

Thea Bowering / HOW TO READ YOUR LOVER'S FAVOURITE RUSSIAN NOVEL

*What is so really almost painful to me is that I think that
art ultimately should be laughter. That's the real pathway.*

— Robin Blaser, *Even on Sunday*

RULE #1: "Against the general rule: *never allow oneself to be deluded by the image of bliss*; agree to recognize bliss wherever a disturbance occurs in amatory adjustment."

Imagine, a young man at a party — a party that's like a movie full of great actors but, amazingly, still really bad — imagine as you go for your coat this young man cocks you a smile, passes you a bottle of European beer, and asks if you've ever read Bulgakov. This is what happened to me. And not so long ago either. Even worse, imagine he's a musician who's quickly pegged you as a student of literature. This is why Bulgakov is swiftly inserted into the conversation you find occurring while you lean, half in necessity, against the hideous rec-room bar in a city, you've come to realize, is nothing like Moscow. Or anywhere else in Europe for that matter. Bulgakov, the young man insists, is what distinguishes him from all the beer-bottle smashers there. Ha ha ha! you will laugh ruefully to yourself. But really, are you any better? You must admit, his introduction allows for a rare opportunity to reminisce aloud about your trip to Russia, three summers ago, before you moved to this god-forsaken dustbowl. You feel momentarily glamorous recounting the interior of the Kirov Ballet as you sweep your arm and quote a tourist brochure from memory: how, if you stood in front of every painting in the Hermitage for 30 seconds, it would take you 80 years to see everything. Or is it 80 seconds and 30 years? You can't remember.

At any rate, he is a guitar player who reads! So why not, what could be better: you are at school. School bores you. Besides, your

last boyfriend had not really read books, and only seemed like a character in a Russian novel. Three people, one was your mother, said he bore a striking resemblance to Raskolnikov — tall dark and gloomy, eyes flashing blue torment, a tattered overcoat. You'd hoped the likeness ended there but found out, soon enough, that this was not the case. He was a shit, just like Raskolnikov. Axed your heart right in two. To be fair, this was partly your own fault. You've always been attracted to men who look like they've just turned the corner from some famous 19th century novel. Who evoke the devastating, climactic scene from such a novel just by walking down the street. But at home: Raskolnikov who makes a great tiramisu; Raskolnikov who sorts the laundry while you sit down to write yet another English paper on Timothy Findley. If translated novels were allowed in English classes you might at least have been prepared: known how many crimes and punishments would be involved.

So relax, don't be so suspicious. Enjoy spending an evening with a guy who just likes to *read* a Russian novel from time to time, because he thinks they're hilarious. Russian novels are hilarious you find out in post-graduate life. You had no idea — too distracted at university reading *Pride and Prejudice* for the third or fourth time. However, when you do finally get to Dostoevsky's *Notes From Underground*, the opening is a revelation. Is there not a moment in every person's life where one's experience of a thing separates it completely from how one has been taught to think about it? This was such a time, and though you know Dostoevsky is a writer of sombre political and spiritual conviction, like they tell you, and though it's well known that he depicts bitter times for the individual at the mercy of the state, you cannot help but hear Woody Allen when the Underground Man says: "I am a sick man, . . . I am a spiteful man. I am a most unpleasant man. I think my liver is diseased. Then again, I don't know a thing about my illness. I'm not even sure what hurts." Another example: Geoffrey Chaucer. To your surprise you find there's nothing highbrow about Chaucer at all; it's all jokes about bums stuck in windows and your wife doing it with your neighbour or the baker. 15th century smut, pure and simple. It takes a lot more studying to find out gentlemen like Darcy don't really exist. If

university reading is supposed to prepare you for life, they should have a course called “The Best Loved Books of Boys to Avoid.” The top three on the syllabus would be ones by Georges Bataille, Charles Bukowski, and Fyodor Dostoevsky.

RULE #2: “The pleasure of the text is that moment when my body pursues its own ideas — for my body does not have the same ideas I do.”

By the end of a second party (where you and the Musician will have continued to allude to each other’s mysteries with shadowy lids and a tossing about of Russian titles) you will find yourself in this young novel-reading/ musician’s bed. And now you’ll have to admit, he may be onto something. His roommate/drummer doesn’t know how he does it; his roommate watches a lot of movies with car chases in them. But you know, like the women before you all knew, that the Musician’s discovered something his friends don’t have a clue about: that there’s a strong link between dropping the title of any 19th century European novel and a woman following you back to your bed — even if she’s not exactly believing a word you say, even if she doesn’t exactly remember the discussion including a talk of Goethe’s influence, or Kant’s distinction between Phenomenon and Noumenon, or the underlying message that the artist type is afforded a different moral code than ordinary mortals.

RULE #3: “The Pleasure of the text is not necessarily of a triumphant, heroic, muscular type. No need to throw out one’s chest. . . . [P]leasure can very well take the form of a drift.”

You could offer his video-renting friends a few pointers: gentlemen, you really only need to be familiar with one masterpiece. That said, you’ll want to avoid any machismo: consider Tolstoy’s popular *War and Peace*, too much war. Then again, you don’t want to come off as a dandy either: *Madame Bovary* will only have her referring to you as one of her “closest and dearest” friends. No gentlemen, here is the thing: the book you choose should feature a pale, emaciated (but handsomely angry) existential hero. People, whatever they say, love a

drifter. Kierkegaard's *The Seducer's Diary* is a shoe in. Now then, throw in any short story that's of the same origin as your masterpiece to show you're well read in the area. In your case Gogol's "The Overcoat" will do. (Its depressing portrayal of domestic life will deter any question of settling down.) And now you're ready. The main thing is to make it obvious that you have a personal relationship with this book. You should be able to communicate, with a sideways glance, that reading it has thrilled you, that something in you also speaks of this thrill, and that you can pass it on to her in various ways that are not available through academia.

RULE #4: "In the text of pleasure, the opposing forces are no longer repressed but in a state of becoming: nothing is really antagonistic, everything is plural. I pass lightly through the reactionary darkness."

When you first open your eyes, you will look back and see that a bookshelf is functioning as the headboard of the Musician's bed. (The rather obvious eroticism-of-the-text will not escape you.) It will be loosely housing leaning and unrelated titles; you'll note that only two are Russian: a Chekov and a Turgenev. In the cruel and rather hung over light of morning you'll see there is also a copy of Anne Marie MacDonald's *Fall on Your Knees*; some apparently eternal tomes of high school English: the *Never-Cry-Wolf-I-Heard-the-Owl-Call-my-Name* variety; and a Motley Crew autobiography which is both uncensored and uncut. You will applaud him for his eclectic and honest taste. However, the intoxicating allure of Russian masterpieces that brought you there the night before will have completely evaporated, and rushing to your mind will come a saying you think belonged to Dean Martin: if you can lie down on the floor without holding on, then you're not really drunk.

Well the same can be said of a futon. And though you are lying next to each other white-knuckled and barely alive, he will somehow conclude that now is a good time to bring up Emily Dickinson. Is this, you will wonder, a gallant effort to recover something of last night's "polite society"? Or does he want you to know that, despite the present depravity, he's still a man of some sensitivity the

“morning after.” Whichever it is, it’s a definite miss. You are nothing like what boys think girls who like Emily Dickinson are like. The “Collected Works of . . .” near your damp temple has the aura of an ex-girlfriend — lingering with the unfinished feel of a long dash. It dawns on you that perhaps the Farley Mowat book was not a high-school leftover, but passed on to him by his free-loving ex from Northern B.C. who tests bear turds for a living. You will begin to think that, perhaps, every book in the Musician’s headboard bookcase was a gift from a woman who has lain beneath it.

However, here is another thing: the bookshelves of men are often interesting for reasons besides the books in them. When you can finally pull yourself upright to retrieve your bra from the dead plant on the top shelf, you will catch a glimpse of a stray photograph: your new lover gazing into the eyes of a girl who looks a lot like Emily Dickinson. You will note, on subsequent visits to his bed, that although this picture sometimes changes position it is never put away. On the next shelf down are three books mysteriously tied together with pink ribbon — caught midway through some erotic Victorian-like exchange? Or perhaps with something of the frustrated Eugene Onegin and Tatyana passionately walking books back and forth between country houses . . . in the movie version anyway. And then there’s the occasional nameless phone number scratched on a matchbook, a balled-up, half-written verse about some girl with blue eyes, your eyes are green, who makes him twist in the prairie wind, etc. etc. . . . At night, amongst these things and the unassuming books, you will calmly find a place for your jewellery. After all, the whole point is to show you feel no antagonism, you can go with the flow, whatever. . . . And soon he will feel he can confide in you, and reveal his favourite Russian novel of all time.

RULE #5: “A text on pleasure cannot be anything but *short* (as we say: *is that all? It’s a bit short*).”

It is important to begin reading his favourite Russian novel early and make sure you read it quickly, because Russian novels are very long and most relationships with musicians are quite short. You don’t

want to be faced with the choice of whether or not to finish the book because you broke up on page 150, and there are 250 more pages yawning up ahead to torment you. It is probably a good book and you are enjoying yourself: *you don't want pleasure got from genuine and noble pursuits to be confused with a drawn-out pathetic revenge*. Case in point: a boy who spent six months practicing a Chopin Nocturne because you played it for him on the first date, but dumped him on the third. And he didn't even know how to play piano before he met you.

Or perhaps, better yet, re-read *Notes From Underground* as a cautionary tale. Skip to the section where the miserable narrator recounts his weeks spent scheming against an offending officer — who has, repeatedly, refused to step aside when passing the Underground Man on the street. Consider the tragic flaw of his brilliant revenge plan: scrounging together enough rubles for a beaver collar to replace the mangy raccoon one on his overcoat . . . so that he can look classy for a brief but orchestrated moment of collision with the officer. Write “undoing” in the margin. Follow the downfall with a highlighter: after many fevered nights, and a lot of last minute sidestepping, the Underground Man finally finds the courage to stay true to his course and clashes shoulders with the officer. The officer, however, who has not broken stride, does not appear to notice the new beaver collar . . . nor, in fact, the Underground Man himself, who now lays sprawling on the Nevsky Prospect. “At least,” the Underground Man tells us, “I have maintained my dignity.”

The point is, you want to avoid this kind of dignity. The first step: admit your pathos — that you have, in a move worthy of the Underground Man, spent a whole day combing Value Village for the perfect dress; bought it solely for the purpose of sashaying by your ex at a show so he can watch your ass with regret as you ignore him. But it's time to concede, ladies, that with musicians every love story is only an introduction to what will never be written. They can only repeat that beginning feeling over and over with someone new without ever introducing anything. So start looking in bookstores early, finish the novel quickly and put it away. Then, if things do end in a

sudden humiliating fashion, you can avoid an elaborate dual your ex won't even know he's engaged in, cut your losses, and move on.

RULE #6: "Bliss may come only with the absolutely new, for only the new disturbs (weakens) consciousness (easy? not at all: nine times out of ten, the new is only the stereotype of novelty)."

And so, awash in new love and the new possibilities of your lover's recommendation, you will go out in search of this magical book. You can't find a copy anywhere. One clerk will tell you that this title rarely comes in and when it does they can't keep it on the shelf. For a brief but terrible moment you will imagine the Musician's secret lovers, ex-girlfriends, and the ones he's prepping for the future, reading this book feverishly all across town. The likely truth is not much better: that his is the quintessential "It" book for this generation's hipsters. Just like a poster of Che Guevara is what all young men, fresh from their parents' houses, tack with attitude to their new bedroom walls. Just like Miles Davis's "Sketches from Spain" is the jazz album for every first-year college man trying to get laid via the old-school avant-garde. You were unprepared for this, thinking his love of this book, like his love for you, was singular, special, came from the private pleasure of reader-response. In fact, the book is probably only read now for the author's "punk-rock" status — as a man who was forbidden by his government to write. Try not to think about this and remind yourself that, nevertheless, the book is still worth reading, considered by everyone to be a classic.

RULE #7: "*Never apologize, never explain.*"

Of course, he does break up with you on page 150, and of course you do finish the book. All 400 torturous pages, in bed, eating Pringles off your stomach for brunch. You should have slammed it shut after the advice of the first chapter title: "Never Talk to Strangers" — not on Moscow park benches, nor at backyard Edmonton piss-ups. You never did get an explanation for why he left. But what of it; you should follow his example. That's what the pleasure of the text is all

about, says Roland Barthes: “Whoever speaks, by speaking denies bliss, or correlatively, whoever experiences bliss causes the letter — and all possible speech — to collapse.” Well yours certainly had. You were left paralyzed in bed for two days thinking your spleen had been poisoned by Pringles. “Ridiculous!” you say — when you can finally crawl back to your desk to finish your essay — “it was less than three months.” For most of your relationship you had attempted to fend off Bliss from your desk. In a wretched bathrobe, weeping over your laptop, you tried to articulate something for English 644 about the African Diaspora, which you know nothing about. Words like “identity” and “exile” swelled in your mouth until your inflated tongue floated you like a balloon against the ceiling, bobbing you along in perfect time to the exquisite twang of his pedal steel guitar, that you agreed he could set up in your livingroom. . . . All this because *Bliss is unspeakable*.

RULE #8: “No sooner has a word been said, somewhere, about the pleasure of the text, than two policemen are ready to jump on you: the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman: futility and/or guilt, pleasure is either idle or vain, a class notion or an illusion.”

Against the previously mentioned good advice about *not* taking justice into your own hands, you will go to the university library to find out everything the critics have said about his favourite Russian novel. In your head you will play out the moment when you “accidentally” run into the Musician at a party or show; how, when he asks if you ever finished reading the book, you will sum up its thesis in a few cool and brilliant sentences — like you’re reading him his rights. . . . You will take home three dark and joyless looking collections of essays. In them the critics prattle on, sorting through inconsistencies between fictional events and the life of the author, making educated guesses about religion and politics, breaking down the complicated structure of the novel. Nothing they say sounds sexy enough to fire out at an ex-lover between sips of beer.

You will realize that you are in need of some real advice. Though you never buy self-help books, you will go back to the library to find

Roland Barthes's *The Pleasure of the Text*. Perhaps it holds the key to the enlightenment you saw on your ex-lover's face, when he was recommending his favourite novel to you. Maybe Barthes can teach you to be spontaneous and irresistibly charismatic — like the novel's unusually large talking cat: who strolls around like a person, in a bow tie, boards Moscow street cars with bravado, and has no qualms about sprawling confidently on a stranger's chaise-lounge with a glass of vodka in one paw while munching pickled mushrooms with the other. Maybe you will even learn how to build an exciting career, like this cat's: working as a magician's assistant, ripping the heads off audience members and screwing them back on, and playing chess with the devil. Now that's the life, you'll think.

As you tunnel through the library stacks you'll notice, pressed together like stiff British businessmen in the tube, *five* copies of E.M. Forster's tight-lipped guide to dissecting aspects of the novel. However, because your school's "world-class" library had its funding slashed in the 80s, there's only one copy of Barthes's guide to Bliss, and it has to be retrieved from the book depository. Or, perhaps no one reads *The Pleasure of the Text* in Edmonton. Or, maybe the idea of reading for pleasure is an outdated theory all together, an embarrassment to be locked away; those caught reading this book are made a mockery of and cast out of school.

RULE #9: "The pleasure of the text is not the pleasure of the corporeal striptease or of narrative suspense."

Once it's been long enough to begin congratulating yourself on how well you've handled things, and not worry about colliding with the Musician at every street corner, you will, of course, run smack into him at one of your favourite bars. The first thing he'll ask is if you ever managed to finish the book. Staring at him — grinning there in the dirty toque he never takes off, his shoes bound with electrician's tape, his only pair of pants — you'll remember why he's irresistible. It's the way with all trickster figures, you'll shrug, recalling your courses in Canadian Literature. Coyote, Raven, Guitar Players — shapeshifters who, no matter how elusive, always win back your

affection with their irrepressible trademarks. Case in point, the novel's cloven foot "visiting professor." Though no one is really sure who he is, he is, nevertheless, known to everyone: the Russian newspapers repeatedly mention a mysterious stranger in an obnoxious plaid jacket, who's first on the scene whenever a fire or flood, or some other hell breaks loose in Moscow. He has a fang that juts out whenever he smiles. He will charm you into doing ludicrous things with him (for the sake of freedom and the human spirit!) even though, more often than not, they result in disaster.

Dumbfounded, you will forget to outwit your ex with the perfect dress and a solid argument, and instead proceed to confess your ignorance of Russian history in the clichés of creative-writing workshops. You did not really understand his favourite Russian novel because, really, you don't know anything about the Russian people of that time, or any time for that matter, or anything about the politicians and artists that are supposedly being ridiculed by the famous Russian writer. As of yet, you have not had time to riddle them out, slowly *peel* back the layers, like an onion, as they say. He will interrupt. "But it's a love story!" He laughs. "Oh, no." You'll explain. "It's actually a thinly veiled allegory. There's Stalin, and some poet called Mayakovsky that Bulgakov despised, and the hero is definitely supposed to be the author because they *both* liked to wear skullcaps." You'll wink and tap your head. Silence. "But," he'll venture, arms akimbo, "the heroine's stark naked for half the book and no one even notices. It's insane!" He is beaming. You will be recalling the magazines in his dresser. The pages with black-haired women on them carefully dog-eared. . . . The novel's famous naked heroine also has long black hair, so does his ex-girlfriend — down and tied loosely off to the side; and then there's Emily Dickinson with her tidy dark bun. You will feel yourself shrinking in your vintage peacoat that once suggested soviet intrigue but now just seems bulky. Does this kind of obvious repetition lead to perversion or ecstasy? one might ask; but, when you search his grinning face you will find no signs of corruption, nor even a trace of guilt.

It will occur to you that, unlike the Musician, the critics have little to say about the sexy heroine (even though her name is half the

book's title), and even less about her naked witchy radiance, rubbed on by the devil's special ointment. In his guide, Barthes says that people in academia don't talk about pleasure. Instead they talk about desire, because desire has an epistemic dignity. Pleasure means you've *arrived* and are just happy to be there — of course professors and critics brush pleasure under the rug; it could put an end to the business of higher learning! Nevertheless, loathing your own insistence, you will feel compelled to push forth: "When the heroine leaves her husband for the artist," you will offer weakly, "it's supposed to be like the October Revolution." Your exegesis, however, gets lost in the alarming curves of the heroine's huge body that has suddenly appeared and is now bobbing naked and shining in the air between you, getting bigger and bigger, taking over the whole bar. People have started running and screaming, and the grinning Musician is pushed back into the crowd and disappears.

You determine that the only safe place in the bar, as usual, is the washroom. You turn on your heel to bolt, but in a moment of tentative camaraderie will yell over your shoulder that the book *had* left its mark on you. "Yes, yes . . . like the stain of red wine!" you hear him yell back. Even across the frenzied crowd this will sound like an overly dramatic metaphor. You'll expect he meant blood, like from his bleeding heart, and feel some satisfaction that, as you suspected, he knows nothing about Russian novels after all. A week later, however, while strolling happily-enough towards Sam Wok's for some noodles, you will stop cold — recalling chapter 30. The devil's emissary poisons the frustrated artist and his morose heroine with the devil's *moldy jug of wine* that turns everything the colour of *blood*. You were, needless to say, doubtful when the Musician said that the Devil, as it turns out, is a pretty good guy; but when you rush home to re-read the ending you'll see that, sure enough, the same wine that kills the lovers also revives them, rids them of the oppressive city and their miserable lives in it! Together they rise up on black horses and, kicking a dove and some linden branches out of the way, soar into a fantastic pleasure garden where nobody tells them how to read, how to write, or love. . . . You can't say for certain, now, just *what* the Musician knows. Which will leave you unsettled for the rest of . . . well for awhile.

RULE #10: “*Texts of pleasure*. Pleasure in pieces; language in pieces; culture in pieces. Such texts are perverse in that they are outside any imaginable finality.”

From this point on, whenever you encounter the Musician by chance his one-liners ring mysteriously of poetry — and, while poetry is a fine thing, it won’t help you with closure. So forget it. Keep in mind: like partially burned masterpieces, Sappho lines, or half-written song lyrics in a boyfriend’s notebook *these moments linger on because of the unknown story around them*. And so, when the Musician is suddenly coming towards you across the grimy Safeway parking lot, shifting his bags full of fresh Alaskan sea bass and prosciutto to wrap it in . . . and he begins to drawl on about the weather — how he chased an onion across the parking lot during last week’s freak dust-storm, now he knows what people felt like during the Depression — do not be surprised that (despite the unlikely allusion) he transforms before your eyes . . . is mounted against the prairie sky, a tragic folk hero from some forgotten Albertan Ballad! For a moment you will even be convinced that times are as tough for Edmonton musicians as they once were for Soviet writers. Are you hallucinating? Of course, but calm yourself, this is just what the poets call “the meeting of the visible and the invisible”; it will pass: he has appeared, unexpectedly . . . and so it follows you want to know who the god-damn bacon-wrapped fish is for, which is to say, piece together what’s continued on without you. Consider here the novel’s most important line: “Manuscripts don’t burn.” The Master’s book *does* burn, of course; nevertheless, the point is that the smouldering fragments carry with them a persistent (one could say perverse) conviction that whatever has been lost must re-surface, at some point, tattered but triumphant.

Therefore, wanting to know, you will “drop by” the Musician’s new house to return his Hank Williams box set. Unfortunately he is “just on his way out” to meet someone. Of course. You wonder who she is. He can provide only a dim epiphany, a few flashes from last night’s drunken black-out: . . . jumping a fence . . . kicking a ball. A child of nature! you’ll marvel; you can’t help yourself. He rubs his

face with his small hand, smiles, raises his eyebrows and sighs with satisfaction “I spend all my time in here.” Cross-legged at his kitchen table, he throws up his other small hand in mock defeat: “I don’t even know why we have the rest of the house.” Of course not, his charming yellow kitchen is the perfect *tableau vivant*; where else would anyone want to be?

But wait, ladies. Try to keep the whole story in mind. “The rest of the house” is, after all, *total squalor*. No different than his previous dump, that you just endured a dragged out winter in, that should have been condemned long ago: chunks of ceiling in the bathtub, no hot water, its liveliness spent. The gentlemen, wrapped in scarves, their breaths visible, played country music in the front room every night. Stand up bass, pedal steel, George Jones on a fraying rug. Reminiscent of an NFB documentary: a story about a struggling but spirited community on some Isle off Quebec. A charming image to put on a stamp, but you wouldn’t want to get stuck there, waiting for spring. Still, this must be what goes on all over the Great Canadian North . . . to fend off insanity, and with blurry eyes you reached for a washboard and awkwardly ran your fingers down it. But, well, this is it then. So what is Bliss? A few anecdotes to hold onto like fragile illuminated parchment. Nothing is to be recuperated. Him, cross-legged and grinning like a cat in the glow of his yellow kitchen, with perpetual winter around it.

RULE #11: “The Bliss of the text is not precarious, it is worse: *precocious*; it does not come in its own good time, it does not depend on any ripening. Everything is wrought to a transport at one and the same moment. . . . Everything comes about; indeed in every sense everything *comes* — at first glance.”

And so, to conclude, the moment the Musician casts you a sideways glance, and cocks a smile, you will accept everything — don’t kid yourself — the same way you jump when a well-known story takes an alarming turn. For instance: the heroine tearing off her clothes, jumping on a broom, and flying madly away from Moscow — Why not! — you say, your heart pounding. However, while you adamantly

support the revolution of Bliss, you cannot give up your years of critical reasoning . . . slowly coming to fruition as you pace the bar's washroom stall: if (a) the name of your ex-boyfriend's new girlfriend happens to be the same as that of the heroine's servant — who *rides a pig* into paradise — then (b) where does that put *him* in the analogy! . . . But really, you don't really think he's a pig. You're not feeling at all vengeful. In fact, you're fine! Besides, a student of literature needs her peace and quiet. A routine. It doesn't work taking Bliss to your parents' for dinner; you can't stay under the covers and watch a movie with Bliss. . . . But you can't "stay friends" with Bliss either. And so, you will exit the stall and walk home in the wet spring snow with a guitar pick in your pocket. For those who aren't quite ready to receive Bliss, Barthes has this mantra: "I write because I do not want the words I find." We might as well leave you here, then, with your aching heart, scribbling down your images of loss, while the Musician goes back to his small round table, to cock a smile at a girl, whose black hair is spiky and wild in the dark and whose eyes flash electrically with love.