

INTERVIEW

Kseniya Melnik and her Ear for English

by Lisa Schantl



Kseniya Melnik

I met with Kseniya Melnik, the author of the short story collection *Snow in May* (2014), on a sunny day in July in Highland Park, Los Angeles. People in long skirts with tote bags chattered noisily in the Civil Coffee café.

Kseniya looked like one of the Romanovs I read about in my children's books and watched a hundred times in Fox's *Anastasia*. I took some pictures of her while she ordered, too soon maybe, exposing a trivial task of buying a beverage to the annoying sound of my camera's shutter. Some slightly nervous touches of her cheeks and blond hair — her figure reflected the daylight like porcelain.

We sipped our iced teas at a table near the entrance, clicking keyboards and a humming air conditioner backing our conversation.

When did you start writing creatively, or when is the first time you remember?

Memory is not reliable. But I swear to God I remember my younger sister sleeping in a cradle when I was four years old, and I am sitting next to it and writing fairy tales with a paint brush. I'd be writing some letters, and then drawing trees or the witch, or whatever. Could I have been writing at four? Maybe. But that's the first memory.

When did you start learning English?

I started learning English in second grade. In the 90s, when the Iron Curtain had gone down, my school in Russia rebranded itself as the English Gymnasium, and they decided that English would be the most important subject. If you failed English, they'd kick you out; if you failed other subjects, they could be more lenient. They really wanted to make sure graduates came out fluent in English.

Instead of having one English lesson a week, we had all these separate classes: oral practice, reading practice, reading comprehension, British etiquette, history of US and UK. The teachers were Russian, so they had this Russian-trying-to-be-British accent. They did a pretty good job, though. At that time, a lot of businessmen, sports teams, and study abroad people started coming over to my town, Magadan, which is only a four-hour direct flight from Anchorage, Alaska. When I went to Anchorage for the first time to perform with a choir, I stayed with American families, and I got compliments on my English. I remembered that my tongue hurt from all the English speaking, but I could make myself understood.

Kseniya Melnik **When did you encounter English as your creative voice?**

© Lisa Schantl

When I was 14, I already knew that we would be immigrating to America. Since then, I pretty much wrote in English, in one form or another. I didn't move for another year, but I was preparing myself. It's not that I decided that my market would be Americans or English speakers, but something in me switched: I will be moving to America, people will be reading English now. So I started writing these poems in English. I was really struck by the movie *Titanic*, and I decided to write this really long poem about it in English. It was crazy, I never finished it.

Thinking back to your first attempts when you started writing in English as your non-native language: What obstacles did you face and what advice would you give to emerging writers who choose to write in English?

It's all about training your ear. It takes a long time to figure out what sounds good on the page. It's different from conversational English, which is a lot more informal and fragmentary. When we talk we finish each other's sentences. I don't have to finish my sentence for you to sort of get where I'm going, but when you're writing it goes beyond grammar. Of course, you also want a certain voice, but that's different from it sounding like an approximation of English. Honestly, the only thing you can do is to read good American and English literature, or literature in English translation. That's the only way you can train your ear. You could translate from a dictionary until you're blue in your face, but if you don't have that ear, you're not going to get it right.

I think we, the ESL people, have an advantage because we are coming to English with very fresh eyes and ears. For example, I'm very careful — when I want to be — and precious with each and every word. My writing is not automatic. I think that allows me to create more interesting sentences. I'd translate a word from Russian and consider a bunch of synonyms, and sometimes my agent or my editor would be like, "Did you mean to say this phrase like this? I mean, it's interesting, but it's not quite how we would have put it." And then I have to decide whether to leave it like that or if it is too awkward. We treat this language as a stranger, and we examine each word with more attention.

If you are careful and put enough effort into it, you can come up with amazing terms and phrases. It's like you're breaking the rules, but, of course, you have to know the rules first. You have to train your ear like a classical pianist and then you can add some jazz and variations, but you have to know from what you're deviating. It cannot be random, because then it would come off as incorrect. The line between an interesting choice and a mistake — you don't want to cross that.

I always think of Nabokov who is one of the most famous ESL writers. I've actually never read him in Russian, but I wonder, would he be such a pyrotechnical stylist if he was a native

English speaker? I think it gives him this extra sparkle. I think of my final drafts as putting them through a Nabokovian processor, and I want to make sure to add any colorful sensory techniques to it, so that the reader sees the world in a new light. Another writer whom I really admire is Aleksandar Hemon. He is originally from Sarajevo and now lives in Chicago. One of his novels is called *The Lazarus Project*. His language is mind-blowing.

How did your time at New York University help you to find your English voice?

By the time I went to NYU, I really had this commitment; I really wanted to become the best writer that I could be because it had been my dream for so long. You certainly do not need an MFA to become a writer, but it gives you the tools. It's a concentrated time where you learn a lot and you are pointed in a direction. Afterwards, you are much more in control of your craft and your direction as a writer.

I had a couple of professors who were very influential for me. Some professors were so smart, just sitting next to them and listening to them discussing books or stories triggered fireworks in my head. In some workshops, we would spend a whole class talking about a ghost of a possible story that could be much better. Maybe you don't know right away how to get there, but your mind has been opened to it.

A craft class with David Lipsky was very helpful. We did this very close reading where we would pick a paragraph and someone would read it slowly, word by word, out loud. And then we would dissect it. For example: Why is this sentence good? Vs: Why is the sentence that you wrote forgettable? And why is the sentence that Nabokov or Martin Amis or Zadie Smith or Alice Munro wrote amazing? Let's find the "live word" in it, and figure out how it connects to the previous sentence, to the previous paragraph, and echoes to the beginning and to the end of the story. It was slow and kind of painful, but it taught me how to read as a writer. Speaking of, in the book *Reading Like a Writer*, Francine Prose analyzes books from that point of view. In Lipsky's class, we practiced such analysis ourselves. It opened my eyes to language and the construction of sentences, paragraphs, and stories in a whole different way. It's like being a mechanic: driving a car is like reading a book, it's pretty easy. But can you pull the car apart and put it back together completely?

Also, if I hadn't gone to NYU, who would I be friends with? Eighty percent of my friends are folks from NYU. Not all of them live in Los Angeles, but we keep in touch. We exchange short stories and novels, and we have an occasional Skype workshop. If I need a smart reader, I know who to reach out to. These people have seen the evolution of my writing for ten years, and I've seen theirs. They can be very honest with their feedback, and it won't hurt my feelings. It's nice to have those witnesses to your development as a writer. It is extra nice to see them succeed, get their stories and novels published, get their agents.

See their names in print. It's your little family that really understands your struggles.

Did you ever feel that you had to work harder since English is not your first language?

Probably. I would always write so many drafts of each story, and I have pretty high standards for myself. Not Chekov, not Tolstoy, but you know, Nabokov.

Kseniya Melnik

© Lisa Schantl

Why do you focus on Russia in your writings?

I like to write when I have a certain energy of longing for something, usually it's a place. I am not in Russia, but I long for it in certain ways. In my mind, there is this well of memories and myths, of stories, and of people I met and history I read; it's this well that I go back to get more material. It's becoming more unreal the longer I stay away from it.

If I went back there and immersed myself in the present reality, got to know Russian people who live there well, I'd probably be writing different stories. In fact, if I were living in Russia, I'd probably be writing historical fiction or stories set in faraway lands because they would be a little removed from my life.

Do you feel a stronger connection to American or Russian culture?

I feel it's fifty-fifty. For me, Russia is a little bit frozen in time in the 90s. Everything since then has been filtered through American news and my American mind. I read some Russian writers here and there, but I am not up to date on the latest cultural and literary developments. If you asked me who the best contemporary Russian writers are and who the young up-and-comers are, I wouldn't know — an American journalist covering Russia would probably know better. American culture and literature, and English literature have been a huge influence on me.

But the things you study and read and learn when you're young, they have a very strong formative effect on you. My family was really artistic and literary; so all the fairytales and all the classical literature I read, all the movies I saw, the dance and music I studied, all of that stuff — I feel I have this key that makes it easier to go back and feel close to Russian culture when I want to. When I read Russian fairy tales, there's something that stirs in me, some ancient excitement.

Would you say you strongly associate language with culture?

I noticed that Russian language has a different effect on me than English. It can be more tender and familiar. Sometimes, speaking Russian to people that I am not too close with is almost uncomfortable and some topics, when expressed in Russian, are almost unbearably

intimate. For example, growing up, I watched all the movies about World War II in Russian. And so, if I hear something spoken about WWII in Russian, it affects me emotionally on a much deeper level than if I hear or read about it in English. There are certain sentiments — primal things like nature, death, life, childhood, mother, father — that when expressed in Russian, get to my core. English, for me, is almost a language of science, politics, achievement, and current events — or even relationships. I started dating seriously after I had already moved to America, so I express myself about relationships much more comfortably in English.

Do you think that's also why you choose English to write about Russia? To distance yourself?

I've heard other writers say that English gives them a certain freedom. For me, writing in English, is almost like saying that I do not pretend to be one of the Russian greats, Tolstoy or Chekhov. I try this thing in English, and I can experiment. It also gives me some political freedom in a way. I feel like I am just this immigrant trying to make sense of Russia, and I'm not making the claim that I know the one and only truth. Don't hold me accountable; I'm just doing this through my own filter of English and my own immigration experience. It may be just my truth, but it's not quite the conclusive truth. It can be multi-faceted.

Would the publishing process of your story collection have been different in Russia?

It's hard for me to tell if my book would even have been published in Russia. I got some good, but also some mean feedback from some Russian readers. Some wrote that they do not think that I knew what I was talking about. Some of my stories are set in the 50s or 70s, and I am this young woman living in America — what do I really know about that time, I don't have any authority. I got the sense from this very small sample of people that they think they don't need this book; they already have their great Russian writers. Do I really have enough authenticity to tell the real Russians something new that they do not already know?

In the American market, I am introducing this Russian world to Americans through my Russian-American eyes and making it a little more accessible for them. I too, am looking at it with a stranger's eyes. I am an immigrant, I have lived here longer than in Russia, and I certainly have not lived in the periods of times that I have set some of my stories in. I am their guide to this world.

Your story collection was translated into Japanese. Would you consider translating or having your story collection translated into Russian?

Russia did not buy the translation rights. I know some Russian-Americans whose books have not been translated into Russian, and there's always the question why. One of my stories was

translated by a professional translator into Russian for *GQ* magazine. It was very exciting. He really captured the voice. He was so much better than I would have ever been. For example, I have pitched a translation of a book and it is something that I would love to do, but I think that my active vocabulary in Russian is limited. I speak Russian with my family. My mom's language is actually a bit of a mishmash of English and Russian. My spoken and written Russian is just not on a professional level.

Kseniya Melnik

© Schantl

What's your reading practice like? And what's your favorite genre and the last book you read?

I do not read every book like a mechanic. If I wanted to enjoy a book and have it affect me in a certain way, I can do that. But I can also switch into that mode and really try to dissect it. For example, if I am struggling with writing, I can find a novel that does something well and take a notebook out and analyze how the novel does it.

I guess literary fiction would be my number one genre. One of my favorite things to do is to read a book and then watch the TV or film adaptation. I'm reading the Patrick Melrose novels by Edward St Aubyn at the moment because I want to watch the Showtime adaptation.

You told me that you're working on a novel. Where will it take us? Will it connect to your short story collection?

Part of it takes place in Magadan itself, part of it in this weird parallel reality in Magadan and the wild tundra all the way up to the Arctic Ocean. I'm not tracking down each river. They are all floating through time and geography. Magadan is a fascinating place on its own, and I don't have to make up new streets; it's already weird and magical as it is.

For the final drafts of my novel — when I'm going to get there — I'm going to go on Google Maps, and make sure the layout of the town is correct. You can walk down almost every street now. A few years ago, they only had one road mapped there, but now you can look at the windows of my old school or where I used to live.

I pulled out my camera one more time. With the echo of rattling dishes, arguing guests, and the camera's shutter, I thanked her and we parted.