



## The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol

*Nikolai Gogol, Richard Pevear (Translator), Larissa Volokhonsky (Translator)*

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When Pushkin first read some of the stories in this collection, he declared himself "amazed." "Here is real gaiety," he wrote, "honest, unconstrained, without mincing, without primness. And in places what poetry! . . . I still haven't recovered."

More than a century and a half later, Nikolai Gogol's stories continue to delight readers the world over. Now a stunning new translation--from an award-winning team of translators--presents these stories in all their inventive, exuberant glory to English-speaking readers. For the first time, the best of Gogol's short fiction is brought together in a single volume: from the colorful Ukrainian tales that led some critics to call him "the Russian Dickens" to the Petersburg stories, with their black humor and wonderfully demented attitude toward the powers that be. All of Gogol's most memorable creations are here: the minor official who misplaces his nose, the downtrodden clerk whose life is changed by the acquisition of a splendid new overcoat, the wily madman who becomes convinced that a dog can tell him everything he needs to know.

These fantastic, comic, utterly Russian characters have dazzled generations of readers and had a profound influence on writers such as Dostoevsky and Nabokov. Now they are brilliantly rendered in the first new translation in twenty-five years--one that is destined to become the definitive edition of Gogol's most important stories.

## The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol Details

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Author : Nikolai Gogol , Richard Pevear (Translator) , Larissa Volokhonsky (Translator)

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## From Reader Review The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol for online ebook

### Sabrina says

I was in an airport in Nottingham, England with Ben filling out those "welcome to the country, now who are you?!" cards.

We get up to the police clerk and I give him my card and move off to the side. Ben hands over his card. Trouble. Police clerk (sheriff of Nottingham perhaps??) says "do you think you are funny?" and proceeds to berate Ben with such ditties as "Do you want to make your girlfriend cry, I'll send you back to France!). Turns out that Ben put "rockstar" with the a as a star symbol for his occupation.

When we were let free to leave the Nottingham airport, I asked Ben why he did that. He said he thought it was funny and was very confused why the clerk didn't enjoy the lively alteration of his daily routine. I told him I found the whole situation hilarious, predictable, completely not upsetting, and that he needs to read more Russian lit.

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### Kelly says

"Vanished and gone was the being, protected by no one, dear to no one, interesting to no one, who had not even attracted the attention of a naturalist—who does not fail to stick a pin through a common fly and examine it under a microscope; a being who humbly endured office mockery and went to his grave for no particular reason, but for whom, all the same, though at the very end of his life, there had flashed a bright visitor in the form of an overcoat, animating for an instant his poor life, and upon whom disaster then fell as unbearably as it falls upon the Kings and rulers of this world. . ."

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### Alex says

My first reaction to Gogol was bewilderment. It's funny, and engaging to read, but...what the hell is it about? I'm not sure what the point of "Diary of a Madman" is, although I know I enjoyed it.

Pevear and Volokhonsky's intro is helpful, although it contains a number of minor spoilers. Their point is that if you try to understand Gogol, you are failing: Gogol himself didn't understand Gogol. "We still do not know what Gogol is," says some guy they quoted. P&V write that Gogol, as compared to traditional storytellers, "has nothing in mind. Memory plays no part in his work. He does not know where the act of writing will lead him."

Pushkin, an early and ardent supporter, wrote, "Here is real gaiety - honest, unconstrained, without mincing, without primness. And in places, what poetry! What sensitivity! All this is so unusual in our present-day literature that I still haven't recovered." And that seems fair to me. It's still unusual now (although at least we have Borges); maybe we should shut up about what it means and just have a good time with it.

## **2017-11-17 Diary of a Madman**

The madman is a clerk, and right away hears two dogs chatting. One belongs to the director's hot daughter. Never mind, never mind. Silence. The dogs are corresponding by letter; he steals the letters to find out more about the daughter.

Meanwhile, Spain is in turmoil: the throne is vacant. It cannot be, he says, that there was no king. A state cannot be without a king. There is a king, only he's somewhere unknown. ...luckily our clerk realizes that he is actually indeed the king of Spain. (Around this time the dates on his diary entries start getting more royal - from Dec. 8 to the 86th of Martober, to "date none. The day had no date." He is eventually returned to Spain, which bears a passing resemblance to an insane asylum, where he is shaved and beaten and possibly murdered.

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### **Mike says**

A digression-free, lean review, gentlemen! exclamation points a-plenty!

The first six Ukrainian tales are a tedious, dreadful slog. "The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich" has a funny premise, and funny moments, but is too bloated. Then, we hope Gogol gets better when he gets to Petersburg, and he mostly does. "The Nose" is really good; "The Overcoat" is great; and "Diary of a Madman" is awesome. The others are as clunker-ish as the first half of the entire book (though I suppose "The Portrait" is alright).

Honestly, stick with "The Nose," "The Overcoat," and "Diary of a Madman." The rest of this collection (that's 75% of it) isn't worthwhile. Did it suck? Well, maybe, but, you know, haters gonna hate.

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### **Jeff Scott says**

This version of Gogol's Collected Tales includes his Ukrainian and Petersburg Tales of which, now Tales can be complete without The Nose and The Overcoat (the story that Dostoyevsky's credits as the beginning of modern Russian Literature, "we all came from Gogol's Cloak"). If you have never read any Gogol, you need to read those two stories, it explains all his other stories. There is something about them a mystical quality along with folktales that all dovetails into criticism of human nature and politics. There are morality tales that damn Russian Beauracracy.

I first became fascinated with Gogol in College. He wasn't assigned reading for a literature class, but brought up during a 19th Century European History Class. The one thing I loved about that class was the literature references and how they defined and impacted the time. He focused on Gogol's Dead Souls which is a wonderful book that details the Russian character as Huckleberry Finn defines the American character. However, Dead Souls doesn't even touch his short stories. They are simply amazing and I read them, incredulous that someone could have that vivid of an imagination. I loved all these stories!

Gogol has the Devil pluck the moon from the sky, wrestle with his characters, and is tricked himself in one story. In others, fantastic images and hilarious incidents punctuate Russian life and exposes our own human nature. Our need to be recognized, to be important, to pull ourselves up by pushing others down, all combined in these wonderful and imaginative tales. I've always been a fan of Nathaniel Hawthorne, but

Gogol's stories certain surpass him. What Hawthorne implies, Gogol implements, these are simply amazing stories.

Some Passges:

"My God! My God! Why this misfortune? If I lacked an arm or a leg, it would still be better; if I lacked ears, it would be bad, but still more bearable; but lacking a nose, a man is devil knows what: not a bird, not a citizen--just take him and chuck him out the window!" p. 308 of the story The Nose

"But nothing in this world lasts long, and therefore joy, in the minute that follows the first, is less lively; in the third minute it becomes still weaker, and finally, it merges imperceptibly with one's usual state of mind, as a ring in the water, born of a stone's fall, finally merges with the smooth surface." p. 311 of The Nose

I imagined the story The Overcoat was part lesson, part ghost story that reminded me of the La Llorona. It's a classic Russian tale that exposes how we treat our fellow man, corrupt and insensitive bureaucracy, and revenge.

"Let me be. Why do you offend me?" -- and in these penetrating words rang other words: "I am your brother." and the poor young man would bury his face in his hands, and many a time in his life he shuddered to see how much inhumanity there is in man, how much savage coarseness is concealed in refined, cultivated manners, and God! even in man the world regards as noble and honorable..." p. 386 from story The Overcoat

"Thus everything in holy Russia is infected with imitation, and each one mimics and apes his superior...His usual conversation with subordinates rang with strictness and consisted almost entirely of three phrases: "How dare you? Do you know with whom you are speaking? Do you realize who is standing before you?" p. 405 from story The Overcoat.

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## James says

Nikolai Gogol, based on the image results my Google search spat back, reminds me of that quietly excited classmate who's usually game to tag along with you for some mischief-making. Whoopee cushions and joy buzzers presumably hadn't been around then, so one shudders at the tricks his imagination must've improvised. From his eyes shines a look too knowing not to have exposed his hastily-planned cover-ups and landed him in a few or hundred detentions, spent here sweeping grounds and there copying lines. In short: my kinda guy. Russian literature, since books began making me feel things, has been for me that scary mountain whose lack of obvious footholds has sent me running home into the squishier bosoms of easier genres, whose peak is peopled with happy campers roasting marshmallows while animatedly discussing scenes from this Dostoevsky classic or that Tolstoy epic. What sure hand would, as soon as I attempt the climb, save me from tripping over the first loose rock and snap my neck? Gogol's, while mindful to point out where not to step, wouldn't hold mine, yet what convinced me more to turn to his works first of all was learning of the ripples they caused that soon impacted on others' in waves. "*We all came out of Gogol's 'Overcoat,'*" some dude said, which, prisoner to that tedious no-stones-left-unturned school of thought that I am, rather finally shut the case.

No gripes to be had here about that, to be on the same page, as evident by how finding no more of the book

to savor left me so restless my withdrawal dissipated only when I spent half an hour the next day at the bookstore, head-deep inside *The Inspector-General* a similar collection of another company included (and, along with several other shorts, this one has omitted for crimes against humanity convenience). Let's come back to the point: the hype? It's real. Where Gogol's praisers have stumbled is that they haven't been louder about it. Each of the stories, 13 in all (and more besides that lay scattered elsewhere), springs from a mind able to hop between moods as simply as switching socks and, more impressively, capture all that in writing that not so much reads as flows. By no means, mind, does Gogol here achieve infallibility: *St. John's Eve*, where the roller-coaster rolls out of the station, and *The Terrible Vengeance* get so twisty and turny I had to read the latter twice before heads and tails could be made of it. *The Carriage*, fangirled over to no end by Anton Chekhov, fell short of my hopes, which, granted, the preceding unbeatable trifecta kicking off the second half of the book set impossibly high. *The Overcoat*, too, didn't much measure up to those same expectations. People, at least in the earlier parts, are either regularly found with their "arms akimbo" or perennially "vexed." But for all that, any misgivings don't matter so much the more I think on them. If they're not because my attention wandered, they're a placement issue; if not that as well, then nitpicks. Where there are strike-outs, Gogol makes up for a hundredfold in home runs.

*The Night Before Christmas* is hugely fun and entertaining, the vibe throughout fit for a 90's Saturday-morning cartoon, albeit one soon headed for the chopping block on account of complaints from parents outraged at their bumpkins' being exposed to such degenerate content as "*a devil who had one last night to wander about the wide world and teach good people to sin.*" *Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt* contains the strangest dream sequence that, contrasted with the mundane goings-on its characters face in the waking world, not enough weed will ever exist to help make sense of it. *Old World Landowners*, even without witches and devils, is still plenty captivating with two old couple, developed masterfully, taking center stage. The second-scariest short of the lot, *Viy*, proves books can take years off such scaredy-cats as me as well as that closet scene *The Ring* have long sucker-punched unsuspecting viewers with. Wrapping up the first half of Gogol's colorful re-imagining of his country's rural life is *The Quarrel*, which boasts of a higher laugh-per-page rate than any other short to date—"Excuse me for appearing before you in my natural state," says the more corpulent main character called Ivanovich Nikiforovich after being barged in on by his friend, neighbor, and soon-to-be-bitter-rival. *St. John's Eve*, either, doesn't lack for bright spots, and even those are soon outshone into white oblivion by a passage of just astounding imagery in *The Terrible Vengeance* that describes the Dnieper river to musical perfection.

Gogol's genius, aimed at the then-capital, burns even hotter. While not as inventively and unapologetically fantastic and outrageous as their Ukrainian predecessors, the *Petersburg Tales*, far from stumbling for their lack of broomstick-riding witches, moon-stealing devils, and the odd incest, are likelier than the former to worm their way into the collective subconscious to there make a permanent home. The devil, representative in Gogol's wacky world of the ubiquitousness of bad influences whose seduction every day tempts us, lurks even in the city, but almost as an afterthought: what need have we of the ultimate troublemaker when man himself can beat the master at his own game? In the majority of the shorts, no puppet master hides behind purple curtains, pulling levers and pushing buttons to nudge events his way. The result is often spectacular. *Nevsky Prospect* throws a knockout from the opening bell, soaking us with ejaculations the narrator makes over what a great place *Nevsky Prospect* is, and then magnifies the microscope over two acquaintances, each different in their approaches, chasing after two women spotted there. Gogol, at one point, shows so powerfully what it is to fall in love that it would still be a more effective form of communication than if telepathy were possible. *The Diary of a Madman*, as the title gives away, takes us into the mind of an apparently healthy everyman whose mental deterioration should well satiate that morbidly curious class of gawkers-by who gravitate towards car-accident sites. Dogs exchanging letters and talking politics aren't even the weirdest things here.

Next, The Nose seems straightforward enough, almost too straightforward: someone finds someone else's nose inside his bread one morning and, after his story's more or less wrapped up, we trail the said noseless man as he tries to locate it. No other story, however, has ever so completely robbed me of my words, myself prostrate with awe at Gogol's audacity, as this one where he blindsides you with the last expectation you can think of. It's a tough act no one wants to follow, so The Carriage, with its relatively normal happenings, can be forgiven for not wowing some people. The Portrait, on the other hand, picks things up and Gogol is back where he's comfortable: keeping therapists in business by sending to their recliner chairs us traumatized readers. The story, separated into two parts, details the rags-to-riches-to-ruin life of an artist called Chartkov, whose painting skills are moderate and potential unmistakable, who happens upon a mysterious portrait of a creepy old man. His stare, which Gogol's description gives major heft, is worse to imagine than to watch the best horror has to offer cinema. In a nutshell: there's gold hidden behind the portrait's frame that Chartkov exploits to better his position in society and that in the end destroys him. The second part delves fully into the portrait's origins and is no less mesmerizing. Along the way, Gogol touches on the artist's life and their creative process, social manipulation and superficiality, competition and obsolescence. It's a meaty story with something for everyone and, as with most of his works so far, to relish anew with every reread.

The Overcoat, the last in line, continues the supernatural element The Portrait brought back, but dominated by the more down-to-earth routines of mediocre, bullied outcast Akaky Akakievich, it takes a backseat. After his tatty overcoat, a source of ridicule at work, became useless as protection against the brutal Russian winter, Akaky gets another made, which gains him confidence and popularity. His moment in the sun doesn't last, though, and from there does the story return to more familiar grounds: doom and gloom. This second bookend may have suffered from the same positional problem The Carriage did (the lesson here: short-story collections read from cover to cover are bound to favor some and hurt others), but hindsight is its friend. There's a matter-of-fact, deadpan quality to the narration that gets funnier in retrospect. A long-suffering tone there also can't be missed when the writing takes great pains to explain how Akaky Akakievich came by that name, the purpose of which section is obvious and hilarious when (Wikipedia to the rescue!) you read later that it is the Russian equivalent of "John Johnson" as well as sounds like the Russian word "obkakat" or "kaka," meaning "to smear with excrement," that makes it read as "Poop Poopson." The idea that the likes of Dostoevsky wasn't above toilet humor warms these cockles greatly. Then, on the aforementioned Russian winter, it's not generally that it's the enemy of poor people, but that it's the enemy of people *"earn[ing] a salary of four hundred roubles or thereabouts."* The exactitude is killer. Another: *"An order was issued for the police to catch the dead man at all costs, dead or alive."* Added to Gogol's in-jokes and humor is a question that, if given any consideration, is an easy road to a panic attack: what's your overcoat? Another character features in the story that goes by no other name than "the important person," and in answer, he would probably bring up his rank, which is as much smokes and mirrors as Akaky's overcoat is that masks their total ignorance about certain workings of the world. The balance between such introspective moments and the satirical asides in this story and the others is, if you ask me, not a half-bad explanation for why Gogol is ducking awesome.

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### **Carol Storm says**

Worth reading for the classic St. Petersburg stories, "The Overcoat," "The Nose," and "Diary Of A Madman."

The Ukraine stories are not really as good. They have some beautiful nature descriptions but Gogol is much too sentimental about the daily realities of serfdom to capture the times he lived in. And the Cossack stories are absolutely putrid. The way Gogol tells it, those poor Cossacks just can't murder, rape, steal and drink in

peace because they're always being hassled by armies of invading Poles and cheated by no-good Jews!

The wonder of Gogol's career is that he evolved from a sentimental flatterer of the brutal oppressors to a sensitive chronicler of the daily lives of the oppressed. This collection of stories charts the evolution of a great artist by slow degrees, but can't really explain how or why he changed.

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### **Jean-marcel says**

This anthology is so achingly good that I read it slowly over a period of about a year, and when I was through I was extremely sad that there weren't any more tales for me to come to afresh. But I can still re-read these many a time and always gain once again that feeling of a glorious, unfettered sort of artistic madness that teeters on so many precipices but never falls nor falters. Here we have wild humour, sincere and touching expressions of humanity, carousing, feasting, absurdity, and threatening darkness touched with a hint of irreverent levity even at the worst of times.

I love the Ukrainian tales, with their lyrical style and descriptions of tiny hamlets and provincial revelry. But, these are not cozy tales; in fact, there is a real grimness leaning over your shoulder in many of these. "Viy" utterly surprised and thrilled me with its depiction of the macabre and the horrific, especially as I didn't imagine at the time any writers in Gogol's time addressing the supernatural with such plain, open language and without a hint of repentance or avoidance of the "bloody details". "Viy" even became the basis for Mario Bava's classic film *Black Sunday*, one of the ultimate gothic revenge movies, but believe it or not, the Gogol story is even darker. It's also kind of funny, though, especially with all of Gogol's descriptions of the young priest and his fruitless efforts to get away from the village so he wouldn't have to perform an exorcism. Then there's "A Terrible Vengeance", which is probably the dreariest, grimdest thing in this anthology and makes you feel bitter toward everything. But, Gogol seems to be saying, "you need this! You simply must be reminded!"

I notice a certain sad wistfulness in the Petersburg tales. I get the feeling that Gogol, while kind of set afire by the cosmopolitan glories of Petersburg, missed his homeland terribly. Of course I could be misapprehending here, but the character of the stories in the second half of the anthology is different....the pain more introspective, the appeals to human nature touched by genuine sad experience. I was particularly moved by "Nevsky Prospekt", which is a story so modern in its apprehensions and depictions of urban life that it's quite startling and eye-opening. I wonder if Dickens ever read Gogol?

The style of Gogol, whether told (and these stories really do all feel as though they were told, and not written) in Petersburg or Kiev and the surrounding villages, is steady and assured throughout the book. And lest you think that in Petersburg Gogol gave up his provincialism and love of the fantastic and strange, think again....all this stuff is very much still alive in the big city. There's nothing that Gogol can see that can't, at some point, be touched by the supernatural and eerie. This is in fact one of the things that I love most about him. He tells his stories as though they were folk knowledge, but the introduction in this book stresses that in fact they weren't and that he really made most of this stuff up himself. I've a feeling he would have been a strange, compelling man to meet. The translation by Pevear and Belakhovsky is excellent, and although I don't know Russian, I always look for their translations of Russian classics because they feel very genuine somehow, very natural and alive with their attempt to communicate the lyrical power of the writers whose work they bring to the English-speaking world.

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## **Graham Wilhauk says**

I was wanting to get back into classics, so I picked up 2 books from the library. This collection and Jane Austen's "Pride and Prejudice." I DESPISED "Pride and Prejudice" and was worried about going into this collection thinking I was just not into classics anymore. However, people say "you can always rely on the Russians for a good book" for a reason. This is the best collection of stories I have read besides Ted Chiang's masterful "Stories of Your Life." This collection ranges from tragic to funny to even politically aware. It is even relevant today, and the latest story in my edition of the collection was written in 1843! Simply put, I LOVED Nikolai Gogol's short stories. Well, only one thing to do now! LET'S GET "DEAD SOULS!"

I am giving this one a 4.5 out of 5 stars.

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## **Inderjit Sanghera says**

Gogol's wild and wonderful fantasies expose the phantasmagoria of his imagination-from the lowly civil servant who haunts to streets of St Petersburg in search of his overcoat, to the man who one day wakes up to find his nose has disappeared and is walking the streets disguised as a titular councillor, Gogol's tales are by turns whimsical and melancholy, exposing the irrationality and absurdities of life.

Some people, shockingly, call Gogol a "realist"-whilst he may have intermittently dabbled in what he deemed "realistic" fiction, none of his characters are remotely real, instead they exist as vague shadows who exist upon the fringes of Gogol's outlandish mind, so although Nevsky Prospect is essentially a tediously told story about a morosely idiotic and inattentive artist falling in love with a papier-mâché girl, it is saved from the brink and banality by Gogol's wonderful and unique long, rambling metaphors, like a thief is able to steal a pumpkin from a field at night, when the moon is as round as the button on a soldier's uniform. (A very Gogolian metaphor!)

"Both the muddy, clumsy boot of the discharged soldier, under whose very weight the granite appears to crack, and the miniature shoes, as light as a puff of smoke, of the young lady who, like a sunflower to the sun, turns her head towards the glittering shop windows, the rattling sable of the ambitious ensign that leaves a sharp scratch-everyone displays his own strength or weakness..."

Gogol as a realist is tedious, but as a fantasist when he gives free reign to his imagination like a master who frees his horse to gallop in the sallow, sodden fields (another Gogolian metaphor) he is unmatchable; never read grotesque Gogol to learn about people, but read Gogol to be enchanted and entranced, 'Gogolized' as Nabokov put it; his works are like the cool remnants of wax from the burned out candle of his mind; strange and surreal, they will drip constantly through the readers mind even long after they read them.

None of Gogol's stories are as profound as 'The Overcoat' the story of Akaky, a pathetic and snivelling civil servant, who dreams of one day owning an overcoat, only to have it stolen from him. Gogol is able to capture the lowliest and most vulnerable members of society, not due to promote any social or political message, but to demonstrate the dignity of every human being, even those as pathetic as Akaky and their constant struggle to find happiness in a world which only offers them pain. Gogol is able to capture these awkward and weird characters, because he was essentially one of them himself, an outsider from birth onwards, Gogol was sensitive to the plight of the outsider in society and was able to give them a voice without sounding tendentious or sentimental. Gogol is also able to capture the absurdity of human behaviour, in this case that of civil servants and our often illogical social conventions-such as the bellicose yet ultimately pathetic director, whose dressing down of Akaky inadvertently leads to his death and yet Akaky is able to avenge his

mistreatment by the director by haunting him and stealing his overcoat after he dies; showing the director up to be the weak and weasely man that he is.

The Nose is off-set with more humour than ‘The Overcoat’, as the protagonist, Major Kovalyov, wakes up to one day to find his nose has disappeared (we learn that the disappearance may have something to do with the nose tweaking habits of his barber, Ivan) and to run into him in the streets, only to be greeted in haughty and supercilious manner and to find out later that his nose has attempted to flee the city under the guise of a state councillor, only to be stopped by some eagle eyed official. Although the absurdity of the tale was not lost on Gogol, it was no absurd in his mind, than the asinine social conventions which his plastic characters go through on a daily basis-for Gogol if a man can spend so much time worrying about the cut of his waistcoat, then it is really so absurd that a man can one day wake up to find his nose has disappeared; finishing Gogol is like waking from a long, deep and absurd dream (or nightmare).

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### Noah says

Mit meist großem Vergnügen habe ich nunmehr den ganzen Gogol gelesen. Was gerade bei den weniger bekannten Erzählungen ins Auge sticht: 1. Es steckt unglaublich viel E.T.A. Hoffmann - mit allen guten aber auch schlechten Seiten - in Gogol. 2. Gogol ist - insbesondere im Frühwerk - erstaunlich ukrainisch, was Handlung aber auch Hintergrund der Charaktere angeht. Gerade diese Facette ist reizvoll und eröffnet interessante Einblicke.

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### Warwick says

Do you remember that bit in *Through the Looking-glass* where the Red Queen turns into a sheep?

‘Oh, much better!’ cried the Queen, her voice rising into a squeak as she went on. ‘Much better! Be-etter! Be-e-e-etter! Be-e-ehh!’ The last word ended in a long bleat, so like a sheep that Alice quite started.

She looked at the Queen, who seemed to have suddenly wrapped herself up in wool. Alice rubbed her eyes, and looked again. She couldn’t make out what had happened at all. Was she in a shop? And was that really – was it really a *sheep* that was sitting on the other side of the counter?

When I was a kid I was *obsessed* by this passage. That a writer should ‘make things up’ was something I accepted instinctively – nothing could be more natural than to invent incidents, people, even whole species, for a story. But that the basic preconditions of reality – the laws of physics, the relationship between senses and experience – that these could be simply ignored, or blended at will – that a queen could become a sheep, mid-sentence, with no explanation considered necessary...that just blew my mind.

I reread this little section endlessly, amazed by how I would fall for the sleight-of-hand even while aware of

it. And that nonsensical line of speech (*Be-etter! Be-e-e-etter! Be-e-ehh!*) is, silly as this sounds, one of the most talismanic in all literature for me. It represents something fiction can do that cannot be done by any other medium.

### **A Terrible Revenge**

Carroll had the device down perfectly, and I reckon that's why the Alice books, despite being written for children, have such a hold over literary history. It is easy to see that a queen becoming a sheep in 1871 is not far away from a salesman waking up as a giant insect forty-four years later. Reading Gogol's 'The Nose' (???) was therefore a bit of a join-the-dots moment for me, because here we have the literary ancestor of all such techniques. I especially loved that exquisite moment where our noseless narrator first glimpses a familiar figure in the streets of Petersburg:

Something inexplicable took place before his eyes: a carriage was stopping at the entrance, the carriage door flew open; a gentleman in uniform, bending down, sprang out and ran up the steps. What was the horror and at the same time amazement of Kovalyov when he recognised that this was his own nose! At this extraordinary spectacle it seemed to him that everything was heaving before his eyes; he felt that he could scarcely stand; but he made up his mind, come what may, to await the gentleman's return to the carriage, and he stood trembling all over as though in fever. Two minutes later the nose actually did come out. He was in a gold-laced uniform with a big stand-up collar; he had on chamois-leather breeches, at his side was a sword. From his plumed hat it might be gathered that he was of the rank of a civil councillor. Everything showed that he was going somewhere to pay a visit. He looked to both sides, called to the coachman to open the carriage door, got in and drove off.

What makes this so wonderful is the matter-of-fact prose: Kovalyov may be astonished, but the narrator is not. In the unlikely event that such a scene would even occur to any other writer, it's very easy to see that, in less skilful hands, paragraphs of description might be dedicated to convincing you of how a two-inch nose can have become a six-foot personage capable of wearing clothes and of moving of its own accord. Gogol makes no attempt whatever to convince, to persuade. He just relates the impossible.

For him, clearly, this epistemological malleability is something that has been inherited from folktales. The earliest stories in this collection *are* basically Ukrainian folk stories, and I found them mostly tiresome and overblown. Only later, when you get to the good stuff, do the earlier stories become more interesting in retrospect, because you can see where a lot of his techniques originated.

### **St John's Eve**

The unrestrained demonic hijinks of his earlier stories are gradually brought under control and funnelled into specific themes and ideas – as in 'The Portrait' (???????), for instance, where a strong element of supernaturalism is used as a means to comment on artistic integrity. Even in the straighter stories, though, an underlying uncertainty bubbles up into a sense of genuine weirdness, especially in the later works – there's an almost Nervalian, unhinged quality that manifests itself in odd little unexplained narrative devices. There is certainly something eerily convincing about 'A Madman's Diary' (???????? ??????????????), with its progressively insane dating system. 'I don't remember the date,' one entry is headed. '*There was no month*

either.'

### **The Nevsky Prospect**

This collection culminates in the very influential 'The Overcoat' (??????), a story that oozes with proto-Freudianism and that seems, despite its comic-philosophical flourishes, to be papering over some underlying terror. Nevertheless, 'The Nose' remains my favourite piece. It is just so odd, so resistant to any satisfactory interpretation, and the idea that it might just be intended at face value is almost frightening. 'What is utterly nonsensical,' Gogol asserts with appealing simplicity, 'happens in this world.?'

This particular edition from the Folio Society comes with eleven beautiful iconographic illustrations from Peter Suart, a few of which are scattered above. They complement Gogol's brand of formal weirdness perfectly.

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### **Jimmy says**

There's not a bad story in this batch! But I especially loved "Nevsky Prospect" and "The Story of How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich". These are long stories, but they are cozy and full-of-life stories that I want to read out loud by a campfire. Nobody alternates between the absurdly comical and the frighteningly chilling like Gogol. The first half (Ukrainian Tales) tells more stories that are mystical in nature, sounding sometimes like folktales, dealing with witches and devils. The second half (Petersburg Tales) have some of that as well, but more surreal unexplained occurrences (like "The Nose") and other oddities. Gogol makes hilarious observations about his characters and their hypocrisies. He also inserts his own (or his persona's) storyteller voice in almost every story, wedging himself inside of them (sometimes the narrator's voice adds a whole new dimension to the basic story) would hardly work for any other writer but Gogol is not just any other writer. Ah, but before we go on, we should first acquaint the reader somewhat with this remarkable character, Nikolai Gogol...

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### **MJ Nicholls says**

First: this is not *The Complete Tales*. The unlearned distinction between Collected & Complete has angered completists the world over. Collected means incomplete: a mixtape of works that constitute, critically, the best this writer has to offer. Complete means the totted-up totality, depending upon what is being completed, i.e. Complete Works is ambiguous and open to omissions, depending on what is classed as a *work*—prose? plays? Just assume a fuller completion when it's Complete, not Collected. Except in those rare moments when Collected means Complete. In the case of Gogol, Yale U Press have the one Complete Tales in print, in two volumes, incorrectly lumped with the *Collected Tales* eds. This beautiful Everyman's hardcover edition (and, presumably, the paperback equivs) omit a slab of material from *Evenings on a Farm Near Dikanka*, which only exists as an old Oxford paperback conflated with *Mirgorod* stories, suggesting the work is so lacklustre it doesn't bear reprinting.

For the sake of tedious exactitude, this edition omits all the story fragments, and, from *Evenings*: The Fair at

Sorochintsii, May Night or the Drowned Maiden, The Lost Letter, A Bewitched Place. From *Mirgorod*, Taras Bulba is omitted (available as a separate book from the Modern Library). These tales, presumably, are found in Yale's *Complete Tales*. The tales in this *Collected Tales* perform the Gogol mixtape function perfectly, from the rambling horror of Viy and The Night Before Christmas to the hilarious sinister satire of The Nose and The Overcoat. Not all the tales spark and sizzle, like the slight St. John's Eve and Old World Landowners, but the best of these, the bestest, are, at their bestest, some of the premier examples of the Russian short story: chilling and macabre, thigh-splitting and mad.

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### **Ali says**

3.8.

Many of the Ukrainian Tales are almost physically painful to read, though they contain a few moments which made me laugh out loud. Starting with "Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt", the stories begin to get a lot of fun. I was particularly struck by Gogol's descriptions of the titular characters' friendship and its end in "How Ivan Ivanovich Quarreled with Ivan Nikiforovich", and found that it closely mirrored some of my own experiences with friendship. "Diary of a Madman" is both hilarious and moving, especially the last paragraphs. "Ivan Fyodorovich Shponka and His Aunt" contains one of the greatest dream sequences I've ever read. This is one of my first experiences with nineteenth-century Russian literature, and I'm glad I chose Gogol.

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### **Andrew says**

A few old favorites, plus a number of Gogol stories I hadn't read before, including "The Portrait," which seems to rank among his finest works. For those of you who haven't read Gogol, please do so as soon as possible-- the great unkempt beast of Russian literature emerges from the woods in these stories, and they're as full of as much violence, absurdity, superstition, and vodka-drenched misery as you could want.

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### **Garima says**

*"We all came from Gogol's overcoat."*

**Fyodor Dostoevsky**

During my childhood, like many other kids, I was also in the habit of listening to bedtime stories. They were usually told by my father or my grandmother. My granny stuck to stories she knew already, either related to her life in her village or some anecdotes related to Hindu Mythology where there is no dearth of tales. My father however had to come up with a new story every time in an on-the-spot manner. These stories used to be sweet, simple, at times illogical but enjoyable nevertheless. The topics used to vary but the purpose was the same, to put me to sleep with sweet thoughts in my head to carry forward to the dream world. These are the luxuries one enjoys being a child but soon our dependence on such stories fades away and inadvertently we start finding solace in a more complicated network of words to excite us.

Lately I've been reading some twisted literature and enjoy it too but thanks to Italo Calvino, I also became particularly inclined to short stories and started looking for some good collection by other writers and thereupon came across Nikolai Gogol. Initially his simple introduction that I encountered was: *Russian*

writer who introduced realism to Russian literature (1809-1852).

Later after reading few of his stories, I searched a little more and found this extended introduction: *Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol was a Ukrainian-born Russian dramatist, novelist and short story writer. Considered by his contemporaries' one of the preeminent figures of the natural school of Russian literary realism, later critics have found in Gogol's work a fundamentally romantic sensibility, with strains of Surrealism and the grotesque.*

But to be honest, I just don't want to objectify him with any of that literary jargon. For me he is just a story-teller who knew his gift very well and wanted his readers to enjoy his beautifully crafted tales with that child-like excitement and curiosity. For most of the time, I felt like being present at this imaginary set up consisting of a full moon night, with bonfire burning in the middle of a beautiful meadow in a nice country place, and a wise old village patriarch is reciting stories that his old eyes had long witnessed in his wondrous life . The only difference is that those stories are not for children.

This bizarre collection has generous use of outlandish and idiosyncratic elements conveying dark humor in its highest form making each single story worth reading and re-reading. Though of course there are some which are better than others namely **The Nose, The Overcoat and The Diary of a Madman**, which are mainly in the same league of brilliance covering themes such as *alienation in society and status & class anxiety* imbued with ruthless satire. These stories are heavily based on nonsensical musings and that's the very thing that would strike a chord with its readers i.e enjoying the supposed nonsense and making out logical interpretations of the same. Some sources have revealed baffling implications of certain props Gogol applied to his works. He definitely had a fixation with human Nose which features in most of these stories. (view spoiler).

*The Overcoat* recounts the story of a socially withdrawn clerk whose fatal obsession with getting him a new overcoat/cloak turned into a series of unexpected consequences. I especially liked its starting:

*"In the department of -- but it is better not to mention the department. There is nothing more irritable than departments, regiments, courts of justice, and, in a word, every branch of public service. Each individual attached to them nowadays thinks all society insulted in his person. Quite recently a complaint was received from a justice of the peace, in which he plainly demonstrated that all the imperial institutions were going to the dogs.."*

*Diary of a Madman* is another masterpiece of a short story surrounding around schizophrenia and depicts the protagonist's gradual declivity into madness due to his confinement to societal pressures and the standard identity imposed upon him which was in no way unique or special to make him feel a man of some importance. It also presents a broader view upon Russia's identical crisis in the wake of the 19th century. *The Nose* is a satirist aim at societal hypocrisy and administrative & bureaucratic set-up, along with *The Overcoat* .

Apart from them, I was really looking forward to reading *The Viy*, a tale reproduced from a specimen Russian folk-lore having facets of magical realism. Now I knew that I was supposed to get scared by reading it but I really don't get frightened by just 'reading' such stories so I deliberately created an environment wherein I sat alone in a dim-lighted room at midnight and read it. It worked, Yes. Speaking of which I thoroughly enjoyed *The Mysterious Portrait* which had its share of supernatural elements supported by important life lessons based on spirituality and recognizing the good and the evil in this world.

Stories like 'How two Ivans quarreled' (Apparently Ivan was Gogol's favorite character name probably because it was his younger brother's name who died at the tender age of 8) is a sweet story supported by the

old world humor. I equally relished rest of the stories like *Old Fashioned Farmers*, *The Fair of Sorotchinetz*, *An Evening in May*, *Mid-Summer Evening*, and *The Carriage* though there were instances of getting a bit bored due to some detailed descriptions of the settings and characters but since they were necessary points for the development of narrative I'll blame that on my impatience.

The main thing I found common w/r/t all these stories at least in my case is that they evoked a very balanced set of emotions in me. There was no extremity I experienced, being it sadness, happiness, bewilderment or sympathy. It was as if Gogol is implying, "Oh you're feeling sad for that character, take this!" and the very next moment I started to laugh at some turn of events in the narration. Therefore the pathos he created around his works were skillfully juxtaposed with hilarity and there lies Gogol's strength as an outstanding writer who changed the face of literary world and influenced many great works which later served and still serving as the epitome of great literature. I'm glad that it was through these short-stories that I've begun my expedition into the world of Russian Literature and also that of Gogol's before reading his celebrated 'Dead Souls'.

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### **Aaron Arnold says**

Even if he had published nothing but *Dead Souls*, Gogol would still have a claim to be one of Ukraine's all-time greatest novelists. Luckily for us, he kept writing, and these excellent short stories show that his transition to becoming a more "Russian" writer did not dampen his humor or invention one bit. This collection shows off both sides of Gogol's output: first, the strange, magical Ukrainian stories full of drunken peasants, quarreling landowners, hilarious religious bigotry, and fantastical adventures that he wrote to exoticize his homeland to his new Russian friends. Second, there's the more conceptual St. Petersburg stories, which have more realist settings but no less surreal plots, with maddening bureaucracies, inexplicable transformations, and copious humiliations for the unfortunate denizens of the Russian capital. The second half has the more famous stories like *The Nose* and *The Overcoat*, which show Gogol's gift for presenting absurd situations in a straightforward, even poignant way, but even the earlier stories have their touches of genius, often coming across as minor theatrical masterpieces or as undiscovered fairytales. Almost no one was better at taking a mundane scene, adding an outlandish twist, and then following that wherever it led to emerge on the other side as a savage social critique.

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### **Gary says**

Split into two sets of stories - those that take place in Ukraine and those in Russia, this is a collection that takes pride of place on my bookshelf.

The theme of each story tends to deal with the darker aspects of human nature – depravity, poverty, the squandering of talent and opportunity, groupthink and malice. However, the narrative never dips into over-sincerity or narcissistic exposition. There is a sharp, honest, knowing quality to the writing that is evident from the surface level aesthetics down to the very core of each story.

There are some writers who are good storytellers and some who are known because of their penmanship skills. Even translated, Gogol is clearly both. The 13 stories in this collection, while undeniably Gogol's, play with a range of styles and rhythms. He describes states of being and situations from the disintegration of

one's mind to the excitement a young girl can feel for her booties; From the combat of a warrior to a human nose on legs with prose that is completely fitting to each situation. He is not scared of playing with a reader's expectations in this arena. Yet somehow the writing is never inconsistent, either.

Pathos and menace are nearly always present, but somehow you feel comfortable in his hands. He plays and teases with you, drawing you in one direction before shoving you into another. Gogol paints his pictures with deep colours and complex textures, yet communicates all of this with a simple stroke, a glance in one direction that is fleeting but piercing, unapologetic, maybe dangerous in its unwavering loyalty to honesty. One scene (this does not spoil any of the stories), briefly shows a wizard flying past the moon in a magic saucepan. Written here this is sugar and twee. From the pen of Gogol it is delightful and energetic, entirely suited to the scene and, rather than squeezed in like a square peg into a pre-thought squarish hole, is in fact inevitable. It was reading this moment for the first time that I felt that rising excitement in my chest that tells me I'm reading genius. For me it's a standout moment and one I return to again and again.

But as I said, it's not just the writing (and of course this is translated! Gogol is famous for the sophistication of his literary techniques but I shall never read his poetry as he intended me to) but the content of the stories, too. In the grand Russian tradition they tackle the very worst of humanity in a way that is rescued from cynicism with a tinge of optimism for the future, but Gogol's inimitable - slightly mad, and obviously completely at odds with the world around him - mind doesn't just twist some old formulas around but instead smashes them into each other and creates something brand new and rude in their originality. In each story you can see the germination of ideas explored by Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Kafka... and these ideas are spat out and dispensed with almost immediately. Most writers could spend a career delving into each one. The rate at which Gogol sprays them across the page is staggering and beautiful. It's 'The Mysterious Portrait', however, that stands out as the true achievement. Anybody - anybody - who has ever had even an inclination towards art in the smallest bone in their body (in the ear, right?) needs to read it. Gogol lacerates through every affectation and whimsy in order to get to the truth in brutal fashion, executed with such style, with such sureness and swiftness and with such power that I find it difficult to type about right now without running downstairs to reread it.

While dealing with lofty ideas and rich characters, the stories are also compelling and - importantly - fun. You want to see what happens. Not with dread or fear for the worst, but with excitement. It helps that even at his most morose, Gogol is funny. As with his writing style, he has it all - wit, sarcasm, slapstick and punch lines. He has his heroes and his villains, self-discovery, transcendence of thought and all-out action, the scenes of which put the imagination of Hollywood's directors to shame. There is more packed into these 13 short stories than the entire careers of many giants of literature. If you read the stories in one sitting you're left reeling, dizzy with ideas, unsure of which one to contemplate first.

And the best thing about this collection is that this isn't even Gogol's best stuff. That would be *Dead Souls* Part I and II, which I'll write about at some point in the near future.

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### **will says**

Gogol's tales in this book are split into two distinct sections. The first is concerned mostly with life in Ukraine in the early 19th century and is filled with superstitious people and the demons and devils they interact with regularly. The stories are tremendously funny but also strange and dark, mysterious in the best, most inexplicable way. I was reminded at times of the short work of Hawthorne, in which dark creatures often seem to be lurking in the woods, but Gogol feels more modern somehow.

The second part deals with Petersburg and is decidedly more surreal. In "The Nose," a man wakes one day to find that his nose is gone from his face. He later meets this nose in the street wearing the military uniform of a general. These stories clearly prefigure Dostoevsky's writing ("Diary of a Madman" especially) and seem to lay the narrative and formal groundwork for writers like Walser and Kafka. This was one of the best and most riveting collections of stories I have read and I highly recommend it.

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