

31 August 2010

Provost Elizabeth Boylan
Barnard College
Columbia University
3009 Broadway
New York, NY 10027

Dear Dr. Boylan:

I graduated from Columbia College in 2007 with a degree in Russian Language and Literature, and I am writing in support of Rebecca Stanton's promotion to associate professor with tenure.

Professor Stanton, who taught two of my courses in the Russian department, possesses exactly what every student should want in a professor—brilliance, diligence and above all a passion for her teaching and her subject. The extent to which she influenced me and changed my way of thinking is difficult to convey in a single letter, as it would be for any student lucky enough to find such a caring and gifted mentor in the formative academic years—but she is one of the gems, a teacher I will forever remember for her infectious intellectual spirit and dedication. Barnard and Columbia are very lucky to have her.

I was a sophomore when I first met Professor Stanton, having stumbled into the back of her classroom in Milbank for the start of Literary Avant Garde and Revolution, a fancy name for the twentieth-century Russian-literature survey course taught in English translation. She bounded into the room—carrying a bottle of “Pump” water, if I recall correctly—and quickly launched into a semester-long series of lectures that introduced me to some of Russia's finest authors, revealing, along the way, the mechanisms making their prose tick.

It is the mark of a great professor that, some five years on, I still remember the highlights: The numb, youthful ambivalence that gets caught up in violence in Isaac Babel's *Red Cavalry*; the tacit questioning of truth and text against a backdrop of totalitarianism in Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita*; the manipulation of official Soviet language in Mikhail Zoshchenko's short stories; or the scrambling bid to break with the past, and throw the old trappings of language off the ship of modernity, that becomes a hallmark of Russian Futurism around the time of revolution. The list hardly ends there. Professor Stanton knows Russian literature backwards and forwards, but more importantly, however, she knows how to teach it—and make it stick.

I am told that the tenure committee pays particular attention to the interaction between research and teaching, and this touches upon one of Professor Stanton's great strengths. Much of Professor Stanton's research is to do with the function of autobiography in fiction, that is, the extent to which writers such as Isaac Babel and Vladimir Nabokov use and abuse the narratives of their own lives in their prose. This was a key theme in the

second course I took with Professor Stanton—entitled 20th Century Prose Writers—where the readings were exclusively in Russian.

Outside the classroom, Professor Stanton was instrumental in helping me launch *The Birch*, the undergraduate journal of Russian literature, politics and culture, which I started with the help of the Harriman Institute in 2005. Her support, advice, encouragement, and her willingness to help me recruit and cultivate writers, were all critical to the journal's formative years. Her effort is a testament to the reality that, far beyond incisive research and memorable lectures, Professor Stanton is a selfless mentor, willing to spend extra time and effort on students in a way that is not immediately calculable by any measure of standard professorial or professional evaluation, but which is infinitely meaningful to untold students, like me, who have been the beneficiaries of her time and talent.

To give a sense of this extra-special attention, and what it means in real terms, I have attached a copy of a paper I wrote for the 20th Century Russian Prose Writers course I took with Professor Stanton. On the paper, you will find scores of electronic comments from Professor Stanton, who read numerous drafts of the essay and helped push me along each step of the way, inspiring me to be a better writer and challenging me to be a better thinker. She simply could have stuck a B+ on the page and called it a day. But this is a woman who fundamentally believes in teaching and pushing students to improve, no matter what their starting point. I imagine that from her office in the corner of Milbank today she is still sending Word documents just like this across campus. This is the stuff of a true education, the sort I was fortunate enough to receive thanks to Professor Stanton and the Russian department at Barnard and Columbia, and in the fiercely competitive echelons of academia it is unfortunately increasingly rare. For the future students of Barnard and Columbia, you would be gravely amiss not to keep Professor Stanton: She is a treasure, and I can't thank her enough.

Please feel free to call or e-mail me if I can elaborate on any of these points, or if you have any particular questions. Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

All the best,

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