



## The Slynx

*Tatyana Tolstaya , Jamey Gambrell (Translator)*

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Two hundred years after civilization ended in an event known as the Blast, Benedikt isn't one to complain. He's got a job—transcribing old books and presenting them as the words of the great new leader, Fyodor Kuzmich, Glorybe—and though he doesn't enjoy the privileged status of a Murza, at least he's not a serf or a half-human four-legged Degenerator harnessed to a troika. He has a house, too, with enough mice to cook up a tasty meal, and he's happily free of mutations: no extra fingers, no gills, no cockscombs sprouting from his eyelids. And he's managed—at least so far—to steer clear of the ever-vigilant Saniturions, who track down anyone who manifests the slightest sign of Freethinking, and the legendary screeching Slynx that waits in the wilderness beyond.

## The Slynx Details

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## From Reader Review The Slynx for online ebook

### [P] says

I am a butcher. Only I don't work with meat, I work with words. Cutting, slicing, trimming. All for Vladimir, the great and powerful, and The Good Russian People. Give me War & Peace and I'll hand you back a pamphlet. That's progress, comrades. When they gave me the job they said that I would be serving my country by preventing the spread or dissemination of dangerous materials. Most people don't realise how dangerous literature is. They focus too much on bombs and guns, and forget all about the clever metaphor. No one ever dropped a clever metaphor on a village of women and children, they say. Well, that means I'm doing my job properly. They'll give me the Order of Lenin one day, no doubt. Recently I've been working on The Slynx. Cutting, slicing, trimming. It's hard work, comrades. First, you have to read the book several times. You don't want to miss anything, to let anything through that ought not to get through. Vladimir, the great and powerful, would not to be pleased. And when Vladimir is not pleased someone gets it. I thought about the title for a long time. Slynx. What is it? What does it mean? Is it some kind of code? According to Tolstaya, who wrote the book, it is a strange, mysterious creature that grew out of the nuclear explosion that has, in a sense, created the world that she describes. Well, ultimately I decided to get rid of it. The title, I mean. You can't be too careful. I renamed the book The Sensible Adventures of Comrade Benedikt. There are a lot of weird creatures in the book; mutants, I guess you would call them. One woman has multiple cockscombs; there is a man with ears all over his body; another man can breathe fire. Tolstaya calls these defects or mutations Consequences. While I wasn't too entertained by all that – in fact I found it rather silly and distracting – I let it go. I saw nothing in it to corrupt The Good Russian People. You have to be careful not to censor too much, otherwise our citizens will have nothing to read, to keep them busy and stop them from thinking for themselves. Stop Worrying, Let Vladimir Think For You, goes the popular slogan.

Oldeners are people who were born before the blast, and survived it. They remember. Memory, comrades, is perhaps our most potent weapon. Sometimes I meet someone who can recall the original books, before I got my hands on them. 'Where is the rest of it?' they say. 'It's all there, comrade,' I reply. 'My arse it is!' they say, 'I know something about books, comrade, and I can tell you that there is a character in this one called Bazarov.' We were talking about Turgenev, of course. 'And yet, now there is no Bazarov!' I told him that he was imagining things. Bazarov! You made that up, comrade. Whoever heard of such a name, you silly shit! The problem with post-apocalyptic literature is that it is, generally speaking, not half as clever or inventive as the author thinks it is. Take The Slynx, for example. The blast has left people mutated, with strange powers? Ok then. And these people are ignorant of what existed before the blast? Dandy. The ignorant ones make mistakes about, mispronounce or misunderstand the things that existed before the blast, so that morality becomes more-allity, for example. Well. Let's be honest, all this is pretty standard stuff, you really expect this sort of thing, it's a formula. I once worked on Russell Hoban's Riddley Walker, comrades, and I can tell you that The Slynx is very similar indeed. Very similar! Now, I'm not a writer myself, you know, I'm an editor, and being an editor I know something about authorial decisions, so to speak. If I could have spoken to Tolstaya I would have said, 'comrade, does your book have to be so similar to other books of the same sort? Isn't doing something that has been done many times before, with only minimal changes, rather pointless, in fact?' And she'd probably turn up her nose at me or laugh or call me an unpleasant name, like Kulak, but I would be right, of course. And she'd probably point out to me that The Slynx is a satire, that the ignorant masses are meant to represent our own ignorant masses, The Good Russian People. Sure, sure. But then I would likewise point out to citizen Tolstaya that satire, or allegory, is itself the province of the lazy and unimaginative, because it is necessarily obvious, otherwise the nincompoops wouldn't get it. Take Kapek's War with the Newts [which I wittled down to a still generous 30 pages], in which human beings colonise a race of newts. Well, the newts are, of course, meant to represent all the races or peoples that we have attempted to colonise ourselves. And one has to ask oneself, well, what was the point of that? It is as though

satire allows you to do really obvious things, to make points even a child would grasp, just because you've changed humans to newts. No, comrades. If you want to want to write about colonisation, do so; it is artistic cowardice to hide behind a bunch of lizards. What elevates *The Slynx* is the narrative voice, which is buoyant and charismatic, although somewhat naïve and simple-minded, like Huckleberry Finn after a hard blow to the head. It is such a charming voice, albeit strongly reminiscent of Bohumil Hrabal or even Gogol. Hrabal was a Czech novelist whom Vladimir, the great and powerful, despises. I once let one of his novels through, with major cuts of course, and Vladimir got so angry he punched a bear square in the face. That wasn't very nice, if I may say so. Aleksey, the bear, wasn't expecting it, having agreed to a wrestling not a boxing match. One of the hardest parts of my job is managing humour. It is very easy to ruin a funny book if you make too many alterations. For example, you might leave in three quarters of a joke and expunge the punchline. And that is bad. A joke without a punchline is like an army without a general. *The Slynx*, I must confess, is very funny indeed. It is not a sophisticated humour, because sophisticated humour is not actually funny, I've found. Sophisticated humour makes you smile, often with only one half of your mouth. Real humour, on the other hand, draws ugly sounds from your throat. I made some very conspicuous noises when reading this book. Fortunately, I work alone, and so no one would have heard me, except the spiders in the corners, and spiders won't denounce you if you laugh at the wrong thing, comrades. For example, I was much amused by the izba where you pick up your wages by putting your hand in a narrow hole and grabbing what you can, hopefully without injuring your hand or arm too much, while the hole where you pay your taxes is wide, spacious and unlikely to harm you. I had to get rid of all that, obviously, but it did make me chuckle. I liked the Degenerators too. They are a kind of workhorse, hairy but with human features and the ability to speak. They pull troikas and sleighs. They are foul-mouthed too. I imagine that they are the peasantry, the Muzhiks in Tolstaya's world. Of course anything to do with the peasantry had to go, which is a shame as I think you would have got a kick out of the Degenerators. Sometimes I will cut something but save it for myself. This is foul weakness in me, I know. At home I have a scrapbook full of pages, quotes and phrases that are likely to unsettle *The Good Russian People* and lead them towards uselessness and a lack of right-thinking consciousness. I, however, as a government employee, am immune to that horrible potentiality. So I kept a little something from *The Slynx*.\* I would also have liked to have taken home all the parts and pages about the recreation of culture, which obviously I had to eradicate, but I considered that too much of a risk. The Oldeners, if you recall, can remember life before the blast, and so they yearn for a return to that way of life. One of them, Nikita Ivanich, puts up signs to indicate what and where certain places used to be. I found that rather moving. He has Benedikt carve a wooden statue of Pushkin too, in an attempt to reconnect with the past. Of course, in our beloved Rus we are always surging towards the glorious future, a future helmed by Vladimir, the great and powerful, so this kind of soft peasant sentimentality is just not on. I'm ashamed, I tell you, but there was something in this retracing, this desire to remake a lost world – the manners, the monuments etc – that got to me, that made me blub, bub. I guess Tolstaya is making a serious point too, about how humanity is drawn towards culture, how we strive towards it. We need books and art, I guess. There is a lot written about literature in *The Slynx*. There are also numerous quotations throughout the text, mostly from our Russian writers. In my time, I see around me a weird kind of fetishisation of books in particular, where people will loaf in shops smelling and caressing them. And of course this is classless decadence, but when you consider that citizen Tolstaya is Russian, and that people like me have censored works of literature for many years, her characters' obsessions with books doesn't seem so odd. For *The Good Russian People* a book is not just something you pick up at the store because H.R.H. Oprah Winfrey has had it stickered. You do not pass it on to your neighbour simply because you know that she likes brutal murders and bondage hanky-panky. A book is a statement, it is a kind of protest. It is, in short, a serious business. We Russians, at least, understand this. You do not suppress something unless you recognise its power, comrades.

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\*This is what I kept:

“I only wanted books—nothing more—only books, only words, it was never anything but words—give them to me, I don’t have any! Look, see, I don’t have any! Look, I’m naked, barefoot, I’m standing before you—nothing in my pants pockets, nothing under my shirt or under my arm! They’re not stuck in my beard! Inside—look—there aren’t any inside either—everything’s been turned inside out, there’s nothing there! Only guts! I’m hungry! I’m tormented!...”

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### Nataliya says

Few books terrify me to the depths of my soul as much as this postapocalyptic tale full of **bleakly-black humor and dark satire**, set amongst the radioactive desolation of ~~Москвa~~ Fyodor-Kuzmichsk - which is sunk low in degradation and regression, with economy dependent on mice-hunting, with a lone half-finished statue of ~~Пушкин~~ *pushkin* stuck in between vegetable plots, **with ignorance and superstition ruling it all**. Welcome to the world of *The Slynx*!

What makes this book so terrifying to me is **how accurately it captures the darkness that inhabits the souls of your everyday average humans**, the darkness that makes us hang our heads in shame for our little pathetic human race. These traits are hidden right under the surface - *naked power hunger, greed, xenophobia, extreme egoism, glee at others' misery, hatred of anything different...* These are always there, lurking in depths of the human soul - individual and collective - just barely reigned in, barely forced underground by the influence of science and literature and medicine and technology and social conscience. **But what if the social structures that contained these horrors of humanity collapsed, and resulting destruction of existing culture, regression, and ignorance allowed the worst to come out?**

Tatyana Tolstaya brilliantly depicts the results of such destruction. **It's been 200 years after the nuclear Blast, and what once was a city of Moscow is now a big village of Fyodor-Kuzmichsk** (named after its current ruler, of course - until he is unseated). The effects of radiation are on the borderline between terrifying and outright comical. The economy is sustained on hunting mice, and as far as cultural life goes - well, the scribes make handwritten copies of a mishmash of books (*supposedly written by Fyodor Kuzmich, of course*) ranging from fairy tales to literary classics to logarithmic tables, and the dreaded red-robed Sanitars are omnipresent to take you away for the 'Healing' if you're found to be harboring a book from before the Blast.

**Take out the radiation side effects, and this can almost be the world of deep Russia centuries ago - the world that is so remote to us and yet so uncomfortably close at the same time.** People live in huts, burn candles, do a bit of agriculture and hunting (well, mostly mice, really), there are serfs, the wheel has been recently invented, as well as that new-fangled device for carrying buckets of water from the well (*attributed, of course, to Fyodor Kuzmich*), boats have been recently invented as well, men beat wives for fun and out of boredom, the strangers are feared and fought with, and superstition permeates every aspect of people's lives... This is the world in which Benedikt, a scribe and an innocent creator of **pushkin monument**, discovers that he loves reading books, and that **there is only ONE correct answer to the 'burning' question (pun intended) - which item would you take out of a burning house first?**

And this brings me to what I think is the most important theme in this otherwise entertaining but ordinary postapocalyptic story - ***the importance of MEMORY***. People are nothing without it. Memory is what provides the framework, the context for our actions. **Memory is what this ruined world lacks** - even though there are people from "before", belonging to a variety of Soviet social classes, almost magically prevented from dying. However, these 'former' people seem more concerned with reminiscing about the past and complaining about the present, and do little of value - unless you consider talking about social injustices and putting up signs with the names of long-gone streets and the half-finished monument to Pushkin, which the locals use for securing their clotheslines. With the memory of the past gone, there is no context to any of these. **Pushkin is just, well, 'pushkin', lower-case, a random unnecessary statue, a symbol of something ungraspable, unneeded, un-understood**; the sign for *Arbat* or *Nikolskie Vorota* is worth no more than 'Vitya was here' sloppily carved out below it, and any book is just a collection of empty printed words. **They are nothing without the context of memory.**

*"In the web of the streets, pushkin stood like a small black stick, and like a thin thread was from high above a clothesline, wrapped like a noose around the poet's neck."*

This is where I think Tolstaya is brilliant. The idea of a protagonist's world changing once he discovers the miracle of books is not new. What's great here is her approach to it - **the idea that all the books in the world mean nothing without the context of memory, without which even Hamlet can be easily interpreted as, perhaps, the story of an unsuccessful mice hunt or something of the sorts**. In order to beat the ignorance you need more than just ability to mechanistically read - you need to be able to understand and learn, otherwise reading can be quite dangerous, actually. In order to achieve any kind of enlightenment you need to first learn the '*alphabet*' - which is not as simple and straightforward as poor naive Benedikt may think (*by the way, I'm not sure how it was done in the English translation, but in Russian, the chapters of the book are titled with the names of the letters of the old Russian alphabet. I thought it was quite neat*).

**The language of this book is a treat** (at least to those who read Russian). The medieval peasant-like feel of the language with some twisted and half-forgotten neologisms of 'recent past' is quite fun and unsettling at the same time. **And almost on every page there are allusions to the classics of the literature, including, of course, Alexander Pushkin, creating wonderful, delicious subtext and context**. I can only hope that the translation managed to capture the feel of the original, since otherwise it'd be a loss to the overall feel and message of the story. **And let us not forget the constant references to relatively recent Russian politics, that give this story a sharp edge of political farce in addition to everything else it is.**

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**4.5 stars is the verdict.** It fell just a bit short of absolutely loving it, perhaps because of the slow build up in the first half of the book that reminded quite a bit of the standard postapocalyptic/dystopian fare. Also, I'm still trying to figure out how I feel about the ending (*is it the only possible way for it to end - or a cop-out? Time will, maybe, tell*). **I recommend it highly, however - it is a true gem of the genre.**

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And special thanks to Jeffrey Keeten, whose excellent review prompted me to reread this book (and without the reread, I would not have understood nearly as much as I had the second time around).

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(Sorry for the long Russian quote. I love it so much, but it was too much to translate while still preserving the beauty of the original. Usually, I translate the quotes from the books I read in Russian myself, but this one was too much for me to tackle.)

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### **karen says**

i have a long and troubled relationship with the russians. for years i didnt want to read them, because i felt that i wouldnt understand them with their troubled political history, their interchangeable names, their fucking ability to endure that is so intimidating and making-me-small-feeling. and then i read bulgakov. and i felt a little more confident.... then i got a little older and i thought... maybe im ready for some dostoevsky... and then i wondered what i had been so worried about, because it was all so accessible. then in my twenties i read kurkov, solzhenitsyn, nabokov, makine, zamyatin, chekhov... i have been around the russian block, my friends... and yet... theres still this barrier between us. i feel like there is so much subtext i am just missing... that unless you are russian, there is something gently exclusionary about the writing - that you could know all there is to know about russia and its history and its peoples and still - this is not intended for you. anyway, this book was very good but im sure that a real russian would appreciate it in some more deeply personal way than i ever could.

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### **Joaco says**

I came into this book completely blind. Other than reading the description from GR and the fact that the author was a descendant from Tolstoy, I knew nothing else. However, this was a gamble I was willing to take since I really liked its post apocalyptic setting.

The gamble paid off. Extraordinarily.

I was expecting some high brow critique at communism and its totalitarian rule. Even if that is present throughout the book, there are many more things tightly packed in such a short novel. There is also a fierce critique to the intelligentsia and their uncommitted attitude; satire running through all characters actions when they show themselves too stupid to understand the past the "oldeners" talk about; a gloomy perspective on everyday life but with a hopeful, redeeming, ending.

Through Benedikt's character development, Tolstaya gives us a run through of this society which is backwards yet wants to advance, that makes decisions based on a tradition they do not comprehend, suffering the choices between evils and tries to understand the morals of the consequences. All this while making fun of the character which is oblivious to all this as he is a stone age barbarian rediscovering the

beauty of books without ever understanding their true meaning.

This is a book I wish I had picked up earlier.

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### **Jeffrey Keeten says**

Tatyana Tolstaya was born into the Russian aristocratic family of Tolstoy. You might be thinking, as was I, would that happen to be the Leo Tolstoy family? Why in fact it is! I wasn't able to trace down exactly how she is related to Leo, but in several articles it mentions her relationship to the Russian literary giant. Her grandfather, Aleksei Nikolaevich Tolstoi, was also a well respected writer who wrote the book "*Peter I*". Tolstaya has a literary blue-blood heritage that gives her a leg up in the publishing world. The Russian publishers had to be wiping the saliva from their chins at the thought of having another Tolstoy to publish. But can the woman write, can she make Leo Tolstoy proud?

**YES!!!** In my humble opinion she delivered a masterpiece. A wonderfully inventive book that Leo would have read with awe and delight. The book is part of the New York Review Books classic series that are of such high quality I often wonder why I'm not reading more of them. Here is a link to their website.

<http://www.nybooks.com/books/>

Our hero is Benedikt and he is living in a post-apocalyptic world where rabbits are toxic, food in general is scarce, and nearly everyone is exhibiting **Consequences** as a result of **THE BLAST** event that happened 200 years ago. Benedikt transcribes old books, written before the **THE BLAST**, and they are presented to the world as the writings of their leader Fyodor Kuzmich, Glorybe. The scribes begin to question that the writing style of their dear leader changes so much from book to book, but it is best not to have any association with Freethinking.

Anytime you feel different than you should you must be careful. *"When you growl through your teeth, grumble and grouse--the anger feels good, it kind of rolls around all prickly warm inside you. You wanna show off your strength. Kick a fence. Or a dog if you meet one. Or smack one of the guys around. Whatever. There are all kinds of things you can do. But sometimes you don't feel like getting mad. It's like there's a sadness inside. Like you feel sorry for someone. Must be feelosophy."*

Bureaucrats control every faze of their existence. These are for the most part self appointed people who have taken over collecting taxes, rationing of script, and managing the distribution of goods. Most are corrupt and cut a fat hog while the rest of the population is near starvation. The main source of protein and bartering power comes from one little critter that most of us don't even want to contemplate adding to our diet, and certainly it makes me shiver to think of my survival depending on my ability to build a better mouse trap.

Trade is determined by how many mice something is worth. Benedikt carries them around in braces under his jacket to barter them for more variety in his food diet. When he goes to see the widow Marfushka he must have enough mice for the legs to part.

*"Benedikt went to see the widow woman Marfushka about the woman business: maybe once or twice a week, but he'd always go to see Marfushka. You couldn't exactly say she was pretty. In fact, her whole face was sort of crooked, like someone hit her with a battle ax. And one eye wandered. Her figure wasn't all that great either. She was shaped like a turnip. But she didn't have any Consequences. She was rounded out where she out to be and caved in where she out to be. After all, he didn't visit her to look at her, but to take care of the woman business. If looking's what you want--well, you can go out on the street and look until your eyes pop out."*

Benedikt's life takes an abrupt turn when he decides in a moment of starry eyed lust to ask the beautiful Olenka to marry him. Her family is wealthy and part of his new father-in-law's job is to track down old books. It is illegal to own books printed before the blast and even though most of the population has been made afraid of being in the same room as a "toxic" book from the past there are still people brave enough to squirrel books away in old wells or hidden in walls. It is a life changing moment for Benedikt when he finds that his father-in-law has a room full of books, and once Benedikt gets over his inherent superstitions, and begins to read, he is absolutely lost to the world of books. He inhales them. He spends so much time reading that his wife complains that he isn't paying attention to her anymore. He begins helping his father-in-law to find more books. He becomes an insane (more than just gently mad) bibliophile. He becomes desperate when he realizes that he has...**READ THEM ALL.**

His father-in-law, a few cards short of a full deck, dangles the prospect of liberating the books held by Fyodor Kuzmich, Glorybe and what ensues is not only hilarious, but a wonderfully constructed piece of social commentary.

The world after the blast has slid backwards. Food is an issue. There is never enough of it and too much of what used to be a staple of the Russian table has proven to still be toxic from the blast. Half-human, four-legged Degenenerator's are used to pull sleighs, and the sarcastic word exchanges between one in particular and Benedikt elicited more than one snicker from me. The book receives high marks for originality, humor, and "feelosophy". **"Don't you shake your beard at meeee!** I with utmost confidence HIGHLY RECOMMEND this book.

If you wish to see more of my most recent book and movie reviews, visit <http://www.jeffreykeeten.com>  
I also have a Facebook blogger page at:<https://www.facebook.com/JeffreyKeeten>

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### **Isidora says**

I would give ten stars to this book, if I could. It is innovative, funny and frightening and I loved it.

The title of the book, Slynx, is an invented word. There are many such words in this book set up in a post-apocalyptic Moscow, two hundred years after civilization ended in an event known as the Blast. People born after the Blast are deprived of any contemporary commodities and live in a wild land, most of them marked by mutations which they call Consequences. They live mostly on mice and use them as currency and a measure of things. Life is full of fear of unnamed Disease and moreover of mysterious screeching creature Slynx from the woods. Freethinking is forbidden as well as printed books from before the Blast, but there are few Survivors who recall the world as it used to be. In such degraded world lives Benedikt, the narrator, luckily free of mutations and with enough mice to eat and trade on. His travel starts with a comfortable job of transcribing books from the past, but then goes on along the dangerous path of change. Reading, art and real books (yes, "The Slynx" is a tribute to art and literature) flip his world upside down and forces a new

beginning.

I cannot recommend this book highly enough. I was just blown away by its surrealism and originality. Tatjana Tolstaya is a brilliant, skilled writer. Her wonderful prose is dark and funny at the same time. Behind the fun, I ended up worried by book's prophesy.

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### **Glenn Russell says**

Tatyana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* is a jewel among the list of classics published by *New York Review Books*, a post-apocalyptic satire taking place two hundred years after "the Blast" in what was the city of Moscow. Human society has reverted to a state more primitive than a village in the darkest age of medieval, dark-age Europe. And that's understatement - mice provide the main diet and are used for barter and trade; fire is a source of magic forcing people to rely on "stokers" to keep their stoves going; strong taboos and prohibitions surround writing and books.

Life from end to end is filthy and brutish – even some of the population serve as beasts of burden while others born following the Blast have all sorts of bodily deformations: gills, one eye, cockscombs, nostrils growing out of their knees, webs between fingers, long tails, claws instead of feet. Not exactly the stuff of Madison Avenue.

The novel's main character is Benedikt, a young man who is, as the saying goes, not the sharpest knife in the drawer. Among those Benedikt deals with are some Olderners, that is, people who survived the Blast and miraculously continue living for hundreds of years. I suppose one can infer such longevity is the result of direct exposure to the aftereffects of the Blast.

Benedikt's mother was one such Olderner, a woman who would still be alive if she hasn't been poisoned by a nebulous something or other, perhaps a critter, known as a fireling. Poor mum, she pined over the loss of those pre-Blast days where she could visit department stores and booticks - and, yes, such bending of language runs through the entire novel. Jamey Gambrell deserves special praise for her English translation from the Russian in what must have been one of her most challenging projects.

All in all, a peculiar, highly original work of fiction having more than a little in common with Russian absurdist author Daniil Kharms. For those unfamiliar with Kharms, he wrote a story where a man not only loses his handkerchief, hat, jacket and boots but also loses himself. One of his plays features Pushkin and Gogol who do nothing but repeatedly trip and fall over each other and another play with several characters running out on stage one at a time only to vomit followed by a young girl telling the audience they might as well go home since all the actors are sick.

So, we may ask, why did Tatyana Tolstaya, granddaughter of Aleksei Tolstoy and grandniece of Leo Tolstoy, author of two previous collections of lyrical, poetic short stories, spend four years (1996-2000) devoting herself to writing a three hundred page wacky dystopian novel?

One reasonable answer is such a tale gave Ms. Tolstaya a broad literary canvas to make sharp, penetrating

observations on the nature of language, art and literature, particularly in the context of her own country's history. Additionally, a reader can sense elements of Russian folktales popping up now and again. But, let me underscore, on the level of sheer storytelling *The Slynx* is highly entertaining, a lively humdinger featuring all flavors of screwy high jinx. To take one small example, someone's chickens go mad, start to talk like people and lay big, creepy-looking eggs.

The many references to literature and the arts are among the most fascinating parts of the novel. Here are a few of my favorites:

There's Fyodor Kuzmich, Glorybe, a puffed up leader who feeds the population heaps of lies and other assorted crap. Among the long list, he claims to be the author of all sorts of poetry and prose, the work of Pushkin in particular, and even decides to write a shoppinghower and calls it *The World as Will and Idea*. He goes on to say art for art sake is no good since art should be connected to life. Oh, my, with this statement, we hear echoes of Leo Tolstoy's famous *What is Art?*. A number of characters attempt to address questions revolving around the purpose and nature of writing and the arts.

One of the Oldeners, Nikita Ivanich, the Head Stoker, makes his presence felt throughout the tale. Old Nikita (I couldn't help but think of Khrushchev) says he wants to keep memory alive and hopes for a spiritual runnysauce (his word for renaissance). Old Nikita's notions of art are linked with improving morals. Yet again another dimension explored within *The Slynx*.

Meanwhile Benedikt's marriage gives him access to his father-in-law's library where he can immerse himself in books. At one point he observes: "You read, move your lips, figure out the words, and it's like you're in two places at the same time: you're sitting or lying with your legs curled up, your hands groping in the bowl, but you can see different worlds, far-off worlds that maybe never existed but still seem real. You run or sail or race in a sleigh – you're running away from someone, or you yourself have decided to attack – your heart thumps, life flies by, and it's wondrous: you can live as many different lives as there are books to read."

Fantastic! Even someone like Benedikt who isn't exactly scholar material (he thinks *The Gingerbread Man* is a scary story since the fox eats the Gingerbread Man in the end) can enlarge their imagination and multiply mental vistas. It might be claimed Benedikt uses literature primarily as an escape rather than other, more profound reasons to engage with books and ideas, but who knows where even Benedikt's escapism might lead since tapping the imagination can open up so many worlds.

Imagination brings us to the Slynx. Beware! Old people say, "The Slynx sits on dark branches and howls a wild, sad howl - *eeeeennxx, eeeeeennxx, eenx-a-leeeeeennxx!* - but no one ever sees it." The Slynx will bite you, take away your reason and make you go crazy and then you'll just die.

What can the Slynx represent? Is it the destructive animal side of the novel's men and women with their tails and claws? Or, is the Slynx the power of imagination and mythmaking that grabs us so we can undergo the needed death and transformation that will empower us become more complete selves? As Charles Bukowski said, "You have to die a few times before you can really live."

The Slynx as the creature that sets our imagination on fire, in this case the very novel we are reading. Personally, above all others, I favor this interpretation - *The Slynx* is the Slynx.

Special thanks to my Goodreads friends Jeffrey Keeten and MJ Nicholls for their glowing reviews that prompted me to give *The Slynx* a whirl.

“You, Book! You are the only one who won't deceive, won't attack, won't insult, won't abandon! You're quiet - but you laugh, shout, and sing: you're obedient - but you amaze, tease, and entice; you're small, but you contain countless peoples. Nothing but a handful of letters, that's all, but if you feel like it, you can turn heads, confuse, spin, cloud, make tears spring to the eyes, take away the breath, the entire soul will stir in the wind like a canvas, will rise in waves and flap its wings!”

? Tatyana Tolstaya, *The Slynx*

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## Jacob says

February 2009

You expect post-apocalyptic fiction to be depressing. You expect dystopias to be bleak. The words "wickedly funny" do not usually come to mind. But in *The Slynx*, a story of Moscow set two hundred years after The Blast destroyed civilization, life is not quite what it seems to be. The people don't really deserve to be enlightened, and the thought police are almost justified; at least, books aren't the thing to worry about. Just thank Fyodor Kuzmich, Glorybe, that you have fire. Oh, and make sure to check your rabbit before you eat it. The males won't kill you, but they'll cause no end of trouble. Why don't you stick with mice?

I can't praise NYRB (New York Review Books) enough for publishing this. It's raucous and bawdy fun all around--only, like most Russian novels, one reading isn't going to be enough. This is a clever and complex little tale, and this golubchik may have missed some things...

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## Matthias says

No matter which way you look at it, **The Slynx** is a strange and furtive creature. Concocted by an obscure descendant of one of the Greats, this beast possesses a significance we instinctively fear. We feel it lodged in our bones, we feel it slithering between the tiny hairs on our arms and on the back of our necks, we feel it gnawing at the base of our minds, we feel it cocooning in our hearts. Some brave readers set out on the expedition to find its lair. A few came back, wide-eyed with wonder and with many a tale to tell.

As a valiant voyager, I too wanted to glimpse this shadow. Hiding beyond the barren Siberian plains in a forest thick with thorns and teeth, it shrieked its name. *Slyyynx. Slyyynx.* Ignoring my misgivings I set out to follow the cry that would lead me to its den.

My journey had a promising start. I found a guide, a quirky fellow by the name of Benedikt, who was as endearing as he was eccentric. His childlike candor was refreshing and as he pointed out the finer points of the dystopia he was living in I became enraptured by the sights and intrigued by this post-apocalyptic society. The mutants that inhabit it, some of them immortal firebreathing Oldeners from before the Blast, added colour to the grim painting of a fledgling economy based on dry weeds and rodents.

Unfortunately, Benedikt lost the way at some point. He got drunk on rusht, started uttering experimental jibberish disguised as meaningful metaphors and ran in circles, widening, but never going anywhere. I completely lost sight of him, got word that he married rich and developed an all-consuming passion for books, but couldn't make heads or tails of it all. The last thing I heard was that he was close to a fire that

basically destroyed almost everything and everyone around him. The reasons for the fire remain unclear, much like everything else. Others, maybe more well-read russophiles, can perhaps make sense of Benedikt's ramblings, which probably have a significant connection with Russian history. I, on the other hand, find myself confined to a wonderment whether or not I dreamt it all.

And the Slynx? I never found it. Worse still, I can no longer hear its lonely shriek.

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### **Hadrian says**

This was a very Russian dystopia novel, and a fun one at that. Nuclear war, myths, mutations, hallucinations, philosophy, and lots of good reading.

The Slynx is very funny at first reading, but there are some sad and rather worrying truths behind it.

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### **Aubrey says**

*Let him stand there strong and safe, his legs in chains, head in the clouds, his face to the south, to the endless steppe, to the far-off dark blue seas.*

I am absolutely convinced that everyone must read this book. Unfortunately, unlike that other book I said the same of, *Les Misérables*, I have no great moral undertakings or social justice to spur readers forward with. No musical either. Not even a movie. Instead, I have an old review, a few big name references, and ah yes. Logos. Lots of that, as per usual.

By the way, the 'old' review is a little more than two years in longevity, and is the type of construct that doesn't astound me, *per se*, as much as give me the feeling of, huh. Younger self wasn't as nearly as lost or confused or failing in general as I thought. Good job, younger self. I can still feel you in there, somewhere, much as Benedikt near the end of the book still has the essence of Benedikt at the beginning of the book. I do hope my evolving into my current self wasn't nearly as, well, how did you put it, younger self.

*...the progression the main character goes from man to monster. 1984 has nothing on how easily he slips into the mindset of what he fears above all else...the transition beautiful in its slick descent...*

Let me reiterate: good job, younger self.

The mention of 1984 reminds me that there is a book here waiting patiently to slynx its way into future brains and diabolical temperaments of the literature kind, so let's get some of the standard dry stuff out of the way, shall we, in the form of stating that this is a Russian dystopic novel. I'm going to let that simmer while I expound on what that actually means for us, the readers, during our journey through said novel, a novel so subsumed in the mind of the character, the character so melded with their world, the world so saturated in that feeling of, yes, this is life after the destruction when the wisps of culture flurrying down are starting to collide with the aborted imaginative risings of the populace, that you have to wonder where Tatyana Tolstaya got that time machine, and more importantly, how the hell she made her way back in both time and prose.

Although the truth of the matter is, you take one look at said Benedikt character, the star of this post-apocalyptic tragi-comedy as only the Russians can write them, and you know it's all the author. As put by younger self:

*It is much more concerned with the mentality of the populace, the complete ignorance and great practicality the denizens of this fallout zone are capable of.*

Too true. And this practicality does not include putting the mind down with pen with any measure of accuracy or skill. However, I wish to add that Benedikt is a special type, prone in his words to being 'newrottick' and an especial victim of 'feelosophy', where all the raucously hilarious ignorance and practicality cannot save him when his mind, ever grasping onto reality with conjectures and explanations and densely woven meanderings of thought, begins to shiver in the dark under an eye unseen. Fear is the price of imagination, and Benedikt has been cursed to wander a realm where esoteric political discussions trickle down through the mouths of radiation-stricken immortals, culture has schizophrenicked into scraps and bits of precious knowledge that where not lost are laughably, horribly misunderstood, and the only solution to the excess of imagination is a book.

*This book. This book describes the addiction to literature I have in excruciating detail. It makes me appreciate the wealth of knowledge I have in comparison to the main character, for what is reading if you don't understand it?*

Indeed, younger self. Indeed. For Benedikt is not only driven by the tentacles of his neurons towards an item that his civilization has the most complex relations with of any object (someone along the line read 1984 and began to fear Freethinking and all its delicious growths, also known as the Illness, more deadly than radioactivity and guaranteed to get you 'treatment'), there's a good chance he has photographic memory. For him, a book is as good as a shot of the purest cocaine, as easily reused once the silt has slipped the vein and bounded amongst the blood, and far, far less easy to replenish. When he has it, he has all the abject lack of caring of the mentality most indebted to *Brave New World*, and reality fades to a speck in the corner of that lack. When he doesn't, oh. As said previously, 1984 cannot even begin to compare.

And in the words of Benedikt, mor-allity? He knows the Law of Everyone's a Thief, he knows the Comedic Game of Broken Limbs and Injuries Stopping Short at Death, he knows the Governmental Approach to Dirty, Grimy Golbuchiks with books, precious books hidden away in their dank and filthy izbas, sitting, molding, rotting, handled by ignorance and by fear. He functions along emotions that barely register in his mind and thought patterns that strain at genius with the tools of a haphazard enlightenment that has only a decrepit world and blind society to work with.

But mor-allity? Can you eat it without dying? Drink it? Use it to catch mice aka staplehood of stable exchange of goods? Well then, what use is it?

*Golbuchiks? Golbuchiks are ashes, entrails, dung, stove smoke, clay, and they'll all return to clay. They're full of dirt, candle oil, droppings, dust.*

*You, O Book, my pure, shining precious, my golden singing promise, my dream, a distant call—*

*O tender specter, happy chance,*

*Again I heed the ancient lore,*

*Again with beauty rare in stance,*

*You beckon from the distant shore!*

Benedikt will discover just what use it is. And you, reader who has ridden along in his mind and, as a lover

of books, can empathize with the slow change and maybe perhaps further along the increasingly gory path than you wished, can follow. You'll laugh at the antics, to be sure. But there's so much more to the tragicomedy for a lover of literature for one such as yourself, if you can bear to look.

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Younger self's review:

(7/5/11)

This book. This book describes the addiction to literature I have in excruciating detail. It makes me appreciate the wealth of knowledge I have in comparison to the main character, for what is reading if you don't understand it?

Also, post apocalyptic at its best. No drowning in scientific garble describing the desiccated toxic surroundings. It is much more concerned with the *mentality* of the populace, the complete ignorance and great practicality the denizens of this fallout zone are capable of. You never find out much of what exactly happened, but frankly, that's not what counts here.

What counts is the progression the main character goes from man to monster. 1984 has nothing on how easily he slips into the mindset of what he fears above all else, all for the sake of the written word. God forbid books be as scarce and prized as they are in this world; one could hope they were valued in the real world as much as they are in this novel, but it's frightening to consider the consequences.

In addition to the transition beautiful in its slick descent are the emotional overtones, the hilarious vulgarity juxtaposed with the overwhelming depression that surfaces every so often. It is loss conveyed at its best, despair over having lost a world of light and having to grind out an existence among the remains; worst of all being able to feel the emotion but not be able to comprehend the reason behind it.

A very good read. Will definitely get you thinking, if nothing else.

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### Oana Brustur says

Distopie + umor + parabola = Genialitate!

Tu, Carte! Numai tu nu în?eli, nu love?ti, nu superi, nu p?r?se?ti! E?ti lini?tit?, dar râzi, ?ipi, cân?i; e?ti supus?, dar uime?ti, a?â?i, ademene?ti; e?ti mic?, dar în tine sunt popoare f?r? num?r; un pumn de literă, dar, dac? vrei, z?p?ce?ti pe oricine, îl învâr?i cum vrei, îl încurci, faci lacrimile s? ?â?neasc?, tai r?suflarea, sufletul întreg nu e decât o pânz? ce flutur? în vânt, face valuri, d? din aripi! ?i în piept parc? ti se zvârcole?te o senza?ie inexprimabil?, bate cu pumnii în u?i, în pere?i: m? sufoc! D?-mi drumul! Dar cum s?-i dai drumul a?a, goal?, aspr?? În ce cuvinte s-o îmbraci? Nu avem cuvinte, nu le cunoa?tem! Suntem ca animalele s?lbatice, ca minciorbii, ca rusalcele — nu avem cuvinte, ci doar un fel de strig?t! Deschizi îns? o carte ?i iat?-le, cuvintele, divine, zbur?toare.

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### Josh says

Besides the meaning of the word "horripilating" ("the erection of hairs on the skin due to cold, fear or excitement"), found on the chocolate-and-lime backmatter of this book's NYRB edition, reading Tolstoya's

vision of civilization's hilarious, underwhelming ashes gave me a feeling of gratitude, and also anger that the ostensible genre of this book will allow people to compare it to mechanic nightmares like 1984 and Animal Farm, or even the killer, terrorizing Road. But Russians don't do genre - or rather, all they do is genre, meaning all they do is take the various over-used urinals of western literature and transform them into cornucopias (that's pollen on your hands) so blooming and fetid that closing their covers you feel like Big Anthony sitting on Strega Nona's pot. Lucky boy. Lucky, neckerchief-wearing boy. Or maybe you like books that stop when you say enough? If so, stay away from the *Slynx*, which is not just a parable so much as a parable that destroys parables (like an evil-mirror version of Mandelstam's reading of Dante's Divine Comedy, in which the terza rima is compared to an airplane that makes airplanes) by reminding us that if we think of literature as a video game whose levels are played once and then played out, instead of a forest whose rocks are things before they stand for things, we will forget how to read. You have to start with the alphabet. The way you learn that is the way you learn the rest. And, as always, beware ye readers the readers of the world.

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### **Jason Pettus says**

(Full review can be found at the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography [[cclapcenter.com](http://cclapcenter.com)].)

Ah, those Russian writers -- those crazy, drunken, angst-filled, delightful Russian writers! Mention the phrase "Russian literature" to most Americans, and you're likely to see the same mental images appear again and again; the dense books, the heavy symbolism, the perverse dark humor, and of course the national introspection, always the national introspection, as inherent a part of Russian culture as monster-truck rallies are here in the US. And so it is with Tatyana Tolstaya's blackly funny *The Slynx*, which has quite the long history behind it: started in 1986 while Russia was still a Soviet state, not finished until 2000 under the equally absurdist Putin administration, now newly reprinted in English form by the publishing wing of the *New York Review of Books*, not to be confused of course with the 2003 hardback English edition by Houghton Mifflin, which is technically the version that was read for this review. Whew!

And indeed, if you're a fan of Russian literature, *The Slynx* is sure not to disappoint; after all, Tolstaya is no less than the great-grandniece of Leo Tolstoy himself, not to mention one of the most famous intellectuals in contemporary Russia right now because of her popular television interview show "The School for Scandal." Set 200 years in the future, the novel is basically a farce on modern politics masquerading as a dystopian science-fiction story, a tale in which a mysterious event from the past known only as "the Blast" has rendered the city of Moscow back into a peasant-village-like state, with most of its citizens having no recollection of a civilized past and no idea how to recreate such a thing even if they wanted. It's a world where people have literally forgotten how to make fire, yet have somehow retained all the red-tape of the old Soviet bureaucracy; a place where mice have become the national currency, a place where people stand in line for hours for no reason at all, to receive nothing at all, because "that's the way government works."

Throughout the novel we follow one of these "golubchiks" in detail, Benedikt the Decree Copying Man,

whose job is to hand-copy the purloined works of their current leader (Fyodor Kuzmich Glorybe), who in typical style has re-named the city after himself, and lives in the crumbling remains of Red Square. And in fact as we follow the travails of our mentally challenged hero, we discover that a surprisingly large amount of 20th-century Russian life still remains in post-apocalyptic Moscow, only twisted now into black-comedy proportions, and with the people following these dictates through a combination of superstitious fear and just plain ignorance; how the KGB, for example, are now known as the "Saniturions," traveling the city in sleighs while wearing hooded red robes, confiscating forbidden books from average citizens with a weapon that's curiously sickle-like.

In fact, this is one of the most delightful things about *The Slynx*, is in all the ways modern Russia has been twisted and perverted in this future vision, and special credit needs to be given to translator Jamey Gambrell for the rich English wordplays on display: to cite just one example, how the "degenerates" of our modern times, those in a post-Soviet world who ignorantly long for the old Soviet days, have literally become their own species in the future known as "Degenerators," mostly beasts of burden who are in charge of pulling the sleighs of the upper class, but during their time off still stand around the stables smoking cigarettes and bitching about the good ol' days. The book is full of such sly jabs at contemporary Russian life -- of the old "moozeeums" that are now hated and feared by the general populace, of the genetic mutations each person has on display and are simply known as their "Consequence."

But then again...

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### **Inderjit Sanghera says**

A feeling of desolation pervades the atmosphere of the post-apocalyptic world in which 'The Slynx' is set; a world of drudgery and paranoia, of bleakness beneath which lurks a violence and insurrection as what we would loosely describe as the protagonist-Benedikt develops a sense of self-awareness via the books he reads; snatches of Anna Karenina and her realisation of the shallow emptiness of society, of the subtle sadness and dimpled beauty of Chekhov, of the indescribable joy of holding a book in your hand, its feel, its touch and smell, the ideas it propagates, how it opens Benedict's eyes to the beauty of the world, from the swirl of dust in the sun-light to the vastness of the night sky or of its chameleon like ability to transform Benedikt into the character he is reading about. Yet reading is a double-edged sword; whilst it opens Benedick's eyes to beauty it also opens it to banality; the banality of the world around him, of his marriage and family, of his foul-mouthed father-in-law and vulgar, vapid wife and corpulent mother-in-law, of the tedious, tepid Fyodor Kuzmich, the diminutive ruler of the world Benedikt inhabits and who Benedict ends up over-throwing and replacing with a far more violent and arbitrary tyranny.

'The Slynx' is set in a post-apocalyptic world where an unspecified nuclear attack has rendered the population hopelessly disfigured and dis-formed. It would be difficult not to acknowledge the obvious metaphor for the overthrow of the old world of Russia and its replacement with the Soviet state; Blok was replaced by blockheads, the wonders of its theatre by the turgidity of Soviet dramas, its high culture, within which it was the leading light of all art-forms, from literature to ballet, replaced by the dry, mechanical and tedious political literature of the Soviet Union. Nevertheless Benedikt's awakening allows him to render the world around him with a kind of elegant, elegiacal beauty;

"Near the ground everything was blue as blue could be, and up above, the sky shone even and yellow, smoldering it's last; every now and then a swipe of pink would tint the yellow, or a gray cloud would stretch like a spindle, hang there a bit until its top would stain raspberry, flare, and be gone. Like someone was

rubbing the sunset, smearing it with his fingers."

A wonderful exploration not only of the joys of reading, but also the feelings of isolation and alienation it can engender, a dark and dreary exploration of a world stripped of its humanity and, most importantly, a story bursting with verve and imagination beneath the bleakness, 'The Slynx' is an interesting take on the post-apocalyptic novel.

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### **MJ Nicholls says**

This exceptional little pearl should go straight atop your reading list, knocking off that willowy story collection, those fat-arsed historical doorstoppers, and that free verse thing carved into tree bark. Get rid of them all. Put them in a glorious bonfire and read this instead.

The granddaughter of Leo T has all the talent of her antecedent, cribbing also the mordant wit of Bulgakov, the lyrical euphony of Nabokov, the despairing glamour of Zamyatin. *The Slynx* is a first-rate novel on all fronts: original and captivating in its form, succulent and rib-tickling in its prose, dark and prophetic in its subtext, sutured together with sugary feasts of stylistic invention that would make even the illiterate smile.

A book about now, about the past, about the future—this book time travels, this book inhabits the fourth dimension. Read it now.

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### **Megha says**

The Pace of Modern Life [xkcd] -- In 1871, someone expressed concern about how the art of letter-writing was fast dying out. In 1895, someone was worried about how the hurry and excitement of modern life was causing mental and nervous degeneration. In 1907, there was concern about every individual's head being buried in a magazine while they sat together as a family. Now a days, of course, we hear about the curse of the smartphones, 140 character limit on communication and dwindling inter-personal interactions. Yes, time continues to change. People are nostalgic about what is being left behind, there is excitement and apprehension about new developments, people adapt and keep inching forward. But no matter how much life changes, there still are certain aspects of human nature that endure all the way. (If you don't agree, David Mitchell may have something to say to you, and so does Tatyana.)

Time keeps moving forward. Except that one time when THE BLAST wiped off the civilization in Moscow and set the clock backwards. People were reduced to a very primitive lifestyle, hunting mice for food. Appliance manuals became relics of the past. Ignorance was rampant. The concepts of free thinking, feelings and morality were alien. What did survive was man's greed and hunger for power. There remained major class differences and a huge imbalance in wealth distribution. While those in positions of power fed themselves well, they followed the motto **Keep them hungry. Keep them foolish.** when it came to the general population.

In *The Slynx*, Tatyana plays out a struggle between man's desire for finer things in life and eager-to-overpower vices. Benedikt, the protagonist, one of the commoners, often found himself overwhelmed with

anguish and a longing for he didn't know what. There was something he wanted for, but it was too much for his simple mind to understand what that could be or how to escape this feeling.

"But in November the rains start falling and just keep on and on and on - *eeeeeee!*. Everything is murky between heaven and earth, and your soul is clouded over too! The roof leaks if it's thin; cold and damp blow in through the cracks. You cover the window with rags, you slump closer to the stove, or doze on the stove bed, and something inside cries, and keeps on crying!"

He found an answer when a life-changing twist put him in the company of books. His spirits lifted as he devoured them. So was that it? Was this refinement, a better intellectual and emotional life what he had been desperate for? Tatyana's answer to this is a pessimistic one. Once he was through all the books, the baser instincts that were dormant in him rose up. No, art couldn't win over his pre-disposition. A simpleton gradually transformed into something grotesque. It was rather impressive how convincingly the author handled this transformation (someone please tell George Orwell).

There is much to love about *The Slynx*. When you think of a post-apocalyptic setting, you immediately imagine a bleak world swaddled in fifty shades of grey. *The Slynx*, on the contrary, is charming, imaginative, humorous and colorful. The people are endearing despite their naive, crude and often brutal manners. Nikita elicits sorrow with his attempts to keep the past alive, to hold on to the bare threads. Some of my favorite moments were when Benedikt would feel the hand of the Slynx tap him on the shoulder and a dreary feeling would dawn over him. The times when he would dream of dissolving into the world beyond what he had seen, but lacking in imagination would fail to put a picture together. And Benedikt feeling sad when the fox gobbled up the Gingerbread Man in the story - how heartwarming was that!

It's a shame that I couldn't connect better with this book. I can hardly find anything wrong with it. Just that for more than half the book, Tatyana only builds the setting, establishing and re-establishing the same ideas. By the time the story switched gears in the second half, it was too late. I had already kind of checked out by then.

But really, don't mind the three stars. This book ought to be read and adored.

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**Book-jacket Trivia:** Tatyana Tolstaya is a great-grandniece of Leo Tolstoy.

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### Zach says

Here is a paragraph from this book:

*After the entrance there were more corridors and the sweet smell grew nearer. Glancing upward, Benedikt clasped his hands: books! The shelves were packed with books! Lord Almighty! Saints alive! his knees gave way, he trembled and whined softly: you couldn't read them all in a whole lifetime! A forest of pages, an endless, indiscriminate blizzard, uncounted! Ah...! Ah!!! Aaaaa! Maybe... just maybe... somewhere here... maybe the secret book is here somewhere! The book that tells you how to live, where to go, where to guide the heart! Maybe Fyodor Kuzmich, Glorybe, has found it, and is already reading it: he jumps up on the bed quick as a wink, and just reads and reads! He went and found it, the monster, and he's reading it!! The tyrant! Shit!*

Seriously, could someone with a kindle tell me how many exclamation points are in this book? (can kindles do that?)\*

Anyway it's 200 years after "the Blast" (nuclear war) ended civilization as we know it and we're in Moscow and everything is decrepit and falling apart and covered in mud and the bureaucracy controls everything and life, as it turns out, isn't that different, which seems to be Tolstaya's point.

Plot? There isn't one.

\* While you're at it, why not count the words "whoa" and "yikes" too?

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## **Cher says**

2.5 stars which officially and technically shall translate to "I liked it...a little bit". You know those old fashioned wooden roller coasters at small county fairs - that is what reading this book was for me. It took a while to get started and once it got going there were small thrills but mainly bumpy ups and downs with jolting turns, and at the end of the ride I was a bit disenchanted and bored. It never bodes well when you get excited that you only have X% or pages remaining.

I cannot even begin to imagine how difficult of a book this was to translate. There was a lot of play on words and lyrical prose at times, many relying on rhymes. Again, it had to be extremely difficult to stay true to the author's writing and translate with the same effects.

While this book was unpredictable, I discovered that unpredictable does not guarantee goodness. However, I did enjoy, and always enjoy, when authors display the precariousness of a government that overreaches and limits liberties. Towards the end of the book when Benedict and Father-in-law were arguing and FIL literally said, "Nanny nanny foo foo" I was caught off guard by their puerile behavior. It goes without saying this statement was also inaccurate. Everyone knows it is Nanny nanny boo boo, stick your head in doo doo. But then I realized that most modern societies (ahem, America) today also have politicians that are caught saying or doing shameful things and in general acting like petulant toddlers throwing a temper tantrum. Why do we allow such childish people to be in positions of power over us, let alone to limit our liberties??

Favorite quotes: Life is better when you've got a dream, and sleep is sweeter.

AND

If you feed and feed people, and keep on feeding them, they'll stop working. You'll be the only one sweating, all for them.

AND

Water and fire don't mix, they can't. Except, of course, when people stand watching a fire and the flames lap in their eyes in water, reflected.

First sentence: Benedikt pulled on his felt boots, stomped his feet to get the fit right, checked the damper on the stove, brushed the bread crumbs onto the floor--for the mice--wedged a rag in the window to keep out the cold, stepped out the door, and breathed the pure, frosty air in through his nostrils.

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## **Nate D says**

Even with society collapsed into muddy, decaying near barbarism, philosophy (whatever that is), and freethinking (not allowed), creep in thoughts won't stop, people are joined to their forebears (us) by universal thought patterns. For a while, as we follow the yearnings of our protagonist towards better things (dreams, books) amid strange danger and squalor, avoiding the despair-call of the Slynx that strips one of the will to go on, this is really quite wonderful. Then, by (again somewhat universal) social satire patterns, circumstances change to allow greater satiric cross-section, and we lose our protagonist to the mechanisms somewhat. Not that it ever really flags, it just recenters less ideally to my ear. And for a book that is so much about books, what are they here? Avenues into a killing solipsism detached from any of the urgent forces of the world, or worse, driving their own destructive world-forces. A pretty depressing assessment, really, though so much praise to Russian lit is also sung that I'm not sure of the intent there.

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