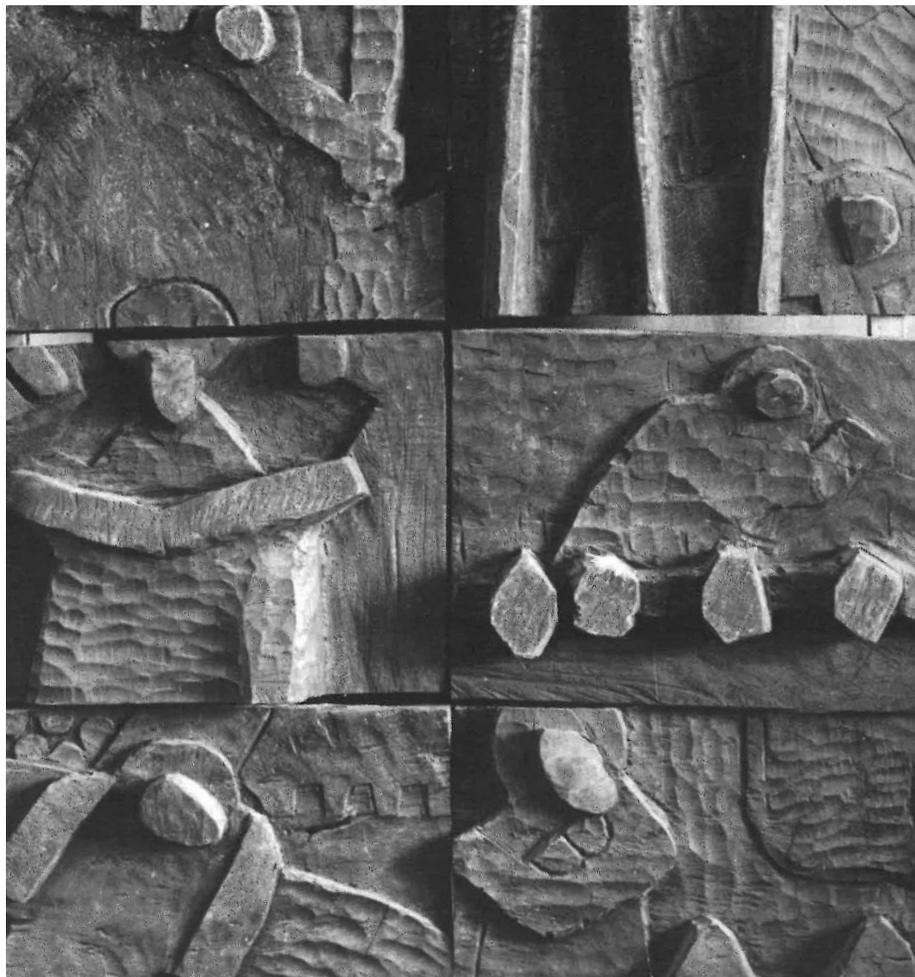


# The Slavic Scene

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THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN  
DEPARTMENT OF SLAVIC LANGUAGES & LITERATURES

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# The Slavic Scene

## Letter From the Chair

### Dear Friends,

I hope that you had a relaxing and interesting summer. As fall semester progresses, we are intensifying our efforts to expand course offerings on Russian and East European culture. Over the past several years, we have noted several courses that have been developed in our Polish and BCS curricula by Benjamin Paloff, Piotr Westwalewicz and Tatjana Aleksic. Last year we added a key course for our Ukrainian minor on Cultures of Ukraine, designed and co-taught by Mikhail Krutikov and Svitlana Rogovyk. This course dealt with the thousand-year history of Ukraine from the period of Kievan Rus to the centuries of Tatar, Polish, Russian and Hapsburg rule. The course stresses that the territory of present-day Ukraine has long been multicultural, with important influences not only from the former ruling empires but also from other significant populations of the region: Jews, Roma and other Central Asian ethnicities. The course deals as well with the formation and evolution of Ukrainian national identity and philosophical and religious traditions, educational systems, literatures, arts and cultures. By the summer of 2016, when we hope that peace and stability will have returned to Ukraine, we plan to add an optional two-credit supplement to this three-credit course which will provide students with the opportunity to continue their studies for three additional weeks in May, in Ukraine itself.



Last year, Ewa Pasek launched her First-Year Seminar on Romani culture, with focus on the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland and Hungary. The course covers the socio-cultural stereotypes of Roma that developed over the centuries of their migration into Europe. Focus is on the present-day legacy of oppression of the Roma (which included enslavement in some cases) and the ideology and culture that it fostered among the Roma themselves, including such issues as controversies over assimilation, economic problems, housing, education and healthcare. Ewa will be offering this First-Year Seminar again in the winter.

Alina Makin introduced a new minicourse this fall on Russian language, people and culture in the U.S. The Russian immigrant community is now the second largest in our country, having grown substantially in recent decades as a result of emigration from the Soviet Union and post-Soviet Russia. The course will explore the history of Russian immigration, ethnic composition of the émigré Russophone community, and the social issues, needs, and problems facing its members. The presence of our university in Ann Arbor and other economic opportunities in our area have especially encouraged Russian families to settle here. In addition to covering the impact of this immigration broadly, this new minicourse will serve as the preparatory course for our RUSLAN program (Russian Service Learning in Action Network), which enables our students to use their Russian language skills in providing help to Russian immigrants, especially seniors, in negotiating linguistically the logistical demands of their new lives and preparing for citizenship.

In the Winter semester, Michael Makin will be expanding our current course on Old Russian Literature to cover more comprehensively the culture of Eastern Slavs from the ninth century until the seventeenth. While the primary emphasis will be on literature, the course will also examine religion, art (iconography in particular), architecture, folklore and other cultural forms. It will also consider how post-Petrine Russia has turned again and again to "Old Russia" and has, indeed, in some areas, shown remarkable continuity with that Old Russian past. We hope that this broadening of the course will attract undergraduates to what heretofore has been primarily a graduate-level course.

Needless to say, the expansion of our cultural offerings while maintaining our language offerings in Russian, Polish, Czech, Bosnian-Croatian-Serbian, and Ukrainian would not have been possible without your continuing generous support.

Best wishes for the new academic year,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Herbert Eagle".

Herbert (Herb) Eagle [hjeagle@umich.edu](mailto:hjeagle@umich.edu)

# The Slavic Scene

## 2013-2014 Year In Photos



# The Slavic Scene

## Congratulations Graduates



Russian Majors, Russian Minors, Czech Minor: Rachel Reed, & CLEE Minor: Amanda Mroczek

### 2014 Slavic Graduates

#### Jackie Cole

Bachelor of Arts,  
Russian

#### Monica Harmsen

Bachelor of Arts,  
Russian

#### Julia Papiyants

Bachelor of Arts,  
Russian

#### Kristina Pingston

Bachelor of Arts,  
Russian

#### Agne Sriubaite

Bachelor of Arts,  
Russian

#### Thea Torek\*

Bachelor of Arts,  
Russian

#### Justin Zemaitis\*\*

Bachelor of Arts,  
Russian

#### Ryan Bloom

Minor in Russian  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Andrew Boboltz

Minor in Russian  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Jacob Clark

Minor in Russian  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Zoe Crowley

Minor in Russian  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Sally Davis

Minor in Russian  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Deirdre Jones

Minor in Russian  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Callie Kalinowski

Minor in Russian  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Daniel Sutton

Minor in Russian  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Amanda Mroczek

Minor in Culture &  
Literature of Eastern  
Europe

#### Adam Parada

Minor in Culture &  
Literature of Eastern  
Europe

#### Lydia Gardynik

Bachelor of Arts, Polish

#### Conrad Brown

Minor in Polish  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Christopher Kogut

Minor in Polish  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Rachel Reed

Minor in Czech  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Christine Vanek

Minor in Czech  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Viktoria Krislaty

Minor in Ukrainian  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

#### Anastasia Tkach

Minor in Ukrainian  
Language, Literature, &  
Culture

\*Denotes December 2013 Graduate

\*\*Denotes August 2014 Graduate

### PhD, Slavic Languages and Literatures



#### Vladislav Beronja

Winter 2014  
Dissertation:

*History and Remembrance in Three Post-Yugoslav Authors: Dubravka Ugrešić, Daša Drndić, and Aleksandar Zograf*



#### Yanina Arnold

Winter 2014  
Dissertation:

*Writing Justice: Fiction and Literary Lawyers in Late Imperial Russia, 1864-1900*

### Slavic 2014 Award Winners

**Excellence in Polish Studies:** Salvatore Parenti III

**Excellence in BCS Studies:** Gojko Kilibarda

**Excellence in Ukrainian Studies:** Justin Zemaitis

**Essay Award for an Essay Written in a Slavic Language Learned at U-M:** Craig Send (Russian)

**Essay Award for an Essay Written in Student's Native Language:** Lilit Kazazian (English)

# The Slavic Scene

## Graduate Student Focus

### Meet Our Newest Graduate Student



#### Jason Wagner

Jason Wagner was born in the swamps of North Central Florida. He studied Russian Literature at Hampshire College. His current focus is Russian and Yiddish modernists texts.

### Awards & Accomplishments List

**Alena Aniskiewicz** received a summer 2014 FLAS award to study Polish in Krakow, as well as a CREES Research, Internship and Fellowship (CRIF) program grant to engage in research in Warsaw.

**Paulina Duda** received a Rackham International Research Award and Copernicus & Konopka Endowment fellowships for summer 2014 to engage in dissertation research in film archives in England and Poland. She published excerpts from Antoni Slonimski's sci-fi novel "Two Ends of the World" in the "Alchemy Journal of Translation" together with **Jodi Greig**. Paulina's paper entitled "Shaping Polish National Imagination: How Extra-Textual Status of Literary Works Affects Wajda's and Hoffman's Film Adaptations" will be published in November and she will present it at the International Academic Conference on Social Sciences and Humanities in Prague. Paulina also translated subtitles into Polish for a film, "Girl Rising."

**Meghan Forbes** received a Fulbright Award to do research in Berlin, Germany for the 2014-2015 academic year. *See related article on page six.*

**Bradley Goerne** received a summer 2014 FLAS award to study Czech in Prague through the Summer Language Institute of the University of Pittsburgh.

**Haley Laurila** studied Russian through the school of Russian and Asian Studies (SRAS) in Irkutsk, Russia with the assistance of a FLAS award in summer 2014.

**Natasha McCauley** presented a conference paper at the Association for Women in Slavic Studies this past spring, and also attended the Feminist Critical Analysis in Croatia over the summer. She will present papers at the upcoming ASEEEES and ATSEEEEL conferences this fall and winter.

**Jessica Zychowicz** attended the Digital Humanities Summer Institute at Univ. of Victoria in Canada with funding from U-M Institute for the Humanities, CREES, and Slavic. She published translations of poetry and prose in *Prostory Literary Journal: The Maidan Issue* and *Absinthe: New European Writing*. She is working on a chapter to be featured in a forthcoming anthology entitled *Women Behaving Badly: Towards a Cultural History of Feminist Transgression in Russia and Eastern Europe*. Jessica will also present research on contemporary art initiatives in Kyiv at the upcoming National Women's Studies Association, ASEEEES, and ATSEEEEL conferences.



**Congratulations to Amanda Getty, Natalie McCauley, & Jamie Parsons on becoming PhD candidates in Fall 2014.**

# The Slavic Scene

## Graduate Student Focus

### A Year in the Grey City: Fulbright Funded Research in Berlin

By Meghan Forbes

This September, rather than return to Ann Arbor and an autumnal canopy of maples, I have moved to Berlin, brimming with its parks, galleries, and cheap beer, for a ten-month dissertation research trip supported by a Fulbright grant. In Berlin, I will be looking for materials that support my dissertation thesis, which contends that the role of the Czech avant-garde is a significant and overlooked link in the vast network of exchange that existed amongst various European centers of art making in the interwar period.

For example, in the eighty years since the Bauhaus in Germany was shuttered, many aspects of this interwar art and architecture school, including its unique pedagogy, functionalist aesthetic, and transnational influence, have been documented. Yet there is an absence in the vast scholarly literature on the Bauhaus when it comes to the dynamic relationship between the school's major figures in Germany and their peers in then Czechoslovakia. It is my aim to fill in that gap, charting the influence of the Bauhaus eastward and reciprocally, the influence of the Bauhaus' eastern neighbor on the school's aesthetic ethos. The implications of this revised telling are universal – and especially pertinent in our contemporary moment as the humanities move towards a more interdisciplinary approach – by encouraging a shift in historical narratives that sees multiple centers where once only one was perceived.

As a doctoral candidate in the Slavic Languages and Literatures department, and a student of Czech and German literature and visual culture, I am able to use my interdisciplinary training to map the exchange between the Czech avant-garde and its German counterparts by describing the role of photography, typography, journal publications, and letter writing in facilitating a dialogue that reverberated beyond Bauhaus walls. By reading personal correspondence between Czech and German associates of the Bauhaus – teachers, students, and enthusiasts – comparatively against publicly circulated materials, I will show that the conversation flowed two ways and was mutually influential.

In Prague, at the National Literary Archive and the Library of the Museum of Decorative Arts, I have unearthed numerous examples of the influence of Bauhaus principles on the Czech avant-garde and the distinct way its functionalist aesthetic was translated into the Czech context. In Berlin, specifically at the Berlinische Galerie and the Bauhaus and Werkbund archives, I'll be looking for correspondence and other documents that explicitly show the reverse: a particular Czech influence on the German Bauhaus – for example, how it manifests itself in Bauhaus theory and practice corresponding to typographic design.

I am not only delighted to have received a Fulbright grant because I know that it will provide me with the necessary tools to successfully complete my dissertation, but also honored to conduct my research under the auspices of a program with community outreach at the core of its mission. Likewise, my admiration of the Bauhaus is not confined to my academic pursuits but is also manifest in an arts and literary journal I founded in 2011 and co-edit with fellow U-M doctoral candidate Hannah McMurray. Typed on typewriters, letter pressed, and hand bound, *harlequin creature* employs some of the production and distribution methods of the interwar period, and makes available to our contemporary community through public events the experience of engaging in these modernist processes. Activating this history and setting it against our present day via *harlequin creature* has proven a novel and highly productive way for me to think through the theory and practice of my academic discipline. As a not-for-profit organization, *harlequin creature* began conducting writing workshops with children last year, bringing interwar modernism to life for young people who have never known a world without the Internet. First supported by an Arts of Citizenship grant from the University of Michigan, these workshops have so grown in popularity and repute that they are now offered at places like the Guggenheim Museum in New York. I intend

(continued on pg. 7)



(continued from "A Year in the Grey City: Fulbright Funded Research in Berlin," pg. 6)

to fulfill the Fulbright aim of community outreach by bringing this creative writing workshop to Berlin, and also expanding the journal's focus on translation by developing a Czech-German-English translation project with a circle of emerging young Czech and German poets.

As would befit the school's ideals, the aesthetics and principles of the Bauhaus inhabit my daily life as a site of research and artistic inspiration. Through my dissertation research and proposed outreach project in Berlin, I hope to eradicate some of the

bias that lies in East-West distinctions and call for a more fluid contemporary conversation emblematic of the interwar period, and am so confident that I will have the resources and support as a member of the Fulbright community to do so.

## Outstanding GSI Award

Slavic Department Ph.D. candidate, Sarah Sutter, received a 2014 Outstanding Graduate Student Instructor Award through the Rackham Graduate School. This award recognizes the efforts and accomplishments of Graduate Student Instructors (GSI) who demonstrate exceptional ability and creativity as teachers, service as outstanding mentors and advisors to their students and colleagues, and growth as scholars in the course of their graduate programs. Sarah writes of her graduate teaching experience:

"The courses we teach in the Slavic Department provide opportunities for students to broaden their awareness of other cultures and gain insight into their own cultural backgrounds. We learn a great deal about ourselves as we become literate in new languages and cultures. I therefore strive

to keep the study of Russia and Eastern Europe personally relevant for my students, with the hope that they will gain the ability and confidence to form meaningful connections with people from this region. I hope that my teaching promotes experiences of self-discovery for students as they study the languages and cultures of Eastern Europe."

In 2014-2015, Sarah will serve as the Graduate Student Mentor to graduate student instructors in the Slavic department. She is an IT teaching consultant through the Center for Teaching and Learning on campus.



# The Slavic Scene

## Faculty Focus

### Benjamin Paloff, Stanford Humanities Fellow 2013-14

In first-person stories about the time he spent in Nazi concentration camps, influential Polish author and journalist Tadeusz Borowski portrays himself as a cynical and opportunistic prisoner who, among other transgressions, steals the confiscated belongings of other prisoners.

The stories, which Borowski composed about his time at Auschwitz, portray him as “at best indifferent, at worst, complicit,” according to Stanford Humanities Center fellow Benjamin Paloff.

But there is no historical evidence that Borowski was anything like the way he portrays himself in his stories, and even he was irritated that readers found his self-portrait so convincing.

Even with everything we know about the brutality of life in concentration camps, Borowski’s stories continue to shock and disturb readers because of the detached and matter-of-fact way that the fictional version of himself describes the atrocities happening around him.

According to Paloff, Borowski’s less-than-realistic accounts are hardly anomalies. It wasn’t uncommon for writers in the post-World War II era to publish fictionalized accounts of their actual experiences.

During his year-long fellowship at Stanford, Paloff studied the strange phenomenon of fictionalized historical memoir. An assistant professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures and of Comparative Literature at the University of Michigan, Paloff is particularly interested in “the ethics of representation” – the moral implications of an author’s unfaithful self-portrayal.

Borowski’s work is an ideal case in point because, as Paloff said, it’s an incredibly powerful ethical project: he lies to readers in order to get them to truly understand what he experienced.

By manipulating point-of-view and painting himself as an anti-hero, Borowski “makes you feel conflicted,” just as he felt while he was in the concentration camp, where he struggled with the reality that “something

absolutely horrifying was becoming unremarkable or the norm,” Paloff said.

Paloff, whose research interests span modernism in Eastern Europe, philosophy in literature, and translation, said his current investigation is “a provocation to those who think they already have a grasp on things like ‘historical truth.’”

Paloff has found rich source material for his research in the Hoover Institution Library and Archives at Stanford, which holds the personal archive of Polish author Jan Karski, who published an incredible factual account about the investigative role he played during the Holocaust.

As part of his fact-finding work for the Polish government, Karski smuggled himself in and out of concentration camps and ghettos on multiple occasions. In 1945 he published a book in English as a plea to the West to intervene on behalf of the victims of genocide and called it “Story of a Secret State.”

Paloff knew Karski’s papers were held at Hoover and was eager to see if the collection contained source materials that would help him better understand the “process by which Karski’s documentary evidence became a narrative representation.”

Karski’s papers, which include photos he took on spy missions, diaries, and documents he wrote for the Polish government, verify the details in his book.

With confirmation of things such as what Karski witnessed in the Warsaw Ghetto, Paloff said the corroborating information is helping him “separate fact from embellishment in other accounts.”

Paloff is drawing on Karski’s report and later reflections on the Ghetto for his forthcoming book project, “Worlds Apart: Real-Life Fictions of Concentration Camps, Ghettos, and Besieged Cities.”

-Excerpted with permission from The Stanford Report; original article by Leah Stark



## Mikhail Krutikov, Professor

In the past two years (2013 and 2014) I have co-edited two volumes of collected essays on the American Yiddish author Joseph Opatoshu and the Soviet writer Der Nister.

These books, published in the UK by the Legenda Press as part of its Studies in Yiddish series, are part of an ongoing collective project which can be broadly described as a history of modern Yiddish literature. Each volume deals with a particular literary figure, genre (the forthcoming volume will be devoted to Yiddish children literature) or theme.

These publications are based on the annual Mendel Friedman symposium which usually takes place in Oxford in August, and in which I have been involved since its beginning in 1999. My own contributions in these collections focus on the development of the Yiddish novel genre during the first half of the twentieth century in the Soviet Union, Poland, and the United States.

Next academic year I will serve as the Head Fellow of an international group of scholars working on the theme Jews and Empire at the Frankel Institute for Advanced Judaic Studies here at the University of Michigan.

This broad theme covers a broad variety of interesting topics, from the Roman Empire to the post-Soviet states. My own project deals with the representations of Soviet spaces in contemporary Russian Jewish writing. I have just edited a block of articles on contemporary Jewish writers in the Russian diaspora in the Moscow academic journal *New Literary Observer* (NLO, 3, 2014), and I am going to develop some of the themes in a new book which I will be writing during the next year. Besides, I keep writing a column in the New York Yiddish newspaper *Forverts* in which I regularly review new books, theater productions, films etc.

*Mikhail Krutikov was promoted to the faculty rank of professor on September 1, 2014.*

## Aleksandra Kremer, Visiting Scholar (The University of Warsaw)

When I came to Ann Arbor in mid-February 2014, I was surprised to discover that many people seemed to be sorry about the weather I was about to experience in Michigan. After all, Warsaw winters could be equally snowy and cold, I naively thought at that time. But when two months later there were still no signs of the spring, and the snow had only just melted, I could indeed understand what was meant by the "record winter."

Nevertheless, I really enjoyed my 3-month stay as a Visiting Scholar at the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures. Since I lived in East Lansing, where my husband was a Visiting Fulbright Scholar, I always came to Ann Arbor with a bag, which I used to fill with a pile of books to be read later at home. The collections of the Hatcher Library, both printed and electronic, were an invaluable support for my research. For me it was the time of transition from

my previous doctoral study of concrete poetry to a new project on the vocal performance of verse. The idea of analyzing authors' poetry readings, almost absent in Poland, is much better grounded in the recent English-language literary scholarship, so the sources available in Ann Arbor were especially useful for me. Other fields of my interest included phonetics and philosophies of voice, as well as discussions on metaphor and metonymy.

During these three months I also had a chance to attend some thought-provoking seminars and lectures organized by the Department. I will never forget the translation workshop taught by Professor Bogdana Carpenter, and devoted to the poetry of Julia Hartwig. It was also a pleasure to talk to Krzysztof Hoffmann, a Visiting Professor from Poznań, thanks to whom the first presentation I heard in Michigan was about Polish poetry. My stay

(continued on pg. 15)



# The Slavic Scene

## In The Classroom

### Modern Ukraine and Shevchenko's Legacy

By Svitlana Rogovyk

To the majority of students of the newly developed mini-course, taught in the winter semester, on Taras Shevchenko, the poet's name was not familiar at all. They decided to enroll in the course because of the general interest in Ukraine, its people, and culture. The course, titled "Let My People Go: Taras Shevchenko and Modern Ukraine", attracted 33 students of different backgrounds and majors. During every meeting the topics of Shevchenko's life, poetry, prose, and artwork were discussed in connection with current events in Ukraine. For their

final projects students had the freedom to discuss the course content on a chosen topic in any format. To my surprise, in addition to academic papers, many of them wrote songs and poems because they wanted not only to illustrate their knowledge of the subject matter, but also to express their feelings about the influence of Shevchenko's creative works on people of modern Ukraine and other countries of the world. Here is one such project, a poem, from a student in the course.



"A Man I Wish I Knew," By Anton Jacob  
(printed with permission)  
Slavic 290, Winter 2014

Taras Shevchenko,  
For those who don't know it  
He was a luminaire, artist and Poet  
Folklorist, ethnographer, and a master with paint  
Known in Ukraine as a modern day saint  
Troubled as a child, yet in his psyche only,  
is where he chose to go wild.  
These chords erupted through various prose, poems, and illustrations  
These ideas have, and will be passed on for generations  
Searching and praying for political liberalization  
His life and Legacy will forever carry on  
And so hold on Ukraine, when there is nothing  
Left in you, except his will which says to them hold on.  
A man with magnificent brilliance  
Sent from above, with relentless resilience  
His motivation, drive, incitement to deliver his messages  
200 years later, here we are at the University of Michigan.

Ukrainians and fellow supporters consider this.

The life of Taras was filled with chaos, misery, and misfortune. Yet, his legacy has left behind countless pieces of magnificent art, clever poetry, and beautifully written prose. The life of Taras can be represented as a modern day analogy for what the people of Ukraine are going through. At the end of this dark and plagued tunnel there is a light filled with peace, unification and harmony. The life and hope that lingers from his artwork and literature symbolizes that same light and hope which exists in the people. A world imagined

by Taras Schevchenko.

## New Mini-Course: The Magic World of the Russian Folk Tale

By Alina Makin

In Winter Term 2014 I taught a new mini-course, “The Magic World of the Russian Folk Tale,” under the rubric Slavic 290 -- Studies in Eastern European Cultures. Having taught several times a “readings course” (ie, seminar) on the Russian folk tale in my Intensive Russian Program in the Residential College, I knew that students were often intrigued not only by the diversity of types and topics in the Russian tales but also by the equally great diversity of interpretive approaches that can be taken to them. But the audience for a mini-course is, naturally, very different from that in an intensive Russian-language program; if this mini-course were to succeed, it would have to appeal to students from



across the University, many taking the course for an elusive, final Humanities credit, and few with much knowledge of Russian culture. For such students, however, Russian folklore could, perhaps, be more approachable than some other areas of culture, since it is so easy, when looking at Russian folk materials, to make associations with folklore well beyond the Slavic world and probably more familiar to a general student audience. Hence, in my lectures I tried to combine discussion of the specifics of Russian folk genres with ample examination of motifs shared with (or borrowed from) other cultures and with exploration of features that might be regarded as “universal” – from narrative devices to claimed archetypes.

I assigned tales primarily from that perennial classic, Afanas’ev’s three-volume collection, surely part of almost every Russian’s library (and I discussed the processes by which, in the nineteenth century, folk tales first came to be collected and studied with such intensity, as exemplified by Afanas’ev

himself). We looked at, among others, animal, domestic, and magic (“fairy”) tales, while a guest lecturer from the Russian literature program talked about the importation of folk-tale motifs and devices into belles lettres, with especial focus on the creation of “literary folk tales”. In their reading, students met magic pike, clever fools, evil wives, shape-shifting wolves, and sleeping beauties; they traversed dangerous terrain guarded by Baba Yaga and Kashchei the Deathless; and they mapped the topography of the Russian village and the Russian peasant home. I also assigned materials in which scholars took a wide variety of approaches to the Russian folk tale – from such classics as Propp’s “morphological” descriptions to Freudian and feminist readings. And I asked students to experiment in their papers with a variety of those approaches while handling exemplars of different genres of folk tale.

The results were, overall, very satisfying – from the South-Asian engineer who talked about motifs shared between Russian tales and those of North India to the student of Russian heritage who commented that he finally understood the meaning of what he had read as a small child. In general, students seemed surprised by how often such superficially simple narratives could reveal great and sometimes enigmatic depths. Many of the final assignments and subsequent student comments indicated that engagement with the topics and methodologies of the course had been rewarding, opening hitherto unexplored avenues. As I read the course papers and reflected on the class discussions that had accompanied my lectures, I reflected again on the ways in which folk genres can, indeed, engage a broad student audience with that characteristic combination of (often colorful) national specifics and universal features. This is a course I shall look forward to teaching again.

# The Slavic Scene

## Classroom-Inspired

### Richelle Mead, BGS '98, Talks Slavic Folklore and Vampire Fiction



Richelle Mead is an author of urban fantasy novels for adults and teens, including the Vampire Academy series; the first book in this series was recently adapted for a film (February 2014). She graduated from the University of Michigan in 1998 and took “Slavic Folklore” in her time as an undergraduate. She took some time to answer a few questions for us about the course and how it influenced her work. Thank you, Richelle!

looked at was the dualistic nature of the vampire story—how humans are drawn to the conflicting sides of light vs. dark, good vs. evil, life vs. death, etc. That idea became a predominant one in the world of Vampire Academy, which has two warring races of vampires at its focus. One of the female protagonists in my series is named Vasilisa, though she goes by the American nickname of Lissa, which was inspired by a comment Prof. Stolz made after we kept running into Russian folktales with heroines named Vasilisa. “The heroines always seem to be Vasilisa,” he said. “And the heroes always seem to be Ivan.” (Consequently, I have no main characters named Ivan, but that’s a name that still shows up in my books too!).

**You took “Slavic Folklore” (Slavic 240) in 1998 with Prof. Benjamin Stolz. What enticed you to enroll? What are your memories of the course?**

I had a huge interest in mythology – I still do! Since there was no mythology concentration at Michigan, I elected a BGS (Bachelor of General Studies) program, which allowed me to have an interdisciplinary approach and take mythology and folklore classes from across all different departments. What really struck me about Prof. Stolz’s class was how engaging he made it and how he used so many different approaches to make the material interesting. We had academic books and articles—but also studied novels and movies as well. One day he had some Slavic folk dancers come in, and another time, we ate Russian food (my first experience with borscht!). It all made for a really great combination to reinforce the content we were learning.

**Do you feel that the course influenced or inspired the story behind the “Vampire Academy” series? If so, how?**

We actually had a vampire unit in the class, where we examined the origins and fascination with vampire mythos around the world and, of course, in Slavic cultures in particular. A huge part of what Prof. Stolz

**What drew you to use Slavic folklore/mythology over other cultures’ folklore as a basis for your series?**

After seeing how rich the folklore and mythology was in Slavic cultures from this class, I knew that was the part of the world I wanted to use when I set out to write a vampire story. It’s also the basis of where we in America and the West get a lot of our common vampire lore and tropes. The vampire societies in my series have settled in America in the present day, but they trace their origins to Russia and Romania, so you see a lot of those terms and names popping up in the books.

**What was the basis for your research on vampires (i.e. course materials, travel, etc.)? How long did it take you to sketch out the story?**

Once I’d decided to use Russian and Romanian vampires as a starting point, I began with just general internet searches to see what I could find on that topic. I turned up a reference to the Romanian Moroi, Strigoi, and dhampirs. Dhampirs (half-vampires) had come up in Prof. Stolz’s class, but not the other two terms, so from there, I spent time in libraries and looked into “real books” since

I'm always hesitant to rely strictly on what you find on the Internet. The world created in my books became a fusion of pieces of myths I read about, as well as a number of elements that were strictly fictitious. The initial process only took a few months to get the basis for the series and first book, though it took just over three years to write all six books in the Vampire Academy series.

**What ignited your passion for writing? What led you to a career as a writer?**

I'd wanted to be a writer from childhood. Even in college, I wanted to be a writer, though I took few creative writing classes. Most of those available focused on short story writing, which requires a different mindset from novels. So, instead I focused my classes on content and the literary themes I was interested in learning more about. After my undergrad degree, it took several years and a few alternative careers before I had the discipline to finally start and finish my first novel.

**What kinds of projects are you currently working on?**

I'm currently working on *The Ruby Circle*, the last book in my Bloodlines series, which is actually a spin-off to the Vampire Academy series. Both those series are for young adults, and after this one is done, I'll start a new (non-vampire) project for teens. I'm also in the middle of a series called Age of X, for adults, which takes place in a future that's renounced religion—but then finds mysterious phenomena occurring when old gods return to reclaim the world. Its latest installment, *The Immortal Crown*, just came out.

**What reading recommendations do you have for people interested in similar subject matter to vampires in particular, or Slavic folklore and mythology in general?**

It's tried and true, but Bram Stoker's *Dracula* is a great place to start, if only because of the effect it had on

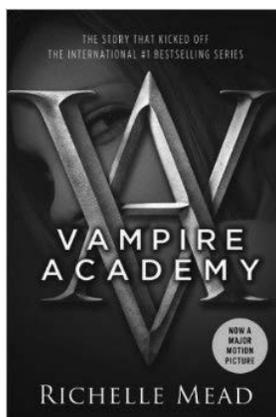
vampire mythos in Western pop culture. Another book we read in Prof. Stolz's class is *Russian Fairy Tales* by Afanasev and Guterman, which I still own and reference. It's an extensive compilation of some of the most popular stories from that region and is a great resource for beginners and pros alike.

**What fond memories do you have of your time at Michigan?**

Too many to list! I attended other universities after getting my undergrad degree and had wonderful times in those places, but "Michigan" is always what I immediately answer when people ask me where I went to college. Ann Arbor and the university are filled with so much vibrancy, and it was such an incredible experience to spend those four years in a community with so much culture, intelligence, and unity. They left a huge impression on the person I am today, and I'm so proud to be a Wolverine.

**Is there anything else you'd like to share with our readers?**

Go Blue! Anyone interested in updates about my past or future books can find out more at [www.richellemead.com](http://www.richellemead.com), which I try to keep updated with the latest news when I can. I'm also pretty active on social media. Thanks so much for reaching out to me!



# The Slavic Scene

## Staying Connected

### Jonathan Bolton, PhD '01, Receives Scaglione Prize

The Modern Language Association of America announced it is awarding its eleventh Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for Studies in Slavic Languages and Literatures to Jonathan Bolton, of Harvard University, for his book *Worlds of Dissent: Charter 77, the Plastic People of the Universe, and Czech Culture under Communism*, published by Harvard University Press. Alexander Etkind, of the University of Cambridge, will receive honorable mention for his book *Internal Colonization: Russia's Imperial Experience*, published by Polity. The prize is awarded biennially for an outstanding scholarly work on the linguistics or literatures of the Slavic languages, including Belarussian, Bulgarian, Croatian, Czech, Polish, Russian, Serbian, Slovak, Slovene, and Ukrainian.

The prize is one of sixteen awards that [was] presented on 11 January 2014, during the association's annual convention, to be held in Chicago. The members of the 2013 selection committee were Dan E. Davidson (Bryn Mawr Coll.); John Burt Foster, Jr. (George Mason Univ.); and William Mills Todd III (Harvard Univ.), chair. The committee's citation for the winning book reads:

Cold War journalism produced heroic images of dissent and dissenters, and they quickly entered Western mythology. Jonathan Bolton's elegantly written, rigorously researched *Worlds of Dissent* takes a hard, fresh look at how this phenomenon played out in the former Czechoslovakia, drawing on social, political, and cultural history but most of all reading the rich variety of both public and personal documents critically and insightfully. He replaces the frozen myths with a

sympathetic, at times wry, but always engaging view of dissent as an unfolding process in which the dissenters, ranging from former communists to quirky free spirits, were not always sure of where they were going and what their efforts should be called. He deliberately begins his narrative with the Soviet invasion of 1968 and ends it in 1980, well before the triumph of 1989, better to capture the uncertainty and anxieties involved in living dissent.

Jonathan Bolton is a professor of Slavic languages and literatures at Harvard University, where he teaches Czech and Central European literature and history. He received his PhD from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor; his MA from the University of Texas, Austin; and his BA from Harvard University. He has edited and translated *In the Puppet Gardens: Selected Poems, 1963–2005*, a selection of approximately one hundred poems by the contemporary Czech poet Ivan Wernisch. *Worlds of Dissent* was named a *Foreign Affairs* Best Book on Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet Republic and a *Choice* Outstanding Academic Title of 2012; it received the 2010 Thomas J. Wilson Memorial Prize for a best first manuscript from Harvard University Press, as well as honorable mention for the Reginald Zelnik Book Prize in History from the Association for Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies.

-Excerpted from the Modern Language Association Press Release, December 3, 2013



## Jennifer (Cornell) Guernsey, (BA, Russian, '86)



I arrived at U-M planning to be a doctor and to take Norwegian. However, the Norwegian class was cancelled. I had long nursed a curiosity about the mysterious land behind the Iron Curtain, and as we were at the height of the Cold War, I thought Russian might prove useful.

My first Russian instructor was none other than Herb Eagle. He put us through the paces of the satirical Lipson first-year Russian texts. I loved the language, but doubted a science-y type like me could be a Russian major. Surely those required literature classes would do me in!

Enter Deming Brown, who offered a two-credit class entitled Modern Russia Through Her Writers that focused on understanding contemporary Soviet life through, and largely between the lines of, contemporary novels and short stories. I was hooked. I declared a Russian major, and moved into the Russian House in Oxford Housing, but I continued to take all of the pre-med courses as well.

Shortly after graduating I was hired as a freelance tour manager by a tour company specializing in the USSR. I saw dozens of Soviet cities, traveled to Mongolia, rode the Trans-Siberian Railroad, and very much improved my Russian.

At the same time, I answered an ad for Russian translators that appeared in the U-M Slavic Division's

newsletter. My science background was put to work, as I was translating scientific monographs on everything from underwater acoustics to the manufacture of synthetic rubber. Thankfully, I was able to telephone the authors to ask them questions, and my work was subsequently edited by a subject-matter expert. The pay was peanuts, but the experience was invaluable.

I then went to work for a State Department contractor processing the applications of Soviet refugees. Our staff was mostly bilingual, including many native Russian speakers, and I heard and spoke Russian constantly. A translation company was just a block away, and through a coworker's referral I began translating patents.

My next full-time job entailed working as a writer and research assistant for a man who had developed biological weapons for the USSR before defecting to the US. Again, my science background and my Russian both came in handy, and I learned a lot about infectious disease while continuing to translate on the side.

I left that job to focus on motherhood, but I continue to freelance. My translation work these days is primarily in medicine and pharmaceuticals. It is the perfect combination of my medical and linguistic interests.

(continued from "Aleksandra Kremer, Visiting Scholar," pg. 9)

in the U.S. also allowed me to deliver a paper at a conference in Chicago, which gathered numerous scholars working in the field of Polish Studies.

The time that I spent in the U.S. was for me quiet and peaceful, ideal for reading and writing, compared with the busy fall semester that I had spent at the University of Warsaw. Now, being back at my home

institution, where I have been employed since the defense of my PhD thesis in 2013, I may use my new experiences in teaching and research. I am very grateful to the Slavic Department for all the hospitality and helpfulness, thanks to which my stay was possible and very enjoyable.

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