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# Once Upon A Time In Russia: The Rise Of The Oligarchs And The Greatest Wealth In History



## Synopsis

The best-selling author of *Bringing Down the House* (63 weeks on the New York Times best-seller list and the basis for the hit movie *21*) and *The Accidental Billionaires* (the basis for the Academy Award-winning film *The Social Network*) delivers an epic drama of wealth, rivalry, and betrayal among megawealthy Russian oligarchs - and its international repercussions. *Once Upon a Time in Russia* is the untold true story of the larger-than-life billionaire oligarchs who surfed the waves of privatization to reap riches after the fall of the Soviet regime: "Godfather of the Kremlin" Boris Berezovsky, a former mathematician whose first entrepreneurial venture was running an automobile reselling business, and Roman Abramovich, his dashing young protégé, who built a multibillion-dollar empire of oil and aluminum. Locked in a complex, uniquely Russian partnership, Berezovsky and Abramovich battled their way through the "Wild East" of Russia, with Berezovsky acting as the younger man's krysha - his roof, his protector. Written with the heart-stopping pacing of a thriller - but even more compelling because it is true - this story of amassing obscene wealth and power depicts a rarefied world seldom seen up close. Under Berezovsky's krysha, Abramovich built one of Russia's largest oil companies from the ground up and in exchange made cash deliveries - including \$491 million in just one year. But their relationship frayed when Berezovsky attacked President Vladimir Putin in the media - and had to flee to the UK. Abramovich continued to prosper. Dead bodies trailed Berezovsky's footsteps, and threats followed him to London, where an associate of his died painfully and famously of Polonium poisoning. Then Berezovsky himself was later found dead, declared a suicide.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This book is about Boris Berezovsky and his spectacular rise and fall as a Russian kingmaker. The book is not about the Oligarchs in general although Roman Abramovich is mentioned in relation to his dealings with Berezovsky. I found the book choppy, it strings vignettes together that occurred over a number of years into a semi-cohesive tale. There is much liberty taken in the form of ascribing feelings, emotions, intent upon the actual activities that we know occurred. It's dramatic and interesting, reading like a fleshed out screen play. How factual it is, whether the people really are as the author describes them is a question that can't be answered due to the overwhelming assumptions put forth in the narrative. I may now need to read a less dramatically written book about this book's central players to see if their actions add up to the personality ascribed to them by the author of this book. If I could have given 3.5 stars I would have.

This book, although based in fact, reads more like a novel. The story of the Oligarch Boris Berezovsky starts with his already being a powerful businessman in Russia in 1994, through his rise to the stature of Oligarch and to his death, in the UK in 2013. A sub-plot centers on the life of KGB/FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko, his links to Berezovsky and to his ultimate death in the UK in 2006 of Polonium 210 poisoning. The basic facts of the lives of these two individuals is fairly well known – in fact, you can just check Wikipedia, if all you want are the bare facts. But, this book goes deeper and through the relating of various meetings and stories, it fleshes out the basic story and makes it come alive. I found one proofing error in the book – on page 190, the word *stagedcraft* is printed when it should have been *tradecraft* as it was referring to Litvinenko's following basic anti-surveillance techniques, normally referred to as *tradecraft* by those in the intelligence services. The joke told – that the Lubyanka building (former home of the KGB, and current home of the FSB) was the tallest building in Moscow, since you could see all the way to Siberia from the basement – was in fact a joke being told in Moscow following the collapse of the Soviet Union – I personally heard it there in late 1991. I enjoyed this book and had to keep reminding myself that this was true and not just another spy novel – the insights this book gives to that period of Russian history are worth the price of the book themselves.

The problem with "Once Upon a Time in Russia" is the same one a reader encounters in all of Mezrich's books - he takes a fascinating, captivating true story and pollutes the narrative with "re-imagined" (fictionalized) conversations. Some nonfiction books call out for conversational reconstruction between "characters" - this is not one. The flowery prose imagined for real individuals is not necessary to tell this sequence of events in a powerful way. If the author continues to present his fictional version of real individuals' thoughts and feelings, he should perhaps consider reclassifying his work as "historical fiction."

Given the current state of affairs in the world, I thought I should read up on the Russian hierarchy known as the Oligarchs. This book was an eye-opener. It confirms the ideas that lay just beneath the surface regarding the Russian manner of political way of life. I would recommend this book to anyone wanting a quick tutorial on this Russian phenomenon. A good history lesson, too. Now when the media says "Oligarchs", my brain can say "Ah, ha! Got it!". Seriously...read this!

Ben Mezrich's title is ironic in that this high speed adventure story takes place in the Europe of the past decade. There is no 'far away' or 'happily ever after' element to this story. Instead this thriller takes us on a roller coaster ride that hits you deep in the pit of your stomach. It's literally gut-wrenching. I held my breath as his title character, mathematician turned entrepreneur, Boris Abramovitz Berezovsky, navigated his way through the amoral corporate board rooms, government offices, billionaires' yachts, and the luxurious homes of the super rich, in an attempt to amass, not millions, but billions of dollars. His political and financial favors are not necessarily reciprocated when poisoners spike his best friend and business partner's drink with radioactive polonium. How fitting in this new world! We then watch Berezovsky's eventual downfall as his legal case for five billion dollars in damages against his former protege (the largest civil law suit in recorded history) doesn't go the way he had planned. By the end of the book, the reader is tacitly aware that the buck always stops at the seat of power. Putin's agenda does not include the new would-be titans of world industry. He has a totally different vision for the new Russia (although it bears a striking resemblance to the Russia prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall). I highly recommend this book.

Gives good insight into the rampant greed and corruption of Russia after the fall of the USSR, and how Vladimir Putin exploited his power and position to aggrandize vast wealth for himself and his oligarchs, while dismissing or destroying those rich entrepreneurs who did not support him, and created a police-state where democratic government today is a sham. The fact that Donald Trump

has expressed "admiration" for a despot like Putin, should cause all Americans to be vigilant in defense of our own democracy.

Interesting account of the post Yeltsin period in Russia when seven men took excessive Capitalism to an unprecedented level creating a new class of the very, very rich. These men bought power and reaped millions of dollars and vast material riches (private planes, lavish European homes), still considering themselves loyal and devoted citizens. This book, based on private interviews with one of these oligarchs, almost reads like a fairy tale. It is well written and brings to light the political corruption that took place after perestroika.

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