

The Deeper the Water the Uglier the Fish, By Katya Apekina
Two Dollar Radio

Born in Moscow, Russia, Katya Apekina is a novelist and screenplay writer. Her first novel, *The Deeper the Water the Uglier the Fish*, was named a Best Book of 2018 by Kirkus, BuzzFeed, LitHub and others, was a finalist for the LA Times Book Prize and has been translated into Spanish, Catalan, French, German and Italian. Apekina lived in Moscow, as well as New York, New Orleans, and Los Angeles which are the core settings of the novel. She uses her Russian background and uses Russian writers like Nabokov, Bulgakov, Gogol to create an extremely dark, sad, unsettling story with hints of humor and sarcasm. *The Deeper the Water the Uglier the Fish* explores the beautiful relationship between sisters and how self-centered, depressed parents can hinder their bond. The novel is split between over ten perspectives and point of views, including the two sisters and the parents. The short, but emotional and detailed sections are one of the most interesting aspects of the novel and keep the story at a fast pace.

The two sisters, Edie, 16, and Mae, 14, already had a complex life, but once their mother, Marianne, who struggles with depression and an unsuccessful poetry career, tried to kill herself and is put in an intensive care center, the sisters are forced to move out of New Orleans and to New York with their Father. Dennis is a civil rights activist and has a very successful writing career. He left his daughters and his former wife when Edie was four years old and has been absent up until Marianne was unfit to care for her children. As any sixteen year old would, Edie holds immense resentment and anger towards her father, and while he is desperately trying to fill the void of a fatherly figure, Edie hates being away from home, school, her boyfriend, and hopes for her ill mother to get better so she can be freed from Dennis. Mae on the other hand, lived in close quarters to her mother, and felt trapped under her mother's dark thoughts. Being with her father was a breath of fresh air and Mae was more open to rekindling a better relationship with her father and didn't have a desire to leave. While Edie and Mae love and care for each other and both recognize the terrible situation they are in, their contradicting views on their parents form distance from each other. The center of the story are Edie and Mae, however Apekina adds in a handful of different points of views in forms of letters, past memories, commentary, and documents from both present and past. We see the situation through tons of different eyes like the girls' grandfather, Dennis's sister, Aunt Rose and one of his lovers, Amanda, Edie's friend Charlie and her boyfriend Markus. Each character gives the reader a different viewpoint and retells a new piece to the puzzle as the story unfolds.

The stereotypical favoritism is very prevalent throughout the story and plays a huge role in the family dynamic. Mae, being the youngest and also the most open, is set in the middle of two parents. Mae resembles her mother, which makes her dislike being around her. However Marianne spent every waking moment with Mae and drowned her daughter in her own worrying thoughts and depression.

"We were like a hall of mirrors," she muses, "her-creating-me-creating-her, and so on. Which one of us was real? Which one of us was the reflection?" (278).

Apekina usage of imagery is persistent, uncomfortable, and complex. The entirety of the book has an uncomfortable feel to it and Apekina adds to it by switching the narrative to multiple different characters. Doing this gives the readers more to imagine and room to understand the complexity of the main characters. Apekina adds to her imagery by relying on metaphors of water and fire. The girls go through a lot of hot and cold and their emotions are shown through water and fire. Mae sets herself on fire and surprisingly survives, however she describes her as a “new person after the fire” (265) and calls it an exorcism. Mae as well uses fire to describe her relationship with her mother explaining that “when I burned her face off of my face, I killed her in myself” (p. 278). On the other hand, Edie relates to water and refers to herself as an iceberg, stating that “you are an iceberg. I am an iceberg. We are across the country from each other but our teeth chatter in unison” (p. 79). Edie has more of a negative tone towards water as she refers to it as “nothing” and “pathetic”. Mae finds herself trying to recreate the feeling she had when she first went to the beach and says the cold water made her “momentarily euphoric”. The contrast between fire and water emulates the differences between the two sisters.

The entire novel is based on a very interesting family dynamic. It exposes the complex problems each family faces and how it affects each member differently. The sister-duo is the most significant as the young girls endure something that most teens do not. Being through a whirlwind of emotions and trauma that almost splits the sisters’ up, they conquer through it and their relationship remains strong in the end. The novel displays this intense need for love and care that can only be found in parental figures. Overall, Edie and Mae are fighting for parental love that wasn’t given to them. In the end, Edie and Mae are children who are far from being perfect and prepared to face such a sad situation and Apekina does a good job of illustrating this as at times, the readers are frustrated with the girls’ actions and thoughts. It is heartbreaking to watch the relationship of two sisters spiral out of control. The novel ends on a good note, where the girls are grown up, living in Los Angeles and living a happy life despite such a traumatic childhood.

The Deeper the Water the Uglier the Fish, is dark, upsetting, but also beautiful and passionate. The usage of different characters' perspectives make the story very captivating and bouncing around to different views creates tension between characters. Apekina creates characters that we all can relate to in some way, but also has us feel sad for them. The diction and vividness is another factor that pulls the story together. As someone who has a sister and experienced divorce, this story is amazing and scarily accurate. The reader’s feel what the sisters are going through and sympathize with them. A book that has similar aspects to this novel is *Frankenstein* by Mary Shelley. *Frankenstein* has a very different plot and meaning, but it does touch on heartbreak and neglect in the same way. Although Victor despises his creation, the creature stays very loyal to him and longs for love and affection, similar to how Edie and Mae crave their parents' love. The two books also shift through various narratives. *The Deeper the Water the Uglier the Fish* have way more narratives compared to *Frankenstein*, but how they're used and why they're being used is the same. Both Shelley and Apekina want to give their readers more than one point of view so their story connects better. As the reader’s we can grasp

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more of a deeper understanding of each character and how they feel. I enjoyed reading *The Deeper the Water the Uglier the Fish* and would recommend this book.