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greater extent and resolved the matter in 1974 by emigrating to America with her school-age offspring who aspired at first to a musical career, but settled into writing and reporting about food and travel. This memoir is the outcome of a very extended conversation (over 50 years) between that child and her mother. And the outcome too of a joint attempt to cook meals that exemplified the culinary history of the USSR, decade by decade, in a small flat in Queens, New York. Out of these two activities comes an enticing account, at once depressing and uplifting, and always intriguing, of the Revolution across the stove-top. There is sufficient history, and it is well enough researched, to provide structure; sufficient anecdote and consecutive narrative to entertain and inform; sufficient wild facts to supply a week's worth of dining-out. The author's approach to history smacks of Carlyle and the Great Man complex, but it is probably a true reflection of some people's experience that the history of Russia seems to concentrate on the big men and their failings: Lenin, Stalin, Brezhnev and the rest. The fall-out from their autocracy was felt in the smallest and barest grocery store, and in the shopping bags of those who relied upon it. The book is rich in detail about culinary shifts, problematic supplies and matters of housing and accommodation. It also offers a very different interpretation of the Gorbachev regime to that which we are accustomed to here in the West. There are a few of those paradigmatic recipes at the end, but this is a memoir, not a cookery book. Were I to say that she would have written in a different style had she ended up in England, that would be to cavil.

Ben Downing: *Queen Bee of Tuscany: The Redoubtable Janet Ross*: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2013: 340 pp., hardback, £22.85.

Janet Ross was the author of *Leaves from our Tuscan Kitchen* (1899 and repeatedly reissued; still in print indeed, with Grub Street). [As a young man, I had the privilege of knowing Michael Waterfield, her great-great-nephew (and editor of a later edition of *Leaves*), who was the chef-proprietor of the Wife of Bath restaurant in Wye, Kent – one of England's finest in its time – when he was cooking with my stepfather at the Hole in the Wall in Bath.] There is little enough in this book about *Leaves*, save for the admitted fact that Janet Ross cooked not one of the dishes herself, and that the original idea was her niece's. There is a great deal, however, about her family background and the affairs of the English and foreign colony in Florence from the late 1860s until her death in 1927. The author is literate and well informed; the book is readable and instructive, as well as serving as a constant reminder of the closeness of connection among the Anglophone intelligentsia of the time. That is not to say that it is entirely enjoyable. By the finish, I had come to the conclusion that Janet Ross was not someone I would have liked to have met. Nor did Ben Downing persuade me I was mistaken. Perhaps because there

are so many connections and personalities to cover, over so many years – not to speak of wars, revolutions and political upheavals – the reader is often adrift in a maze of names, genealogies and news bulletins. Because quite a substantial amount of material is drawn from published memoirs rather than manuscript correspondence or journals, there is a certain distance between the reader and subject – and, alas, a distinct lack of scandal (Janet herself seems devoid of the sensuality you might expect from someone revelling in *la vita toscana*.) Expecting a whole lot of knockabout rumpy-pumpy (think of Norman Douglas, or Walter Savage Landor from an earlier period), it was surprisingly dry.

Nina Stibbe: *Love, Nina. Despatches from Family Life*: Penguin-Viking, 2013: 322 pp., hardback, £12.99.
This has possibly been many people's Christmas present, or Christmas reading at the least. It consists of letters written to a sister at home during the early 1980s by a 20-year-old from Leicester who had been taken on as nanny to the two young sons of Mary-Kay Wilmers, already working at the *London Review of Books*, which she now edits. The spare prose, the frequent and economical dialogues, the personalities in this star-studded corner of north London, the humour, affection and wry realism all contribute to a highly enjoyable experience, refreshingly unsullied by poor taste or ill will. A book that makes you feel good, and feel a little guilty as a reader when you interrogate the text for signs of beastliness, class status or self-awareness. Because, of course, that's what really interests us. An apparently semi-literate girl (and, at first you think, relatively poverty-stricken) surrounded by giants of English letters (Alan Bennett is the hero figure, Jonathan Miller the ogre). But this girl's aunty usually stays at the Meridien in Piccadilly, she owned a horse when younger, and had been sent to France for her improvement at some stage too. All these questions (and guilt about asking them)… Then, there's the matter of food. The historian anxious to trace the tides of fashion will have a field-day here. (Why, for instance, did she think that we were only coming to grips with the BLT sandwich in 1982?) When we trace the graph of Britain's rising appreciation of good food, documents like this will serve as an important corrective. If you have a long train journey, and have not read it yet, go bag a copy.

Ben Highmore: *The Great Indoors. At Home in the Modern British House*: Profile, 2013: 292 pp., hardback, £15.99.
The author is Professor of Cultural Studies at Sussex. He has written a book about interiors with almost no illustrations, the gist therefore is literary and cultural studyish. And it is entertaining enough. The emphasis is postwar but when material is lacking, he goes further back, even to the Victorians, to make