

Swallowing Mercury

Wioletta Greg

TRANSLATED BY ELIZA MARCINIAK

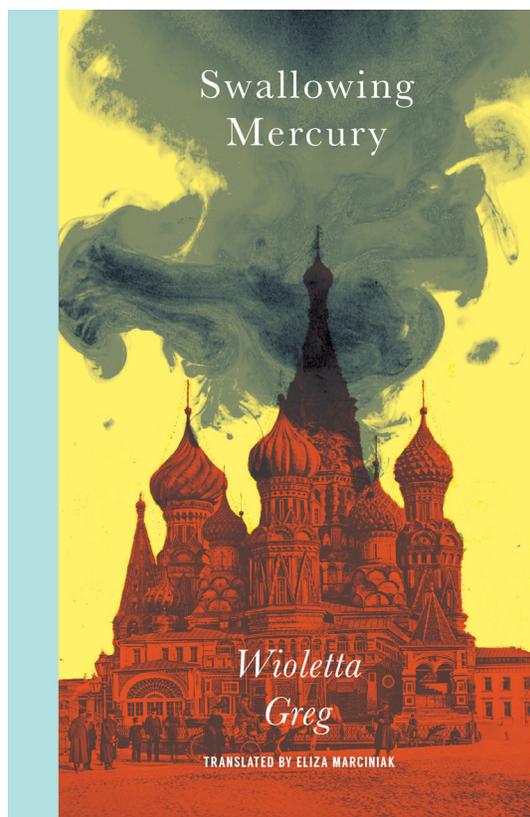
In this celebrated debut, longlisted for the Man Booker International Prize, Wiola looks back on her youth in a close-knit, agricultural community in 1980s Poland. Her memories are precise, intense, distinctive, sensual: a playfulness and whimsy rise up in the gossip of the village women, rumored visits from the Pope, and the locked room in the dressmaker's house, while political unrest and predatory men cast shadows across this bright portrait. In prose that sparkles with a poet's touch, Wioletta Greg's debut animates the strange wonders of growing up.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Wioletta Greg is a prize-winning Polish writer; she was born in a small village in 1974 in the Jurassic Highland of Poland. In 2006, she left Poland and moved to the UK. Between 1998–2012 she published six poetry volumes, as well as a novel, *Swallowing Mercury*, which spans her childhood and her experience of growing up in Communist Poland. Her short stories and poems have been published in *Asymptote*, the *Guardian*, *Litro Magazine*, *Poetry Wales*, *Wasafiri* and *The White Review*. Her works have been translated into English, Catalan, French, Spanish and Welsh.

ABOUT THE TRANSLATOR

Eliza Marciniak is an editor and translator. She lives in London, England.



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Conversation Starters

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1 How is the particularity of childhood experience captured in the structure and language of *Swallowing Mercury*? Did the book make you reflect on the way you saw the world as a child, and on the limitations of memory?

2 What role do religion and superstition play in young Wiola's life? How about the other characters in the book? How does this compare to the role religion and superstition play in your own life?

3 Plants and animals are a constant presence throughout the book. Why do you think the natural world is so prominent?

4 In Hektary, men and women carry out different tasks. Do you think women are at a disadvantage in this society? How about Wiola? In what ways is her experience of the world defined by her gender?

5 "What a strange world this is," he said to me suddenly when the bus turned into Pulaski Street. "Before I've even had time to blink, they're already calling me old, when inside I'm like an unripe fruit." How is growing up presented and explored over the course of the book?

6 Wiola's childhood has a grittiness that is sometimes shocking, and yet the narrator does not color her memories with explicit judgments. How do you think she feels about her childhood and the world it took place in?

7 "Strawberry" is narrated by stranger who reveals a dark secret to the narrator during a train journey. How does this chapter fit into the general structure of the book?

8 Despite taking place in the fictional village of Hektary, *Swallowing Mercury* is set against the backdrop of real political and cultural change in Poland during the 1970s and 1980s. What did you learn about Poland from the book? How useful are intimate fictionalized accounts such as these in understanding a real historical period?

9 Once, when her father played music, Wiola remembers: "I smelled burning juniper branches, saw Gypsy caravans and people in colourful costumes jumping through flaming hoops in a forest clearing." To what extent can art transport us to another time and place? Do you think this book succeeds in doing so?

10 The translator's note provides some background information on the political context of the period described in the book as well as a note on its Polish title. How did this affect your understanding of the novel?

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