

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on June 10, 2024.

The Gambler

There was a time when the name of the sprawling Union of Soviet Socialist Republics raised memories of reading classic Russian literature such as novels by Leo Tolstoy, Ivan Turgenev, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky. They are authors of the 19th century, and early 20th in Tolstoy's case. I read many of their works decades ago, but recently I acquired a copy of Dostoyevsky's "The Gambler," to remind myself that there once might have been a better Russia, if you can redact its pogroms from memory and think only of its literary heritage.

Why "The Gambler"? Because the title also reminds me of the adult neighborhood men that I knew in childhood, almost all of whom engaged in gambling in some way(s) on a daily basis, some of it legal and some of it not. Legal was thoroughbred horse racing when attending trackside in person. Not legal was betting on the ponies with bookies either by telephone or by hanging out in backroom parlors, playing the numbers in days before the state took that on for fundraising, and actually supplementing income by being a numbers runner as a sideline. A person who lived in my most immediate physical and relational space did all the above.

"The Gambler" is about none of the above forms of gambling, but rather it is centered primarily about roulette played in a spa casino in Germany. It is about streaks of winning and inevitable streaks of losing, and how all that plays into the goings-on of a party of multi-language speaking characters accommodated together in a hotel. Roulette is integral to the entanglement of financial matters and woes that underly the plot. It is the addiction of the protagonist and storyteller Alexy Ivanovitch. Dostoyevsky himself was addicted at some point in his life.

So is Granny. News from afar of her imminent death from natural causes is eagerly and ignominiously awaited, because of her wealth and an expected inheritance. She comes back to life however and joins the roulette action of the plot in a telling way. That is all I'll tell you.

Less complicated in his stories perhaps and still my favorite Russian novelist is Ivan Turgenev. He is author of "The Hunting Sketches" (1852), "Rudin" (1856), "On the Eve" (1860), "Fathers and Sons" (1862) and "The Torrents of Spring" (early 1870s), for example, each easily obtainable in English translation.

I have promised myself a reread of Turgenev after all these years. But I still remember enough to recommend him to you highly.

So, there you have it, a few short novels to read, and there are more, from which to learn about a better Russia, but by no means a pogrom-free Russia as I have said. But at least not the Russia of now, when a reduced state power that seems to have lost its way has made itself synonymous with aggression only, and lost its memory, too, for what really matters, the literary beauty in its written heritage.

Published in the Penn-Franklin News on June 10, 2024.

Libraries are here to remind us. There are reasons to know.

Charles B. Greenberg,
Board Director, Murrysville Community Library Foundation