

# Russian Literature Reading Group

The RLRG at the Topanga Library began in August 2014 at the behest of a couple of respected community members. My goal for the group was to give members a background in Russian Literature that went beyond the commonplace assumptions of Russian Lit as "long, depressing novels". I wanted to explore the big names in Russia's prose and poetry by reading their works, examining their biographies, considering academic/critical standpoints, and contextualizing it with country's complex history -- an ambitious plan, especially for a non-expert librarian. Almost two years later, I'm happy to say that during our monthly meetings, we've put a tiny, but satisfying, dent in our perception of Russian Lit, and perhaps even the Russian Soul. We held our last meeting on May 14, 2016 in which we discussed the life of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, his book *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, and the purpose of literature in daily life. Leading the group has been truly been a gratifying experience personally and professionally.



## **August 2014 (Silver Age):**

Anna Akhmatova - "In Intimacy" (Mary Maddock translation)

Anna Akhmatova - "White Night" (Oleg Kagan translation)

Marina Tsvetaeva - "I Like That You Are Not Lovesick for Me" (Oleg Kagan translation)

Marina Tsvetaeva - "The Cemetery" (Rose Styron and Olga Carlisle translation)

Andrey Bely - "Adam" and "The Bush" (Ronald Peterson translation, from *Complete Short Stories*, Ardis, 1979)

## **September 2014 (Chekhov):**

Anton Chekhov - "Lady with the Dog"

Anton Chekhov - "Gooseberries"

Anton Chekhov - "Uncle Vanya" (Curt Columbus translation)

## **October 2014 (Tolstoy):**

Leo Tolstoy - "Death of Ivan Ilyich" (Rosemary Edmonds translation)

Leo Tolstoy - "The Cossacks" (Rosemary Edmonds translation)

## **No November 2014 Meeting**

## **December 2014 (Folklore):**

Biography of A.N. Afanasiev (from *Handbook of Russian Literature*, Victor Terras, Ed., Yale UP, 1985)

Entry on Folklore (from *Encyclopedia of Russian History*)

Tales all from *Russian Folk Tales* (Natalie Duddington, translator. Funk & Wagnalls, New York (1969))

"Daughter and Stepdaughter"

"Kuzmá Get-Rich-Quick"

"Bird Language"

"The Firebird"

"Vassilissa the Fair and Baba Yagá"

## **January 2015 (Lermontov):**

Mikhail Lermontov - "No, I'm not Byron, it's my role" (Alan Myers translation)

Mikhail Lermontov - "The Dying Gladiator" (Eugene M. Kayden translation)

Mikhail Lermontov - "Borodino" (Frances M. Cornford translation)

Mikhail Lermontov - "The Testament" (Eugene M. Kayden translation)

Mikhail Lermontov - "Vindication" (Eugene M. Kayden translation)  
Mikhail Lermontov - "My Native Land" (Vladimir Nabokov translation)  
Mikhail Lermontov - "The Triple Dream" (Vladimir Nabokov translation, 56-57 version)

**February 2015 (Gogol):**

Nikolai Gogol - "The Overcoat"  
Nikolai Gogol - "The Nose"

**March 2015:**

*The Tale of Igor's Campaign* (Vladimir Nabokov translation)

**April 2015 (Topanga to the Stars/Science Fiction):**

Yevgeny Zamyatin - *We* (Hugh Aplin translation)

No **May 2015** Meeting

**June 2015 (Pushkin):**

A.S. Pushkin - "Queen of Spades"  
A.S. Pushkin - "Grapes"  
A.S. Pushkin - "Winter. What shall we do in the country..."  
A.S. Pushkin - "My Rubicund critic, my full-bellied mocker,"  
A.S. Pushkin - "Eyes open wide, the poet weaves,"  
A.S. Pushkin - "Exegi Monumentum"

**July and August 2015 (Dostoevsky):**

Fyodor Dostoevsky - *The Brothers Karamazov* (Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky translation)

**September 2015 (Turgenev):**

Ivan Turgenev - *Fathers and Sons* (Rosemary Edmonds translation)

**October 2015 (Mid-19th Century Poets):**

Fyodor Tyutchev - "Dusk" (trans. Vladimir Nabokov)  
Fyodor Tyutchev - "Autumn" (trans. Vladimir Nabokov)  
Aleksey K. Tolstoy - "A well, and cherry trees swaying" (trans. Babette Deutsch & Avrahm Yarmolinsky)  
Aleksey K. Tolstoy - "By chance once, amidst all the bustle" (trans. Avril Pyman) and "It chanced when the dance was pealing" (trans. C.M. Bowra)  
Afanasy Fet - "All, all that once was mine is mine for ever" (trans. O. Elton)  
Nikolai Nekrasov - "A heavy cross is her allotted burden" (trans. Vladimir Nabokov)

**November 2015 (Maxim Gorky):**

Maxim Gorky - One Autumn Evening  
Maxim Gorky - Red

No **December 2015** Meeting

**January 2016 (Isaac Babel):**

Isaac Babel - Early Story: "Mama, Rimma, and Alla"  
Isaac Babel - Odessa Tales: "Justice in Parenthesis" , "Froim Grach"  
Isaac Babel - Red Cavalry cycle: "Gedali", "Dolgushov's Death"  
Isaac Babel - Later Story: "Guy De Maupassant"

**February 2016 (Ivan Bunin):**

Ivan Bunin - "Light Breathing" (1916)

Ivan Bunin - "Sunstroke" (1925)  
Ivan Bunin - "In Paris" (1940)  
Ivan Bunin - "Cold Autumn Evening" (1944)

**March 2016 (Bulgakov):**

Mikhail Bulgakov - *A Country Doctor's Notebook*

**April 2016 (Pasternak):**

Boris Pasternak - *Doctor Zhivago*

**May 2016 (Solzhenitsyn):**

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn - *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*

**Further Reading:** Osip Mandelstam, Alexander Blok, Bella Akhmadulina, and many more.

Lieven, D. C. B. - *The End of Tsarist Russia: The March to World War I and Revolution* (2015)

Haslam, Jonathan - *Near and Distant Neighbors: A New History of Soviet Intelligence* (2015)

McSmith, Andy - *Fear and the Muse Kept Watch: The Russian Masters - From Akhmatova and Pasternak to Shostakovich and Eisenstein - Under Stalin* (2015)

Golinkin, Lev - *A Backpack, A Bear, and Eight Crates of Vodka: A Memoir* (2014)

Polonsky, Rachel - *Molotov's Magic Lantern: Travels in Russian History* (2011)

Frazier, Ian - *Travels in Siberia* (2010)

Volkov, Solomon - *The Magical Chorus : A History of Russian Culture from Tolstoy to Solzhenitsyn* (2008)

Remnick, David - *Lenin's Tomb* (1993)

**Parking Lot**

Note that in choosing the readings I was bound by a few limitations:

1. Availability: The County of Los Angeles Public Library rarely had enough copies of specific translations or editions of books that I might have selected if they were available. Case in point, we did not read "Eugene Onegin" in June when we covered Pushkin because the system didn't have enough copies of any one translation.
2. Reading Time: I promised the group that the readings would be manageable. That meant that despite my whims, I couldn't assign graduate reading loads. Thus the readings tended to be what a typical busy person can carefully read in a month.
3. Translations: With regard to translations, when one was noted, that was the one I insisted we read. This is especially true with poetry, where translation plays such a huge part in understanding for non-speakers; there was no one philosophy in the choices I made, though every choice had its reason(s). Some translations I chose because they captured a musicality, some because they expressed a meaning better, some because they demonstrated a point about translation. Mary Maddock's creative interpretation of Akhmatova's "In Intimacy", for example, is so unlike the original that when I put the two side by side I could not recognize one in the other, and yet Maddock has a whole book of such "translations" that surely influenced many reader's perceptions of those notable poets. Where I didn't find any suitable translations, I made my own.
4. Depth: Because one couldn't be sure how long a group like this would continue, I had restricted most of my selections to big names because what is a general purpose Russian Literature Reading Group without Tolstoy, Chekhov, Dostoevsky, Gogol, Lermontov, Pushkin, or Turgenev? My eventual goal, however, was to go beyond the leading lights and dip into the writers that are no less great, but less known outside of Russia. Part of that impulse included adding gender and ethnic diversity to this syllabus.