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## Review: *Paper Victory;The Old Woman*

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**Levine, James S., ed. 2017. *Paper Victory. Three Stories by Ludmila Ulitskaya. An Annotated Russian Reader.* iLearn Russian Publishers. 92 pages.**

**Levine, James S., ed. 2018. *The Old Woman. A Story by Daniil Kharms. An Annotated Russian Reader with Exercises on Verbs of Motion.* iLearn Russian Publishers. 114 pages.**

These two Readers are a welcome addition to the available authentic texts for learners of Russian at the intermediate level of proficiency (CEFR, 2011). Both of these James S. Levine-edited Readers have much to offer, not only in terms of their linguistic accessibility, but also through the way they might improve students' cultural literacy and analytical skills when it comes to Russian literature. One's reading skills, review of Russian grammar and vocabulary also stand to benefit from these two valuable volumes.

*Paper Victory* is a collection of three stories by Ludmila Ulitskaya: "Paper Victory," "Cabbage Miracle," and "Nails," from her book «Детство сорок девять» (2004). Levine provides glossed, unabridged versions of these three stories, along with accent marks, line numbers, and explanations of potentially difficult words and grammatical structures. Asterisks indicate all participles and verbal adverbs that also appear in alphabetical order at the end of each story, along with translations and grammatical information. Following this list are vocabulary exercises and activities aimed at checking text comprehension. Levine provides topics for compositions that conclude exercises for each story. Meanwhile, a Russian-English glossary, in which each vocabulary item is translated and accompanied by grammatical information, can be found at the very end of the volume.

Ulitskaya's stories at the center of Levine's volume feature illuminating interactions between children and adults in post-WWII Soviet Union. These stories are, as Levine states in his introduction, "engaging literary texts suitable for readers of all ages." He praises the texts' "universal themes, abundance of colloquial dialogues, and largely straightforward prose style" (p.6), which make them accessible to Intermediate level (B1-B2) readers (CEFR, 2011). Following Iatsenko's

criteria for conceptual difficulty of literary texts used in a foreign language (FL) classroom (Iatsenko 2006, p.5, cited in Yunusova 2018, p.9), the stories in this Reader should not present too great a challenge for students. Since the plotlines focus on plausible incidents in the young characters' lives, the stories prove straightforward, with time and space presented objectively and the author's point of view remaining neutral. Despite stylistically marked vocabulary («всегда носила в кармане *гребёнку*» [p.17], «цыгане *свели* или кто» [p.34], «кусоч *давешнего* большого хлеба» [p.52], emphasis added), comprehension is manageable thanks to the abundant annotations and commentary.

By introducing the historic background, i.e., the Soviet Union's recovery after WWII (p.5), Levine sets the stage for Ulitskaya's stories. Through this brief introduction, Levine enhances students' understanding of each plotline and each story's broader significance. Students' grasp of the literary text, would have been even more immediate had Levine pointed out, if not explained, the significance of various culture-specific practices, such as spending hours in line outside on a cold winter evening to buy cabbage ("Cabbage miracle") or involving grand- and great-grandparents in the upbringing of their grand- and great-grandchildren ("Nails"). Of course, if Levine's Reader is used in class this hardly poses a problem, for course instructors can address such concepts on their own.

Levine offers a number of exercises, aimed at expanding students' vocabulary and checking comprehension of the stories. Vocabulary work centers around word-formation and synonyms, while text comprehension is checked through true-false statements and close-ended comprehension questions. Although such comprehension activities generally require only short, sentence-long responses, they can be used to guide extended classroom discussions of each text. Further extended discourse comes when students write a concluding composition for each story. Grappling with Ulitskaya's work, students will not only improve their close reading skills, but also become better acquainted with contemporary Russian literature, Soviet history, and Russian culture broadly conceived.

Unlike the Ulitskaya Reader, Levine's second Reader centers around one relatively long novella, Daniil Kharms' *The Old Woman*. Although the structure of this Reader generally repeats the structure of the Ulitskaya Reader, the emphasis shifts from checking text comprehension to exercises targeting the review of grammatical material.

In comparison to Ulitskaya's stories, comprehension of Kharms' *Old Woman* plot proves somewhat problematic. Even though the novella depicts an incident occupying only one day in the protagonist's life, it is full of his inner monologues, his dreams, shifting time frames, and sudden changes of subject. In the Introduction to this Reader, Levine does not shy away from the novella's complexity. Here he presents various facets of Kharms' piece as "political allegory" consisting of "illogical, nonsensical and fantastical situations" with a "concern for faith and religion" (p. 7). The novella, Levine emphasizes, is an "innovative imaginative work that is at once disturbing, darkly funny, and thought provoking" (p. 7). As an absurdist piece of Soviet fiction written in the tumultuous 1930s, *The Old Woman* will require more linguistic and cultural support than Ulitskaya's stories.

Following the glossed text of the novella and the list of participles and verbal adverbs, Levine presents various grammatical topics which naturally arise from the novella. Aside from the beauty of Kharms' text, Levine's work on verbs and syntax emerges as this Reader's major strength. Levine offers a review of verbs of motion, including prefixed and transitive ones, and translation and fill-in-the-blank activities, whereupon such verbs are highlighted in colloquial and idiomatic expressions. Levine presents verbs of position, many of which Kharms uses in his story almost as extensively as he uses verbs of motion. These verbs of position are activated and drilled through fill-in-the-blank activities. The Exercises section concludes with the review of the subjunctive mood and impersonal sentences. All themes of the Exercises section prove necessary and useful for learners of Russian.

Thanks to careful annotations and commentary throughout these texts and ample post-reading activities, both of Levine's Readers can serve as effective supplementary texts for independent learning and for classroom use alike. When read in class, these stories can be part of a language course or a content-based course on Soviet and Russian literature. The applicability of these two Readers is undeniably ample.

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**Kudyma, Anna S., and Olga E. Kagan. 2019. *Russian Through Art: For Intermediate to Advanced Students*. London and New York: Routledge. 250 pages.**

Both teachers of language and language learners are always on the lookout for a good textbook. The textbook *Russian Through Art: For Intermediate to Advanced Students* is a welcome addition to the textbook pantheon in the field of teaching and learning Russian, and is another major contribution to a very limited number of textbooks for this level of language. According to the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century: "Through the study of other languages, students gain a knowledge and understanding of the cultures that use that language and, in fact, cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs" ("Standards for Foreign Language Learning" 1996). Language teachers introduce students to and lead them through the realms of tenses, cases, vocabulary, and so on, but the real world opens up to students when they can understand the culture of the target language, and the environment in which the language is used. That is exactly what the latest textbook by well-known and respected authors Anna Kudyma and Olga Kagan attempts to do.

The shape of the textbook is straightforward: it is arranged according to the following six modules or chapters, to cover a surprising amount of material: *Museums and Collections, Painting of 19<sup>th</sup> – Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Art of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Sculpture, Architecture and Urban Space, and Music and Theatrical Art*. The textbook has an accompanying website with lectures, visual materials, and news clips. Each chapter has a glossary that lists key words and expressions while the textbook itself ends with Russian-English and English-Russian dictionaries.