



Spirit-wrestlers

PHILIP MARSDEN-SMEDLEY

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The new book from the acclaimed author of *The Crossing Place* and *The Bronski House*. In Moscow, a man points on a map to the place where he was born. He is a Doukhobor, a 'spirit-wrestler', a member of a group of radical Russian sectarians. He is pointing to a village beyond the southern steppe, at the far south of the old Russian empire: 'I was born here,' he says. 'On the edge of the world.' So begins Philip Marsden's Russian journey - perhaps the most penetrating account of Russian life since the Soviet Union's collapse made travel possible again. In villages unseen by outsiders since before the revolution, he encounters men and women of fabulous courage, larger than life, dazed by the century's turbulence. By turns wise, devout, comic, they seem to have stepped straight from the pages of Turgenev, Gogol and Babel. Marsden meets such figures as the Yezidi Sheikh of Sheikhs, an exiled Georgian prince and a cast of passionate scholars, stooping survivors of the gulags, strutting Cossacks and extreme, isolated sects of Milk-Drinkers and Spirit-Wrestlers. *The Spirit-Wrestlers* peels away the grey facade of post-Soviet Russia and reveals a people as committed as ever to answering that great Tolstoyan question: how a man should live. Even more than in *The Bronski House* and *The Crossing Place*, Philip Marsden shows that behind the horrors of the Soviet years the human spirit remained triumphant. In so doing, he shows himself to be one of the most exciting and original travel writers of his generation.

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