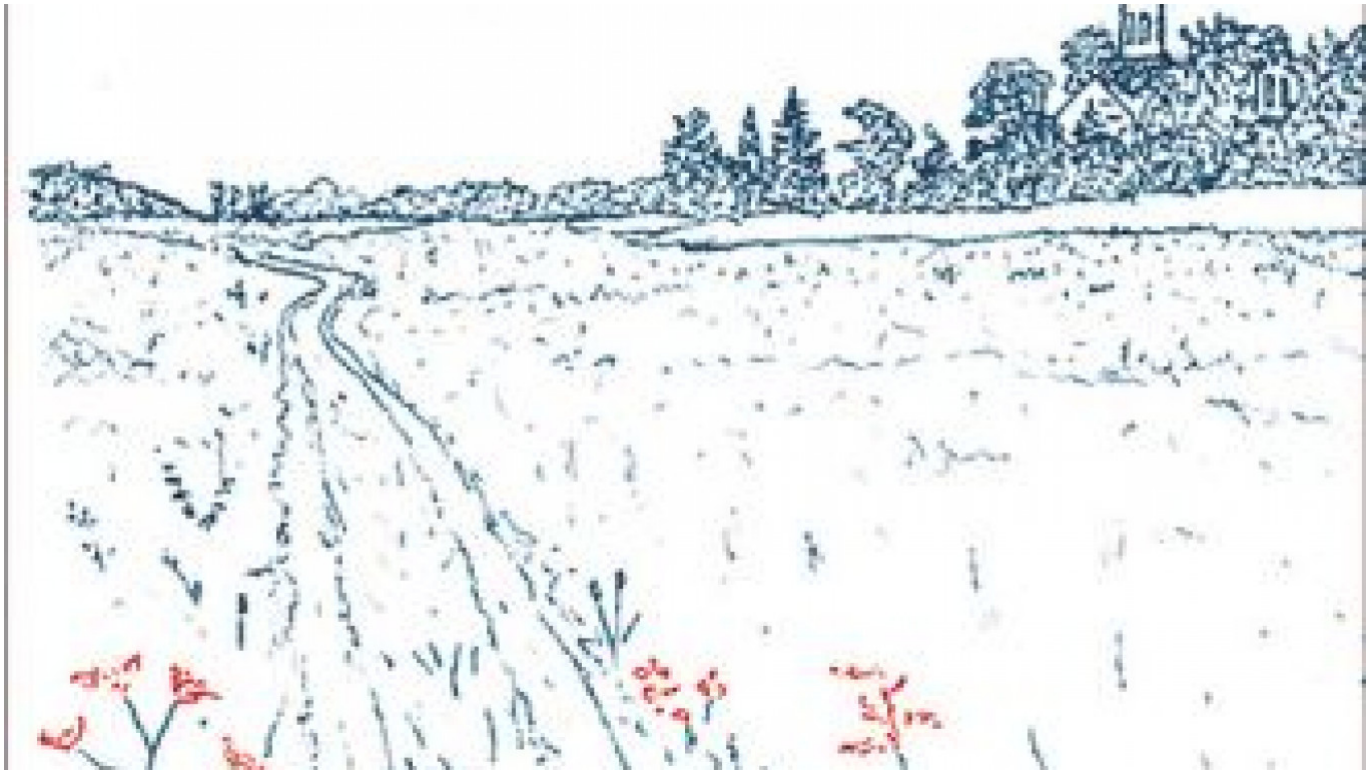
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

New Yorker Author Writes of His 'Russia-Love'

By Melani Robinson

November 12, 2010



Frazier is a U.S. writer and humorist.

Take an eccentric 59-year-old author with wanderlust, a dilapidated van, two intrepid Russian guides and the vastness of Siberia, and you have a small taste of Ian Frazier's latest book, "Travels in Siberia." In this chronicle of the author's 17-year quest to explore areas of Russia most fear to trek, Frazier is downright smitten with what he calls "Russia-love."

Frazier began his journey in 1993 when he arrived in Moscow for the first of five trips to the country. He did so at the urging of an artist friend, Alex Melamid, and his wife, Katya Arnold. He befriended them after writing about Russian artists for a "Talk of the Town" article in The New Yorker magazine. When they insisted that he return with them for the first time since their exile, with their new U.S. passports in hand, he couldn't resist. "Stepping off the plane, I was charmed. Like falling in love. It was embarrassing because I was in my 40s and it had some of the aspects of a midlife swerve. Like a middle-aged man buying a new sports car."

The author of nine books including the travelogues “On the Rez” and “Great Plains,” Frazier has a passion for Russia that’s been building since he was boy in Ohio. “I remember listening to “Peter and the Wolf” narrated by Peter Ustinov. Studying the album cover of Peter going through the woods with all the snow and trees, it was bewitching. When I was going around Lake Baikal on the train, it looked just like that.”

Frasier described his all-encompassing passion: “I have it for the place geographically, its history, architecture, its people. I’ve been told it is surprising that I love Russia so much because I complain about it all the time, but just because you complain doesn’t mean you don’t love.”

Still, grumble he did. From his breakfast oatmeal peppered with combative mosquitoes, the knee-deep trash along the roadside, or the silent treatment he occasionally received from his guides-for-hire Sergei and Vladimir, Frazier did some serious carping.

The roadside trash he described in great detail came in handy while traveling southeast from Krasnoyarsk. The rutted, rocky road knocked off the tailpipe of the van. The air inside the vehicle had become a blue fog and Frazier struggled to recall the symptoms of carbon monoxide poisoning. The guides didn’t think it was a problem, but on Frazier’s insistence they pulled over onto the shoulder and one of them meandered about kicking the rubble until he discovered a rusted tailpipe that had been discarded. Using it, he rigged the van. He told the story with wry humor, an example of the survival skills of the Russian people that the author was so impressed by.

Frazier thinks that Americans can learn a lot from the Eastern Europeans. “We complain and fuss and don’t take suffering well and don’t think we should have to. In myself, I could be more stoic,” he said, adding that “there is a weight they have to carry, and they carry it.” He finds most fascinating the survival of Russia in a global environment without the defenses of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans that protect the borders of United States. “They’ve managed to become a great country despite all of these things washing over it. They’ve had people show up for its entire history. They beat Hitler and lost 20 million people doing it, and the world should thank them.” Frazier also believes that Russians deserve thanks for bearing the burden of Mongol invasions for three centuries.

The Harvard graduate also includes a vast amount of Russian history in “Travels in Siberia.” On his first trip, he felt he was participating in a historical moment. A few years before, the Soviet Union had been largely closed and the kind of travel he was experiencing would not have been possible. Frazier explains why he felt it necessary to include so much history. “I entered the picture at this historical moment. Just to get an idea that what we are seeing now is only a point on a line, but to not know what’s gone before it can just seem arbitrary. Sort of like if you know people’s family you can understand them better.” The book covers the reign of Genghis Khan, the tyranny of Ivan the Terrible, and the horror of Josef Stalin. “Russian history is like falling down a flight of stairs — it’s just bam, bam, bam. Some of it is just so awful, some glorious, and much of it is awful and glorious combined.”

The New Jersey resident documented his struggle to learn the Russian language and the Cyrillic alphabet — the latter was necessary so he could read books not written in English. He never mastered the spoken word completely but it was a labor of love that he wrestled with

throughout the book. “When you get to places where nobody speaks English if you try, it indicates a desire to communicate, make some attempt.” Why not just hire a translator? He couldn’t afford it. Frazier spent his book advance within the first two years of the project. The last 15 years were on his own ruble, and it was an expensive adventure. A $1,000 satellite phone was a good investment, as Frazier used it to call his wife and two children at his lowest points when he needed to feel connected to the familiar. The van was another story. It was supposed to be sold so he could recoup some money, but as far as he knows it is still sitting in a far-flung city rusting.

Frazier found the stark beauty of Siberia alluring. “I like the outdoors. When I leave New York, I want space. I’ve even left crowded parties for a parking lot where I’ll lie down on the warm asphalt enjoying the openness. The wilderness of Siberia appealed to me. Such a sad place.”

There were low points along the way, but none bothered him more than when his guides weren’t speaking to him after he took a photo of a prison. Frazier felt that their disapproval might have been because of national pride. “It would be like if I took friends to Yellowstone and they wanted to go to Alcatraz.” Even at that bleakest moment he never considered quitting. “It was difficult, and I was unhappy and uncomfortable. We were camped in a cow pasture. Russia is dark. It’s a dark and scary place where you don’t know what the hell is going on.”

Another dismal experience occurred during a 800-kilometer train ride transporting the van from Chernyshevsk to the town of Magdagachi. Travel between the two locations was impossible by car because of swamps. There was in effect no road. Frazier, his guides and their van were stuffed inside a boxcar with no windows. Frazier slept in the front seat, propped against the door and the steering wheel. “The train car was sealed shut from the outside. The guy who was running it was extremely sketchy.” Safety issues were a great concern only to him locked inside the train car, vehicles parked inches apart with gasoline in each and no fire extinguishers. “Those personal injury attorneys who advertise on the subway, their eyes would light up in Russia at all the potential lawsuits,” he said. “No side rails on the roads, no rumble strips. If the apocalypse comes, the Russians will be ready.”

A recent New York Times review succinctly stated, “Frazier peels away Russia’s solid veneer to reveal the quirkiness and humanity beneath.” The exploration of Siberia is told as only Ian Frazier, the lone two-time recipient of the Thurber Prize for American Humor, can with bellyaching and belly laughs along his bumpy ride. Fasten your seat belt as you move along, but since it’s not the law in the wilds of Siberia, only if you want to.

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