



Written by [James Heiser](#) on June 23, 2012

A Review of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's "Apricot Jam"

In the years since his return to Russia in 1994 and especially since his death in 2008, the literary legacy of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has been an uncertain thing — at least in the English-speaking world. On the one hand, the work which he considered to be his *magnum opus*, the *Red Wheel* series of historical works chronicling the history of the Bolshevik revolution, has apparently ground to a halt: only the first two “knots” have been published in an English edition, and it seems unlikely at present that the rest of the work will be so published for the foreseeable future. However, established works such as the [Gulag Archipelago](#), [One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich](#), and [The First Circle](#) have continued to draw interest, and even new, improved translations.



The most recent addition to Solzhenitsyn's English literary legacy is a collection of experimental short stories entitled *Apricot Jam and Other Stories*. The volume has been met with mixed reviews — an unsurprising development, given the experimental character of the stories in question. Some readers may come to a new collection of stories by a Nobel-Prize-winning author imagining that they know in advance what they will find, only to discover that even in his later years, that author had not given up his willingness to experiment with new forms.

Undeniably, the stories seem somewhat uneven — several of them are works of penetrating insight, while others feel forced. Solzhenitsyn described the stories as “binary” — different plots are woven together in the stories with varying degrees of success.

One of the more successful is the book's title story, “Apricot Jam,” which is summarized here to give a sense for the feel of Solzhenitsyn's “binary” stories. The first portion of the story is the account of “Fedya” — a man who was born to the peasant class and who suffered Soviet persecution — who is seeking assistance from “the Writer” — a Soviet literary hack. Fedya's moving account of his life of sorrows and loss begins with the Bolsheviks cutting down the family's apricot tree: “In the summer kitchen in the yard my mother would make us apricot jam, and my brothers and I just couldn't get enough of that sweet foam. Before they deported us as kulaks, they tried to make us tell them where we had hidden our goods. Otherwise, they said, we'll chop down your apricot tree. And they chopped it down.” (2) This moment passes quickly, and begins a tale of sorrows which ends with Fedya physically broken, released temporarily from slave labor so that he can recover in a hospital, imploring “the Writer” to simply send him a food parcel to spare his life: “I'm a prisoner here, near hand to dying and trapped in a life that brings one hurt after the other. Would it cost too much for you to send me a food parcel? Please take pity on me...” (9)

The second portion of the story is written from the perspective of an advisor to “the Writer” — Vasily



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Kiprianovich, “a professor of cinema studies.” Vasily — unlike Fedya — understands how heartless the Writer actually is: In his heart of hearts, Vasily Kiprianovich had little respect for this Writer; he had a huge talent, to be sure, and weighty, meaty turns of phrase, but what a cynic he was! Apart from his novels, tales, and a dozen or more plays — weak things though they were (he also had some silly farces in which abandoned elderly ladies recovered their lost youth) — he managed to keep churning out newspaper articles, each one of them filled with lies. When he spoke in public, as he did quite frequently, he displayed an amazing panache in extemporizing — eloquently and smoothly — the propaganda demanded of him, but always in his own distinctively individual manner. (10)

Vasily, the Writer, and his opposite number, “the Critic,” inhabit what seems to be an entirely different universe from the suffering Fedya — which is, of course, the point. While Vasily, the Writer, and the Critic fret over the politics of Soviet literature and the use of the Russian language, they sit comfortably, enjoying the very food which Fedya needs to sustain his life: “Some soft white bread had already been sliced for the butter and cheese, while there were dishes with two types of pastry and two types of jam — cherry and apricot.” (15) Lest the reader miss the point, the Writer turns to the apricot jam: “‘Now this,’ he said, dripping some of the thick apricot jam from a teaspoon onto a small glass dish, ‘this very amber transparency, this surprising color and light should be present in the literary language as well.’” (19)

When conversation briefly turns to Fedya’s letter, the Writer is fascinated with his “primordial language”: “His language doesn’t follow today’s rules, yet it had such compelling combinations and use of grammatical cases! I envy the writer!” But when Vasily asks the obvious question — “Are you planning to reply in the same fashion?” — the Writer’s response is a confession of spiritual deadness: “What can I say to him? The points isn’t in the answer. The point is in discovering language.” (20)

Another noteworthy story is “Nastenka,” which relates the lives of two women of the same name. Both women are spiritually compromised by their life under communism; both seem to reach a tragic end — one the fruit of moral decay, the other through compromising her love of art to promise Soviet literature. The reader is left wondering which woman has lost more.

One of the more disappointing stories is also the longest in the book, “Times of Crisis,” a fictionalized account of the life of Marshall Georgy Zhukov (1896–1974), told from the perspective of his dying days. The flat characterization of Zhukov as a man fundamentally unaware of the significance of events around him and blind to the political machinations of the apparatchiks — even if true to Zhukov’s character, makes for a pedestrian story which becomes little more than a recitation of the events of his life which cannot sustain the pathos of the life of the character.

Many of the stories included in *Apricot Jam* are connected, at least in part, to the Second World War. For Solzhenitsyn, the war is a crucible for the Soviet regime which lays bare the hypocrisy of Stalinism in particular, and communism in general. The quiet confession of a commissar — “You cannot change human nature even under socialism” — sets the theme for the work. There is a sense of tragedy which pervades the whole collection, and yet one witnesses characters who refuse to surrender their principles, despite the futility of their labors.

Apricot Jam is not a volume which is likely to earn a prominent place in studies of Solzhenitsyn’s works. Nevertheless, there is still much of value therein, and several examples of the quiet character of conscience which is a mainstay of Solzhenitsyn’s great works of fiction.



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Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, [Apricot Jam and Other Stories](#), trans. by Kenneth Lantz and Stephan Solzhenitsyn (Berkeley: Counterpoint, 2011) 375 pages. hardcover. \$28.00

Photos: Apricot Jam cover and Solzhenitsyn after returning to Russia from exile in 1994



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