

Andrew Drummond: Novgorod The Great (Polygon)

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Lives cross in 19th-century Russia.

In 19th-century Novgorod, everyone's got a story and they're just dying to tell it. The aged Russian soldier who stops = travellers at the city gate, climbs into a carriage and reminisces about the war.

The sentry who can't accompany a couple of civilians across a compound without breaking into an anecdote. The poor inn-keeper who can never get through his tale of the 1570 massacre uninterrupted.

Into Novgorod step two complete strangers: Ksenia, a Russian woman who appears to be fleeing her second husband; and Horatio, a former slave from the West Indies. Their chance meeting at the inn sets romantic sparks flying, and their flirtation continues as they are persuaded to visit an old general across town, who is on his deathbed and not expected to last the night.

Half a world away, and several years earlier, the gruff Andrew Cochrane-Johnstone is reunited with his illegitimate son, John Cochrane, who is keen to impress his father. John (based on a real historical figure, as are all the main characters) has walked thousands of miles, all the way across Siberia to the tip of Asia. Now, anyone who could claim that he furnished himself "with a fresh Cossack" at the start of the day clearly has a gripping tale or two to tell, but his father stubbornly insists the young man has wasted his life and has nothing of interest to say.

But never mind that: why did Ksenia find her first husband's nakedness so peculiarly becoming? That's the question Edinburgh-based author Drummond raises at every opportunity and, in a riff lifted from *Tristram Shandy*, delays answering, preferring to drop clues as to how these disparate characters might all be connected.

Even though there's a romance at the heart of it, *Novgorod The Great* isn't really a novel for engaging the emotions. It's fun, though, evoking the period in its chapter titles and marginalia – choice phrases plucked from the text like "rum, weevils and the rough backsides of slippery midshipmen" – while ditching most of the ornate language that might be a stumbling block for modern readers. And, amazingly, some of the credibility-stretching coincidences happened in real life. You couldn't make it up.