

Radio Canada International CBC The Link Host: Marc Montgomery

(Script courtesy of book columnist Geeta Nadkarni.)

WEB: Our book critic, Geeta Nadkarni, discovers what it's like to be an 11-year-old Canadian kid off at communist summer camp in Russia. A hilarious look at sex, politics, religion and culture, *Lost in Moscow* is a book that's about children — but not necessarily *for* children.

BILL: Our book reviewer attempts to stop laughing after having read the ultimate "What I did last summer" essay ever. Come along for a hilarious trip to communist Russian summer camp with Kirsten Koza.

INTRO:

When we talk about culture clash, it usually revolves around religion or clothing or language. But what about politics?

Imagine a child brought up here in Canada, under democracy--having to spend a summer over in communist Russia.

That's exactly what happened to 11-year-old Kirsten Koza in 1977. Armed with \$50, a stash of Cadbury's Crunchie bars and her favourite pair of jeans, Koza recounts her hilarious MIS-adventures in the Soviet Union.

And Geeta Nadkarni, who's sitting here with me trying not to giggle, is going to tell us all about it. Hi Geeta.

HOST: Is the book really that funny?

BOOK COLUMNIST: Actually Mark, it *is*. I wasn't sure at all when I first picked it up - I thought, Gosh, how enjoyable a read could a glorified 'what I did last summer' type book be. Boy was I wrong. Kirsten Koza has an unusual gift. She's got this wacky sense of humour that completely caught me off guard. And it's very constant throughout the book- it doesn't just fade in and out.

You know how some writers have become synonymous with love poetry--like Pablo Neruda--or others have become famous for detective novels a la Sir Arthur Conan Doyle? Kirsten Koza's specialty is describing unfamiliar bathrooms.

Excerpt:

"The door of one of the toilets had swung open. There was no toilet at all. There was a hole in the ground with two orange metal foot-pads with a turd on one of them. People were lined up in front of the cubicles. The doors on the cubicles were unbelievable too. They only covered the person's body, not their face. So the lady going to the bathroom was staring straight into the eyes of the people in the lineup.

"I tried not to make eye contact with the woman who was going in front of me. It was too bizarre to look in the eyes of someone who was having a poop. When my cat Muzik went poo, his eyes went out of focus. I noticed it was like that for people too."

HOST: So other than toilets, what else is the book about?

BOOK COLUMNIST: It's about a lot of things — culture shock, for example. And it starts right at Toronto airport. The group is a bunch of 11-year-olds with two adult chaperones. Right off the top, they're divided as some of the group, including the chaperones, are self-proclaimed communists. So the 'capitalist' kids are not allowed to criticize anything about the Soviet way of life—including the toilets. Even when they're served such delicacies as boiled cow tongues (with the taste buds still on them) or a porridge called 'kasha' (which, according to Koza tastes like topsoil). But most of all, it deals with Koza's inability to follow orders 'just because' and all the hot water that gets her into. At one point she even finds her self fleeing the Russian army across Red Square.

Summer camp crushes, unauthorised parachute jumps and iodine treatments for the flu. Oh, and the fact that back in the 70s, Aeroflot served vodka on flights instead of milk. Even to kids.

That's a rough idea of the book.

HOST: Wow. Sounds pretty intense. And what's Koza's style like?

BOOK COLUMNIST: Well, that's what I found most refreshing. She has a very warm, conversational style. And because it's nonfiction, because SHE herself is the protagonist (albeit at age 11), Koza's done an admirable job of capturing the *voice* of an 11-year-old child. She presents everything through a lens that's both compelling and naturally funny because the mind behind it is only half grown up.

It's a book that will appeal to anyone over the age of 11 — and for different reasons. I think kids will love it because it's funny and they can totally identify with Kirsten. And adults will be tickled pink by the zany way that Koza perceives life — because make no mistake, even 11-year-old Koza is enormously sophisticated and just naturally droll.

So to sum up, I'd describe Kirsten Koza's style as very warm, accessible and funny.

HOST: And you were saying that the story behind the story — the reason why the author wrote this book is as funny as the book itself.

BOOK COLUMNIST: Indeed Mark. Koza was born in Canada, but as an adult, she'd moved to the UK. During a brief sojourn in Canada before returning to acting school in the UK, Kirsten managed to have her car—with her passport and all her immigration documents in it—stolen and burnt to a cinder. She was informed by Canadian immigration that if she left Canada, she would not be allowed back in!

Now homeless — she'd rented her apartment to friends — she suddenly discovered she was also out of work because the Artistic Director of the theatre that was going to stage a play she'd written had died of a massive heart attack. The theatre committee had consequently cancelled all the premieres for the following season. So, in addition to the fact that it was too late to send her play out to other theatres for the current season, she lost money on the stock market, had severe bronchitis from England, and as the final straw, had the screen on her laptop destroyed by her dogs.

And then, her mother showed up with a box. It contained the scrapbook she'd maintained while she was in the USSR, including a speech she'd written called 'Lost in Moscow'. Koza sifted through the pages and photos (some of which are included in the book) and something clicked. It took Koza less than a year to write the book, and Canadian immigration (as she likes to joke) two years to give her her visa back.

HOST: So your final word?

BOOK COLUMNIST: I think this is a fantastic book for kids and adults alike. And if you or anyone in your family hails from a communist or ex-communist country, I think you'll experience an added layer of enjoyment. Koza is never mean or disparaging about the Soviets — even when their actions totally baffle her. So I think it's a book for all the family to enjoy. Good for anyone who's ever experienced culture clash.