

# GEORGE



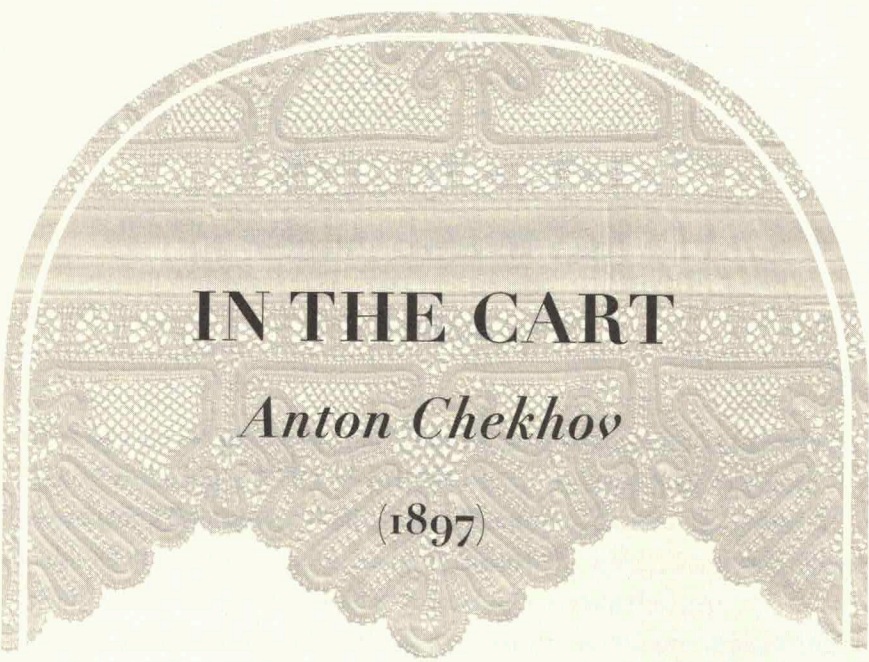
IN WHICH FOUR RUSSIANS GIVE A MASTER CLASS ON WRITING, READING, AND LIFE

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# SAUNDERS

— Author of LINCOLN IN THE BARDO —

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**IN THE CART**

*Anton Chekhov*

(1897)



## A PAGE AT A TIME

THOUGHTS ON "IN THE CART"

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Years ago, on the phone with Bill Buford, then fiction editor of *The New Yorker*, enduring a series of painful edits, feeling a little insecure, I went fishing for a compliment: "But what do you *like* about the story?" I whined. There was a long pause at the other end. And Bill said this: "Well, I read a line. And I like it . . . enough to read the next."

And that was it: his entire short story aesthetic and presumably that of the magazine. And it's perfect. A story is a linear-temporal phenomenon. It proceeds, and charms us (or doesn't), a line at a time. We have to keep being pulled into a story in order for it to do anything to us.

I've taken a lot of comfort in this idea over the years. I don't need a big theory about fiction to write it. I don't have to worry about anything but: Would a reasonable person, reading line four, get enough of a jolt to go on to line five?

Why do we keep reading a story?

Because we *want to*.

Why do we want to?

That's the million-dollar question: What makes a reader keep reading?

Are there laws of fiction, as there are laws of physics? Do some things just *work* better than others? What forges the bond between reader and writer and what breaks it?

Well, how would we know?

One way would be to track our mind as it moves from line to line.

A story (any story, every story) makes its meaning at speed, a small structural pulse at a time. We read a bit of text and a set of expectations arises.

"A man stood on the roof of a seventy-story building."

Aren't you already kind of expecting him to jump, fall, or be pushed off?

You'll be pleased if the story takes that expectation into account, but not pleased if it addresses it too neatly.

We could understand a story as simply a series of such expectation/resolution moments.

For our first story, "In the Cart," by Anton Chekhov, I'm going to propose a one-time exception to the "basic drill" I just laid out in the introduction and suggest that we approach the story by way of an exercise I use at Syracuse.

Here's how it works.

I'll give you the story a page at a time. You read that page. Afterward, we'll take stock of where we find ourselves. What has that page done to us? What do we know, having read the page, that we didn't know before? How has our understanding of the story changed? What are we expecting to happen next? If we want to keep reading, why do we?

Before we start, let's note, rather obviously, that, at this moment, as regards "In the Cart," your mind is a perfect blank.

## IN THE CART

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They drove out of the town at half past eight in the morning. The paved road was dry, a splendid April sun was shedding warmth, but there was still snow in the ditches and in the woods. Winter, evil, dark, long, had ended so recently; spring had arrived suddenly; but neither the warmth nor the languid, transparent woods, warmed by the breath of spring, nor the black flocks flying in the fields over huge puddles that were like lakes, nor this marvelous, immeasurably deep sky, into which it seemed that one would plunge with such joy, offered anything new and interesting to Marya Vasilyevna, who was sitting in the cart. She had been teaching school for thirteen years, and in the course of all those years she had gone to the town for her salary countless times; and whether it was spring, as now, or a rainy autumn evening, or winter, it was all the same to her, and what she always, invariably, longed for was to reach her destination as soon as possible. [2]

She felt as though she had been living in these parts for a long, long time, for a hundred years, and it seemed to her that she knew every stone, every tree on the road from the town to her school. Here was her past and her present, and she could imagine no other future than the school, the road to the town and back, and again the school and again the road.

. . .



Now your mind is not so blank.

How has the state of your mind changed?

If we were sitting together in a classroom, which I wish we were, you could tell me. Instead, I'll ask you to sit quietly a bit and compare those two states of mind: the blank, receptive state your mind was in before you started to read and the one it's in now.

Taking your time, answer these questions:

1. Look away from the page and summarize for me what you know so far. Try to do it in one or two sentences.
2. What are you curious about?
3. Where do you think the story is headed?

Whatever you answered, that's what Chekhov now has to work with. He has, already, with this first page, caused certain expectations and questions to arise. You'll feel the rest of the story to be meaningful and coherent to the extent that it responds to these (or "takes them into account" or "exploits them").

In the first pulse of a story, the writer is like a juggler, throwing bowling pins into the air. The rest of the story is the catching of those pins. At any point in the story, certain pins are up there and we can feel them. We'd better feel them. If not, the story has nothing out of which to make its meaning.

We might say that what's happened over the course of this page is that the path the story is on has narrowed. The possibilities were infinite before you read it (it could have been about anything) but now it has become, slightly, "about" something.

What is it about, for you, so far?

What a story is "about" is to be found in the curiosity it creates in us, which is a form of caring.

So: What do you care about in this story, so far?

It's Marya.

Now: What is the flavor of that caring? How, and where, were you made to care about her?

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In the first line, we learn that some unidentified “they” are driving out of some town, early in the morning.

“The paved road was dry, a splendid April sun was shedding warmth, **but** there was still snow in the ditches and in the woods. Winter, evil, dark, long, had ended so recently; spring had arrived suddenly; **but** neither the warmth nor the languid transparent woods, warmed by the breath of spring, nor the black flocks flying in the fields . . .”

I’ve bolded the two appearances of the word “but” above (and yes, I phrase it that way to avoid saying, “I bolded the two buts above”) to underscore that we’re looking at two iterations of the same pattern: “The conditions of happiness are present, **but** happiness is not.” It’s sunny, **but** there’s still snow on the ground. Winter has ended, **but** this offers nothing new or interesting to . . . and we wait to hear who it is, taking no solace in the end of this long Russian winter.

Even before there’s a person in the story, there’s an implied tension between two elements of the narrative voice, one telling us that things are lovely (the sky is “marvelous” and “immeasurably deep”) and another resisting the general loveliness. (It would be, already, a different-feeling story, had it started: “The paved road was dry, a splendid April sun was shedding warmth, and although there was still snow in the ditches and the woods, it just didn’t matter: winter, evil, dark, long, had, at long last, ended.”)

Halfway through the second paragraph, we find that the resisting element within the narrative voice belongs to one Marya Vasilyevna, who, failing to be moved by springtime, appears in the cart at the sound of her name.

Of all the people in the world he might have put in this cart, Chekhov has chosen an unhappy woman resisting the charms of springtime. This could have been a story about a happy woman (newly engaged, say, or just given a clean bill of health, or a woman just naturally happy), but Chekhov elected to make Marya *unhappy*.

Then he made her unhappy in a particular flavor, for particular reasons: she’s been teaching school for thirteen years; has done this trip to town “countless times” and is sick of it; feels she’s been living in “these parts” for a hundred years; knows every stone and tree on the way. Worst of all, she can imagine no other future for herself.



This could have been a story about a person unhappy because she's been scorned in love, or because she's just received a fatal diagnosis, or because she's been unhappy since the moment she was born. But Chekhov chose to make Marya a person unhappy *because of the monotony of her life*.

Out of the mist of every-story-that-could-possibly-be, a particular woman has started to emerge.

We might say that the three paragraphs we've just read were in service of *increased specification*.

Characterization, so called, results from just such increasing specification. The writer asks, "Which particular person *is* this, anyway?" and answers with a series of facts that have the effect of creating a narrowing path: ruling out certain possibilities, urging others forward.

As a particular person gets made, the potential for what we call "plot" increases. (Although that's a word I don't like much—let's replace it with "meaningful action.")

As a particular person gets made, the potential for meaningful action increases.

If a story begins, "Once there was a boy who was afraid of water," we expect that a pond, river, ocean, waterfall, bathtub, or tsunami will soon appear. If a character says, "I have never once in my life been afraid," we might not mind it so much if a lion walks in. If a character lives in perpetual fear of being embarrassed, we have some idea of what might need to happen to him. Likewise with someone who loves only money, or confesses that he has never really believed in friendship, or who claims to be so tired of her life that she can't imagine another.

When there was nothing in the story (before you started reading it) there was nothing that wanted to happen.

Now that Marya is here, unhappy, the story has become restless.

The story has said of her, "She is unhappy and can't imagine any other life for herself."

And we feel the story preparing itself to say something like "Well, we'll see about that."

Paused here for what I expect you are finding an unreasonable amount of time, at the end of the first page of an eleven-page story,



we're at an interesting place. \* The story is under way. The first page has radically narrowed the concerns of the story; the rest of the story must now address (use, exploit) those concerns and not any others.

If you were the writer, what would you do next?

As a reader, what else would you like to know?

\* One of the features of this page-at-a-time exercise: the better the story, the more curious the reader is to find out what's going to happen and the more annoying the exercise is.