



# **Once Upon a Time in Russia: The Rise of the Oligarchs—A True Story of Ambition, Wealth, Betrayal, and Murder**

*Ben Mezrich*

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# **From Reader Review Once Upon a Time in Russia: The Rise of the Oligarchs—A True Story of Ambition, Wealth, Betrayal, and Murder for online ebook**

## **Wesley Roth says**

I was fortunate to get my hands on an advanced paperback copy of “Once Upon a Time in Russia”, and I’m glad I did. Ben Mezrich does a great job of pulling the reader in right away, with a mysterious meet of top oligarchs in Russia in July 2000. Then Mezrich takes you back to 1994 to tell the story of Boris Berezovsky. Then fluidly brings in Roman Abramovich later in the book. I really liked how the author fully described the decision points that each oligarch had to make at critical points in their rise to the upper echelons of Russian society. Then Putin’s rise to the top collides with Berezovsky’s and Abramovich’s worlds to astonishing affect, as the reader learns. There is plenty of “ambition, wealth, betrayal and murder” as the subtitle suggests. An interesting side story was the beautiful Abramovich aide, Marina Goncharova, who struggles dragging a “forty-three pound” suitcase to the office of Berezovsky (p. 69). What was in it? One million dollars in US cash! This was one of the many “krysha” payments made from Abramovich to Berezovsky over the years, which was a common way to do/still do business in Russia. Overall, I would highly recommend this book, and it’s crazy that its true (not fiction).

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## **Caren says**

This book is a real page-turner, written with the breathless feel of a political thriller. It could also be viewed as a cautionary tale about completely unfettered capitalism. The Russian oligarchs, who rose in the 1990s after communism in the old Soviet Union fell apart, are profiled in their ruthless grab for money and power as state-held businesses were privatized. These were smart, unprincipled men who made billions, but who had to employ bodyguards in order to go about their daily lives. The focus of the book is on Boris Berezovsky, whose first venture was a car reselling business, but who really began to rise in power after he purchased ORT, the chief Russian TV station. He became a sort of "president maker" by controlling this media outlet. It all worked quite well while he kept Yeltsin in power, but when Yeltsin unexpectedly stepped down six months before his term would end and Berezovsky helped replace him with Vladimir Putin, Berezovsky's world fell apart. Berezovsky had seriously underestimated Putin, who sought to decouple business ventures from the political control the oligarchs had previously wielded. Berezovsky ended up exiled when his media efforts to break Putin's control failed. This book includes exploding cars, stealthy assassinations, business deals conducted on yachts and in dachas, political opponents tracked down and poisoned (remember the Polonium poisoning of Litvinenko?), and unimaginable wealth held by a few while the majority of Russians were barely able to get by. It reads like a novel, but it's all true. You will watch Vladimir Putin with renewed interest after reading of his rise. This is a quick read well worth your time.

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## **Sam Quixote says**

The fall of the USSR led to a rush to capitalise on the new state system as it rapidly became privatised. One such man, Boris Berezovsky, a former mathematician, became a billionaire buying state television on top of his car empire. He used the media to get Boris Yeltsin re-elected, giving him political leverage in the

process. He took on an eager young protégé, Roman Abramovich, and together became even richer by controlling Russia's oil and aluminium markets. They were part of a small group called oligarchs, business magnates of enormous wealth, who also had political power. And they were responsible for giving the world the ruthless Vladimir Putin, a man they made president, believing they could control him and discovered too late that they couldn't.

Ben Mezrich's book tells the interesting true story of the rise and fall of Berezovsky which in turn highlights the corrupt nature of Russian business and politics. Berezovsky was smart enough to make a fortune off of the new opportunities in Russia after it shook off decades of communist rule, but how he acquired and kept it is almost like reading *The Godfather*! Assassinations, small armies of balaclava-wearing, gun-wielding thugs, massive bribes, car bombings, street executions and intimidation seems to be de rigueur for how Russian business is conducted!

Mezrich explains the concept of "krysha" (roof, or protector), an almost medieval-type system of political patrimony, ie. you only get ahead if you have someone looking out for you. Such was the relationship between Berezovsky and Abramovich as Berezovsky became Abramovich's krysha, ensuring the young man's rise through his political connections, while pocketing vast sums of cash (allegedly on one occasion nearly half a billion dollars in a year!), all delivered from Abramovich in stuffed suitcases.

It's a fascinating story particularly as Berezovsky's out-of-control ego, that took him so far, became his downfall. Angry that Putin was elected by the oligarchs whom he then turned on once he was in office, Berezovsky used the Kursk incident in August 2000 to take multiple shots at Putin via his media empire. This in turn would lead to Berezovsky having to flee Russia for exile in the UK, an almost Bond-villain-style assassination of his employee, ex-FSB agent Alexander Litvinenko in 2006 (Polonium poisoning!), and Berezovsky's supposed suicide in 2013.

While it is eye-opening stuff – made all the more incredible by being real-life – I really disliked Mezrich's thriller-style approach. This is a non-fiction book that reads like fiction. For example, during the chapter on the Barents Sea disaster in August 2000, Mezrich takes the perspective of Lieutenant Captain Dmitri Kolesnikov aboard the nuclear submarine, the Kursk, closing out the chapter by describing Kolesnikov's actions:

"The last thing he did, before he closed his eyes, was whisper, one last time. "

Um... how did Mezrich know that this was the last thing he did? How did he know Kolesnikov didn't go out screaming as he drowned? He wasn't there and Kolesnikov didn't survive – all hands went down with the sub – so how does he know? Later on he writes:

"Boris crouched low in the backseat of the armored limousine, his face inches from the bulletproof side window, to stare up at the gunmetal canopy of clouds. He couldn't be sure how long the car had been parked in that spot; he had spent the first few minutes simply gazing at the crown of mountains that surrounded them, his thoughts lost in the swirl of snow that seemed to be blowing through the heliport from every conceivable angle."

How does he know "Boris crouched low" to look up at the clouds? How does he know he spent the "first few minutes" looking at the mountains? How does he know "his thoughts were lost in the swirl of snow"?

Another example, this time the fatal meeting between Litvinenko and a colleague:

“‘If you came to London to warn me about my former agency’ Litvinenko said, stabbing at the piece of sushi on the table in front of him with a chopstick, ‘you could’ve put it in a postcard’.”

How does Mezrich know Litvinenko said these exact words while “stabbing at the piece of sushi on the table”?

In non-fiction, you just can’t make these suppositions – you can’t take real people and turn them into characters in a novel. It’s easier to read but it’s wholly inappropriate, disrespectful and false. Mezrich’s choice to do this (and while I quoted a few sections, he writes this way for the entire book) not only took me out of the history but it annoyed me that the author was taking so many liberties with his material.

The writing style and the short length makes for a quick read though it does feel like Mezrich doesn’t delve very deeply into his subjects. We get a surface-level understanding of everything and that’s basically it. It feels like it’s designed to appeal to the largest possible audience by presenting itself as an exciting, fast-moving thriller rather than attempting to be a definitive, in-depth and serious work on the subject.

Once Upon a Time in Russia provides a compelling look at the life of Boris Berezovsky and an overview of the Russian business world but Mezrich’s cavalier approach to non-fiction cheapens its impact. Truth is stranger than fiction but truth should never take the form of fiction.

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## **Esil says**

3 ½ stars. Once Upon a Time in Russian is scary and fascinating – and at times a bit tedious. The author has compiled information about a number of oligarchs in post-soviet Russia, and their role and tactics in shaping Russian politics from the mid 1990s to 2000 during the Yelstin presidency. By the second half of the book, Putin ascends to the presidency and -- while he is not painted as a heroic figure – he is shown as wrestling some power out of the hands of the oligarchs – essentially to assert his place and control. It is a book about power struggles, greed, ruthlessness, corruption and violence and it does not paint a very flattering picture of Russian contemporary politics. The tedious aspect of the book? At times it reads almost like a mechanical desensitized recounting of killings, betrayals and petty battles with huge consequences. There is a bit of a disconnect between the gravity of the information conveyed and manner in which it is told – factual, dead pan, with little analysis about what this all means for the world and for the ordinary people who have lived under these regimes. I suppose it’s Mezrich’s chosen approach – the information should speak for itself – but at times I found my interest waning as I skimmed over the long list of long Russian names and all of the bad things these men – yes they are all men – have been up to. But mostly, it made me want to know and understand more – so that’s a good thing and a worthy endorsement of Mezrich’s book. Thanks to the publisher and Netgalley for an opportunity to read this book.

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## **Patricia Reding says**

For NetGalley.

It recently came to my attention, having read quite a number of Russian classics over the years, that they all seem to be “gray.” Following that thought, I discovered that oftentimes for me, mysteries or thrillers are “red,” books of encouragement are “blue,” fantasies register “orange,” and so on. However, stories of long ago

Russian history and of the days of the Soviet Union are “gray.” The people seem sad, lost, hopeless, forlorn—leaving me feeling “gray.” *Once Upon a Time in Russia*, by Ben Mezrich, however, did not fit that mold, perhaps because . . .

Read more at <http://www.oathtaker.com/patricias-re....>

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## **Paul Pessolano says**

“Once Upon a Time in Russia” by Ben Mezrich, published by Atria Books.

Category – History/Russia Publication Date – June 02, 2015

If you are looking for an eye opener about the fall of communism and the rise of “democracy/capitalism” in Russia, this is about as good as you will get.

This true story revolves around the life of Boris Berezovsky who worked his way up from a car salesman to one of the richest men in Russia and maybe the world. He made his fortune by backing the right man (Boris Yeltsin) and making astute business maneuvers when state owned businesses became privatized. He also became friends with Roman Abramovich who became just as wealthy when he took over the oil and aluminum industries. Berezovsky cemented his relationship with Yeltsin by insuring that he would remain President of Russia, thereby exacting favors and security from the government.

Berezovsky, who helped Abramovich, was able to; in exchange for his services receive 491 million dollars in just one year. This allowed him to purchase several luxuriant houses, a plane, a yacht, priceless paintings, and just about anything else he wanted. Unfortunately, his ego and desire for power got into the way of being smart. He chose to challenge Vladimir Putin. Putin who was basically a nobody became head of the KGB and with Berezovsky’s help made his way to the President of Russia on Yeltsin’s resignation.

Berezovsky and Putin did not see eye to eye, each wanting to bring the other down. Their rivalry left a wake of dead bodies, least of which was the supposed suicide of Berezovsky.

An excellent read that will have one shaking their heads at the immense wealth, corruption, and political machinations that still form the Russian version of “democracy/capitalism”.

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## **Ebonique Ellis says**

it felt like a gossip book, that is likely not entirely true, but I learned a little about modern russia politics.

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## **Jeff Hanson says**

Mezrich has written a history of the rise of the Russian oligarchy complete with explosions,

yachts, nuclear subs, assassinations, and atomic poisonings, that reads more like a thrilling espionage novel than non-fiction. Especially timely reading, as I finished this on the eve of Trump releasing his proposed budget which is supposed to have the biggest cuts to government since post World War II, and the Oligarchs rose to power as the Russian government privatized much of the government they couldn't afford to maintain. The government functions Trump cuts will likely be picked up by new corporations, and you can bet that a few existing 1%ers (and probably a few lucky new ones) are about to get even wealthier and more powerful. Mezrich also shows how the oligarchs knew the power of the media and by acquiring and controlling that, they could in fact buy an election, first retaining Yeltsin, and then installing a young man named Putin whom they thought they owned, but who had powerful aspirations of his own and enough KGB experience and savvy to eventually stand up to them. However, the best lesson to take from this book is that all power is fleeting and when you're talking billions of dollars, no allegiances last forever.

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### **Eduard says**

All Mezrich books are superb. Author gives insight into unique niche subcultures of small groups of highly intelligent people that capitalize a system to make enormous money. Once Upon a Time In Russia is about the oligarchs that garnered incredible wealth in the changing USSR political system. It's an excellent orientation to where the oligarchs came from and how they "made" their money.

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### **Sammy Loves Books says**

**This is the True Story of The Rise of the Russian Oligarchs. These are their actual images and their properties.**

**What an Amazing tale of wealth and murder as communism comes to an end in Russia. A handful of men were savvy enough to jump on this privatization of previously state owned businesses. These few men rose to obscene wealth by purchasing companies for millions that were valued at billions within years of purchase.**

### **Boris Berezovsky**

Boris rose through the ranks by first purchasing a car company. He then purchased the LogoVaz club and started dabbling in politics. After purchasing 49% of ORT, a major Russian television station, he started using his power to influence the television broadcasts to make Vladimir Putin look incompetent. Instead of making Putin look incompetent, he made an enemy of a man with serious power. Boris was later forced to sell his shares in ORT, and fled into exile to escape prosecution from the Russian government.

**Boris' Yacht, Radiant, worth \$320 Million**

Radiant was seized from its port in France by Russian officials. Just one of many financial losses that Boris experienced at the hands of the Russian government while in exile.

### **Boris mocking President Putin in an interview**

Exile didn't stop Boris from doing everything in his power to cause trouble for President Putin. His obsession became his downfall, as he wasted multi millions on efforts to undermine President Putin. He only succeeds in making himself look foolish and ending in financial ruin. He eventually committed suicide while in exile.

### **Roman Abramovich**

Roman was Boris' protégé. Roman played the game better than Boris by staying out of the spotlight and refraining from making political enemies. Most importantly, he didn't piss off President Vladimir Putin. Roman Abramovich became a mega oligarch worth over 13 billion. He owns three yachts but his Eclipse is worth one billion.

### **Eclipse, worth \$1 billion**

### **President Vladimir Putin**

Putin moved up the ranks with a quiet power. None of the Oligarchs saw him coming and were all caught off guard when President Boris Yeltsin retired in the middle of his presidency in December of 1999, only to name Putin as acting president. Vladimir Putin then won the upcoming election with ease. He immediately put a stop to Oligarchs interfering in politics. He felt that the state and capitalism should be separate.

### **Alexander Litvinenko**

Alexander Litvinenko was Boris' friend/bodyguard that was also exiled to the UK. Prior to being exiled, he was considered a whistle blower, telling secrets about Russia and the FSB. Once in the UK, he continued to trade secrets and information with ex-FSB agents that had also been exiled.

## **Alexander on his deathbed after being poisoned**

Alexander was assassinated with chemical warfare, Polonium. Polonium-210 is rare, expensive, and practically impossible to obtain. There are theories the polonium was a lethal calling card. It was placed in Litvinenko's food or drink, and he died a slow, painful death. It sent the message to Boris Berezovsky that they could get to him at anytime.

## **Mikhail Khodorkovsky**

Mikhail Khodorkovsky had the opportunity to go into exile, but he refused. He was jailed and his companies and billions were taken away. Mikhail was naive to the power that Putin wielded.

## **Badri Patarkatsishvili**

Badri Patarkatsishvili had an estimated wealth of twelve billion, and was the wealthiest Georgian. Badri and Boris were best friends. When Badri died in 2008, his best friend, Boris, sued his widow for 50 % of his estate. With friends like that, who needs enemies?

Wow!! This book was beyond interesting! I totally enjoyed the political history lesson, mixed with the obscene wealth of the Oligarchs. It's one thing to hear about and see these men on television, with their yachts and mansions. It's even more interesting to read up on how they obtained their wealth.

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## **J says**

A peek into the world of the Russian oligarchs and their mad scramble to make billions. The story focuses on one oligarch in particular, Boris Berezovsky, and the circle of people his life touches, giving the reader a taste of modern-and corrupt- Russia in the world of Putin. If you read "The New Tsar" about Putin's life, this will offer another perspective that helps round out the picture. It's a very disturbing one.

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## **H. says**

Once Upon a Time in Russia bills itself as a story of the rise of the oligarchs in the subtitle, and as “the behind-the-scenes, true story of two larger-than-life billionaire oligarchs” in particular—Boris Berezovsky and Roman Abramovich—in the introduction. But this is Berezovsky’s story. Abramovich plays a surprisingly small role, arguably less important than Georgian strongman and Berezovsky’s right-hand

muscle Badri Patarkatsishvili, former-FSB agent Alexander Litivenko, and Bond villain Russian dictator Vladimir Putin, even Boris Yeltsin and his daughter Tatiana.

Berezovsky was one of an early wave of Russians from all walks of life—he was a half-Jewish former academic—to make his fortune in the wake of perestroika. Berezovsky made his first fortune selling cars bought from the manufacture on credit during a period of gross inflation. From there he moved into TV (his eventual downfall), oil, and aluminum. It was oil that sprang from his initial partnership with Abramovich. Abramovich, already owner of a pipeline, approached Berezovsky with the idea to take a state oil company private, and Berezovsky used his connections to make it happen. Berezovsky, along with his fellow oligarchs, also uses his connections, his millions, and his TV station to get Yeltsin reelected when it looked like the Communists were going to regain power.

It is hard as an American to grasp post-perestroika Russian business. Berezovsky and Abramovich didn't make millions, they made billions. Berezovsky and the six confederates he recruited to finance Yeltsin's reelection accounted for half of Russia's GDP. Berezovsky lived surrounded by heavily-armed bodyguards and traveling in armored cars. And with good reason. Mezrich tells of a near successful assassination attempt at the beginning of the book that destroys Berezovsky's car and decapitates his driver. Berezovsky himself probably orchestrated the killings of at least a couple troublesome journalists and had a business rival very publicly pulled from his office by a gang of submachinegun wielding, balaclava-clad men.

Mezrich captures his rise, but it is his fall that is really interesting, because it is also the story of Putin's rise. The oligarchs thought they picked someone they could control, but they picked a Bond villain. Putin's evil is shown most viscerally through Alexander Litivenko's story. Litivenko was an FSB agent who blew the whistle on the agency's corruption (at Berezovsky's urging after Litivenko's superior ordered him to kill Berezovsky). That may have put Putin at the head of the agency, but he responded by having Litivenko arrested. After he was finally pronounced innocent by a judge, armed men stormed into the courtroom and arrested him again. He later fled to London only to become the first man assassinated by nuclear means (polonium). Berezovsky, as it turned out, had badly misjudged Putin, although he wouldn't be the last to do so (including a couple American presidents).

Berezovsky was a larger than life figure (the book ends with his apparent suicide), a bit of a buffoon and a bit of a heel. But Mezrich has an obvious fondness and presents him in a favorable light, even when presenting him as utterly full of it in bringing his famously huge lawsuit against Abramovich toward the end of the book.

Disclosure: I received an advance copy of *Once Upon a Time in Russia* through NetGalley.

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## **Harlan Wolff says**

An excellent history of the oligarchs and their silent coup to govern Russia. They thought they had another Yeltsin when they backed Putin, but instead they got an old style president that wanted all the power back in the hands of the state. Reads like a crime novel.

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## **Ron S says**

A stranger than fiction tale of the oligarchs that took control of an unbelievable amount of Russia's GDP as it transitioned to capitalism. Mezrich does a poor job of telling the story, primarily concerned with Boris Berezovsky, somehow managing to deflate this incredible tale.

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## **Ty says**

Ben Mezrich has written a number of "fictionalized" non-fiction books, including "Accidental Billionaires" about the founding of Facebook and some very good poker books. his writing style can be polarizing...he writes scenes depicting what he thinks happened in real life as if he had been present at the time. sometimes this is annoying, such as when he clearly speculates about what was going through the mind of a Russian agent as he died. mostly, the style helps make the story move along in an entertaining fashion, and this book is an entertaining story. Mezrich tells the story of post-Soviet Russia by focusing on one of the first great Oligarchs, very smart and ruthless men who took advantage of the Yeltsin years to literally go from rags to riches, from normal day jobs to billionaires, through an incredibly creative mix of legal, illegal, unethical, and violent means. Boris Berezovsky was a physics professor who figured out how to make millions by floating payment for his inventory of cars while the ruble crashed. he turned the millions into billions by befriending Yeltsin's family and taking over televisions stations, mineral producers, banks...basically anything that was not nailed down. along the way, he helped create other Oligarchs and sometime did open battle in the streets with Oligarchs he opposed.

Most interesting is the way that these oligarchs who thought that they were in control, hand picked a nondescript young ex-KGB agent from St. Petersburg to take over the FSB (descendant of the KGB), then to become premier and finally to become president. only to find out that they had horribly misjudged how pliable Vladimir Putin would be. the book is simply fascinating as it walks through the massive excess that the Oligarchs lived during their peak.

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