



The Twelve Little Cakes

Dominika Dery

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Long before she was born, Dominika first appeared to her mother in a dream, so when she came to be, she was welcomed with eager expectation and much love. Though her arrival was auspicious, as the child of recognized dissidents associated with the failed Prague Spring uprising, Dominika's life would be far from charmed. Her mother was disowned by her parents, who were members of the Party elite. Her father was an inventor whose politics resulted in his working as a taxi driver, but who nevertheless remained an unrepentant optimist. Rounding out the family-colorful, even by local standards-were a beautiful, voluptuous teenage sister with many male admirers and an enormous St. Bernard who was a famous Czech TV star.

In a village on the outskirts of Prague, full of gossipy neighbors, state informants, friendly old "grandmothers," and small-town prejudices, Dominika grows up a self-possessed child, whose openness and curiosity often lead her, and her family, into trouble. Yet the love, pride, and quirky ingenuity that bind them together will guarantee their survival-and ultimately their happiness-through the best and worst of times.

The Twelve Little Cakes is equal parts testimony to the struggles of a bygone era and a love letter to a joy-filled childhood that no external forces could dim.

The Twelve Little Cakes Details

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From Reader Review The Twelve Little Cakes for online ebook

Doug Lebo says

This memoir of a little girl, growing up under the (not so?) oppressive hand of Communism in Czechoslovakia reveals much to those who have never experienced it firsthand. The West could learn a lot about "the enemy" from these accounts of childhood behind the Iron Curtain, because many – Dery's especially - reveal an existence not of extreme poverty and dung-farming, but of life inhibited, and in a way, let free. This memoir, sometimes sad, quite funny, sometimes wry, entirely touching and completely enthralling deserves a place among the best stories. Dery's work says something not only about the time and place it recalls, but something universal. Her printed words talk of an innocent child growing up near Prague, but speak to us of the human condition. We could all learn to see the world as Dominika does, through the revealing lens of her own childhood.

Chasity says

This was an amazing and surprisingly uplifting read which was just what I needed right now in my life. It's interesting when books come into your life with perfect timing.

This seems like it would be a heart crushing read since the premise of the memoir is a little girl growing up in Communist Czechoslovakia with, as she describes at the end of the book, 'no money, no choice, no chance.' However, the story revolves around her family, a tight-knit unit navigating the unfair laws of the time as they are constantly hampered by neighbors who want to report them and the secret police punishing her father for his work with the former government. The father is endlessly optimistic and determined, the mother is gentle and encouraging of her daughter's dreams, and there is a lot of love in the family. We should all be blessed with this type of family.

The story is told with the voice of the author at her current age looking back at the events. The naivety of Dominika at that young age is well conveyed but also punctuated with insights from her older self about the history of her country and the politics of the time. It is an interesting blend of insight and the gentler perspective of a young child.

I enjoyed learning about the country. Some of their language, some of their tradition for the holidays, how people functioned under communist rule were all very interesting to me.

In the beginning of the book, Dominika comments that during this time good sausage, cheap beer, and plenty of public holidays were enough to keep people going even though times were hard. This kind of hope and the ability of the people in this country and particularly in Dominika's family to find small happiness is inspiring to me as I look at the problems in my own life. This was the happiest time in Dominika's life despite the many tragedies, illnesses, and set backs she faced. All because of her loving family providing a source of strength and safety as she grew up.

I highly recommend this read to anyone who likes memoirs, likes learning about history and other countries and customs, or anyone who wants to read about the strength of the human spirit. This story manages to be funny, uplifting, and inspiring even as it deals with difficult topics and the unfair nature of life.

Tiana says

Delightful! This is a memoir of the author's childhood in Communist Czechoslovakia in the 70s and 80s. Dominika really does come across as an "Eastern Block Scout" to quote Lisa H. The stories are charming vignettes, while simultaneously pointing out the harsh realities and ridiculousness of Communism. My only complaint was that the book ended a little abruptly.

It helps that I happen to live with a Czech speaker, who loves all things Slavic. So I had could talk to my husband about the geography, descriptions, and traditions. I also had help with the pronunciations. The few days while I was reading, he also decided to make me some Czech food. So I was able to read while eating Segedinsky Gulas, and fruit Knedliky. Yummy.

Lisa says

I adored this book. Dominika has the spunk and spirit of an Eastern Block Scout. Since I lived in the Czech and Slovak Republics in 1993, I liked getting a very human peek into their histories. I liked the way she could point out the silliness of the Communist system but do so without bitterness. I laughed at her father's ability to rope Communist spies into doing his dirty work (working in mud in their backyard!) and was delighted by the old-style Christmas rituals she described (as well as her loss of innocence surrounding them!).

I highly recommend this book to all!

Rebecca McNutt says

With beautiful scenery, stunning imagery and an overall unforgettable story, *The Twelve Little Cakes* is an amazing piece of Czech literature.

Corinne Edwards says

When Dominika is born, her country of Czechoslovakia is under the iron fist of Communism. Her parents, however, are dissidents which makes Dominika's life a struggle, to say the least. In a world where her neighbors are ready to report any movement her family makes, where every project requires bribery of some kind and there is only ever money to barely get by, Dominika somehow ends up with a loving and, strangely enough, charming childhood. Beginning in her very early years, Dominika's memoir of living in the outskirts of Prague during the late 70s and 80s paints a unique picture. She is a clever and naughty one, sometimes her antics made me cringe or laugh out loud!

Especially as she gets older, I truly got a sense of what life must've been like living in Prague during that time period. The clear juxtaposition between party elite and those who do not support the regime. It's almost comical, how her father had to finagle everything because he refused to give in to the pressure. When I put it together that she's only about 18 months older than me, I had to wrap my brain around how different our two upbringings were, despite the fact that we were going through it all at the same time. Sometimes it even felt nearly dystopian, like 1984, the way you were watched, interrogated, fired from your employment. I can't imagine the relief when the Velvet Revolution finally created a more open government - little Dominika's entire childhood was a shifting and growing awareness of how different she was because of her family's decision to not support the Communist government.

I really liked this - it's an incredibly readable story and while I always have a hard time with memoirs that are so descriptive when one was so very young that you can't possibly remember EVERYTHING, even the tone of the book, Dominika's experiences at school and with her family, they just were good reading whether they were perfectly accurate or not. She a refreshing little heroine and despite her family's hardships, she seems to have been given an incredibly solid foundation.

Katie Burdett says

This is a wonderful memoir of a not-so-distant time in history. The humor, warmth and joy this book is written with is contagious. Dominika and her family hardly had an ideal life--many, many trials and difficulties--but she is a happy, hardworking, well-adjusted little child. I admire her and her parents so much. I didn't quite know what to expect from this book, but I loved it and am sad it is over! Highly recommended for those who love interesting memoirs, history and first-person story telling. I will happily read this again and I am suggesting it for my book group.

Cleo says

I love, love, love this memoir of growing up in Communist Czechoslovakia. It's both funny and thoughtful, full of humor, and information, too. The author, Dominika Dery, grew up in the 1970's and 80's in a Communist-controlled Czechoslovakia. This is the story of her childhood, filled with funny anecdotes. Communism "was like an old dragon that would occasionally crawl out from its cave and eat someone for dinner. As long as it wasn't you the dragon was eating, you could live with the sound of screams in the distance." Her dog, Barry, was famous and was on television. Her mother was the disowned daughter of wealthy Communist elitists, one of whom was the "Red Countess". Her father semi-illegally drove a taxi. But everything was semi-illegal; you just had to have a combination of the right connections and money, and then you could get away with it. And her sister Klara was very popular with the boys.

Yet despite the dictatorship, dignity and love survived; in fact, flourished. And overall, Dominika had a happy childhood, marred only by a few tragedies. The reason that I love memoirs are that they both read like fiction, and (hopefully) teach you something about history. The Twelve Little Cakes is both of these things, and it does both very skillfully. Though some of the stories are a bit too absurd to be true, the form of memoir allows that. It allows you to twist the facts, fictionalize a bit, whereas (correct me if I'm wrong), an autobiography is basically a truthful account of your life. Though obviously, nothing can ever be completely truthful, and you're bound to be biased about your own life.

The title refers to these little pastries that the author loved as a child, and that she would buy at the bakery. It was a good title, and kind of summed up the essence of her childhood. Each of the chapters is named after a different kind of cake.

My favorite anecdote from this book was probably when Dominika's family is having their house renovated, and these so-called workers (who are actually government informers) show up. It was hilarious, because even though the family knew they were spies, Dominika's father took advantage of the situation and worked them really hard. In the end, all of them quit. My least favorite anecdote was about her time in the hospital, not because it was poorly written or anything, but because it was scary, and not at all fun to read. However, it did provide a stark portrayal of the root of what's wrong with Communism. It may sound all right in principle, but it never works (in my opinion).

At any rate, I would highly recommend this excellent memoir, and it's a shame that it's out of stock on Amazon. Someone needs to do a reissue.

www.novareviews.blogspot.com

Mamama says

Set in Czechoslovakia during the Communist take over of the 1960's and 70's, a little girl tells her story. This was a gift for Christmas and I read it in 2-3 sittings.

This is a good read, lest we forget what life under the Communist regime entailed.

Not a literary accomplishment of an Angela's Ashes, or A Thousand Splendid Suns, but having visited Prague and with familial roots there, knowing the history of the Czech Republic and Slovakia...living thru it from afar, this book gives a first-hand look at life under a oppressive regime.

Anna says

Never did I imagine that a memoir about a young girl growing up in a small town in communist Czechoslovakia could be uplifting and 'laugh-out-loud' funny – but this one was! It was also deeply thought-provoking, with some very sad and poignant moments, but the over-riding feeling that I had reading it was one of optimism and happiness.

Written by Dominika Dery, the memoir was an examination of her childhood, and an exploration of why it was such a happy one despite what were ostensibly the most difficult of circumstances. Dominika's parents were political dissidents against the communist regime, which meant that Dominika and her family were shunned by most people in their town. None of the neighbourhood children were allowed to play with Dominika, so she was 'on the outer' at school, at ballet and in her spare time. In addition, Dominika's maternal grandparents were part of communism's 'old-guard' in Czechoslovakia, and they had disowned Dominika's mother and the whole family due to the differences in their political views. The family was constantly being spied on by informants, and were very poor, and since Dominika was constantly on a diet due to the pressure to be thin for ballet, her life seemed to be full of deprivation.

The memoir is told through Dominika's eyes beginning before she was even born, and she is a precocious,

insightful and optimistic girl. I initially struggled with the authenticity of her voice and her story, given her extremely young age (the first four or five chapters are before she turns 4 years old) and the high level of detail in her recollections of conversations, body language and tones of voice. Maybe she has an amazing recollection of the early years of her life, or maybe she uses the memories of others and a bit of artistic licence, but regardless, it all helped to create a beautiful and vivid picture of her childhood.

Contributing to the happy and positive mood of the book was the strong sense of optimism and the humour shown by Dominika's father in particular, who refused to let circumstances get him down. The tight family unit and the loving relationships between Dominika and her mother and father also got them through many trials. There was a strong theme of escapism too – especially for Dominika but also others in the book – as a means to temporarily forget the difficult circumstances that they were living under: fairytales, traditions, religion, friendships with adults (especially the three 'fairy godmothers'), Barry the dog (famous in Czechoslovakia for his TV appearances!), the ballet and of course, the delicious 'little cakes'!

Being a memoir, the book only gave the perspective of Dominika, and by the end of the book (which ended when Dominika was about 10 years old) I found myself longing to know more about Dominika's mother and sister in particular, as well as what became of Dominika herself. I will have to wait for the sequel!

I highly recommend this book – especially if life is getting you down – it may just be the tonic you need!

Elise says

"The Twelve Little Cakes" is a delightful memoir that reads like a novel--complete with suspense and strong character development (especially Dominika's mother)--as every memoir should if it is well written. Even though Dominika Dery and her family go through trials the likes of which no first world family typically has to deal with, they work together to overcome the obstacles life throws at them, and they manage to have a little fun in the process. This book made me laugh, made me cry, and taught me a great deal about Czechoslovakia (on the outskirts of Prague) in the 1970s and 1980s under the governance of Communist Russia. Told from the perspective of Dominika from the time of her birth until she turns 10 years old, this story is charming and nostalgic, and she successfully transported this reader to her magical childhood world full to bursting with the richness of Czech culture and its ancient rituals. "The Twelve Little Cakes" also gave perspective, reminding us of the things that are most important in life--love, family, resourcefulness, and imagination--even in the face of disappointments, failures, and catastrophes. The book is cleverly organized into twelve episodes/chapters corresponding to the "twelve little cakes" of the book's title, and each one was a sweet treat I looked forward to at the end of the day. I highly recommend this book; it was a fun and fast read.

Carol says

This memoir covers the first ten years of Dominika Dery life in Cernosice, a village outside of Prague Czechoslovakia between the years of 1965 - 1975.

Book title "Twelve little Cakes" refers to 12 chapters, each a little tale of Dominika's childhood. Last paragraphs of book. "This was the country of little cakes and sausages. This is the memory of my childhood.

Driving back home in our old, rusty, Skoda; my father's big hands steering us safely through the middle of the night; the soft touch of my mother's hand on my head. This was the happiest time in my life. The time when we had no money, no choice, and no chance. It would take me eighteen years to realize that what we had back then was as much as anyone on earth would ever need. We had each other, and plenty of love in our hearts."

I enjoyed the tales of Dominka's childhood. Made me admire the fortitude of the human spirit. There were many hardships they had to endure, things that don't exist in United States.

Tanya W says

Updated 2/4/14

This is a delightful book and a quick read. It was very interesting and funny (and well loved by all the book club!). The resilience of the human spirit is shown through Dominika and her family. They seem to be happy through many trials that would make a lot of people depressed. Dominika's book made me laugh out loud in parts (the secret police participating in a landscaping project) and cry a little bit (thinking of Dominika's loneliness, and the immaturity of her grandparents, and her thinking she might be taken by the devil because of an innocent mistake). I guess I shouldn't have been surprised by the pressure she experienced to be thin to be able to do ballet.

I wished I could have been her neighbor when the flood came, it was sad to see them have to struggle so much alone.

It was lovely how little miracles seemed a part of their lives (dreams of a daughter, help in the lawsuit against the Red Countess, the introduction that helped Dominika get in ballet).

I loved the sweet relationship between Dominika and the three elderly women who were her neighbors... it was sad that she could not be close to friends her age because of prejudice, but the friendships she had within family and the elderly were precious.

I loved this book and read it in a day (on vacation)... I couldn't put it down.

Some of the sad questions I ask myself as I see the injustices and sadness that are part of the story are:

Can you imagine having to share your home?

How can parents disown children?

How does a child have the strength and personal integrity to choose a better way than parents?

Quotes:

"The best things in life usually come along when you least expect them."

"She had made her bed and had no choice but to lie in it with her husband and children."

Daisy says

The narrator or voice of this memoir is a very small, talkative girl between the ages of 3 and 7. She reminds me of a Czech Ramona the Pest with her curiosity and innocence and penchant for saying whatever's on her mind so that it often gets her into trouble. But her adventures are East Bloc, not Ramona Quimby, small-town-USA scrapes. She's resourceful and courageous. She'll befriend anyone from three lonely grandmothers to a goat from a nearby farm to a group of Polish children whose language she tries to imitate by lisping her own Czech. She's a little misfit who's observant and a tireless conversationalist. The first chapter starts out almost too cute but the book, which has more the feeling of a novel than a non-fiction memoir, gathers steam and the details of her family's life are interesting and enlightening. The little cakes of the title are mentioned in every chapter only in passing so that you've forgotten about them until they happen to turn up again, and that's kind of charming. Because, lest we forget, cakes are important in every political system.

3.85 stars

In situations like this, I've always found that brute force and ignorance can work wonders. (says her father)
p. 85

... As there weren't any kids my age to play with, I had no choice but to make my own entertainment. There was an old wooden bench in Mrs. Nova's backyard, so what I ended up doing was playing school with the cats.

... There was one particularly mean, young tomcat whose black-and-ginger fur looked like a flannel shirt, and he took great delight in disrupting my class. Every time I tried to put him on the bench, he would hiss and try to scratch my arms. The afternoons were very hot, so the four house cats and a couple of the friendlier ones were happy to sprawl and fall asleep. I would pat them and tell them all the things I knew. I could count to twenty. I could write my name on a piece of paper. I could name all the colors, even purple and orange, and I knew that Prague was the capital of the Czech part of Czechoslovakia, while Bratislava was the capital of the Slovak part. All in all, I was a very good teacher. p. 187

El says

Dominika Dery grew up in a village outside of Prague in the 70s and 80s, the daughter of former dissidents of the Prague Spring. This is her memoir of childhood tales, written in English, portraying her younger life, family history, dreams and some political beliefs. She describes in great detail her neighborhood, living arrangements and desires to acquaint herself with her estranged grandparents.

This was a surprise to me in just how charming the book was overall. Each chapter is the name of different cakes, and the stories within the chapter are in some way connected or related to the cake (ie, in *The Hedgehog* she tells detailed stories about her experiences in the ballet and how she was asked at one point to perform as a hedgehog, etc.). Most heartbreaking is her description of the family's St. Bernard, Barry, who was a movie star, providing their family with earnings during much of Dominika's childhood. I do not cry easily while reading, but did cry during Barry's story.

Throughout the stories are references to political representatives and situations, such as Vaclav Havel, the Prague Spring, Charta 77, etc. I learned some Czech vocabulary and was able to add some names of famous

Czechs to my growing list.

The fifth star was knocked off at the very sudden and abrupt ending. It was not a poor ending per se, but left much to be desired as I wanted to know the outcome of her sister, Klara, or some inkling as to how things progressed from there. A simple epilogue would have been sufficient, though probably she did not want to break the magic of childhood she had provided throughout the rest of the memoir.
