

Forbes

Book Review: Viv Groskop's Thoroughly Excellent 'The Anna Karenina Fix'

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February 23, 2023

"To think I might have died without having read it." Those were the words of the late, great William F. Buckley. He was referring to *Moby Dick*. Having read it after he'd turned 50, Buckley's love of the novel had him marveling at the very real possibility that he might have never gotten around to it.

Buckley's quip comes to mind frequently with Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* top of mind. To be clear, I've never read it. But I want to. *Badly*. What keeps me from accomplishing the feat is the novel's length in consideration of my desire to maintain my pace of non-fiction reading, plus I've heard it's a very difficult story to follow, with hundreds of different names. But most of all, fear of failure is the biggest barrier to reading the novel. What if I can't finish it?

A desire to summon the courage to jump off the proverbial *War and Peace* cliff was a big driver of my purchase of the great Viv Groskop's 2018 book *The Anna Karenina Fix: Life Lessons From Russian Literature*. As the title signals, Groskop has read more than one Tolstoy novel, along with countless other Russian writers. This is the excellent book she published before 2020's similarly excellent *Au Revoir, Tristesse: Lessons in Happiness from French Literature*. Groskop's descriptions of the novels, along with her application of them to her life and that of

her readers, makes the reader of her books want to read every single one. So many books, so little time it seems.

The funny thing is that per Groskop, it appears Tolstoy himself would want me and others to read *War and Peace* (but not *Anna Karenina*, it turns out...) given what one of his translators termed his overall aim for us “to strive, through unrelenting effort, for self-improvement.” That’s how I perceive Russian literature in general. Having read none of it, but having heard it’s great, the desire to read it is rooted in self-improvement, in being conversant about something that’s seen as the best and also the most challenging of its kind.

Interesting about all this is that one of Groskop’s major aims is to reduce the intimidation factor that has readers like me looking in defeated fashion at a number of unread Russian novels in the bookcase. Groskop is adamant that “Russian literature is accessible to all of us,” and that it’s not for some “secret society of special people.” Better yet, the literature will help us to understand ourselves better by virtue of it “shedding some light on some of life’s most difficult moments.” Self-help in addition to self-improvement. I’ll take it. At risk of being repetitive, Groskop’s book does nothing to dampen one’s desire to be literate about the Russian kind. It only intensifies it, but as I type I haven’t cracked a Russian novel yet, plus next on my list is a long biography of Henry Ford.

Groskop is up front that her book “is not an academic thesis on Russian literature,” nor is it “supposed to be the last word in interpreting Russian literature.” Which is fine for this reader. Again, I haven’t read any of it.

From there, no one reads the same book. As interesting as Groskop’s commentary is on a variety of Russian classics, I read all books through an economic lens first and foremost. In this case, I found Groskop’s own Russian experiences most interesting, and will likely reference them a long time ahead in my own economics columns. I’ll start there.

To begin, there aren't a lot of Groskops in England. Groskops in existence are Viv Groskop's relatives, it would seem. This truth had her thinking while growing up that she wasn't British, or Irish. Groskop *felt* Russian, felt she had a "Russian soul," and ultimately lived there for two long stretches as a student and teacher. Which is part of the economic fascination. She was there in the early 1990s, and while she yet again felt Russian, her friends in Russia felt something else. In her words, "For some people, I was, potentially, a source of money or treats or – what everybody wanted – jeans, ideally Levi's." Funny here is that the late satirist P.J. O'Rourke routinely quipped that what actually ended the Cold War was Bulgarian blue jeans. Groskop would likely have felt that O'Rourke had a point. The Russians she encountered were so poor, and so desperate to get their hands on, among other things, the blue-jean plenty of the west. We have no idea how good we have it and had it relative to the Russians. And it's obviously not just the jeans.

Life was just so cruel there right into the 1990s. Everything was so run down. Groskop writes of a hostel she lived in where "insects and Soviet plaster intermingled, and a draught whistled through the cracks."

What about food? Groskop recalls that "if you opened someone's fridge, it would be virtually bare." This brought to mind Robin Williams in *Moscow on the Hudson* walking through a New York City grocery store, seeing the endless choices on offer, only for his character to faint. In Groskop's case, a visit home after a long stretch in Russia brought her to tears. Her family's refrigerator was full.

When Groskop was suffering a bout of dysentery, a Russian friend who was also a nurse insisted that she "swallow packets of black powder." These packets were charcoal. It turns out that charcoal was "a medieval remedy for stomach complaints." Life in 1990s Russia had medieval qualities. At risk of getting political, or at least economic, communism was so brutal. So was its aftermath.

In light of how awful it was, how did MI6, the CIA, and seemingly every other western intelligence agency not know? How did they not know that a country with empty refrigerators logically lacked an economy, and based on that, posed no threat? Wars are expensive, yet the Soviets had no economy with which to pay for a war. Cato Institute co-founder Ed Crane saw this clearly during a 1981 visit, yet the CIA persisted with the shockingly dim belief throughout the Cold War that the Soviet economy wasn't that much smaller than the U.S.'s. The incompetence of an agency that wraps itself in mystery is staggering.

All of which leads to one more political comment, or question. As previously mentioned, Groskop published this book in 2018. The year is mentioned simply because in her discussion of Nikolai Gogol's *Dead Souls*, she routinely refers to Gogol as a "Russian" writer, and also as "the most adorable of all the Russian writers." Yet in actual fact, Gogol was from Ukraine. Groskop also pursued an unrequited romance with "God's Gift, Son of God's Gift" (read the book!) in Odessa, a seaside Russian town that is part of Ukraine. I found myself wondering about all this. Growing up, Ukraine was always Russia to me, or the Soviet Union. So was Odessa. Gogol was always seen as a Russian writer, and Groskop yet again refers to him as such. What I found myself wondering was how much different life in Ukraine would have been had the U.S. stayed out of the conflict that seemingly gets bloodier and more costly (for both Ukraine and Russia) by the day. No doubt Vladimir Putin is a bad guy, but there's no evidence that members of the Ukrainian political class are angels. Assuming no military or financial support from the U.S., it's hard not to imagine Ukraine falling quickly, though minus hundreds of thousands maimed and killed on both sides, not to mention the hundreds of billions in damage. Are the Ukrainians better off for having the funds, arms, and American military ingenuity to deter Putin? Is the world safer? Groskop is so thankfully *NOT* political in this spectacular book, but I found and find myself wondering what she thinks.

Back to the interesting stuff, Groskop notes that Anna Karenina doesn't appear in *Anna Karenina* until Chapter 18! The lesson from the Tolstoy classic is that "we must know who we

are in order to live an authentic life.” From this we can see how it touched Groskop given her belief, but more realistically her *desire* to be Russian.

Russians are big believers in fate. “Why? You ask why? No reason. It’s fate.” To Russians, things just happen or are meant to happen. Maybe this is a way to come to terms with all of the awfulness? Groskop notes in her discussion of Boris Pasternak’s *Doctor Zhivago* that fate and destiny make it possible and convenient “for the good doctor” to “cheat on his wife” through the “preposterous coincidence” that Lara would be in the same town as the Doctor that was over 700 miles from Moscow. Fate, it seems.

Ivan Turgenev’s *A Month In the Country* teaches readers how to endure life’s inevitable cruelty involving unrequited love. In Groskop’s case, her love for Bodgan Bogdanovich (God’s Gift, Son of God’s Gift) was her real-life instance of a crush that wasn’t returned. The good news here for readers is that the lesson on the matter of the pain really makes sense. As Groskop puts it, “while unrequited love hurts you in theory, it also saves you from hurt.” So true. Figure that love is the fun part, but what of the end of it? To know only the passionate side is certainly to be protected from a lot of eventual hurt. There’s also arguably something to being #2. It can perhaps be said that the loser is the winner simply because the loser never grows stale. The loser will arguably always evoke fond memories, or possibly even memories of “what if?” wonderment. What a place to be. Lionel Shriver blurbs Groskop’s book, and in reading about unrequited love I found myself thinking of Shriver’s excellent *The Post-Birthday World*. In the parallel stories, the loser was the winner.

What about love unrealized? It seems this pairs well with the above. For this life lesson, Groskop features Alexander Pushkin’s *Eugene Onegin*. Onegin realizes after it’s too late that the woman he initially felt silly was the perfect one for him. As Groskop puts it, “we are foolish and we don’t know what’s good for us until it’s too late.” Again, the genius of coming in second, being #2, or yes, the *loser*. The rejected can sometimes come out the winner, or the loved, or the yearned for, and that is so because we humans are foolish.

Most appealing of all, or most entertaining, was Groskop's discussion of Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Groskop very comically explains his message through a circus clown she interviewed who, while dressed up as a clown because he played a clown in the circus, claimed he wasn't a clown to her. He was so much more. Too good! And in Dostoevsky's case, too real. Groskop writes that "Dostoevsky is all about the people who are living as clowns yet are adamant that they are not clowns." What a fun person he would have been to speak with.

At the same time, it was fun to imagine Dostoevsky talking with Solzhenitsyn given his command to not be "delusional about who you are." Easier said than done, one supposes. It seems we all are inventing at least something, or at least allowing partially false perceptions to live. How funny in light of Dostoevsky's perception of us as clowns without knowing it.

Solzhenitsyn notably did not comment on Perestroika as it was unfolding. Groskop quotes him as saying that "things were moving so quickly that any opinion would soon be outdated." What restraint he had. Americans so badly want to offer their opinions about everything, yet Solzhenitsyn was content to be quiet. With good reason. Indeed, I took the explanation of his quietude as a more revelatory comment about markets themselves. Or at the least the future. It's always, always, always opaque. So much so it makes you wonder why so-called experts are so routinely asked what's ahead. Don't reporters know that they don't know? Read Solzhenitsyn to know!

Most moving of all the chapters was the one about Russian poet Anna Akhmatova. From her story and that of Mikhail Bulgakov in a later chapter, readers are introduced to the sad reality of writing "for the drawer" during Russia's tragic Soviet period. In Bulgakov's case, his classic satire on Soviet Russia, *The Master and Margarita*, was published long after he died. Imagine the agony of that. Writers arguably write for themselves most of all, but they surely want to be *seen*. Imagine writing something great, but having to die before it's published out of fear that if it sees the light of day when you're alive, you'll be killed.

Even more tragic with the above in mind, it seems that all too many Russian writers with enormous talent simply chose to not write altogether. Perhaps they had families they wanted to live for, or perhaps they were just terrified of what would be done to them if they wrote what was on their mind. Or maybe more painful than writing what was on their mind, or what they felt, was writing lies to escape death altogether? Whatever the answer, or answers, Groskop sadly writes that “there has not been a huge cache of secret brilliant literature that has been unleashed since the USSR collapsed.” Which would cause one to speculate that some wildly talented people simply didn’t exercise their talent out of fear of “a knock on the door by the KGB.” How awful.

It all ties in well with the aforementioned poet, Akhmatova. Groskop reports that “She couldn’t even physically write anything down because her home was routinely searched by the KGB.” Where it gets fascinating and sad at the same time is that according to Groskop, Akhmatova preserved her poems in “pre-Gutenberg conditions.’ They were part of oral history, not written down, just remembered, in the way poetry was ‘written’ (i.e. committed to memory) for years before print was invented.” This was the safe thing to do, particularly as “Stalin took a particular interest in” Akhmatova. One of her fellow poets by the name of Osip Mandelstam observed about poetry in the Soviet Union that “there’s no place where more people are killed for it.” Sad. Very sad.

All of which brings us to *War and Peace*. Groskop is encouraging when she writes that “reading it is the work of a lifetime,” but discouraging when she adds that “so much about reading it is about re-reading it.” Where to find the time? In fairness to the re-reading part, her point seems to be that with age comes life experience, and it’s the life experience that adds to the relevance of the novel. Still, this reader remains intimidated. From Groskop’s description alone of the story, it sounds so long. And she’s clear that so much doesn’t make sense, that parts of it drag. Ok, but if it drags what to do? Time will tell.

As I type my hardcover copy (better for notes) of *War and Peace* sits unread, mocking me. For now, Groskop's wonderful look at Russian literature will suffice, but it feels like cheating. Precisely because no one as previously mentioned reads the same book, *War and Peace* must be read. It has to be. And to Viv Groskop's credit, the day I begin reading it is much closer thanks to her most engaging of books.