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Great Russian Literature Versus One Tweet by Stephen King

Why Russians still lose their heads over comments made by Western movie critics.

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Epidemia

A bombshell exploded in the Russian media recently: Stephen King praised a Russian TV series that was based on a Russian book no less, and that Netflix had picked up for the largest sum ever paid for a Russian series.

I'm certain that King himself has no idea of the sensation he caused. He was probably just passing a pleasant evening watching Netflix when he posted a couple of short comments to Twitter and then went off to bed. Or had a cup of tea. Or went out for a walk. Or sat down to write another book. Or, who knows what — I wasn't there.

But whatever he did, I have no doubt that by the next day, he wasn't thinking about the Russian TV series *Epidemic* anymore, much less about the book *VongOzera* (*To the Lake*) by Yana Vagner on which it was based.

But, across the ocean from the King of Horror's residence in Maine, events were unfolding very differently. Russian media of every political stripe was in raptures over his tweets. "Stephen King called the Russian series *Epidemic* 'damned good,'" read the headline by the usually damned boring official TASS news agency. Even the very liberal Meduza portal proclaimed, "Stephen King reviewed Pavel Kostomarov's *Epidemic*. Spoiler alert: He liked it!"

In short, everyone from pro-Kremlin loyalists to the anti-Kremlin opposition was truly delighted. Excitement even stirred for several days among the Russian intelligentsia on Facebook. Congratulations came pouring in for Russian-Czech writer Yana Vagner as if she had won the Nobel, Pulitzer and Goncourt Prizes all at once. But that wasn't all.

Some even went so far as to draw a parallel to Pushkin's immortal line: "The old Derzhavin took note of us/And, one foot in the grave, gave us his blessing."

Keep in mind that every Russian considers Alexander Pushkin the brilliant sun in the solar system of Russian literature. The story of how the aging and decrepit Derzhavin, the patriarch of 18th-century Russian poetry, praised the young Pushkin's performance on a school exam is at the very heart of the myth surrounding classic Russian literature and symbolizes a sort of unattainable summit of genius and ability.

I have no desire to offend Yana Vagner or detract from her thriller about a difficult relationship set during a terrible epidemic. Neither would I in any way criticize the TV series by Pavel Kostomarov, with its talented cinematography and creative approach to the original story. They both deserve praise and I am happy they were able to sell their creation to Netflix — especially because modern Russian literature and film is rife with hack productions and soulless commercial projects totally lacking in inspiration.

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But to compare it with Pushkin himself and place it on a par with the greatest achievements of Russian literature, or to lose my head over a couple of tweets from King as if they were divine revelation? No, thank you.

This incident was no accident. It is a symptom of two deep and serious problems plaguing the Russian intelligentsia and, more broadly, the Russian mindset as a nation. The Russian people tend to speak poorly of their own culture and accomplishments much as a colonizer might denigrate its colony, and they suffer from a deeply unhealthy love-hate relationship with the West.

Both ordinary Russians and the intelligentsia behave like erratic teenagers in their relationship with the West generally, and with its culture in particular. One day, they hunger for praise, an approving smile or a flattering tweet — with two such tweets a cause for celebration. The next day, they'll happily tell the West — from Canada to Poland and from Norway to Australia — to go to hell because, they proclaim, "Russians a very different breed,

and independent as well."

In fact, this teenage ambivalence dates all the way back to the time of Pushkin, when the Russian aristocracy invited French emigrants to instruct their children. What's more, this pattern of relations did not disappear, but actually deepened during the 70 years of Soviet isolation. And, from early post-Soviet Russia until the present day, Russian journalists have loved asking any foreigner who has long lived in Moscow what they feel about life here.

Curiously, only prominent Western figures can cause Russians to lose their heads like this, despite all the Kremlin propaganda designed to discredit the West. If, however, a famous Oriental author such as China's Mo Yan were to pen two similar posts in praise of *To the Lake*, they would remain just that — two posts on China's version of Twitter, and nothing more.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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