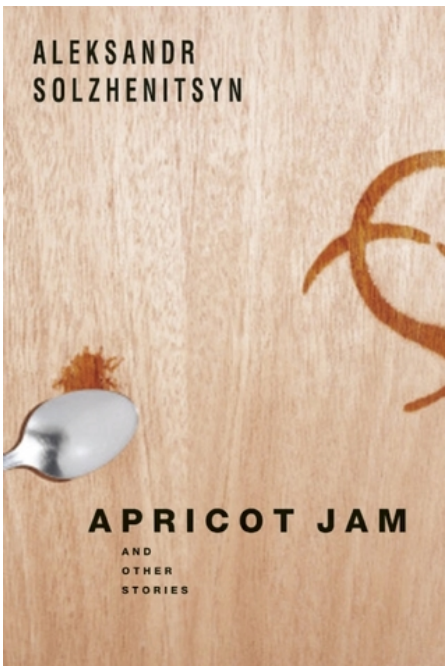

Apricot Jam: And Other Stories

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After years of living in exile, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn returned to Russia in 1994 and published a series of eight powerfully paired stories. These groundbreaking stories— interconnected and juxtaposed using an experimental method Solzhenitsyn referred to as “binary”—join Solzhenitsyn’s already available work as some of the most powerful literature of the twentieth century.

With Soviet and post-Soviet life as their focus, they weave and shift inside their shared setting, illuminating the Russian experience under the Soviet regime. In “The Upcoming Generation,” a professor promotes a dull but proletarian student purely out of good will. Years later, the same professor finds himself arrested and, in a striking twist of fate, his student becomes his interrogator. In “Nastenka,” two young women with the same name lead routine, ordered lives—until the Revolution exacts radical change on them both.

The most eloquent and acclaimed opponent of government oppression, Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1970, and his work continues to receive international acclaim. Available for the first time in English, *Apricot Jam: And Other Stories* is a striking example of Solzhenitsyn’s singular style and only further solidifies his place as a true literary giant.

Apricot Jam: And Other Stories Details

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From Reader Review Apricot Jam: And Other Stories for online ebook

NyiNya says

We all have those inner albums of mental photographs taken at some moment of emotional impact, some event that knocks you out of your comfort zone and on your ear...Kennedy's assassination, the launching of the first Sputnik, 9/11. I remember where I was when I read the last words of Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovitch" -- words so cold and so bleak, they are not just devoid of hope but a great black hole where all hope dies.

Apricot Jam is evocative of that power. Solzenhitsen lulls us with simple story telling until we find outselves standing with our toes at the edge of an abyss, looking into the dark, and trying to find a reason to lean backwards. The stories are not nearly as powerful as "A Day in the Life," where we survive just one day in the thousands that Ivan Shukof will survive. But all the short stories here point in the same direction. What do we learn from Ivan, that wily zek, who doesn't give up and doesn't compromise his humanity? What precept is to be discerned when ordinary souls don't succumb to despair and just keep struggling and slogging onward? Not a one. Zip, nada, nothing. The only moral here is: Struggle all you want, retain your noble soul. That and a buck will get you a cup of coffee. Deal with it.

These short stories don't have the unforgettable impact of "Day," the reader is not left sucker punched and on the canvas; but like Solzenitsyn's greatest books, they have that same powerful simplicity and beautifully wrought sense of loss and hopelessness -- but without any trace of pity or pathos. Apricot Jam gives us that sense of claustrophobia and futility, of swimming upstream, that must be the daily burden carried by all intelligent people who live under a repressive regime.

There is a dry humor at work in the stories...Solzhenitsyn always adds an ironic twist. In Apricot Jam, he uses a literary device he terms "binary" to reinforce the irony. People and events from the past show up to complicate the present. There is an interconnect among the stories and a sting in the tail. Readers of O'Henry will be familiar with the process.

When he went back to Russia in 1994 and did a victory lap around what used to be the USSR, Solzhenitsyn had to be laughing to himself. The champagne and brandy soaked receptions with glad-handing petty Moscow bureaucrats who were his former judge and jury, the back-slapping commissars in Irkutsk and Vladivostok who, a few years earlier, were running the Gulag, not the Trans Siberian Railroad, must have been amusing indeed. But these stories show us that he wasn't buying their dog and pony show. One can imagine a little hardness behind the eyes whenever the writer clinked glasses and toasted "Na Zdrovie" to one of his former captors.

One last word re translation: It's possible to read The Gulag Archipelago or the Cancer Ward in one translation and come away with completely different vignettes than would someone who read a different version. "One Day in the Life" seems to have the fewest major discrepencies. The quality of translation here seems to be good. Much of Solzenhitsyn's playfulness with words and syntax appears to be present.

Dwight says

http://bookcents.blogspot.com/2011/08...
and
http://bookcents.blogspot.com/2011/08...
for more detail.

So how do I feel about the overall collection of stories? If I haven't made it clear in other posts, I enjoy much about Solzhenitsyn's writing, fiction and nonfiction, so don't expect a completely unbiased review (even though I think he's wrong in certain aspects of his overall framework). The strongest work in these pieces focus on life under communism. The stories on World War II appear to include personal experiences, which I found interesting but I realize such stories aren't for everyone. Solzhenitsyn struggles in the stories (or parts of stories) set in the post-Soviet age—it's clear he is unhappy about many things but his focus doesn't consistently have the same bite. Which isn't to say they aren't good stories. It seems he was still working on how to evaluate and express his feelings on the changes in Russia, those for the good as well as for the bad. While there are no consistent themes across all the stories the feeling that a bad decision…such as missing an offered chance…lies at the heart of many unhappy or unfulfilled situations whether it be with individuals, groups, or the country. Literature, and the use/abuse of it by the Soviet system, comes in for its fair share of exposure but not to the same extent as the look at pivotal moments.

I recall seeing some announcements of this book saying this collection of stories would be a good introduction to Solzhenitsyn. If you're looking to avoid his longer works for such an introduction, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* would be a much better choice (although I want to put in a word for the longer works, too). I have no hesitation in recommending the first four stories of this collection to the general reader looking for a sample of Solzhenitsyn general style. The remaining stories gave me various levels of enjoyment but I realize not everyone has the same interest in the writer as I do. Solzhenitsyn has some characters in the 1920s express hope for the change in the direction the country was taking, hopes we know, without having to read further, will be dashed. Fewer characters in stories set in the 1990s express similar hopes as a result of recent changes. Their path still unfolds, but Solzhenitsyn didn't seem to think the results will be much different.

The stories employing a structure Solzhenitsyn called binary tales—two parts related by something tangible, a continuation of the same story but set years later, or simply two unrelated stories with a similar theme—can be uneven but when they click, such as the opening "Apricot Jam", this approach adds to the story's impact.

A few comments on the first four stories:

The first story, "Apricot Jam," uses the so-called binary style. Part one of the story is a letter from a kulak (a relatively well-to-do peasant) serving a hard labor sentence to a famous Soviet writer responding to the writer's claim that "the purpose and meaning of life" as "labor in a communist society" (Kenneth Lantz translated the five stories in this post). "To that I reply that there is queer small substance to this heroism and this labor because it comes from driving people like us nigh to we drop." The peasant goes on to explain the loss of the family farm to collective agriculture and his current plight—nearly starving to death. He begs the writer for a food parcel while recalling the apricot tree in the orchard and the jam his mother made from the crop. Part two focuses on the famous writer in his posh dacha as he entertains a couple of guests, one a department head at the state publishing house. The writer and department head rival each other in praising socialist realism with such statements as "Creating an art of world significance—that is the task of the writer today. The world is waiting for examples, for architectonics from our literature." The writer complains that

other authors fail to use “the language Russians have been speaking for a thousand years” which he discovered when reading confessions coerced from torture. The writer, after flattering himself with the claim that “When I write, I can comprehend my reader through my imagination, and I can see exactly what he needs”, comments on the peasant’s letter. The writer swoons over the language in the letter but ignores the writer's plea. The symbolism of the apricot jam at the dacha reinforces the disconnect between the writer and his claims.

“Ego” and “The New Generation” look at what it takes for someone to sell out their principles. Physical threats are effective for some, not for others, but threats to family prove very effective in both of these stories.

Another “binary” story,“Nastenka,” follows the difficulties of two different women with the same name of the title. The first Nastenka has a rough life as she tries to eke out an existence as a librarian. Raped often by the men in her life, she takes control of her sexuality and uses it to become the mistress of a war hero with access to material comfort she didn't know was possible. The second Nastenka trains to be a literature teacher. While she guards her sexuality, she witnesses the rape of literature in the name of the common cause. Never quite sure what texts are approved or not, this Nastenka feels gratified when the students respond in an inspired fashion to propaganda. Solzhenitsyn doesn’t need to comment on the insipid poem generating their reaction, just as he didn’t have to remark on a literature student’s passionate harangues decrying the literature of the past.

Philip Larmett says

I found this new collection of short stories in my local Kyiv bookstore and was intrigued. What little gems had Solzhenitsyn penned between his return Russia in 1994 and his death in 2008? What had they found in his papers, who had collected and translated them?
Mostly written in his late binary style, the stories in Apricot Jam present a series of striking portraits of Soviet and Russian life across the twentieth century. They span the period from, and the binary device allows Solzhenitsyn to jump decades to see what has become of his characters from the earlier tale. As usual, the upheavals that destroyed so many lives in the Soviet Union throughout the century are the main theme.
From my vantage point in Kyiv in the 21st Century, the tale of Ego was perhaps touching; a tale set in the Tambov rebellion of the early 1920's which was surely a precursor to the destruction of the Kulaks in Ukraine a few years later.
And the two stories set in the Great Patriotic War: Aldig Schwenkitten and Zhelabuga village, who share the same characters; all are vignettes of the larger tale that has yet to be told.

If anyone has never read any Solzhenitsyn, I guess the starting point should still be One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, as the impact of this story can never be underestimated. In the end Solzhenitsyn outlived the monstrous regime that tried to destroy him. A pity not many modern Russians or other ex-Soviet citizens have read his works, but I can understand why they do not want to start. They have new lives to lead, and sometimes it is better to forget what cannot be changed and move on. But in the corner, just in case we forget, we should keep a book by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn to remind us of the past...

Diane says

Powerful collection of short stories about ordinary Russians during the Revolution, Soviet times, and post-Soviet period. Solzhenitsyn is a master storyteller, and he develops his characters well, and sheds light on peoples' lives during the Soviet period.

Sooz says

One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich is one of my favourite books, but until now it was the only one of Solzhenitsyn's books i'd read.
i found the idea of pairing stories interesting -especially at this stage in his writing career - having seen soooooo much of Russian history unfold literally before his eyes.

two thoughts about writing occurred to me in thinking of this story collection. the first is the adage to write what you know. if that is one of the criteria for excellent writing, it is no wonder Solzhenitsyn mastered the art. he lived these times, these events, he knew these people. whether they are fiction or not - they feel true. the second thing that occured to me was something Hemmingway said about being concise. he said a writer should present the tip of an iceberg, and the reader should be able to perceive the huge, submerged mass that is driving the tip forward. here too i think Solzhenitsyn is a master. he writes simply of ordinary things but you can feel the massive driving force of geography and politics and war.

some of the pairs have the same character but the stories are divided by time - old men returning to the villages they visited as young soldiers in the first part of the story. one tells of two young women who share the same name. the first one is sexually promiscuous in order to solicit food and safety from the men she sleeps with. the second remains chaste but sells out her ideals and mimics party lines. both obviously just trying to survive. one is a man in a work camp writing a letter,sharing his thoughts and needs and despair, which is paired with the reaction of the recipient of the letter.

these stories - two sided and reflective - are the perfect ending to Solzhenitsyn's writing career.

Michael says

I was not sufficiently patient to work with the slow narration and ponderous pacing of the first story in this collection. So it may have been merely my own condition, or it may have been that Solzhenitsyn can and does write tediously. When I couldn't sustain enough interest to finish the first story -- I initially wrote "sentence," there, which may more accurately reflect my feelings about this book -- I paid my overdue fine and left it behind in the library where the torpid activity suggests it may take months or years for another reader even to notice it.

Cat. says

I mostly snagged this so I can say I have read Solzhenitsyn, even if it's not one of his famous publications. These stories are good snapshots of a certain time and place (pre-1950, post-Revolutionary Soviet Union) and while they differ in major details, they are similar in tone. The tone is dismal, somewhat cynical, and angry at the corruption of the country that continued after the fall (and murder) of the Tsar. Nothing changed, except that different people were running things, and poor people still starved.

I didn't finish all the stories. I got through two that were more-or-less centered on the Eastern Front during World War II, and just couldn't swallow anymore. I wouldn't have made it that far if I didn't know some history of the era, though. The most memorable one for was a very depressing story about a young idealistic college graduate trying to teach Russian literature to children; every year the curriculum changes, the ideology changes, the list of "allowed" authors changes...horrible.

Ipek says

Either wrong time to read this particular book or something about the prose just kept losing me and i had to force myself back in. Apricot Jam is easily my favourite, the rest had really good moments but couldn't keep me hooked long enough.

Zanna says

Quite often Solzhenitsyn deploys a distinctive technique of contrasting the live circumstances of two or three characters (or versions of the same character), allowing the bitter ironies of life in the Soviet Union to emerge from the juxtapositions. The author's political opinions are usually very obvious and there is an angry edge of polemic in the tone almost all the time. Much of the substance of the majority of these long stories though is extensive military detail. There isn't enough other stuff in it to really hold my interest. By the time I got to the end, I was just skimming.

Jim says

Written in the years between Solzhenitsyn's return from exile to Russia in 1994, and his death in 2008 this new collection of stories from the Nobel Prize-winning author is available for the first time in English. Mostly written in his late binary style, the stories in *Apricot Jam* present a series of striking portraits of a Soviet and Russian life across the twentieth century. Through their unforgettable cast of military commanders, imprisoned activists and displaced families, these stories play out the moral dilemmas and ideological conflicts that defined the century.

Apparently someone has said that this collection of stories would be a good introduction to Solzhenitsyn—no doubt some publicist—and I can’t disagree, the first few stories anyway, but much better to dive straight into *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and then find a copy of the new translation of *In the First Circle* which I hear is good. For those familiar with his work and still interested—perhaps that’s the key here—there is more here, though, than just wallowing in the past.

You can read my full review on my blog here.

Hadrian says

I was surprised to see a 'new' Solzhenitsyn out, simply because he passed on about three years ago. Yet I'm not one to question the maze of difficulties of translation and copyright.

This collection of stories was written mainly in the mid to late 1990s, when the Empire which he had railed against for so long had finally collapsed, and Russia was anemic and fragmented. The range of the stories is very impressive, as always, covering a realistic view of those who lived under socialism, in contrast to the turgid propaganda of the time that is 'socialist realism' in name only.

Even in his 80s, he still recalls some passionate and vivid scenes. My favorite of these is Adlig Schwenkitten, a 24-hour look at a Red Army detachment in East Prussia, almost certainly based on his own experiences.

He is a bit moralizing for some, and his style is offputting, but those who enjoy Solzhenitsyn before, will admire the sheer energy with which he writes.

Shane says

Solzhenitsyn returns to his familiar place and time, the Soviet Union between two world wars. In these nine long stories, using a technique that makes two story lines connect (or not), he unravels the ills of communism and it’s legacy, an ideology that held him in its utopian promise during his formative years but later abandoned and punished him as he grew more enlightened.

In the title story, a young kulak (a landholding class) who has been rendered destitute by the Reds, writes to a celebrated Soviet writer asking for help and intercession; the writer, who lives in an affluent dacha, responds by remarking to his political buddies on how the language of this kulak mirrors the intensity of the times, he sees art in the situation and not the plight of the poor kulak. The story “Ego” is without hope, for it recounts an ill-fated peasant uprising within the Soviet Union, born of the corruption and ineptness of the Bolsheviks during their early years of rule; when the uprising founders, the leaders are forced to betray the rest of their comrades. In “Nashtenka,” two women bearing the same name are contrasted: one woman becomes a plaything of the bureaucrats in order to survive, the other resists moral decay and attempts to teach her students classic literature over the proletarian myths that have overtaken academia – a daunting task for literature has become subverted; “we don’t value a writer by what or by how he experiences life, but by his role in our proletarian movement.”

The stories “Adlig Schwenkitten,” “Zyelyabuga Village,” and “Times of Crisis” seem autobiographical, for they feature historical figures and involve characters mirroring the many roles that Solzhenitsyn played during World War II: commander of an instrument reconnaissance battalion, decorated war veteran, and chronicler of events. They are episodic stories involving military manoeuvres, technology and politics. The price of failure is to be sent to a “punishment battalion,” and you are only as good as your last victory. Stalin, who in real life had Solzhenitsyn committed to eight years of hard labour, is portrayed as a vacillating hypochondriac. The author’s involvement is so intense that in some instances we see him slipping from third person to second person to first person points of view – an editor’s nightmare, no doubt.

The last story “No Matter What” didn’t quite connect its binary story lines, but it concludes with the moral that “might is right” under communism, where no matter what wrong decisions the apparatchiks make, as long as they are protected up the chain of command, they will always be in the right. Joining the party was very compelling in those days, for it determined what job you got. And forget about education and landholding – they did not amount to much. Toe the party line, and you would be okay! Seems to happen in Wall St. too!

Of all the stories, I found “Fracture Points” the most interesting, for it contrasts an entrepreneurial Communist-era factory boss who becomes an oligarch in the vacuum created during the Soviet Union’s collapse, against the plight of a scientific-minded new-generation Russian who is forced to start a bank (one of the many that started and collapsed in the aftermath of Glasnost and Perestroika) and who is lost; the strong message here is that the new Russia is not a place for the idealistic but only one for old vets who are able to carve out stronger niches for themselves in the confusion of system change.

Towards the end of his days, Solzhenitsyn was criticized for being a man out of touch with the times, for being stuck in the time warp between the wars that had moulded his character. And yet, despite the narrative-heavy nature of these stories, and the inconsistencies in craft (blame it on translation!) he does pose interesting questions on humanity that make one pause.

Ralf says

this has been rather disappointing. Grueling descriptions of life in the early time of the Soviet Union, but not really interesting as literature. Maybe deliberately so: the title story (maybe the best) thematizes the problems of aesthetization of language in view of actual terror. Still, I think, this does not work as literature. Solzhenitsyn uses what he apparently calls a binary style, which mainly means: all stories have two parts that are sometimes more, sometimes less obviously connected. Maybe that is part of the problem: the world is not just binary.

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latner3 says

Anyone who is not knowledgeable on the changing politics of early 20th century Russia may not find many of these stories very interesting.

Shelf Magazine says

In his novels such as the Gulag Archipelago and One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, Aleksarndr Solzhenitsyn recounted and renounced Soviet oppression, earning him imprisonment, exile, a Nobel Prize and an acknowledged role in the defeat of communism. Some of his final published works are available for the first time in Apricot Jam and Other Stories.

Read an interview with the late author's son, Ignat Solzhenitsyn, in the October/November 2011 issue of Shelf Magazine. http://www.pagegangster.com/p/3YczN/
