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Jason Merrill. Russian Folktales: A Reader, Newburyport, MA: Focus, 2000. viii + 74 pp.
Bibliography. Notes. Glossary. ISBN 0-58510-014-5.

Russian Folktales: A Reader is a text designed for intermediate or advanced students of the Russian language. The book assumes a knowledge of vocabulary and grammatical structures typically associated with the completion of one to two years of college Russian; that is to say, it is suitable after the completion of any of the basic textbook series commonly used in university Russian classes in the US, e.g. Golosa, Live from Moscow, or Nachalo.

The book begins with an introduction for students discussing the nature of the folktale as a genre and the history of its collection in Russia. This brief overview is followed by a bibliography containing both English language and Russian language materials. This bibliography, which includes not only tale collections but also scholarly works on the Russian tale, is useful for students who intend to pursue research on the tale or simply to do additional reading of Russian tales.

The book is loosely divided into seven chapters, each of which is dedicated to a tale. While the tales need not be read in order, the tales Merrill has chosen move from shorter, less complicated stories to more complex ones. This structure benefits the student reading tales for the first time. The initial two chapters in the book, devoted to brief animal tales, give students the opportunity to adjust to tale language in a manageable way. Merrill has chosen to break the longer magic tales in the final five chapters into pieces. This decision was a wise one. While more advanced students may be able to read one of the longer tales in one sitting, those at the intermediate level can read the pieces of tales without becoming overwhelmed.

Merrill is well aware of the oddities of tale language and the factors that may confuse students faced with this genre. Before the first chapter he includes a general overview of unusual forms and patterns students may encounter for the first time, such as the feminine instrumental ending *-oiu* or the use of internal rhymes. This section concludes with a set of Russian discussion questions to get students thinking about the genre of tales as a warm-up exercise to reading tales, such as what tales they read as a child, who are common tale characters, how are tales different

from literature, etc. Such pre-reading exercises continue throughout the book. They include: brainstorming and discussion exercises; introduction to cultural realia, such as proverbs and the nature of daily life in Russian villages; discussion of unusual grammatical forms; and vocabulary building based on roots of words found in the tales. Each tale (or part of a tale) is followed by a set of questions based on the tale content. They allow students to check their comprehension while also acting as a springboard for discussion of the tale in class. Other more creative post-reading tasks include: retelling the tales from the point of view of one of the characters, such as the wolf in “Prince Ivan, The Firebird and the Grey Wolf”; writing a newspaper article or letter relating the events in the kingdom; description of characters and locations, both in writing and in drawings; and role plays. The skills practiced in these exercises are those essential to advanced proficiency, namely narration, description and comparison.

The glossary that follows the text is comprehensive and includes notes on forms for both nouns and verbs. One disappointment is that the perfective or imperfective pairs of verbs are not indicated in the notations under each verbal entry. Some of the words, such as ...*imia* and ...*zhizn'*, seem strange choices if one assumes an intermediate to advanced knowledge. Eliminating those words would easily allow for the inclusion of aspectual partners. I applaud the author's decision not to gloss words in the text. I agree that they not only detract from the text itself, but, considering the extensive nature of the glossary, are also unnecessary. However, I find his decision to include stress marks on each word distracting. The typeface is small, and the stresses on *i* and *y* make the letters resemble Ukrainian vowels. In fact, the layout is my main complaint with the book. It is difficult to read thanks to the size of the font, and the overall presentation lacks interest. The periodic discussion questions are offset and numbered, but are not really readily identifiable on the page, since they are in the same small font as the text. I would have chosen to number the lines, since the layout makes it difficult to find certain portions of a tale or discuss student questions about the text. Merrill has also chosen to gloss certain larger portions of each tale that may present difficulty to the student. While this idea is a worthy one, these glosses are buried in the back of the book between the last story and the glossary. It would be much more efficient to have them at the end of each story and save much page turning from glossary to notes to story.

Overall, this text is a valuable addition to the readers available to students of the Russian language. Merrill has chosen his stories wisely to showcase the most famous characters of Russian folktales, such as Baba Iaga, the firebird, Little Sister Fox, Koshchei the Deathless,

Vasilisa the Beautiful and the simpleton. It provides a much-needed introduction to a genre of Russian folk literature usually only read by students in translation. Those of us who teach folklore or culture classes to Russian language students will find it of great use. However, it is no less useful to language teachers who want to introduce their students to the style of language and to the cultural realia contained in the folktale.

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