
Contes Russos

Author: Francesc Serés

Translation Rights: Quaderns Crema

This book is set out as if it were an anthology of Russian stories translated into Catalan by an unknown Russian teacher, Anastasia Maximovna and begins with a Translator's Preface and Notes on the Anthology by Francesc Serés: a Borgesian spoof on the steppes and Nevski Prospect! There are five Russian authors (and we are afforded a short, fictitious biographical account of each) and twenty-one stories all of which take place in Russia and encompass a time span from the end of the nineteenth century to the present day. It is then a fiction in which Francesc Serés creates heteronyms and follows more immediately the line of Roberto Bolaño in *Nazi Literature in America* or *Lives under Glass* by Pierre Michon.

Francesc Serés invents an ingenious spread of writers, themes and styles in a patchwork of Russian history. Behind the individual stories the reader intuits a sweep of modern history that goes from the Tsars, the demystification of so-called 'true socialism', the disillusion that accompanies the fall of the Soviet Union and its satellite states and the eruption of a savage form of capitalism. The chronology of the anthology follows a reverse pattern: it begins with a woman writer who was born in 1967 and finishes with a writer born in 1891; so the book begins with stories located in contemporary Russia and concludes with one located in the time of the Tsars. These stories are highly readable and well written. They are not pastiches of Russian writing although one can find homages to Russian and other writers – Jane Austen, Salinger, Gogol and Pushkin, for example. The overall impression the stories give is that the 'Russian soul' hasn't changed despite the violent transformations Russian society has suffered. The characters accept with resignation what destiny has in store for them and adapt to every change and new situation, whether it is political ('For God's Sake!') or personal ('The Peasant Girl and the Mechanic').

Francesc Serés's stories have been translated and published in several anthologies and literary websites. This collection is generally less experimental in style and would translate well. And if the Mexican 'crack' group of Padilla, Volpe and Co can write novels about the First and Second World Wars from a totally European perspective and get translated, why shouldn't a Catalan writer not have insights and entertainment value on Russian themes for English readers?

This is a summary of the reader's report by Peter Bush

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