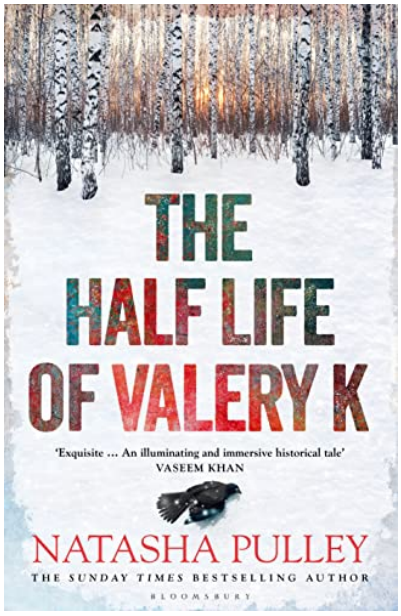
Prison Reading Groups

The Half Life of Valery K

By Natasha Pulley



In 1963, former nuclear specialist Valery Kolkanov has served six years of his ten-year sentence in a Siberian gulag. However, one day, Valery's university mentor intervenes and has him transported to the mysterious City 40, where he is expected to serve the remainder of his sentence studying the effects of radiation on local animals. As Valery begins his research, the erroneous data he is provided with and his cryptic colleagues leave him with more questions than solutions: precisely what is being kept from the town's thousands of residents? Why are radiation levels so high? And will he survive the remainder of his sentence if he keeps seeking the truth?

Pulley blends fact with fiction in this gripping historical thriller. It is based on real events of a nuclear research facility in a Soviet city called Ozyorsk in Chelyabinsk, codenamed City 40. It is a Cold War novel filled with mystery, romance, and lots of science.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the significance of the book title?

2. Do you think Pulley's depiction of Soviet Life was credible?

3. Who is your favourite character, and why?

4. Pulley throws an interesting light on gendered expectations through cross-cultural differences. What are your thoughts on this?

5. While there is a lot of historical truth in Pulley's book, there is no evidence of human radiation trials taking place. Why do you think Pulley added this to her narrative?

6. How do you feel about the ending of the story? What point do you think Pulley was making by her choice of ending?

Thank you to our volunteer Lauren for choosing this title and creating the resource.