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## Review: *The Meek One: A Fantastic Story: An Annotated Russian Reader*

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**Fyodor Dostoevsky. *The Meek One: A Fantastic Story: An Annotated Russian Reader.* Julia Titus, ed. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011. Illustrations by Kristen Robinson. 154 pp. \$22.00**

***Selected Short Stories by Vassily Aksyonov. A Reader for the Intermediate and Advanced Student of Russian with Explanatory Notes, Exercises and Glossary.* Compiled and edited by James S. Levine. Introduction by Julie A. Christensen. Bloomington, Indiana: Slavica, 2013. 254 pp. \$24.95**

Both of these readers are excellent additions to available annotated readers for students of Russian that would be most appropriate after students have completed two full years of Russian.

*The Meek One*, as a single story, would be most appropriate as one of a number of texts for a 19<sup>th</sup> century literature class. The book itself has an informative brief biography of Dostoevsky as well as a well-laid-out two-column design with the text in the left column and lexical items glossed on the right. Titus also provides extensive explanatory notes that explain both cultural concepts and challenging linguistic formulations. In addition, there are also written vocabulary exercise, as well as activities for students to recognize related words by identifying their roots. The volume also provides suggestions for in-class discussion and writing assignments. There are keys to the exercise and quizzes included as well. I highly recommend the wonderful on-line expanded “digital version” which contains an introduction about Dostoevsky (in Russian and in English), the text in both audio and electronic written format with an excellent gloss, electronic flashcards for vocabulary study, and the same fill-in-the-blank exercises that are in the hardcopy, except that students can complete the exercise and get immediate feedback by checking their answers. This online companion appears to be available and free of charge. The online version, however, does not contain the extensive notes, or the suggestions for oral and written assignments. That said, it would be entirely possible for the instructor to use the hardcopy as a kind of “teacher’s edition,” with students working primarily from the online companion, as it appears to be available without a password and free of charge. Both the hardcopy,

and especially the online companion, could easily be used for self-study for more advanced students.

Unlike *The Meek One*, which would have to be included in a more extensive reading list, the volume by James S. Levine *Selected Short Stories by Vassily Aksyonov. A Reader for the Intermediate and Advanced Student of Russian with Explanatory Notes, Exercises and Glossary* could easily form the basis of an entire course for students who have had at least two full years of Russian. This is an exceptionally well-done reader that includes five stories by the young Aksyonov - *Samson and Samsonikha* and *Surprises* from 1959, *From Morning Until Dark* published in 1960, *Catapult* from 1962, and *Local Hooligan Abramashvili* from 1964; and one story, *The Lion's Den* by the mature Aksyonov written in 2003 after his return to Russia after more than 20 years in exile in the West. The five early stories all have young characters who are dealing with the kinds of common issues faced by young people even today, making some of the themes accessible and familiar to the student of Russian. Though the stories are set in a much different time and place, they provide the opportunity to explore the realities of life in the USSR during the 1950s and 1960s. *The Lion's Den* is a wonderful account of the author's visit to Pushkin's apartment-museum, providing rich material for discussion. The introduction by Julie A. Christensen places Aksyonov's life and work in context. Each text is superbly glossed (lines are numbered, glossed items run along the margin) and includes footnotes with cultural and linguistic information that the student is not likely to know already. One of the most difficult things for our students reading in the original is coping with participles and gerunds. After each text is a comprehensive list of all such forms, in the order in which they appear; given for each form is its infinitive and aspect, as well an indication of whether it is a verbal adverb or participle (past or present). For each text, there is an extensive list of questions about the text that serve to check comprehension and can easily be used to guide class discussion, a set of topics for written essays, and a section highlighting Russian word-building based on roots. There is also a comprehensive Russian-English glossary containing all the words that appear in the stories (with the exception of numbers, personal and possessive pronouns, and person and place names). This volume could be used to offer any number of courses, depending on program needs and student level: it may be used as the primary text for an author's course on Aksyonov himself, or it may

be integrated (in its entirety or in part, again depending on institutional context and student level) into a course on literature of the post-WWII period, the Thaw of the late-1950s-early 1960s, or 20<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature in general. There are very few readers available today that can be used as the main textbook for a course, either because they are single-story readers, or because though they may include a collection of stories, the supplementary material included in the volume is insufficient, requiring the creation of such material by the instructor. This superb volume is likely to appeal to instructors and students alike, for both its selection of stories and its approach to the material.

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**Donna Oliver with Edie Furniss. *Pervyi Krug: Russian Full Circle*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013. 384 pp. \$85.00 (cloth)**

*Первый круг: Russian Full Circle* is the first edition of a beginning Russian textbook that represents a contemporary communicative approach with an emphasis on grammatical and pragmatic competences. Additionally, it offers an open-source ancillary web site. The goals and objectives of the course are clear, challenging and feasible. The materials can be used in a traditional year-long language course or in an intensive summer language program.

The course consists of ten lessons consisting of vocabulary, grammar explication, conversation practice, and homework exercises. A unique feature of each chapter is the culture section that includes poetry, tongue twisters, and Soviet propaganda posters related to the chapter's theme. The slogans in the posters not only convey cultural knowledge, but also illustrate particular grammar points in an authentic and amusing way. Along with the posters, the book contains abundant popular Russian jokes, including contemporary political jokes, to provide the necessary element of fun.