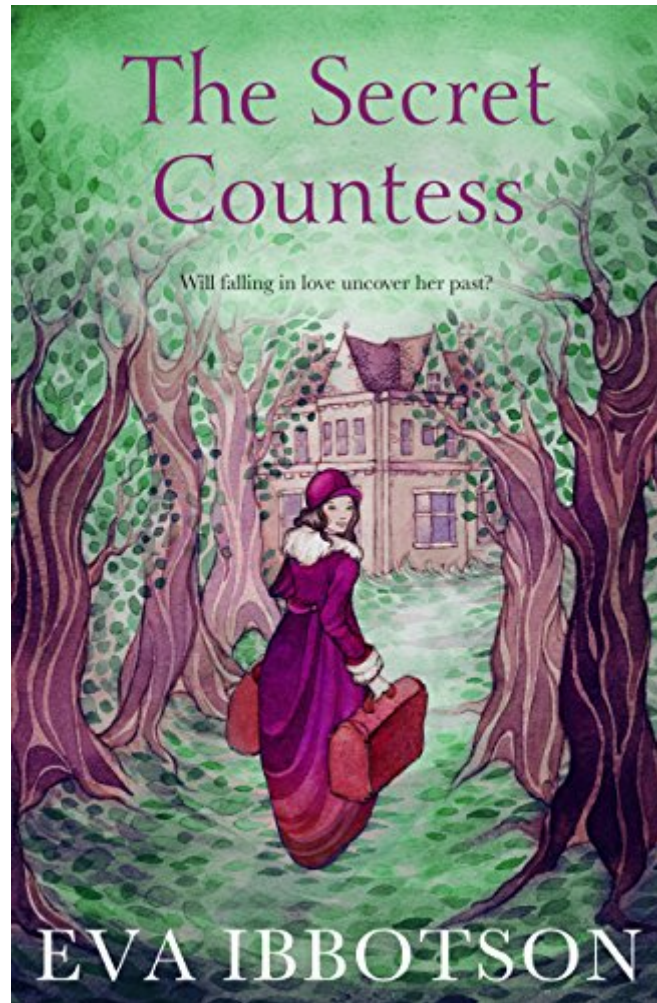




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The Secret Countess



Synopsis

Eva Ibbotson's charming and warm-hearted tale, *A Secret Countess* was originally published as *A Countess Below Stairs*. Anna, a young countess, has lived in the glittering city of St Petersburg all her life in an ice-blue palace overlooking the River Neva. But when revolution tears Russia apart, her now-penniless family is forced to flee to England. Armed with an out-of-date book on housekeeping, Anna determines to become a housemaid and she finds work at the Earl of Westerholme's crumbling but magnificent mansion. The staff and the family are sure there is something not quite right about their new maid - but she soon wins them over with her warmth and dedication. Then the young Earl returns home from the war - and Anna falls hopelessly in love. But they can never be together: Rupert is engaged to the snobbish and awful Muriel - and anyway, Anna is only a servant. Or so everybody thinks . . .

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Customer Reviews

I don't often read YA literature, but this novel was recommended by an author I admire, Ann

Pratchett, and the book did not disappoint. Though good-natured and optimistic, this book does not ignore the darker urges and events that complicate life. The romance is neither sappy, nor predictable. A Russian countess seeks employment as a domestic in an English stately home following the Russian Revolution. The owner, an English earl, though committed by a sense of honor to an increasingly unhappy betrothal, finds himself thinking constantly about the remarkable Russian housemaid. The story ends with madcap adventures and misadventures and provides a satisfying read for both younger and older readers.

Born into an aristocratic family in tsarist Russia, Anna Grazinsky was lavished with affection and material wealth. As her father freely admitted, he spoiled her--yet she remained unspoiled. Anna's life of privilege ended with the war and the Bolshevik Revolution that took her beloved father's life and forced Anna to flee with her mother and younger brother to the relative safety of England. Betrayed by the family nurse who absconded with the family jewels the Grazinskys were going to use to support themselves, they were forced instead to share the small living quarters of Anna's devoted English governess. Determined to do her bit to help with the family's expenses, Anna takes a temporary job as a maid at the country estate of the Earl of Westerholme. The senior staff at Mersham is reluctant to take on the obviously unsuitable foreigner, but they are desperate for the help. The war has left them short-staffed and the new earl himself is soon to return to take up residence after years at the front and a long hospital convalescence. With an overly large and ridiculously outdated housekeeping manual for her reference, Anna is fervent in her new duties, although she is nearly overcome by the sheer physical strain, lack of hygiene, and loneliness. But the tight-knit group quickly takes to the radiant Anna, and she to them. When the house is readied and the young earl himself arrives, he too is intrigued by the mysterious maid. His initial interest does not distract him from his immediate purpose, however. While he recovered from his war wounds, he was nursed back to health by an angel of mercy. The angel was not only exquisitely beautiful, she was also wealthy enough to save the Westerholme estates from the crippling death taxes that threatened them with financial ruin. The earl would marry his angel and fortunes would be restored. But all would not remain well for Rupert, the earl. Muriel, the angel, had a dark side. Unlike Anna who was spoiled yet remained unspoiled, Muriel was spoiled and turned rotten to the core--evil, ungrateful, manipulative behind a lovely façade. Gradually, her actions and beliefs alienated almost everyone around her even as her physical beauty continued to entrance them. Rupert's friends, family, and even servants began to despair for him, knowing that he was too much of a gentleman to back out an increasingly odious arrangement. And, to make matters worse, even

as he stood at the edge of the abyss with Muriel, Rupert could only snatch glimpses of a forbidden heaven with Anna. This is a beautiful, magical book. Once I picked it up, I read it in one sitting. I loved the descriptions of postwar England--complete with the fascination with the occult, the rise in the "study" of eugenics, the ugliness of anti-Semitism, decline of the aristocracy, etc. I also enjoyed the look at life downstairs at large country house--how the servants reacted to Anna's mistake about the reference to the "tweeny," for instance--that was a subtlety that was beyond me before reading this book. I was also mesmerized by the beautiful, romantic love story between Rupert and Anna. By today's standards, of course, it was a very chaste love story, but it was so very sweet. And, I should actually say *stories* because the Tom/Susie courtship was a wonderful secondary storyline. Truly, tho, not to give short shrift to any of these things, or even the Honorable Olive, what I liked most were the brief descriptions of émigré life and how the Russian nobility coped with their new lifestyles. It brought back memories of watching Anastasia or Ninotchka/Silk Stockings. In reality, life probably wasn't a grand adventure, but you had to admire Anna, Sergei, Kira and the others for accepting their new lot and still embracing life for all it was worth. * * * * * I think the difficulty that some readers might have with this book is that it is hard to categorize. What kind of book is it and who is the intended audience? Even after reading it, it still wasn't clear to me. At times it reminded me of a Nesbitt book, but it wasn't really a children's or YA book. On the other hand, there was a fantastical naivete that didn't quite place it in the adult realm. I think the reader just needs to suspend any preconceptions and enjoy the wonderful magic Ms. Ibbotson weaves.

A Countess Below Stairs is a beautiful narrative that floats easily between characters, nations, and cultures without so much as a stumble. It is the story of a penniless, aristocratic girl with a heart for service and of a man bound by a promise to his elder brother who died in the war that he would try and save the money-draining family estate. It is not a love story. It is a character story, moved along by a hilarious and twisty but beautiful plot. It is not that terribly romantic, but it is funny and endearing and will make you root for the protagonists and wish true bodily harm on the villains. Eva Ibbotson, to me, is a master storyteller. One of my favorite books of all time is A Company of Swans, and I am fully convinced that no one can write romance quite like Ibbotson. I was expecting a little more of that from A Countess Below Stairs, but it was more plot oriented, feeling a bit Downton Abbey-ish as they fight to save the estate, which is fine. It was a fun book to read. I loved the Russian characters and the history that was within it, and to be quite honest, Ibbotson's prose is so wonderful the story could have been going in complete circles and I would have still enjoyed it. This is a book for people who appreciate beautiful writing and love a good story. To find more

reviews, check out my blog <http://seaofpages.blogspot.com!>

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