

A Hidden Talent

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

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Талант: talent

Like the vast majority of my fellow Americans, I'm great at making New Year's resolutions and horrible at keeping them. But there is one resolution I'd like to keep.

Awhile back, I realized that I always complain about translation goofs and gaffes, so I resolved to celebrate translation successes from time to time. As we blunder our way through a foreign language, it's heartening to remember that with time, effort and talent, it is possible to make translations that sing.

And when I say "time," I mean a really long, long time. Stanley Mitchell worked on his translation of Alexander Pushkin's "Евгений Онегин" ("Eugene Onegin") for about 25 years. And we can be grateful that he didn't give up. If you have struggled through Nabokov's clunky literal translation or versions in verse with antiquated language and padded phrases to make the rhymes, you may have thought that the genius of Pushkin is just another of Russia's impenetrable mysteries. But when you read Mitchell's translation, you can finally hear

Pushkin's voice. Somehow he has kept Pushkin's short (by English poetic standards) meter and rhyme scheme, without mangling the word order, straying from the meaning, or introducing extraneous images so that moon rhymes with swoon.

He conveys the fey and colloquial tone of some stanzas perfectly (reading aloud recommended). Гм! Гм! Читатель благородный, / Здорово ль ваша вся родня? ... (Hm! Hm! I ask you, noble reader, / Are all your kindred healthy, well?). And he shines on the more lyrical passages, like this often quoted ode to Moscow: Москва ... как много в этом звуке / Для сердца русского слилось! / Как много в нём отозвалось! (Moscow, whose name reverberated / In every Russian heart! I heard / So many echoes in that word!) It goes to show what half a lifetime and a bucket of talent can do.

Another Russian classic rarely read by foreigners is Pushkin's friend, Ivan Krylov, whose fables in verse with their witty morals are part of the vast baggage of Russian culture. For us foreigners, they are an excellent (that is to say, taxing) way to learn the names of animals, insects and birds in Russian. But the old-fashioned language and poetic idiom are hard going for expats used to modern Moscow slang.

But along came Lydia Razran Stone. In her collection of 62 fables ("The Frogs Who Begged for a Tsar"), she took what she calls an unorthodox approach. Since Krylov (unlike Pushkin) varied meter, rhyme and line length greatly in his poems, some of which were adapted translations of Aesop and La Fontaine, she decided not to replicate each line.

This freed her to recreate the poems in English to please small (or large) English speakers, while keeping the sense and the variety of language. For example, in the short verse called "Комар и Пастух" ("The Mosquito and the Shepherd"), a snoozing shepherd is about to be bitten by a snake, but a mosquito bites him to wake him up. He awakens, kills the snake — and the mosquito, too. The moral? Таких примеров есть немало: / Коль слабый сильному, хоть движимый добром. / Открыть глаза на правду покусится, / Того и жди, что то же с ним случится, / Что с Комаром. (You must exert the greatest care / In warning big shots to beware. / If you're a man of low estate, / You're apt to share Mosquito's fate.)

Excellent advice, brought to you by the pen of a translator.

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of "The Russian Word's Worth" (Glas), a collection of her columns.

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