ANTON CHEKHOV’S
SELECTED STORIES
EDITED BY CATHY POPKIN

INTRODUCTION
Cathy Popkin, Jesse and George Siegel Professor in the Humanities, is the editor of the new Norton Critical Edition of Chekhov’s Selected Stories, published in early 2014. A thick brick of a book, the new Chekhov delivers 735 pages of stories, letters, criticism, chronology, and bibliography, all prefaced by Popkin’s “Introduction,” from which we print two sections below: “How to Read Chekhov” and “How to Read Chekhov in English.” What truly distinguishes this new Chekhov is Popkin’s strategy of highlighting the art of translation. The fifty-two stories are the work of twenty-one translators. Twenty-seven translations have been chosen from the rich history of Chekhov in English translation, and the remaining twenty-five were commissioned expressly for this volume. To emphasize the importance of the art of translation, Popkin follows her “Introduction” with comparison passages taken from various translations and short biographies of the translators, with notes on their translation practices, rather than the usual practice of acknowledgments hidden in tiny type on the copyright page. Annotations to the individual stories also highlight key differences among the translators’ strategies.

As an example of the newly commissioned works, we offer Katherine Tiernan O’Connor’s “A Little Game.” O’Connor, best known for her translation of Bulgakov’s The Master and Margarita, co-translated with Diana Burgin, insists that “contrary to popular belief, Chekhov may be more difficult to translate than Bulgakov.”

—Ronald Meyer
Why read Chekhov’s stories? Because they enlarge our capacity for understanding and awaken our compassion.
the deceptive simplicity of the surface for access to the complexity at play in the depths; or even to consider the effects of the language itself, to attend with care to the verbal surface for its sounds and cadences and etymological rhyme, reading the prose essentially as one might read a poem—for what it does, the effect it has, and for what each component—every piece of dark blue fabric—contributes to the meaning of the work as a whole.

Others object to this “totalizing” approach on the grounds that the operative principle in Chekhov’s prose is just the opposite—randomness—and if something in one of his stories looks unrelated to anything else, that’s because it is. Sometimes a gun is just a gun, an incidental piece of the material world signifying nothing beyond its own existence; it’s hanging there because it’s there, and it would be perverse to hang a meaning on it. The function of Chekhov’s eccentric detail, in other words, is not to mean but to be—and in this stubbornly “meaning-free” existence to model something about the nature of existence itself. His prose embodies his own radically new worldview, an understanding of life in the world as chaotic, subject to accident and entropy. Chekhov’s liberation from the shopworn assumptions of unity and purposefulness is the very quality that makes his art modern and non-dogmatic, argues Alexander Chuda-kov; to transform everything into a symbol or a sign of something else would be to miss the very point.

Whichever view is closer to the truth, both are onto something. And in spite of their antithetical assumptions, they are united in a common preoccupation with how the stories work; this, in fact, is the basis of their respective arguments, and it has lent both force and substance to the debate. The works of criticism excerpted in this volume come from both sides of the critical divide as well as everywhere in between, and have been selected expressly for their salient contributions to the ongoing controversy about how to read Chekhov well. The first section, “Approaches,” contains essays that address this question explicitly. But arguing about Chekhov’s prose in the abstract can only get you so far; Chekhov himself abhorred sweeping generalizations, and his work resists them. Not coincidentally, some of the liveliest scholarship on Chekhov consists of close readings of individual stories. Thus, the second cluster of essays, “Interpretations,” has been compiled to demonstrate what such concrete readings might look like—and in some cases a single story looks strikingly different from divergent points of view. Whatever their perspective, all of these inspired readings confirm that interesting things emerge when you pay exquisite attention. The most engaging interpretations are re-readings, considerations that read “against the grain” and suggest not only that things may not be as simple as they seem, but also that Chekhov’s stories work in mysterious ways.

If the meaning of a single detail triggers such fruitful disagreement in the context of an individual work, questions about the relationship of the part to the whole arise with equally interesting results in considerations of how any single story by Chekhov might relate to all his other ones. Indeed, for maximum enjoyment and
appreciation, readers are urged to read both in detail and in plural, to consider both how these “motley” stories work and how they work together. They certainly awaken our awareness of recurrent motifs, sounds, structures, and allusions; we also sense that we are in the presence of abiding ethical questions. Each story connects in suggestive ways to all the others, and every one of them resonates more vibrantly when viewed in connection with everything else.

Then again, the present volume comes nowhere close to containing “everything else.” Furthermore, although it includes a whole spectrum of representative works—from shorter to longer, from first to last, from the frankly comic to the positively lyrical—not even a comprehensive selection is neutral. In choosing the stories and letters that appear here, I have no doubt produced a certain Chekhov, one that I particularly like, since the fifty-two works in this volume represent some combination of acknowledged masterpieces and personal favorites. Happily, Chekhov’s stories illuminate one another in any combination, not to mention the light they shed on the complexity of human relations and the wonders of life in the world. Note that Chekhov’s keest insights come in understated forms, and the stories especially reward quiet focus and sustained attention. While his prose goes down easily, do not confuse an easy read with a quick one. These may be small bites, but they are not fast food. Every story is remarkably rich and deserves to be savored.

Enjoyment is very much to the point, as it happens, and figuring out how to read Chekhov goes beyond the rarified concerns of academics who compile anthologies or produce scholarly interpretations. To pursue honest inquiry, to puzzle our way through, to engage constructively with the other, to gain access to somebody else’s pain, to recall that we are all part of—not separate from—the whole: this is part of what Chekhov’s storytelling strives to do. For those who read Chekhov because they are writers themselves, this sense of relatedness reveals his artistry. For those who read Chekhov for pleasure, this relatedness is surely its source.

Why read Chekhov’s stories? Because they enlarge our capacity for understanding and awaken our compassion. Because they call upon us to make connections of all sorts. Because connecting the dots and making sense reminds us of the potential for meaning and beauty. Because trying to work out what gives a story shape and orders its material—the very activity of constructing and construing meaning—enriches our existence. Because figuring out what counts in (life) stories reminds us to think about what is important, however unprepossessing it may appear at first blush. Because precisely in wondering how to read Chekhov productively, we are already living deeply and well.

**HOW TO READ CHEKHov IN ENGLISH**

First, with a high degree of confidence. Of the fifty-two stories collected here, twenty were cherry-picked from published translations by Rosamund Bartlett, Peter Constantine, Ann Dunnigan, Constance Garnett, Ronald Hingley, Patrick Miles and Harvey
The devil, it seems is in the details, especially the odd ones that crop up with no relevance to the story and that feel particularly incongruous in Chekhov's super-spare prose.

Far from being problematic, these differences are a resource. Some translations stay so close to the original and reproduce its idiosyncrasies so faithfully that they are tailor-made for close readings. These are especially useful for instructors who do know Russian teaching students who may not. And while these also read well, others might contain even livelier prose.

Quite aside from the opportunity these differences create for us to choose translations that suit our varied purposes—differences born of the diverse ways these translators understand the purpose of their task—lurks the thorny question of how the translators understand the purposes of the texts themselves. Translation, like any other form of reading, is an act of interpretation. I cannot think of a better reason, especially in a Norton Critical Edition, that two translators might be better than one.

**ANTON CHEKHOV**

**A LITTLE GAME**

*Translated by Katherine Tiernan O’Connor*

A clear winter noonday . . . The frost is hard, it crackles, and Nadenka, who is holding me by the arm, has a silvery glaze coating the curls on her temples and the down on her upper lip. We are standing on a high hill. Stretching down from our feet to the ground below is a sloping plane that reflects the sun, just like a mirror. Beside us is a small sledge upholstered in bright-red cloth.

“Let’s go down, Nadezhda Petrovna!” I beg. “Just once! I promise you we’ll remain safe and sound.”

But Nadenka is afraid. The distance from her small boots to the bottom of the ice hill seems terrifying to her, like a fathomless deep abyss. She freezes and holds her breath when she looks down, when I simply invite her to get into the sledge, for if she takes the risk of flying into the abyss, what will happen! She will die, she’ll go out of her mind.

“I beg you!” I say. “You shouldn’t be afraid! Don’t you see, that’s faintheartedness, cowardice!”

Nadenka finally gives in, and I can tell by her face that when she does, she’s in fear for her life. I seat her, pale and trembling, in the sledge, put my arm around her and together we plunge down into the abyss.

The sledge flies like a bullet. The shattered air beats in our faces, roars, rips, whistles in our ears, painfully and maliciously stings.
us, wanting to tear our heads off. The force of the wind makes it impossible to breathe. It seems as if the devil himself has seized us in his claws and with a roar is dragging us down into hell. Surrounding objects blur into one long, madly rushing streak . . . In just another minute, it seems—we’ll perish!

“I love you, Nadia!” I say under my breath.

The sledge starts making less and less noise, the roaring of the wind and the hissing of the runners are no longer so terrifying, we can breathe again, and finally we’re at the bottom. Nadenka is half-dead. She’s pale, barely breathing . . . I help her get up.

“I won’t go down again for anything,” she says, looking at me with wide, terror-stricken eyes. “Not for anything in the world! I almost died!”

In a short while she recovers and now looks into my eyes in a questioning way: did I say those four words, or did they just come to her from the rush of the wind? And I stand next to her, smoking and studiously examining my glove.

She takes my arm, and we take a long stroll near the hill. The mystery, apparently, is giving her no peace. Were those words said or not? Yes or no? Yes or no? It is a question of pride, honor, life, happiness, a very important question, the most important in the world. Impatiently, sadly, Nadenka looks at me in a penetrating way, gives disconnected answers, waits to see if I’ll say something. Oh, what a play of emotions on that sweet face, what a play! I can see her struggling with herself, needing to say something, to ask me something, but she can’t find the words, she feels awkward, terrified, hindered by her joy...

“You know what?” she says, without looking at me.

“What?” I ask.

“Let’s . . . go down again.”

We go up the steps to the top of the hill. Again I seat the pale, trembling Nadenka in the sledge, again we fly into the terrible abyss, again the wind roars and the runners hiss, and again when the flight of the sledge reaches its noisy peak I say under my breath: “I love you, Nadenka!”

When the sledge is coming to a stop, Nadenka looks back at the snow underneath the manure,3 the trees are dead, but the scent of the small garden that is separated from the yard where Nadenka can be heard, and I am getting ready to go to Petersburg—for a long time, probably forever.

Once, a day or two before my departure, I am sitting at dusk in the small garden that is separated from the yard where Nadenka lives by a tall nail-studded fence . . . It’s still fairly cold, there is still snow underneath the manure, the trees are dead, but the scent
of spring is in the air, and the rooks, settling in for the night, are cawing loudly. I go over to the fence and peer through a crack in it for a long time. I see Nadenka come out on the porch and cast a sad, yearning glance up at the sky . . . The spring wind blows directly into her pale, despondent face . . . It reminds her of that wind that roared at us those times on the hill, when she heard those four words, and her face becomes sad, very sad, a tear falls down her cheek . . . And the poor girl stretches out both her arms, as if imploring this wind to bring her those words one more time. And I, having waited for the wind, say under my breath:

“I love you, Nadya!”

My God, what is happening to Nadenka! She lets out a cry, smiles a huge smile and stretches her arms out to the wind, joyous, happy, so very beautiful.

And I go off to pack . . .

This happened a long time ago. Nadenka is married now; she was married off, or got married herself—it makes no difference—to the secretary of the Board of the Nobility, and she already has three children. The time when we used to go sledding together and the wind brought her the words “I love you, Nadenka,” has not been forgotten; it is now the happiest, most moving and beautiful memory of her life . . .

But now that I’m older, it’s a complete mystery to me why I said those words, why I played such a game . . .

1886 (revised 1899)

1 By maintaining the narrator’s persistent use of present tense, O’Connor reproduces the sensation that readers are experiencing everything—including flying downhill at terrifying speed—right as it is happening, together with the narrator and Nadenka.

The title, Shutochka, is usually translated literally as “A Little Joke.” O’Connor renders it as “A Little Game” instead, feeling strongly that “Joke” implies something far too one-sided to correspond to what is actually being “played” in the story. The new title, along with O’Connor’s lexical choices emphasizing that each of the characters has a “mystery” to confront, reorients us, allowing us to consider who is playing at what—and with whom.

2 Sledge: a conveyance that slides on runners. Commonly refers to a horse-drawn sleigh of the sort that replaces carriages on wheels during the winter snows. The sledge in this story, however, is small and toboggan-like, with upholstered seats, mounted on runners and used for downhill sledding.

3 In garden plots, manure was spread on top of the snow so that when the snow melted the fertilizer would be absorbed by the soil.

4 Elected body that appointed trustees for the estates of nobles legally prohibited from controlling their property—minor heirs, debtors, the insane.