The Cambridge Introduction to
Russian Literature

Russian literature arrived late on the European scene. Within several
generations, its great novelists had shocked – and then conquered – the
world. In this introduction to the rich and vibrant Russian tradition,
Caryl Emerson weaves a narrative of recurring themes and fascinations
across several centuries. Beginning with traditional Russian narratives
(saints’ lives, folk tales, epic and rogue narratives), the book moves
through literary history chronologically and thematically, juxtaposing
literary texts from each major period. Detailed attention is given to
canonical writers including Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy,
Chekhov, Bulgakov, and Solzhenitsyn, as well as to some current
bestsellers from the post-communist period. Fully accessible to students
and readers with no knowledge of Russian, the volume includes a
glossary and pronunciation guide of key Russian terms and a list of
useful secondary works. The book will be of great interest to students of
Russian as well as of comparative literature.

Caryl Emerson is A. Watson Armour III Professor of Slavic Languages
and Literatures at Princeton University.
Cambridge Introductions to Literature

This series is designed to introduce students to key topics and authors. Accessible and lively, these introductions will also appeal to readers who want to broaden their understanding of the books and authors they enjoy.

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The Cambridge Introduction to Russian Literature

CARYL EMERSON
For Nicholas,
wonderworker
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Illustrations

Frontispiece   Map of Imperial Russia
Sculpture of Aleksandr Pushkin in St. Petersburg
(photo by Michael Julius)  

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This is a book for the advanced beginner. It is not presumed that the reader has taken any courses in Russian literature or history, nor studied the Russian language (although I do introduce a number of Russian words for which there are no precise cultural equivalents; these words are gathered in a glossary at the end). All works discussed exist in English translation and most enjoy considerable name recognition outside Russia. But the beginner is nevertheless not entirely a blank slate. Most readers, hopefully, will have read a story or seen a play by Chekhov and know something by Tolstoy (perhaps Anna Karenina) or Dostoevsky (Crime and Punishment, The Brothers Karamazov). If the name Solzhenitsyn is familiar at all, it sounds less dissident today, in Putin’s Russia, than it did in the post-Stalinist Soviet Union. The reader might have heard that Aleksandr Pushkin is their greatest, most perfect writer, but having come across a piece of his in translation, can’t figure out what all the fuss is about. (If Pushkin is appreciated, probably this is due to the famous operas built off his works: Modest Musorgsky’s setting of Pushkin’s play Boris Godunov, and two Tchaikovsky operas inspired by Pushkin’s texts: Eugene Onegin and The Queen of Spades.) Readers will most likely also know that Russians endured an absolutist autocracy until the early twentieth century; that the enserfed Russian peasantry was liberated around the same time that the North American states freed their black slaves; that a Bolshevik coup d’état took place in 1917; and that this communist regime fell apart in 1991. Further contexts are provided in brief timelines prefacing each chapter or along the way.

Because the book is for beginners, those professional colleagues who helped me by reading drafts, prodding out errors, and advising me on what to delete know a great deal more than the book’s target audience. And yet they kept their erudition in check, remembering that the purpose here is to introduce and seduce, not to resolve some scholarly debate. Of those who donated their page-by-page insights and services to this project I thank, above all, my Princeton colleagues Michael Wachtel (whose Cambridge Introduction to Russian Poetry, 2004, preceded this volume by several years), Olga Peters Hasty, Simon Morrison, Ksana Blank, Ellen Chances, Serguei Oushakine, and Petre Petrov.
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In this as in other Cambridge University Press projects, Linda Bree has been the exemplary editor, ably assisted this time round by Maartje Scheltens, Elizabeth Davey, and Jacqueline French. At the final inch, which became a very demanding mile, Ivan Eubanks provided indispensable editorial, formatting, and research services. Jason Strudler helped me cut 23,000 words from the final draft without batting an eye.

Debts to my family this time round are deeper than ever. To my ever supportive and enabling husband Ivan Zaknic, my parents, and my siblings, the usual gratitude for accepting the fact that the wisdom and provocation of the Russian literary tradition has been my lodestar for as long as I can remember, obliging them to make allowance, decade after decade, for odd priorities and monumental blind spots. Special thanks are due to my father David Geppert, who is the sort of reader and interlocutor that most writers can only dream about, and to my sister Trisha Woolcott, certified nurse-midwife, who persisted in calling Nikolai Gogol “google” and whose no-nonsense diagnostic skills detected all manner of verbal obfuscation. To my grandnephew and godson Nicholas, born in 2004 and thus also a beginner, this volume is lovingly dedicated.