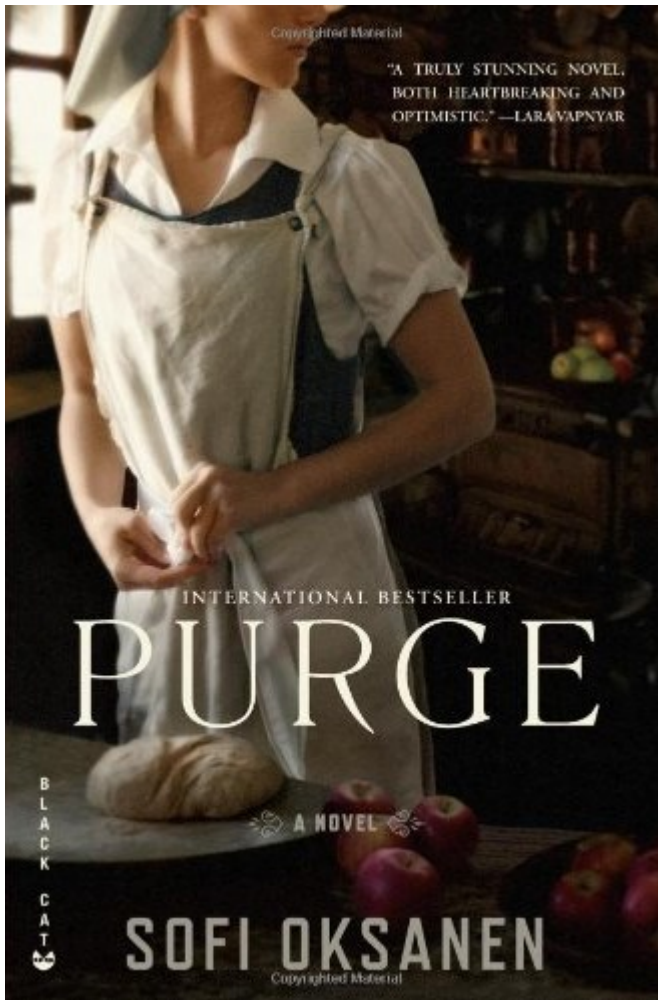


Estonian silence

By [Amy Frykholm](#)

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In Review



Purge

by Sofi Oksanen

Grove

Last week, a friend handed me a novel off his shelf and said simply, "Read it." I did, almost immediately, and I was captivated.

Purge, by Finnish-Estonian writer Sofi Oksanen, tells two stories simultaneously. The first is the story of a young woman in 1992 on the run from her pimp. Zara has fled from her captors and sought refuge with the only person in post-Soviet Estonia who might take her in. That woman, an elderly outcast named Aliide, lives in the Estonian countryside. Her story takes us back to the years of World War II and soon after, when Estonian independence was crushed.

Both stories are riveting and multi-layered. The novel attempts to reckon with not only the unfinished strains of history but also the imprint that the tumultuous and bloody 20th century leaves on bodies, minds and souls. The book is structured like a thriller, even a whodunit, but that narrative impulse is underlined by deep silences that take the reader into the characters' sometimes painful inner realms.

I lived in Estonia in 1993 and 1994, when I graduated from college and taught English at the Estonian Academy of Music. I found Estonians to be difficult to get to know, though unfailingly kind when we managed to break down a boundary.

I was often struck by how silent Estonians could be. Dinner parties would fall quiet for reasons I couldn't discern, and everyone would sit as if struck dumb. This was strange to me and disconcerting, and while *Purge* doesn't offer me a complete explanation, after reading it I have a much greater appreciation for all that cannot be said.