book, and I really really tried. I gave up on page 250 of 388 pages. I used to give books 100 pages to grab me, and if they didn't, move on. Well, when I realized that I wouldn't live long enough to read everything I want to read, then I changed it to 30, unless someone whose opinion I respect tells me it gets better, keep at it (The girl with the Dragon Tattoo was like that.) I went way past that level for this one. Maybe if I heard a discussion by the author, I might give it a second attempt. For now, I'm moving on.

Lorina Stephens says

How to assess J.M. Sidorova's debut novel, *The Age of Ice*? Not an easy task.

The premise of the tale is an epic journey of a Russian nobleman over 200 years of his unnaturally extended life, from 18th century Czarist Russia, through countless wars, political upheaval both national and international. Throughout that journey we are witness to protagonist, Prince Alexander M. Velitzyn's, struggle with his strange physiology: he generates cold. Any extreme emotion will cause discomfort, even harm, to anyone he touches, a sort of cold version of Midas' Touch.

In essence the story explores an age-old concept: what does it mean to be human? And with that premise of course comes exploration of love in all its permutations and perversions.

The narrative voice is first person, past tense, but told in an impersonal, distant tone. While that choice of voice very much reflects Velitzyn's struggle with his inability to embrace or express any intimacy because of the cold he will generate, it also, at times, tends to alienate the reader so that development of pathos for Velitzyn and his plight becomes strained. I'm not sure how else Sidorova might have related this story as effectively. Perhaps that's in fact one of the strengths of the story, rather than a weakness, that the author has

so skilfully embodied Velitzyn's ability (or disability, depending on perspective) that the entire narrative is cold, just as the protagonist is cold both physically and socially.

There is little by way of actual dialogue in the story. Instead, Sidorova has chosen to relate dialogue rather than write dialogue, which again reinforces the theme of emotional and physical cold.

Along with Velitzyn's strange ability to generate epic proportions of cold, is his longevity. While his physical appearance arrests at about the age of 50, he goes on to witness over two centuries, chasing love, chasing an answer to his physical aberrations, exploring business enterprises, artistic development of his cold ability by way of ice sculpture, and in the end abandons all enterprise simply to increase his amassed wealth by brokering deals.

Even then, thwarted still by love and the lack of any answers to what, exactly, he is, he disappears into the Arctic sunset, as it were, with the hope of regenerating the ice cap in order to arrest global warming. It's this final act which, in my opinion, is the undoing of what could have been a great literary novel. It seems almost a throw-away ending to a novel that ended up too long, too repetitive, almost as though Sidorova was searching for an ending and in the end gave up.

Still, some fascinating study of the effects of cold on humans in Siberia in the 19th century, some moments of beautiful writing, and some incisive insight into human nature. I would definitely watch for more from Sidorova.

Davina says

I loved this book at the beginning. I picked it off the New Arrivals shelf at the library, thinking it'd be an amusing way to spend a half hour before my ride took me back to my half-finished sci-fi paperback waiting for me at home. But the half hour flew by and I found I did not want to part with this "amusing" and strange story.

Yes, it is very strange. Yes, it is absurd while not falling into satire. It's magical realism historical fiction.

I loved Alexander's unreliable narration, so firmly rooted in his character, complete with an antiquated writing style. As a fan of 18th and 19th century literature, I was entertained and impressed. Not many modern writers can pull that off. I think it works so marvelously here because it is so keenly character-focused. Even when the style dips into a more modern tone, it fits with the character. Each sentence is constructed with careful aim towards showcasing his attitudes, strengths and faults. The flavor of Alexander Velitzyn is infused into each word and the taste is delicious. He is a complex, thoughtful and self-absorbed narrator; in other words, perfect for telling his tale.

The historical Russian setting is also excellently handled. Sidorova's research is thorough and her love of history contagious.

Then why less than five stars? Where does it go wrong? To put it bluntly, the concept. The story ends before the book. I kept reading because the writing is so scrumptious and the character engaging. But there's more to a story than character and setting. The sense of mystery at the outset dwindles away with a whimper. Alexander doesn't seem to grow from his experiences. There is no resolution or true discovery. I don't need or want a full metaphysical explanation or a "fix it" solution. I need something less and more: a character-driven concept, fitting with the rest of the work.

I really wanted to love this book from cover to cover. It began brilliantly and the writing was consistently luxurious. I liked Alexander, I enjoyed the Russian history, I loved the ways the coldness interfered with life. But the second half suffers from a lack of purpose.

Susan says

Prince Alexander M. Velitzyn and his twin brother, Prince Andrei, begin their life due to something between an unpleasant joke and a punishment. Their father, Prince Mikhail Velitzyn, was forced to act as a jester for Empress Anna Ioannovna, as punishment for an alleged affair with a Catholic noblewoman. The Empress decided to force a jester's wedding between Prince Mikhail and a female jester at the Court - a humpback named Avdotia Buzheninova. Sealed in a wedding chamber made of ice, the couple almost died - Avdotia did, in fact, die nine months later after producing the twins she conceived that day in St Petersburg. As soon as he was able, their father fled to his family estate to remarry, taking his sons with him.

This beautifully written story is told from the point of view of Prince Alexander, product of that bizarre union. He soon discovers that his strange beginnings have left him with a tragic ability to create ice. Not only is he impervious to the cold, but he creates feelings of freezing in others, which leaves him distant from other people and resentful of his inability to be physically close to others. Alexander also lives a (very) long life, which enables the author to take him through a long period of Russian history. We see him join the Elite Lieb Guards, travel to where his brother, sister in law and nephew are involved in a siege, join an expedition in search of the Northeast Passage and more. Alongside Alexander, we witness the time of the French Revolution, of Napoleon, visit the Far East and more, as history unfolds before him. Many real people play cameo roles in this novel - such as Mary Shelley - with nods to literature and history, which readers will enjoy. It is a novel with enormous scope and beautiful prose; an unusual book and a love letter to ice.

Ionia says

Assessing this book for review is somewhat like trying to tell the entire world history in less than 300 words. It isn't possible. Reading this novel is a journey through a world of history and amazing wonders and is a truly beautiful read. If you are into books that slowly and carefully unfold with excellent character development, "the Age of Ice" has you covered.

This is not an action filled book where things happen a mile a minute. The writing seems somewhat reserved and you never feel particularly close to the main character, but you never really have the desire to give up on him either. There is always a shield up between him and the reader, although I can't help, based on the story, but feel that this was intentional.

The main character suffers from a "cold" condition, where any time he is riled up, either positively or negatively, he experiences a full body cold that allows him to hold snow without it melting and makes his desire for a normal relationship more than impossible. The idea that the author wrote his character somewhat impersonally matches that theme perfectly. I found that I, as the reader, spent my time trying to get inside his head and feel closer to him but continually came up short, which made me feel frustrated, just as the character did as he searched for someone to be close to. Well played, J.M. Sidorova.

This book spans a long period of time, and while I found the complicated tale interesting and well written, there were times when I felt my mind wander a bit while reading. The writing itself is solid. The author has an amazing grasp on how to use the proper language to evoke emotion, and the dialogue is excellent,

although written in the same second hand delivery that makes it feel much less personal.

While I did have moments of wandering mind, there were many sections of this novel where I completely forgot myself and became so bound in the story that I could do nothing else but read, hoping the eventual result would be a happy one for the character that I had been with for the duration.

The ending of the book was a bit odd for me, and the reason why I have decided to go with four stars rather than five. I don't want to include a spoiler, so I will proceed cautiously. This book, as I mentioned above, spans a longer time period than most. When it catches up to the more recent history of the world, the character makes a decision about how he will carry on, and I just didn't feel that it quite worked with the rest of the book. It may have just been a personal expectation, but I felt the end struggled a bit to match the previous parts of this incredible Russian literature. I do give the author a lot of credit for dealing with important issues of environmental impact.

If you are going to read this book (and I recommend that you do) take some time away from life. Find a quiet place, and devote your mind to the story. It will consume you, amaze you and remind you that there are authors out there who use common words to create uncommon magic.

This review is based on a digital ARC from the Publisher.

Phil says

I wanted to finish to see what happened but I couldn't even do that.....stopped about 100 pages short....

Brenda says

At times, I seemed to be trudging through snow banks up to my eyelashes, unable to keep from admiring the eloquence of flakes. J.M. Sidorova's Alexander Velitzyn's love affair with ice is longer-lived than Smilla's or Snowflake Bentley's.

Although I did not skate through *The Age of Ice* as if I were on Olympic speed, I reveled in its cold artistry.

Its protagonist does fall in love more than once. He charges into battles like some berserker yeti. He meets Mary Shelley and inspires her account of an ice-bound ship. He longs to immerse himself in heat where he might "melt and die, like an ice maiden who got too close to fire in that old Russian fairy tale" (280).

Velitzyn is a cryogenic personality. His intense emotions burn. The novel recounts his quest for an Other who will not be hurt by his touch.

Like Virginia Woolf's Orlando, he survives history. Born in 1740, he is still alive in 2007.

I recommend this book to readers who do not require the kind of consummation found in the traditional plot.

Acknowledgement: my copy was provided by NetGalley.

Craig says

Other than "Where the Wild Things Are" and others of that ilk, I do not re-read books. Ever. This book may be the exception. There is so much to digest, one sitting may not be enough. Dark, transforming, exquisitely engaging, the life of the King of Ice reaches into your depths like a frigid Siberian night and holds tight. Spun around the history of Euro-Russian-Persian-French-Indian-German history of the 18th, 19th and into the 21st century the tale of Prince Alexander M. Velitzyn is odd, cold, tantalizing and truthfully one of most enjoyable reads I've had in a long time. I'm going back in to see if I missed any icy tidbits.

Emily says

My friend wrote this book and that's awesome! I'll confess that I probably wouldn't have read it otherwise, but I'm glad I did. There is so much stuff in this book--history and science and historical science and languages and even maps. And, of course, interesting characters and fantastic writing.

Eoghann Irving says

How to review _The Age of Ice?_ It's a question that's been nagging at me since I started reading it.

This is not in any way your standard fantasy tome. It's not even your standard alternate history story. It is unashamedly literary fiction that happens to have one fantastical element to it. So I guess I would probably put it in a category with things like *The Prestige* and *Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell*. So I knew going in this wasn't going to appeal to many fantasy fans. But with its focus on Russia it did sound very intriguing.

And the core idea is a fascinating one. This minor Russian nobleman who is "blessed" with an immunity to cold, the ability and the inability to die is a good start to any novel I think. But unlike adventure fiction our protagonist (you really can't call him a hero in that sense) is scared and limited by his power, rather than emboldened by it.

And we see how it shapes his life over the course of a couple of hundred years. As character studies go, that's pretty epic. Other characters don't get the same depth since this is a point of view novel and Alexander Velitzyn's understanding of other people seems very limited. Again and again we see him retreating from the world, or romanticizing their reactions to him (something that is cleverly echoed in the late stages of the book).

The description is, well I think perhaps poetic would be the best way to put it. Very vivid certainly, but more than I normally care to have to slog through. Again, that's the type of book it is. Even though we plough through several wars, there really isn't anything in the way of action, because that's not at all what this book is about.

So what is it about? Honestly I'm not entirely sure. In part it does seem to be a love letter to a long lost Russia which is described in wonderful detail. The historical research that must have gone into this both for Russia and later Persia and India is really very impressive. And the tone of the novel seems terribly Russian to me as well. It's all very grand with a feeling that ultimately it's doomed.

But in terms of the books plot? Really I'm not sure what the author was intending. The conclusion while

fitting seemed to spring out of nowhere for me and while it does end the story it doesn't close the story in any way that I can grasp.

So, how to review this book? It wasn't an easy read certainly. If you like challenging and literary books this is definite worth a look. The author's skill at word smithing is unmistakable. If your tastes run towards character based and heavy description you'll be in heaven I think.

If your tastes run more towards action? My bet is you will hate it. And I'm fully expecting to see a heavy split in reviews between those who give it 5 stars and those who give it 1 star.

For myself. I'm glad I read it. I found it interesting and I think it was worthwhile. But, I doubt I'll read it again.

Kara-karina says

SLIGHT SPOILERS

The Age of Ice is a book in its own genre which took me completely by surprise.

I love reading Russian authors in English language because if the book is good I can recommend it to you, guys, and you might pick it up one day and learn something about the culture and rich history I grew up with. The Age of Ice is one of those books.

It describes the life of a man who is born as a freak of nature. He is absolutely immune to cold, and he has this weird affinity for ice and frost. He also can not die.

Because of his sheer lifespan Velitzyn starts his military career during the reign of Empress Elizaveta, gets into the thick of Pugachev's rebellion during Catherine The Great, becomes a part of a team exploring Siberia, and let me tell you - the journey he undertakes is harsh and gripping. Its hardships turn him into a broken, quiet and dark man...

While he is slowly aging in his estate mourning the death of the only woman he loved, Napoleon invades Russia, and he undergoes a metamorphosis again becoming a sort of a Father Frost symbol of Russian partisans and only developing consciousness again as a younger version of himself in Paris after Napoleon's fall.

The fascinating tale doesn't stop there, because to escape the coldness within himself Alexander runs to a hot and dry Afghanistan where he becomes again embroiled into thick political intrigues of a Great Game between British and Russian Empire.

Little does he know that he will only see his beloved Russia again just before the Revolution while hiding under a facade of a British industrialist and falling crazy in love with a rich Russian girl...

I will have to stop the spoilers here, but bear in mind that the story reads as a recollection from Veliltzyn's letters and diaries to himself and presumably he is still alive right now...

This is a complex, slow and rich in detail historical fiction from those parts of the world you would not necessarily know much about. J.M. Sidorova must have done an enormous research because the historical details and atmosphere are just stunning, but at the forefront of it all is one man's struggle against the time and his own nature. It's melancholic and stark and very Russian.

I hope The Age of Ice will find its way to the right audience, because while I personally think this book is wonderful I can see that a lot of people will struggle with its unique style. Recommended.

Juli Rahel says

There was something about the whole premise of the novel that really drew me in. Russia also has tons of history to offer that, I think, doesn't get explored enough. Just in the 20th century, there was so much change and upheaval there which not only makes for interesting stories but also still fuels modern day politics. But to remain with the literary, I am very glad to have picked up this novel.

Inventive is definitely the word I would use for this novel. The concept of the main character coming from Ice and being constantly drawn to it is absolutely fascinating. On the one hand I wish Sidorova had explored Alexander's whole background more and the very fact of his existence, but on the other hand I like the mystery that remains around him throughout the whole novel. Authors sometimes try to rationalize the magic in their narratives and thereby completely destroy the magic itself. As a reader, it is fun to be able to come up with your own theories and it is what makes the reading experience different for each reader.

Historical fiction needs to be gotten right. There needs to be an even balance between history and fiction and I personally prefer it if the line between the two is blurry. It is better when each character both seems real enough to be actual historic fact but also seems fantastical enough to be mere fiction. It means that as a reader you get to really explore a novel. Sidorova does this amazingly well. The whole novel feels like one big magical journey through Russian, European and Asian history and although there are a lot of things that are clearly fictional (men impervious to cold) there were a lot of instances where I found myself surprised by the fact that these people existed or certain events occurred. In my review of a different historical novel I praised it for spotlighting an aspect of history one doesn't get taught a lot. Sidorova gives herself the time to slowly move from one time period to the next at her own pace, allowing her character to maybe not experience a certain war or a certain accident. It means that whether your familiar with Afghanistan's extended history or not, you will still be able to gain new and different insights from the novel. Sidorova did a lot of interesting research, which really adds to the novel.

I enjoyed Sidorova's writing style. At times she mixes in Russian or dialect words, but they never halt the reading process. Although I do have to add that there was a lull in the middle of the book, I generally didn't want to put it down. The beginning of the novel is very exciting, introducing czarist Russia and the main character and the Arctic Exploration is a very good extension of this. However, the half-way mark of the novel seems to be a moment in the novel where Sidorova wants to say something meaningful about Alexander and unfortunately that makes the narrative falter. Thankfully, she picks up the thread of the narrative again and the second half of the novel adds a whole new layer to the novel.

I was doubting between a 3 and 4 Universe rating. The Age of Ice is an amazing read that is highly enjoyable. The middle of the book stretches a little bit, but Sidorova really picks it up again. The novel offers a great insight into Russian history and therefore gives a whole new insight into European history as well. I would definitely recommend this to fans of historical fiction.

Caroline says

ALL SPOILERS HIDDEN

(Full disclosure: book abandoned at the 31% mark.)

The Age of Ice has a promising start:

I was born of cold copulation, white-fleshed and waxy like a crust of fat on beef broth left outside in winter. I was born of seed that would have seized with frost if spilled on the newlyweds' bed. I was born on the twenty-seventh of September because in the month of January my parents had been sealed in a wedding chamber made of ice.

The whole first chapter is this impressive. Sidorova is an accomplished writer. She knows how to construct a pretty sentence. Unfortunately, as early as chapter two, the magic has disappeared, and this part of the book's blurb, "Surrounded by servants and animals, Prince Alexander Velitsyn and his twin brother Andrei have an idyllic childhood on the family's large country estate" is over in a few paragraphs; all of a sudden Alexander and Andrei are men and before long Andrei is married, and shortly thereafter, (view spoiler).

Additionally, the only indication that their childhood is "idyllic" is the fact that (somehow; it's unclear except that he's a "disgraced nobleman") their father is wealthy. Their mom is nowhere to be found. That doesn't make for an "idyllic" childhood, by an objective standard, anyway; then, for some unclear reason, Andrei is an unhappy child who grows into a somewhat unhappy young adult. Alexander, who is the narrator of this book, on the other hand, is well-adjusted. As for being surrounded by animals...well, they have a family pet that happens to be a brown bear that, "sat on a chain by day and roamed the grounds as a watch by night, and who would dance for a treat when in the mood."

Looking at the larger picture, though, the story concerns Alexander trying to solve the mystery of why (view spoiler). Meanwhile, Andrei, his twin, doesn't suffer from this problem, making it all the more mysterious.

The story is strongest when it's focused on the romance of Alexander and Marie Tolstoy and of Alexander and Anna; those *easily* are its most riveting scenes. Unfortunately, these scenes are far too short *and* few and far between. In the interim, Sidorova chose to focus her story on the Napoleonic Wars--at times in painstaking detail--and an expedition to the Arctic, where Alexander measures the temperature of any and everything. Just consider this passage about a fish:

I pushed in through the crowd and crouched next to the 'toothy one.' Its eyes twisted in their sockets, its jaws clenched and unclenched; but snow coated it the thicker and more it struggled, and already scabs of ice were forming where only slime used to cover its writhing tail. I had a thermometer with me, as I always did by then—a habit turning into a need. I took it out of its sheath and shoved it into the eelpout's throat.

This is but one of many paragraphs overly devoted to tiny plot points. A sentence or two would suffice, if the scene needed to be included at all.

Brevity isn't Sidorova's strong suit. She seemed to enjoy writing long, detailed passages about uninteresting, irrelevant things. A few sentences later, Alexander is counting down the degrees of this fish's temperature, for instance.

The section about the Arctic expedition is essentially a dry itinerary. There's simply no verve whatsoever to this story. What few sparks there are die out almost as soon as they ignite. Considering that the driving force behind Alexander's quest to understand his "unique physiology" is (view spoiler), it doesn't make much sense that the scenes featuring Alexander and Anna are so scarce up to this point. After all, the book so far seems to be about them more than anything and how Alexander's "disability" affects their relationship.

As for the characters, which should be the lifeblood of any story, Sidorova created plenty of them; however,

they behave passively. She was guilty of having Alexander *tell* too much about what was said as opposed to *presenting* it via dialogue.

Additionally, almost all of the characters are men and very war-minded (or focused on the Arctic expedition). That makes for some incredibly dry reading. Some characters are featured more than others, yet they don't stand out well except perhaps for the one gay teenager in the mix, who's slightly more memorable than the other secondary characters, and that's really only because he's gay.

Final verdict: Exciting premise wasted thanks to horrible execution.

NOTE: I received this book as an Advanced Reader Copy from NetGalley in May 2013.

Linda Robinson says

Brilliant. This may be my favorite book this year. Epic, sweeping, and all the other superlatives that are liberally applied to books by Michener or Uris. I don't fall in love with literary characters, but I am in love with Prince Alexander Velitzyn. And many of the other characters merit a quickened heartbeat too. Speculative fiction is how Sidorova's novel is described. Speculative covers a lot of territory, and *The Age of Ice* covers more. Historical fiction in that some of the players were around in the span written. Horror perhaps for the brutal battle scenes, and barbaric political expediencies. Romance, fantasy, literary fiction. A smorgasbord for the fortunate hungry reader. What I am enjoying most about excellent fiction this decade is the singularity of science and imagination together. Sidorova builds this story as elaborately as the ice bedroom wherein our heroes were conceived. Her prose is biting and languid, as compelling as an ice storm, as breathtaking as its aftermath. Dangerous beauty. I cannot come up with a book that is close to the sculpture this novel chisels. Wonderful, unforgettable. Brava!
