

The Other Chekhov. Okla Elliott & Kyle Minor, eds.
Fort Collins, CO: The New American Press, 2008.

Coincidentally, I was reading James Wood's *How Fiction Works* the same day a copy of *The Other Chekhov* arrived in the mail. Wood frequently refers to Chekhov as an ideal of story writing, quoting the "amazing" opening of "Rothschild's Fiddle," praising "The Lady with the Little Dog" as a model of characterization and use of detail, illustrating Chekhov's ability to capture the minds of his characters.

Editors Okla Elliott and Kyle Minor affirm the imaginative importance of Chekhov as a story writer through the ten "lesser-known masterpieces" they have chosen for this collection and the ten contemporary writers they invited to contribute introductions to each of the stories. They offer new perspectives on century-old stories that remain as fresh and startling in form and insights as any contemporary work, reminding us that Chekhov remains unique and unsurpassed.

While a Chekhov story usually includes variations of human longing and an enigmatic ending, his work is far from predictable. Even Joyce's *Dubliners* conditions readers to expect epiphanies. But we never can predict how a Chekhov story will turn out. In their introduction, the editors call him "a writer of tremendous range" in the subjects he took on and in the ways he did it: "It likewise becomes clear that there was no formal strategy he would not pursue if it fit his vision of what a particular story ought to be and do."

The translations of the Russian originals are Constance Garnett's, often criticized for their indebtedness to Victorian English. But her versions still hold up well, perhaps because the stories themselves more than compensate for any deficiencies and perhaps because those of us who discovered the great Russian writers through her work will always be in her debt.

Writing about "The Two Volodyas," David R. Slavitt demands that we read the story before his introduction: "The story is primary. This is just talk." When we have experienced the story, he then helps us understand what has happened, telling us "We have not just seen something," as

in a typical story of epiphany, but “have seen through to something.” The story reveals the many radical shifts of Sofya Lvovna’s emotions, her fear of a meaningless life, her desperate grasp at love, and finally leaves her without “the dignity of punishment,” just the fate of banality.

Christopher Coake believes that many readers will share his reaction to the unusual story called “Gusev” and be “gloriously mystified” by a work that embodies many characteristics of a “holy text.” Two dying men, opposites in temperament and beliefs, share quarters on a ship returning them to Russia on a journey they will never complete. Coake explains that he calls the story holy “because it is a story that both convinces in its reality, and has the nerve and vision to go where flesh cannot.”

Michelle Herman begins her consideration of “The Kiss” with a three-line plot summary, but then goes on to explain the complex richness is this story, how it serves as an archetype for later stories in which apparently nothing much happens, yet does with “cataclysmic effects.” She celebrates Chekhov’s craft in subtle point of view shifts, his mastery of nuance. “Chekhov’s understanding,” she writes, “and insight into the human heart (or soul, as you like) and his eye for precisely the telling detail, internal as well as external, are unparalleled among writers.”

For Steve Gillis, “Misery,” written when Chekhov was only twenty-six, serves as the source of memories about his own griefs and reflections on human loneliness. In the story, Iona, a cabman driving a horse and sledge on a snowy night, can find no one willing to hear him talk about the son who died that week, no one willing to offer human contact. Gillis tells of his mother’s cancer, the failure of his first marriage, his twelve-year-old daughter’s concern about needing other people—all evoked by an eight-page story.

Like Gillis, Pickney Benedict finds a parallel to his own life in “The Witch,” but more tongue-in-cheek as he compares the beauty and the beast motif of the story with his own physical self-image and his marriage to a woman he considers “a babe.” Benjamin Percy goes even further, using “The Huntsman” as a metaphor of a sinister pursuer in his own tale of personal disasters.

Fred Chappell provides the history behind “The Diary of a Violent-Tempered Man,” a satirical sketch Chekhov wrote as a challenge while a medical student in Moscow. Paul Crenshaw argues that “The Dead Body” is really a play in story form, and surely Chekhov knew something about playwriting.

Dorothy Gambrell responds to “In a Strange Land,” a story about an effete Frenchman called Champoun trapped in the service of boorish Russian landowner, with a cartoon story called “The Youth of Monsieur Champoun” that functions as an ironic prequel to the Chekhov. Gambrell’s Frenchman ends up sitting in front of an archway and thinking, “I can’t wait to get the hell out of France.” Hopeless in Russia many years later, Chekhov’s Frenchman despairs: “My God! Accursed be that hour when the fatal thought of leaving my country entered my head!”

As if delineating the “rules” of Chekhovian fiction, Jeff Parker pretends “The Murder,” the concluding story of the collection, serves as a prototype. Parker’s introduction is a series of declarative statements that manage to combine parody with perception: “In any given social context, at least one person is always contemplating an act of violence or sex toward another,” “Everyone in the world is a piece of shit,” “Everything is terrible, but nothing is so terrible as the potato in the blood.” While Parker’s guidelines are dead on for this story, their irony reminds us that every Chekhov story creates its own set of rules. It just seems that each reveals the way all stories should be written.

In his short life, Chekhov published more than 500 stories, not to mention plays that are among the masterpieces of all drama, while functioning as a doctor until the last stages of his fatal illness. Reading *The Other Chekhov*, we are reminded, story after story, of Chekhov’s mastery of the techniques and possibilities of the short story. But this book is not only the stories. The introductions, with the variety of their approaches and their original commentaries, deepen our own insights and appreciation of Chekhov’s accomplishments and their legacy for all writers.

Walter Cummins