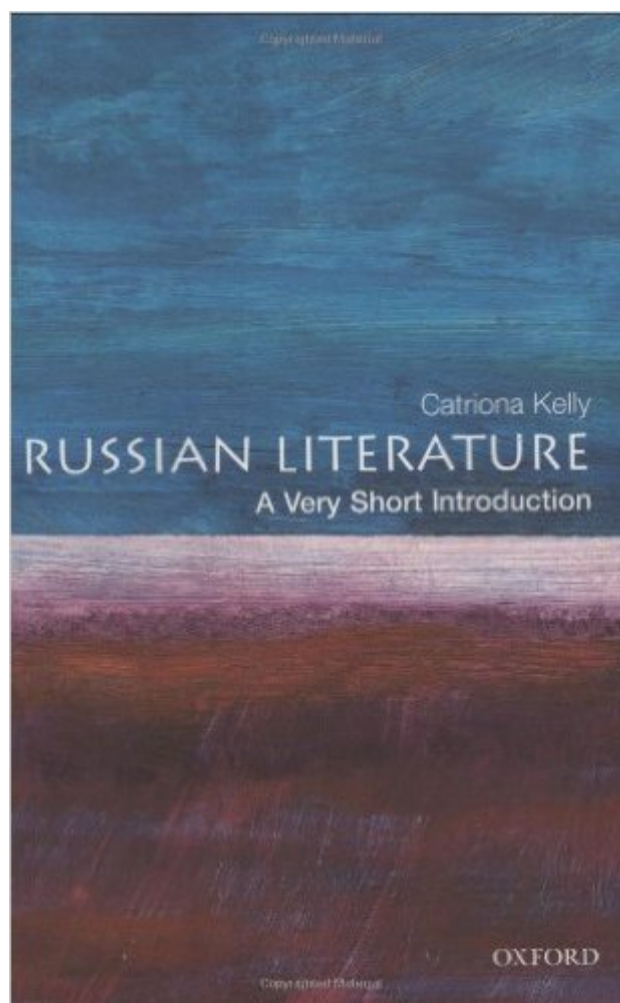


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Russian Literature: A Very Short Introduction



Synopsis

Rather than presenting a conventional chronology of Russian literature, *Russian Literature: A Very Short Introduction* explores the place and importance in Russian culture of all types of literature. How and when did a Russian national literature come into being? What shaped its creation? How have the Russians regarded their literary language? The book uses the figure of Pushkin--'the Russian Shakespeare'--as a recurring example, as his work influenced every Russian writer who came after him, whether they wrote prose or verse. It furthermore examines why Russian writers are venerated, how they've been interpreted inside Russia and beyond, and the influences of the folk tale tradition, orthodox religion, and the West.

Book Information

Paperback: 184 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press; 1 edition (December 6, 2001)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0192801449

ISBN-13: 978-0192801449

Product Dimensions: 6.8 x 0.4 x 4.3 inches

Shipping Weight: 5.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 2.4 out of 5 stars [See all reviews](#) (8 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #236,695 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #10 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > European > Eastern](#) #79 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > Russian](#) #609 in [Books > Literature & Fiction > History & Criticism > Regional & Cultural > United States](#)

Customer Reviews

If you're looking for a basic introduction to Russian literature, this is probably not a very good place to start. Now, I know the title has the words "Russian Literature" and "Introduction" in it, but don't let that mislead you. Kelly has purposely set out to avoid the "standard" approach to the topic, which she says tends to take one of three forms: a chronological canon of writers and their works, a chronological trip through literary movements and cultural topics of relevance, or a more personal essay of appreciation. In retrospect, I now recognize that, not having read a great deal of Russian literature, I was looking for a mix of the canon and the literary movements. Instead, what I found in Kelly's work was a confusing attempt to attack the material by using the "Russian Shakespeare" (Aleksander Pushkin) as a framing device. Through the seven essayish chapters, Pushkin is used as

a starting point for the discussion, and then various other writers and themes are introduced in relation to his work or attitudes. As one jacket blurb puts it, this is "an unexpected approach to the subject". And as another blurb puts it, "you may love it, perhaps loathe it, or feel perplexed, but not remain indifferent." Well, mark me down for perplexed. I'm not at all opposed to this approach to the topic, it just doesn't seem particularly well suited as an introduction. It's hard to imagine anyone without a solid grounding in the major Russian writers being able to summon up love or hate for this brief work. It simply assumes too much familiarity on behalf of the reader to be of any utility to the newcomer to Russian literature. So, perhaps I'll return to it in 15 years, after I've had a chance to read some of the vital works, but in the meantime, I'm still trying to learn what those might be.

The author of this book is indisputably an expert in Russian Literature -- and it shows in the book. Through her studies and research on various dimensions and periods of Russian Literature, Catriona Kelly has formed her own approach, or her own point of view, about this vast topic, and this book is an introduction to Kelly's approach to Russian Literature, rather than an introduction to Russian Literature per se. As the previous reviewer wrote, the book is not for people who want to get an initial idea on the Russian Literature. In my case (and I consider myself a "novice" in this subject), it was only after reading another introductory book (as short as this one) that I realized how many important authors and trends and debates were left out of this "very short introduction". Catriona Kelly is correct to place Pushkin in the center of Russian Literature, but I wish she described in more detail what preceded him, and other, perhaps equally significant authors and poets who followed him. I would recommend this book only to people who are already familiar with Russian literature and are open to new ways at looking at it.

Kelly proposes to introduce Russian literature by "centering" it on Pushkin -- focusing on the "myth" of Pushkin as founding father of Russian literature, and on his many themes that remain contemporary (pp. vi-vii). The plan thus entails three self-imposed handicaps. First, what of the eight centuries that preceded Pushkin? Almost nothing is said of that vast period, and the false impression is pointedly conveyed that the great writer acknowledged no important links with the verbal art of Russia's past (p. 36). Second, Pushkin himself is by far the most difficult modern Russian literary figure to introduce: mercurial, multifarious, and remote. This aspect of the book is disturbingly perfunctory, scattered, and uninteresting. The poet's intensely historical personal saga, at the power center of czarist Russia, is mainly overlooked. Crucial episodes pass by without sufficient explanation: "exiled for political insubordination ... a troubled marriage . . . his death in a

duel" (pp. 3-4). And third, given that very remoteness and elusiveness of personality and artistic design, subsequent shapers of the myth -- compromised by "the anxiety of influence" -- are barely tangential to the great poet, whose organism was indeed wired differently. The mythologists are all too often reductive and trivializing, and prone to invent him out of whole cloth. The writers that crop up in this book, usually with scant benefit of chronology, themselves get no proper introduction, and their Pushkinian joys or conceits (so meaningful to specialists) are not well calculated here to instill an abiding fond curiosity about Russian literature. One way to write a better book along these lines would be to reduce, drastically, the number of myth-makers, and go deeper into each of those presented, especially major figures of literary history that have taken real care with the Pushkin myth (e.g., Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Tsvetaeva, Mandelstam, Siniavsky). Chapter 3 of Kelly's book is titled "Pushkin and the Russian Literary Canon" (pp. 32-69), but one can glean little about the canon from it. The book's index has 15 listings under "Dostoevsky," for example, only four of them in Chapter 3, the rest scattered all over, and tracking down the cumulative scraps of information is finally not worth the candles. There is nothing at all about Dostoevsky's famous Pushkin speech, so richly informed and seditiously arch -- a major landmark in the making of the myth. The biggest single problem with Kelly's book is related to its subtitle "A Very Short Introduction", which logically implies the question of the book's intended readership -- an audience with a very limited knowledge of the subject matter. Unfortunately, it is not an introduction to Russian Literature. Indeed, it is more likely to confuse than enlighten the neophyte.

A totally misleading title. This is a short introduction to Pushkin who is the only Russian author dealt with in any real sense. Passing reference is made to all the other great authors and little effort is put into giving a sense of Russian literature as a whole. The purpose of this series of short introduction books is not well served by an academic who is more enthralled with her unusual approach to the subject. That is not what these books are about. The nature of the series creates an expectation that the editors should have known this book would not fulfill. This thesis has its place but that place is not in a series like the one it is now in. The first "Very Short Introduction" book in which I have been totally disappointed.

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