

Swarthmore Alumni Book Club  
Washington, DC  
2008-2009 Reading List

"Humor and Dissidence"

Background Information and [Reading List](#)

mentored this year by Professor of Russian [Sibelan Forrester](#)

## Why Humor and Dissidence in East European Literature?

Much of Central and Eastern Europe had long and often troubled associations with multinational empires. These included the Holy Roman Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Russian Empire. Some readers and scholars theorize that the intermixing of peoples on the one hand and the imposition of distant authority on the other led to the flowering of a particular kind of literature: what the Russians call "Aesopian language." Aesop (author of the famous fables) was reputedly a slave, and so could only sneak a subversive meaning out by using language that the people in power would not be able to understand - but that would be clear to anyone who shared his experience and point of view.

Though no one would wish a difficult life on artists, it's often true that the need to conceal a dissident or even just non-conforming meaning in languages or music or images whose surface seems ordinary and publishable or performable (what Russian poet Anna Akhmatova described as a box with "a triple bottom") results in works of art that reward repeat reading: even a "native" reader would miss some of what is going on the first time through.

Eastern and Central Europe is a region whose borders may be disputed - does it include Finland, Germany and Greece? Does it include Turkey? Does it include countries like Georgia and Armenia, with their ancient Christian traditions and locations between Europe and Asia? You'll get different boundaries and a different list of countries depending on the factors you use for selection: history, religion, language, dynastic alliances. My interest in Eastern Europe began when I began studying Slavic languages, which are spoken in many countries there.

(West Slavic: Czech, Polish, Slovak, Sorbian; South Slavic: Bulgarian, Croatian, Macedonian, Serbian, Slovene; East Slavic: Belarusian, Russian, Ukrainian.)

Some illuminating books about how Eastern Europe was constructed include Maria Todorova, **Imagining the Balkans** (1997), and Larry Wolff, **Inventing Eastern Europe. The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment**(1994). The regional groupings left over after the Cold War have been changing rapidly since several Central and East European countries joined the European Union.

For the purposes of this reading group, here's a list of countries: thought-provoking if not definitive:

- Albania
- Belarus
- Bosnia and Hercegovina
- Bulgaria
- Croatia
- Czech Republic
- Estonia
- Latvia
- Lithuania

- Macedonia
- Montenegro
- Poland
- Romania
- Russia
- Serbia
- Slovakia
- Slovenia
- Ukraine

A small country can, of course, have outstanding authors who eventually gain renown outside their own nations and become available in translation. Four I would especially recommend but did not include on this reading list (because translations have gone out of print, or because they use humor in less obvious ways, are **Péter Esterházy** (born 1950, Hungarian -- if the name rings bells, it's because yes, he's from that famous family associated with so much of the best classical music in the Austro-Hungarian empire), **Ismail Kadare** (born 1936, Albanian, widely-translated winner of the 2005 Booker International Prize), **Danilo Kiš** (1935-1989, Yugoslav, with a very dark sense of humor and many works on Jewish topics in particular), and **Jaan Kross** (1920-2007, Estonian, passionately interested in history and especially his country's relationship with the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union).

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Finally, a note about translation: each individual author's web page, using the links below, they list some alternate readings that would have been my first choice - not because of any flaw in the books chosen, just because another book was so funny and compelling, but... out of print. While some authors (like Dostoevsky or Tolstoy) will be in print, and in multiple translations, for the foreseeable future, teaching less well-known writers from these regions means a constant dance with the vagaries of publishing: what is out of copyright? What has gone out of print? What might come back into print? If you have bought copies of all these books, thank you: you're voting with your dollars for more published translations!

Remember, too, that all of these books (but one) are in translation - it comes up when there are serious translation problems, but not every translation will convey the linguistic elements of the original's humor.

In case it's interesting, here's a page from the New York area alumni reading group, whose 2002-2003 topic was [The Great Russian Novel of Conscience](#).

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Reading list:

Note: this is a work in progress, and not all the pages are complete yet.

- [Karel Čapek \(1890-1938\), War with the Newts](#)
  - [Ilya Il'f \(1897-1937\) and Evgenii Petrov \(1903-1942\), The Twelve Chairs](#)
  - [Mikhail Bulgakov \(1891-1940\), The Master and Margarita](#)
  - [Vladimir Voinovich \(b. 1932\), The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin](#)
  - [Milan Kundera \(b. 1929\), The Joke](#)
  - [Stanisław Lem \(1921-2006\), The Cyberiad: Fables for the Cybernetic Age](#)
  - [Josip Novakovich \(b. 1956\), April Fool's Day](#)
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For questions about the reading group, meetings, books, etc., please contact Pamela Zurer at [pam@zurer.com](mailto:pam@zurer.com).

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