

Saving Hope

Reading Guide

Ten Years After the Fall of the Soviet Union

With the fall of the Soviet Union, the Russian government couldn't maintain its military, civilian, and university research facilities, and many top-notch scientists found themselves unemployed. Even those who retained their positions might go for months without a salary check. I read of one major regional hospital that tried to pay their medical staff in manure. Through an elaborate bartering process common in the 1990s and early 2000s, the regional government had received the manure as a tax payment and offered it instead of actual cash to the hospital staff. The doctors refused and got nothing.

In that kind of economic environment, what's a highly-skilled research scientist to do? For some, the answer was to sell themselves or their wares to the highest bidder.

In his book *Biohazard*, Dr. Ken Alibek describes a number of countries who recruited former Soviet Union scientists to conduct biological and nuclear research and development abroad, including North Korea, Iran, China, and Cuba. Western countries were aware of these employment efforts and initiated programs to help the scientists and facilities retool and reinvent themselves—everything from bio-engineering better potatoes for French fries to using lasers to create designs inside acrylic paperweights.

Selling trinkets at a market, however, doesn't provide the same income as a single vial of a freeze-dried virus. Dr. Alibek also discusses the proliferation of private pharmaceutical companies in Russia and the other former Soviet republics offering previously well-guarded agents for sale. Many of these materials, or the information to produce and store them, could be easily carried out of the country.

I first learned of the enticements being offered to those with such skills through a 1998 *New Yorker* magazine article and knew I had the basis for a thriller. All the pieces were there—weapons of mass destruction, conflicting governments, and those in the middle simply struggling to survive. I took as my main character an unemployed microbiologist who was also a mother. Her daughter Nadezhda (or Hope) has a heart condition not treatable in Russia, and she becomes willing to do anything to save her daughter's life—even working in Iran.

Weaving together actual facts from Dr. Alibek's insights into the history and state of the Soviet Union's bioweapons program as well as my own observations of Russian culture and life created *Saving Hope* and Alexandra Pavlova's story.

Recommended Reading

Richard Preston, "Annals of Warfare: THE BIOWEAPONEERS," *The New Yorker*, March 9, 1998.

Ken Alibek and Stephen Handelman, *Biohazard*, Random House, 1999.

C.J. Peters and Mark Olshaker, *Virus Hunter*, Anchor, 1998.

An Interview with Liese Sherwood-Fabre

How do you pronounce your first name? Lee-suh? Or Lease? Or some other variation?

The first. It's a German spelling. Think "Liesel"—the oldest Von Trapp family child.

What does the title *Saving Hope* mean?

The story is about a Russian microbiologist whose daughter, Nadezhda—Hope—has a heart condition. It is about her struggle to save her daughter.

Do you write in more than one genre?

I consider myself a woman's fiction writer in the broadest sense. I enjoy writing about strong women who are able to overcome major obstacles. I have published several short stories. One appeared in *Woman's World* (a straight romance) and another in an anthology for *Girl's Life* (middle grade).

You have an awesome quote on your website for *SAVING HOPE* by Steve Berry. OH. MY. GOSH. That is so awesome! I would die for a quote like that. Care to share how you met Steve and garnered that quote? Or is it a state secret?

I was flabbergasted as well! I had heard him speak at the RWA National conference in New York and had read his *Romanov Prophecy* novel. When I started thinking about who I might ask for a quote, I decided to shoot big and someone who would appreciate a novel set in Russia, so I contacted him. His one request was to join the International Thriller Writers' organization, which I did.

Your website tagline says: Good old-fashioned, gimmick-free storytelling. Can you explain what you mean by that? And why this is so important to you?

Steve Berry actually said that about my writing, and I liked it so much, I selected it for my tag line. My stories hinge more on the characters and the situation they are in rather than on an artifact as sometimes happens in thrillers (such searching for the Holy Grail). So, I'm indebted to him for both the quote as well as my tag line.

Tell us a little about yourself. You're from Texas. Ever been in a rodeo? Or dated a rodeo clown? What is something fun and unique about Texas that non-Texans might think is interesting?

I'm a city girl, but I have been to a rodeo. Never dated a rodeo clown, though. I've lived other places, and I can say that Texans are very proud of their state and its heritage. We're the only one that was its own country before joining the Union.

What's next? (future books, novellas, special appearances you want to mention)

I have self-published a collection of three short stories (including one nominated for the Pushcart Prize) and am working on a second thriller. This one is set in Mexico and is loosely based on the Lori Berenson case. In mine, a young woman is arrested by the Mexican army and charged with terrorism—only in this case, the woman is the daughter of a U.S. Senator.

Any special awards or achievements you'd like to mention?

I've been very fortunate to receive several, but I guess I'm most proud of a short story, "Stranger in the Village," that won first-place in *The Briar Cliff Review*. It was nominated for the Pushcart Prize, and my novel *Heads Up, St. Anthony* finished in RWA's 2008 Golden Heart.

Your website says you've traveled abroad. What's the most interesting place you've ever been to? Any funny traveling stories you'd like to share?

Probably the most exotic places have been India and Thailand. The most moving was Israel and Egypt. We went to old Jerusalem and followed the Stations of the Cross. One of the most impressive was a paving stone where Christ's hand supposedly touched when he fell. Pilgrims had placed their hand on the stone and worn it down about two inches into the stone. I was awestruck to think of all the millions of pilgrims' hands that had touched it through the centuries and worn it away.

Are there some go-to blogs you love to read that you want to recommend?

I'm a member of a group of writers called "The Plotting Princesses." The group formed as a way to help work on each others' plots and other writing issues. You can check them out at <http://plottingprincesses.blogspot.com/>

How can readers follow your news?

I have a newsletter that comes out sporadically and can be joined through my Website: www.liesesherwoodfabre.com. Also you can follow me through Facebook (<http://www.facebook.com/#!/liese.sherwoodfabre>), Twitter @lsfabre, and the Plotting Princesses (<http://plottingprincesses.blogspot.com/>)

Discussion Questions

1. Throughout the book, Nadezhda is Alexandra's main priority. Do you think this blinds her to certain aspects of her situation? What would you have done in her situation?
2. Were there any events in the book that caught you by surprise or you didn't anticipate? What and why?
3. According to the International Thriller Writers, a thriller is characterized by "the sudden rush of emotions, the excitement, sense of suspense, apprehension, and exhilaration that drive the narrative, sometimes subtly with peaks and lulls, sometimes at a constant, breakneck pace." Do you feel that *Saving Hope* fits this definition? Why or why not?

4. Russians refer to their country as “The Motherland.” Do you see any similarity between Alexandra’s concern for her daughter and for her country? Any other character whose attitude may be affected by this view of the country?
5. Vladimir reflects the image of the “New Russian.” Do you know anyone who might have a similar attitude or opinion of themselves that might fit that term?
6. What similarities do you see between the US and Russia as described in this story? What differences?
7. Wolves are mentioned several times in the story. Do you see any significance or symbolism in their use? Any other symbols for you?
8. Several Russian sayings were quoted throughout the book. Did you find these as insights into the Russian world view?
9. What significance did the setting (Siberia in winter) have on the story? Can you think of another place this story could have occurred?
10. Could a situation like this happen in the US? Why or why not?