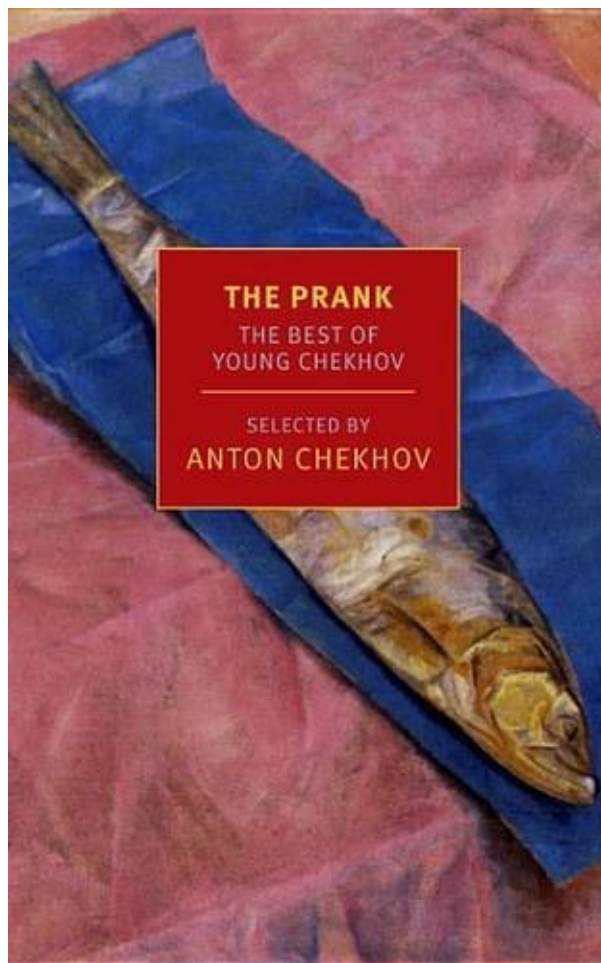
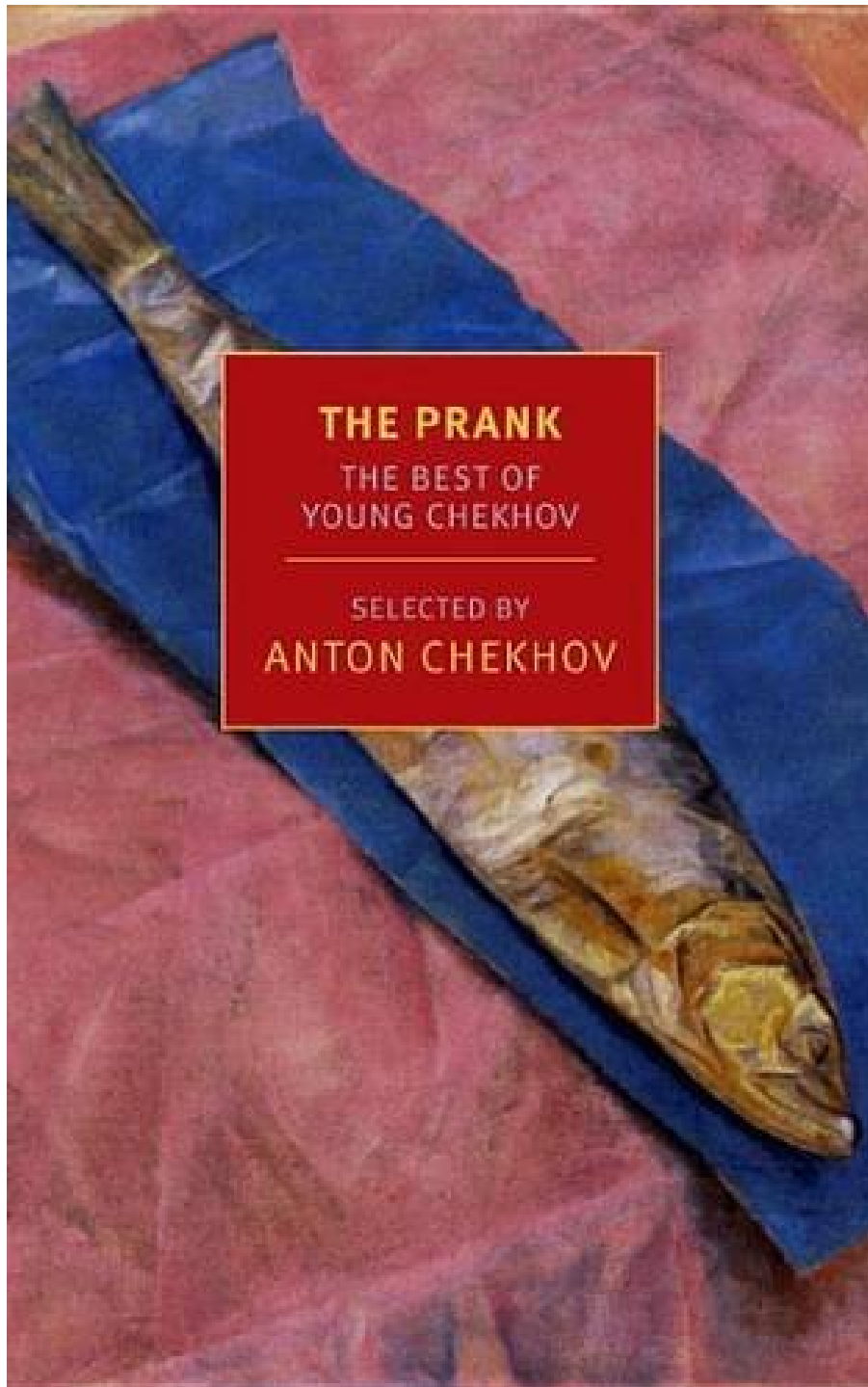


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CHEKHOV (NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS  
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An NYRB Classics Original

The Prank is Chekhov's own selection of the best of his early work, the first book he put together and the first book he hoped to publish. Assembled in 1882, with illustrations by Nikolay Chekhov, the book was then presented to the censor for approval—which was denied. Now, more than a hundred and thirty years later, The Prank appears here for the first time in any language.

At the start of his twenties, when he was still in medical school, Anton Chekhov was also busily setting himself up as a prolific and popular writer. Appearing in a wide range of periodicals, his shrewd, stinging, funny stories and sketches turned a mocking eye on the mating rituals and money-grubbing habits of the middle classes, the pretensions of aspiring artists and writers, bureaucratic corruption, drunken clowning, provincial ignorance, petty cruelty—on Russian life, in short. Chekhov was already developing his distinctive ear for spoken language, its opacities and evasions, the clichés we shelter behind and the clichés that betray us. The lively stories in The Prank feature both the themes and the characteristic tone that make Chekhov among the most influential and beloved of modern writers.

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#### Most helpful customer reviews

5 of 5 people found the following review helpful.

Plenty to enjoy and think about in this admittedly slender volume.

By Greg Wilkin

Can't really tell what the previous reviewer was talking about: there are eleven fascinating early Chekhov stories in this book. Bloshsteyn's introduction is concise and, in short, terrific.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful.

Never realized Chekhov was such a broad humorist...

By BowedBookshelf

This collection of all-new stories by the young Anton Chekhov published this summer by New York Review of Books @nyrb reveals an artist desperate to make a living. He was twenty-two years old and collected these stories hoping to launch his career, but they were never published. Illustrated by Nikolay Chekhov, Anton's older brother, it was censored before it could come out.

When you read the stories you may be surprised, as I was, at what the censors deemed subversive. The stories are broad comedy, slapstick satires, and absurd parodies of Jules Verne and Victor Hugo. The story "St Peter's Day" reminds me of Jerome Jerome's *Three Men in a Boat*, it is so filled with manly boasting and ridiculously goofy repartee. But there is a razor streak of criticism in there and Chekhov gives no quarter. An old peasant accompanying a hunting party drifts off while the other men, middle class and aspiring, buffoonishly discuss where to avoid other rotters who were meanwhile taking the best spots. I kept expecting the old peasant to show up with a hunting bag full while the others expounded, but he never did. The others just left him there.

Translator Maria Bloshsteyn in the Introduction puts these early stories into a perspective that includes Chekhov's later works. The old peasant left by the hunting party, Bloshsteyn tells us, appears again in Chekhov's last play *The Cherry Orchard*. And the social critique of marriage, Russian life, and social strictures that appears in "Artists' Wives" and "The Temperaments" foreshadows all of Chekhov's work. A quick look through *The Complete Plays by Chekhov*, translated and annotated by Laurence Senelick (2006) shows only the late plays of Chekhov not to be "comedic anarchy." When Chekhov dropped the broad humor for his late plays, his work still had bite but was even more damaging than his humor. "Uncle Vanya," for instance, exhibits many of the broad categories of personality shown in his early stories but seems almost despairing.

A quote of Chekhov's chosen for the cover of the above-mentioned collected plays shows his resistance to government interference in daily life: "My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and the most absolute freedom imaginable, freedom from violence and lies, no matter what form the latter two take." Chekhov trained as a doctor in the 1880s. During his residency he began publishing short humorous pieces in magazines as he was the economic mainstay of his extended family. Knowing of his extensive education adds to our enjoyment of his snide observations, and may explain the quote in which he expresses "the human body" and "health" first among his holy of holies.

In "Artists' Wives," a short story in *The Prank*, Chekhov takes a swipe at those living the bohemian life, which included himself: "Madam Tanner's vice consisted of eating like a normal human being. This vice of his wife's struck Tanner to his very heart. 'I will reeducate her!' he said. Once he set himself that goal, he got to work on Madame Tanner. First he weaned her off breakfasts and suppers, and then off tea. A year after her marriage, Madame Tanner was preparing one course for dinner instead of four. Two years after her marriage, she learned to be satisfied with unbelievably small amounts of food. Namely, during the course of twenty-four hours, she would ingest the following quantities of nourishing substances:

1 gram of salts

5 grams of protein

2 grams of fat



7 grams of water (distilled)

1 1/23 grams of Hungarian wine

Total: 16 1/23 grams

We do not include gases here because science is not yet able to determine accurately the quantities of gases that we take in."

In "The Temperaments (Based on the Latest Scientific Findings)" Chekhov describes the "humours" of man, that is to say, how the "Sanguine Temperament in a Male" exhibits: "The Sanguine male is readily influenced by all his experiences, which is the cause...of his frivolity...he is rude to teachers, doesn't get haircuts, doesn't shave, wears glasses, and scribbles on walls. He is a bad student but manages to graduate..." We read on for two pages and then get the description of "Sanguine Temperament in a Female." "The sanguine female is the most bearable of women, at least when not stupid." That's all. We learn about the "Choleric Temperament" ("the choleric man is bilious with a yellow-gray face..." and "the choleric female is a devil in a skirt..."), the "Phlegmatic Temperament" ("the phlegmatic male is a likable man..."), and the "Melancholic Temperament," none of which reassure us that human life is worth the resources needed to sustain it.

In "Papa," the mother of a son failing in school sounds remarkably current: "Papa, go to the math teacher and tell him to give the boy a good grade. Tell him that he knows his math but that his health is poor. That's why he can't cater to everyone's whims. Force him to do it!" In "Before the Wedding," a father speaks with his daughter, the bride to be: "And, my daughter...European civilization got women thinking that the more children a woman has, the worse for her. How wrong! It's a lie! The more children, the merrier! No, wait! It's just the opposite! My mistake, sweetie. Less children—that's what it is. I read it in some journal the other day—something someone named Malthus came up with."

Anyway, this is Chekhov unbound, young, exuberant, and silly. His parody of Jules Verne is classic while the one of Victor Hugo sounds more like Chekhov than Hugo. It may have been the translation he had, no? This is Chekhov's take: "Then thunder rolled. She fell upon my chest. A man's chest—it is a woman's fortress. I clasped her in my embrace. Both of us cried out. Her bones cracked. A galvanic current ran through our bodies. A passionate kiss..." I put a couple pictures of the illustrations in my blogpost.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Unique volume of Chekhov

By R. H. Chandler

The review by "BobinPV" is nonsense. The book is indeed a collection of Chekhov's own writings - and a very good collection at that! Wittily and elegantly translated, and with excellent illustrations.

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