



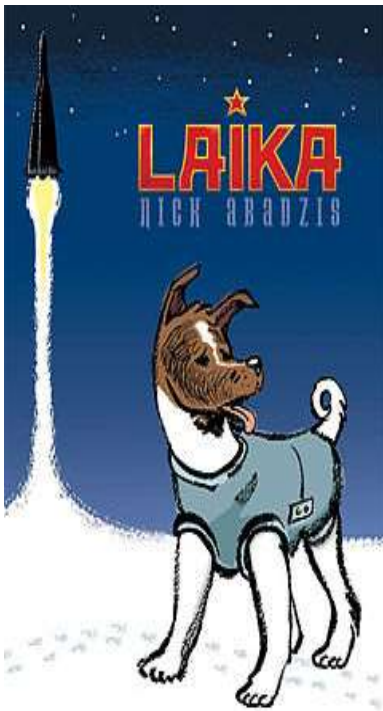
LAIKA

- Book review by Jui Navare (Boston, MA)



On 3rd Nov, 1957, exactly 59 years ago from today, Laika created history as the first animal to be launched into orbit on the spacecraft - Sputnik. She was chosen for this mission because of her hardiness as a street dog and the capability she exhibited during training to be fit for this mission. She would die in space because the technology to bring her back safely had not yet been developed. Many questions were raised whether it was ethical to send a dog on the space mission knowing that she would die. Nick abzadis has written a very touching graphic novel on Laika. The illustrations capturing the facial expressions, body language of both the humans and the dog stay with you long after you have shut the book. I read the book several times alone and also with my toddler, each time I uncovered a new depth of emotion and a new beauty behind each illustration. It is a story that is a must read for everyone and especially for dog lovers.

Laika is a very touching and poignant story, with three main characters - Laika, the first dog to go into space, Yelena Dubrovsky ,dog trainer and Sergei Korolev, lead Soviet rocket engineer and spacecraft designer for the Sputnik mission. Laika led a life of hardship, unloved and neglected. Her owner was a young boy who did not take care of her and she suffered at his hands until she escaped to become a street dog. The Sputnik project engineers were looking for street dogs to send into space as they would be tough and hardy as compared to pet dogs. Laika showed exceptional qualities, fit for being sent into orbit and was shortlisted for the mission.





The relationship between the dog trainer Yelena and the dogs is beautifully illustrated. Yelena is aware of the fate that lies in wait for Laika and she is unable to get that out of her mind. Even on weekends, when she is out with her friend, her mind is bogged down with worry about Laika. Yelena has conversations with the dog imagining what they must be thinking. Nick Abadzis was against anthropomorphizing Laika so he decided upon this technique. The reader grows to love Laika not just as a dog but as somebody with feelings who has no say in her pre-ordained destiny.

Korolev was confined to a gulag and his reprieve was a stroke of luck as hardly anyone is ever released from a gulag. The graphic novel starts with Korolev's release from the gulag during severe winter and it is indeed a miracle how he survives and manages to reach his destination. His survivors' spirit and his guiding star allow him to build a new life after his release. After the success of Sputnik I, Krushchev wanted Sputnik II to be launched in record time as good propaganda during the cold war. However that left no time to ensure an exit strategy for the dog aboard the spacecraft. It meant certain death for the dog.

It was not until 1998, after the collapse of the Soviet regime, one of the scientists, Oleg Gazenko, responsible for sending Laika into space, expressed regret for allowing her to die: **Work with animals is a source of suffering to all of us. We treat them like babies who cannot speak. The more time passes, the more I'm sorry about it. We shouldn't have done it... We did not learn enough from this mission to justify the death of the dog.**

For anyone new to graphic novels, this is a very good first read. The humane angle to the story is brought out succinctly through the medium of the graphic novel.