

South African Literature's Russian Soul: Narrative Forms of Global Isolation
by Jeanne-Marie Jackson

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Some readers might find the title discouraging, even if astonishingly original. How many scholars, after all, can claim to be experts in both post-apartheid South-African and nineteenth-century Russian Literature, or can be said to be working on the influence of the latter on the former? And isn't the idea of a nation's literary "soul" dangerously close to both mysticism and essentialism? But to be intimidated or otherwise put off by the title would be a mistake. To begin with, the book focuses mainly on structural modes of similarity beyond simple "influence". Further to that, the subtitle – "Narrative Forms of Global Isolation" – weighs just as heavily as the title does; this is just as much a book at the forefront of literary theory, arguing for global comparisons that use smaller-than-global scales and literary canons as it is a book about two geographically and temporally separated literary traditions.

Jackson's Russian focus is for the most part on well-known world-literary figures like Chekov, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy (and in one chapter, as an atypical example, working in the 20th Century and in English, Vladimir Nabokov). Her South-African canon, however, is more eclectic, ranging from the Nobel Prize winners, J.M. Coetzee and Nadine Gordimer, to lesser-known figures such as Reza De Wet, Mark Behr and Miriam Tlali, expanding the book's linguistic coverage beyond English and Russian to include Afrikaans and isiZulu. *South African Literature's Russian Soul's* center of gravity lies with these 20th- and 21st-century South-African authors rather than the 19th-century Russian ones, though one of the book's claims is that the latter serves as an inspiration for the former in more cases than one might think. Each chapter groups a Russian source, or point of comparison, with one or more South African writers. So, for example, the second chapter traces the role of Ivan Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* (1862), as well as the intergenerational intellectual debates in Russia that give context to that work, in Nadine Gordimer's idea of the novel form and, specifically, on *July's People* (1981). It then moves to Miriam Tlali's *Amandla* (1980) as a "complementary rather than oppositional" counterpoint to Gordimer novel (27). In this and in other chapters, the result is that Jackson manages to not simply take South African literature's Russian forebears to be a sort of skeleton key to their interpretation, but rather performs the kind of work that makes visible previously ignored aspects of both sides of the comparison and gifts the reader with a coherent and compelling new analytic category: "narrative forms of global isolation."

South African Literature's Russian Soul is an important study not only for those interested in South-African or Russian literature, but for scholars who have an interest in modes of comparison as such. It proposes a multi-scalar globalist paradigm without the hubris typically associated with such an ambitious undertaking. It is recommended reading for anyone interested in contemporary South African literature, students and experts alike.

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