

The Winter Queen

by **Boris Akunin** (Random House 0-8129-6877-8)

Preparations

Four flipcharts with the following:

Burning Questions (heading)

Russian Themes (heading)

Discussion questions 1 and 2

писатель (pisatel) / беллетрист (bellatrist) [headings in two columns]

MP3 player or computer and speakers

Audio file of Boris Akunin section of panel discussion: available from the PEN American Center <http://www.pen.org/viewmedia.php/prmMID/878/prmID/1064>

An overview of Russian history, Russian literature, and the mystery genre is provided. Starred items are important for the discussion. Other points can be added if time allows or the group has specific questions.

Read “A Russian’s Revolution,” an interview with Boris Akunin from The Times Online, August 6, 2005 [*The Times Online*, August 6, 2005 <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/crime/article551700.ece?>] All quotes herein are from this source.

Introduction (5 min)

Speed Round Check-In (10 min)

➔ Quick show of hands:

Who has been to Russia?

➔ Go around the table once for each question; 30 seconds per person, per question; record answers on flip chart:

What is your biggest question after finishing the book? We will see how many answers come up during the discussion and come back to these at the end.

What strikes you as particularly Russian about this book? (No repeats allowed)

➔ Catch any latecomers, repeat introduction.

➔ Open question to the group, collect answers on Russian themes chart:

What Russian literature were you reminded of as you were reading *The Winter Queen*?

Mini-Lecture on Author, Historical and Social Context (15 min)

➔ Ask group:

What do you know about Boris Akunin?

1. Biography of Akunin

- born Grigory Shalvovich Chkhartishvili in Georgia, 1956
- literary editor, translator, expert in Japanese culture
- writes these books under a pseudonym (Akunin = villain in Japanese, also evokes Bakunin, an anarchist)
- only Russian writer to reach mass audience abroad as well as domestically since collapse of Soviet Union

2. Brief history of Russia

- ★ over 1000 years of insular autocracy, expanding territory and making it Russian
- ★ Russian empire began to come together in late 800s; through Tartar rule (Genghis Khan) 1200s to mid-1450s, its enemies in West (Scandinavians, Poles, Germans), and alignment with Orthodox Church (not Pope) Russia has always looked to the east
- Under almost 500 years of autocratic tsars, service to the state was paramount
- Russia began looking West under Peter the Great in 1682. He built St. Petersburg from scratch on a swamp as a Western city and moved the capital there. He created the very complicated administrative system with provinces and districts we might recognize from Russian literature and this book. After his death in 1725, Russia stagnated.
- 1796-1801 Paul I brought the “modern age” to Russia; a tsar’s absolute privilege began to change to a feeling of duty and responsibility to the people. However, he worked hard to keep out liberal ideas of the French Revolution, science, and literature.
- 1812 Napoleon invaded Russia unsuccessfully. Russia emerged from the Napoleonic era as a new world power with more territory and prestige. However, the closer to the West Russia became, the more the government resisted change: still a feudal society with no middle class.
- ★ By 1825, a group of intelligentsia emerged, upset that European reforms had not reached Russia. Their goals included abolishing monarchy and military dictatorship, freeing the serfs, possessing land communally, reducing the power of clergy, and opening trades to all citizens. From this movement, the Dekabrist (Decemberist) Revolutionaries emerged, trying to take advantage of confusion after Alexander I died at the end of 1825. Nicholas I took power, crushed the revolution, and weakened the movement for years. His slogan was “Autocracy, Orthodoxy, and Nationalism,” which didn’t mesh well with the Industrial Revolution. The more society changed from industrialization, the more the government tried to keep old structures: a new government department called the Third Section infiltrated revolutionary movements (remember Brillinger from the book?), persecuted religious sectarians, censored books and newspapers, supervised universities, and turned educational system into factories of “good subjects.”

- Efforts at reform continued in debates between Slavophiles and Westernizers. Both groups were influenced by Western philosophy, loved Russia and her peasants, feared its incompetent government, and opposed a bourgeois society of exploiters and exploited. The Slavophiles were non-political, more conservative, interested in spiritual reform, and opposed individualism. Westernizers were radical, atheist, and individualist, and believed in progress through capitalism or class struggle.
- ★ Under Alexander II, the serfs were freed in 1861; they did not get land but were tied to a communal farm.
- The 1856 defeat in Crimean War showed how broken down Russia had become. Although Alexander II was a genuine reformer, he also freed the serfs in an attempt to preserve autocracy and exploit labor in factories instead. Emancipation led to other reforms, including extending education, local self-government. However, it was hard to get reforms to work in huge country. Inefficient agriculture and industrial crises fed revolts.
- ★ Now we get to the era of *The Winter Queen*. In the 1870s, intelligentsia agitated for more reforms: populists were theorists who went out into the masses to investigate social and economic conditions, leading to socialist ideas; nihilists were essentially anarchists, wanting to free people from duties of family, state, and church, and destroy society through terror. They assassinated Alexander II in 1881.
- Reforms continued but could not keep up with needs of the immense country and backwards population. The utopian and anarchist movements disappeared in the 1880s, replaced by real political parties: Social Revolutionaries for agricultural issues, Konstitutional Democrats wanting a parliamentary state, Social Democrats concentrating on industrial issues. These are the people who split in 1903 into Bolsheviks for violence, Mensheviks for working within the system. New terrorist outbreaks began in 1901.
- ★ It is important to remember that any trends toward democratic liberalism was considered temporary in Russia; they wanted a Russian system based on communal spirit, not Western ideas.
- In 1904-1905, there were huge protests against the war with Japan and general inequality. In January 1905, a huge protest outside the palace was fired on by police and hundreds died. Strikes and violence escalated, socialists gained strength; the October 1905 strikes paralyzed country; government responded by expanding votes and convening a popularly elected legislature. Who has seen the film *Battleship Potemkin*? That is about a mutiny in Odessa at this time.
- World War I broke the government once and for all: 1916 Progressive Bloc of legislature took over many governmental functions; 1917 bread riots led to strikes and mutiny, tsar abdicated, provisional government formed from progressive middle class (not revolutionary); Bolsheviks led by Lenin and Trotsky took advantage of the weak government to get elected and control the military. They took over in October 1917.
- Created Socialist state, defeated counterrevolutionaries in Civil War 1918-1920; the new USSR went through a parade of leaders, propaganda, economic tinkering, purges, censorship, cult of Stalin, expansion of Soviet territories, Cold War, Gorbachev's opening up

(Glasnost), collapse of Soviet Union, frantic Western investment and then financial meltdown, and now?

➔ Reiterate historical context of story

1876: the tsar is no longer all-powerful; not yet in the totalitarian Soviet era; Russia was a place of wild schemes and optimism; same issues faced by Russians today

3. Social context of literature in Russia

★ Cyrillic alphabet created 855-885; literature did not begin until a thousand years later with Pushkin

- 11th and 12th century epics, historic chronicles, lives of saints, folk songs and fables
- 1650-1800 most people read literature in translation, very little Russian lit; hampered both by censorship and by linguistic complexities; 1700s language standardized
- Pushkin the first great Russian poet and author; defined Russian Romanticism, shaped language of all later works, distilled his own thoughts instead of recording those of others; wrote *Ruslan and Ludmila* 1821, which made him greatest poet, *Eugene Onegin* 1831, perhaps most famous work, turned into Tchaikovsky opera, 1833 finished *The Bronze Horseman*, which brilliantly described the formation of modern Russia on the backs of its exploited people, unpublished until his death, censored until 1912

➔ Compare *Don Quixote* 1605-1615 and Shakespeare year 1589- 1613

- Pushkin taught Nikolai Gogol, who wrote satires of Russian life and moved Russian literature to realism, which led to Dostoevsky and Tolstoy

➔ Read quote from Akunin:

“In Russia nowadays, the middle class is the revolutionary class. It did not exist before. It’s very energetic, very active and in need of everything a class needs, like ideology, ethics, aesthetics, and well, easy reading.”

After the collapse, a large gap opened between Tolstoy and Dostoevsky and pulp fiction.

4. Birth of *The Winter Queen*

- written in six weeks in 1998 to fill gap in Russian literature
- In Russia, published under the title *Azazel*
- ten more titles in this series

5. Literary references in *Winter Queen*

➔ Refer back to Russian themes and other Russian literature chart

- Akunin borrows from all the greats and Russian readers recognize the references. “This saves space. I just have to draw a few word pictures and my reader knows exactly what sort of person this is. I don’t have to spend pages and pages describing his or her life story.”
- Anarchists in Dostoevsky’s *Possessed*
- Detective in Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*
- Gambling party in Pushkin’s *Queen of Spades*
- Social hierarchy in Gogol’s *The Nose*

6. Brief history of mysteries

➔ Ask the group

Who is widely acknowledged as writing the first detective mystery? [Poe with *The Murders in the Rue Morgue* (1841)]

- Classic detective stories revolve around a single gimmick, clue, or revelation. The villain is always caught.
- Poe influenced the British, who were then imitated by the Americans. Mysteries took place in homes of the wealthy.
- The American pulp stories of the 1920s and 30s broke away from the British style by describing the “mean streets.” Victims came from all walks of life and the detective did not always win.
- In the 1960s, mysteries became more outright commentaries on social issues, e.g., Patricia Highsmith, P.D. James, Ruth Rendell.
- By the 1980s, mystery novels focus on the characters. The mystery is not nearly as important as the detectives of Sara Paretsky and Sue Grafton. And think of the cityscapes of Dennis Lehane’s Boston.

Discussion Questions

➔ Every other person turns their chair to the left.

Question 1 (10 min)

Choose one of the following characters to discuss:

- Erast Fandorin
- Lady Astair

How are they presented? What do they represent? How are they sympathetic? How are they unsympathetic? How do they see the world?

➔ Everyone turns their chair around so they have a new partner.

Question 2 (10 min)

Choose one of the following themes to discuss:

- Travel
- Gambling
- Political movements and terrorism
- Science and crime investigation (think about Brillling and Grushin)

Aside from moving the narrative along, what do these themes accomplish in the story? How does Akunin surprise you and the characters?

➔ Return to group

7.50-8 Summarize discussion (10 min)

➔ Read Akunin quote

Akunin thinks this is because his creation embodies so much that modern Russians aren't. He's "understated, dignified, reserved". He's also the straight-up action hero whom Akunin never found in his own voracious reading of the Russian classics as a boy, unable to pick the wrong pistol in a duel and so spiffing at martial arts (picked up on a six-year attachment to the Russian Embassy in Tokyo from which he returns at the beginning of *The Death of Achilles*) that he can do back-flips off the ceiling and whack you in the back of the neck on his way down. Yet Fandorin is still Russian. "He is not very sure of himself. He's reflective. He doesn't always win, and when he does, sometimes he regrets it. This is one of the features typical of the Russian intelligentsia that I find attractive."

8-8.15 Wrap up Burning Questions (5 min)**8.15-8.30 Literature and Genre Fiction (15 min)**

➔ Play Akunin clip from 15 seconds in (4 min 15 sec)

PEN American Center BenettonTalk Young Writers Series: Mixed Media: Writers on Their Languages, April 27, 2006

➔ On flipchart, compare Serious Writer (pisatel) with Entertainment Writer (belletrist).

Why is the *Winter Queen* genre fiction and not great literature?

What makes a book transcend genre?

Name some genre writers. And who are serious writers?

Interestingly, in *The Best American Mysteries of the 20th Century*, guess who is the first listed. [O. Henry, then Willa Cather. Also included are Hemingway, Faulkner, Steinbeck, Joyce Carol Oates, and James Thurber.]

What made *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* by Steig Larsson such a phenomenon?

How do mysteries comment on society?

Conclusion

➔ Ask group

Who reads mysteries and has other recommendations for the group?

Resources

Kirchener, Walter. History of Russia. 5th ed. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1972.

Lincoln, W. Bruce. Between Heaven and Hell: The Story of a Thousand Years of Artistic Life in Russia. New York: Viking, 1998.