

Mushrooming in Tolstoy's World ... Or, Tolstoy on Mushrooms

Bob Blaisdell

It was Leo Tolstoy who made collecting mushrooms seem normal to me. He was so great a writer he could make a small cluster of invented people living in another land and era seem more vivid than I could imagine my own friends and family. When I was in college in the late 1970s reading Russian literature in translation, it stopped seeming quaint to me that characters enjoyed going into the woods to pick mushrooms.

In the early 1870s Tolstoy, already acknowledged as Russia's supreme living author for having composed the novel *War and Peace*, threw himself into writing a textbook and series of primers for teaching the country's vast uneducated population of peasant children to learn how to read. In his *Azbuka* (ABC Book) he collected and retold fables, from as far back as Aesop (he had recently taught himself Greek),

familiar European folk tales like "Little Red Riding Hood" (in his version "Little Cap" has been gathering mushrooms and berries to bring to her grandmother), anecdotes (in Russian, "anekdotes" connote *jokes*), and a genre called "*byli*," which I like to translate as "realies." That is, the narrator is saying or pretending *this really happened*.

I edited a collection of Tolstoy's tales for children in 2002, and I was intrigued enough by the differences I found in the translations that I decided, despite having reached middle age, to learn Russian. With the help of patient tutors, thousands of hours of practice, and several trips to Russia and Tolstoy's estate, Yasnaya Polyana, now a state-run museum and park (where I overlooked the mushrooms but encountered hedgehogs and other woodland creatures), I learned enough Russian to make it all the way through *Anna Karenina*, the pinnacle of my reading ambitions. But, to be honest, in the



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PUBLISHER'S NOTES: Although many wild mushrooms are quite palatable, some are deadly poisonous. It is advisable to avoid eating any wild organisms, including fungi, unless absolutely certain of identification. And although some mushroom species are edible for many people, those same species may cause allergic reactions or illness in others. When in doubt, throw it out. FUNGI wants to ensure that all readers are long-term subscribers. It is a good idea to have any wild mushroom checked by an expert before eating them. It should be understood that the Publisher and all Editors are not responsible for any consequences of ingesting wild mushrooms. Furthermore, the Publisher and all Editors are not engaged, herein, in the rendering of any medical advice or services. All readers should verify all information and data before administering any drug, therapy, or treatment discussed herein. Neither the Editors nor the Publisher accepts any responsibility for the accuracy of the information or consequences from the use or misuse of the information contained herein. Unauthorized reproduction of published content of FUNGI is strictly forbidden, and permission for reproduction must be obtained by application in writing to the Publisher.

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original, the *Azbuka* is more my speed. Tolstoy starts with the alphabet, then simple sentences (among them, “Mushrooms are not found in the snow”), and proceeds through little stories to longer ones that are for readers of all ages.

I started translating my favorite of his *Azbuka* stories that hadn’t been translated into English. As he was writing and rewriting the children’s tales, he continually realized that the language “needs to be completely beautiful, short, simple and, most of all, clear.”¹

My challenge as a translator has been to try to maintain his delightfully natural tone and phrasing. These first untitled selections are for children who have only recently learned to read:

Misha was going through the woods. A mushroom was growing by an oak. The mushroom was old; nobody had picked it. But Misha was glad and brought the mushroom home. “Here’s a mushroom, the best of all!” But the mushroom was rotten and nobody ate it.



The children were walking through the woods for mushrooms, and picked baskets full. The children went back across the field and sat on a mound of hay and were counting the mushrooms. From behind the bushes wolves started howling. The children forgot about the mushrooms, threw them onto the hay and went off home.



Mitka picked so many mushrooms that it was impossible to carry them all home. He set them down in the woods. At daybreak Mitka went to get the mushrooms. The mushrooms had been taken and he began to cry. His mother said to him, “What are you crying for? Did the cat eat our cakes?” Then that became funny to Mitka; he wiped the tears off his face and began laughing himself.²



And now for the two extended tales of mushrooms, these with titles, for more adept but beginning readers:

The Girl and the Mushrooms

Two girls were going home with their mushrooms. They had to cross the railroad tracks. They thought the engine was far off and climbed onto the embankment and were walking across the rails. Suddenly came the sound of an engine. The older girl ran back, but the younger one ran across the tracks. The older girl cried out to her sister, “Don’t come back!”

But the engine was so close and roaring so loudly that the younger girl didn’t hear it all; she thought she was told to come back. She ran back across the rails, stumbled, dropped the mushrooms and began picking them up.

The engine was already so close and the engineer whistled that it was going full speed.

The older girl cried out, “Throw away the mushrooms!”

1 This remark occurs in a letter to his cousin, Alexandra Andreyevna Tolstaya, April 6-8, 1872. (The phrase in Russian: “... надо, чтоб всё было красиво, коротко, просто и, главное, ясно.”) Lev Tolstoy. *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii (Complete Collected Works in 90 Volumes: “Jubilee Edition”)*, Moscow, 1957; Vol. 61: 283.

2 These tiny tales can be found in Volume 21 of Tolstoy’s *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*. [Misha, p. 31; the children, p. 48; Mitka, p. 65.]

but the little girl thought she was told to gather the mushrooms and crawled along the tracks.

The engineer couldn’t hold back the engine. It whistled with all its might and went right over the girl.

The older girl cried out and wept. All the passengers looked from the carriage windows, and the conductor ran to the end of the train to see what had become of the girl.

When the train passed on a distance, everyone saw the girl between the rails, head down and not moving. Then, when the train had gone on further, the girl raised her head, hopped onto her knees, gathered up the mushrooms and ran off to her sister.

As brief as that story is, the first time I read it I admit I was as terrified as the engineer. I still laugh with joy at her aplomb and her dutifulness about those mushrooms she had spilled.

Before starting the next one, you might be reassured to know that there was usually a space for sleeping atop the stoves in Russian huts and cabins.

How the Boy Told How a Thunderstorm Caught him in the Woods

When I was a boy I was sent to the woods for mushrooms. I reached the woods, collected mushrooms and wanted to go home. Suddenly it got dark. It began to rain and thunder. I was scared and sat under a big oak. The lightning flashed so brightly it hurt my eyes and I winced. Something cracked above my head and thundered, then something hit me in the head. I fell and lay there until it stopped raining. When I came to, through the whole forest the trees were dripping, the birds were singing and the sunlight was playing. The big oak was shattered and smoke was coming from the stump. Splinters from the oak lay around me. My clothes were all wet and sticking to my body. I had a bump on my head and it hurt a little. I found my hat, grabbed the mushrooms and ran home.

Nobody was home. I took some bread that was on the table and crawled onto the stove. When I woke up I saw from the stove that my mushrooms were cooked, placed on the table and that they were wanting to eat.

I cried out, “You’re eating without me?”

They said, “Weren’t you sleeping? Come on and eat.”³

I now worry that it’s a concussion the boy has suffered! In any case, while the instances of “they” in the scene in the cabin seem vague, I believe Tolstoy wants to convey by that pronoun that the boy simply takes his family for granted and he doesn’t need to name them. *They* just are and *they* just want to eat!

By looking at the very rough drafts of these two titled tales in the scholarly Soviet edition, it is apparent that Tolstoy developed both plots not from actual incidents but from his imagination.



In *Anna Karenina*, in an episode that came to Tolstoy in the writing of the serialized novel (published from 1875 to 1877) and not in the planning of it (he had plotted the most basic framework in his first few weeks of writing in the early spring of 1873), the half-brother of the Tolstoy-like hero Konstantin Dmitrievitch Levin, Sergey Ivanovitch Koznishev, a longtime

3 Lev Tolstoy. *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*. Volume 21. Page 147 [“Devochka i griby”] and 112 [“Kak mal’chik rasskazyval pro to, kak ego v lesu zastala groza”].

bachelor, has decided that on the mushroom hunt he is going to propose to Levin's wife's friend, Varenka. She will not expect too much of him in the way of romance, and that she doesn't have any family means she or her relatives will not tilt the balance of his life, the way he sees his younger brother's household being discombobulated by his marriage to a lively young woman with a large and involved family:

The feeling of happiness in being near her continually grew, and at last reached such a point that, as he put a huge, slender-stalked agaric fungus⁴ in her basket, he looked straight into her face, and noticing the flush of glad and alarmed excitement that overspread her face, he was confused himself, and smiled to her in silence a smile that said too much.

"If so," he said to himself, "I ought to think it over and make up my mind, and not give way like a boy to the impulse of a moment."

"I'm going to pick by myself apart from all the rest, or else my efforts will make no show," he said, and he left the edge of the forest where they were walking on low silky grass between old birch trees standing far apart, and went more into the heart of the wood, where between the white birch trunks there were gray trunks of aspen and dark bushes of hazel. Walking some forty paces away, Sergey Ivanovitch, knowing he was out of sight, stood still behind a bushy spindle-tree in full flower with its rosy red catkins. It was perfectly still all round him. Only overhead in the birches under which he stood, the flies, like a swarm of bees, buzzed unceasingly, and from time to time the children's voices were floated across to him. [...]

[...] Was it not youth to feel as he felt now, when coming from the other side to the edge of the wood he saw in the glowing light of the slanting sunbeams the gracious figure of Varenka in her yellow gown with her basket, walking lightly by the trunk of an old birch tree, and when this impression of the sight of Varenka blended so harmoniously with the beauty of the view, of the yellow oatfield lying bathed in the slanting sunshine, and beyond it the distant ancient forest flecked with yellow and melting into the blue of the distance? His heart throbbed joyously. A softened feeling came over him. He felt that he had made up his mind. Varenka, who had just crouched down to pick a mushroom, rose with a supple movement and looked round. Flinging away the cigar, Sergey Ivanovitch advanced with resolute steps towards her.

Thus one chapter (Chapter 4 of Part 6) ends and yet completely continuously resumes in the next, with Koznishev mentally rehearsing his proposal on his way to where Varenka is helping the children find mushrooms:

Kneeling down, with her hands over the mushrooms to guard them from Grisha, she was calling little Masha.

⁴ In Russian: "огромный на тонком корне с завернувшимися краями березовый гриб ..." (Lev Tolstoy. *Polnoe Sobranie Sochinenii*. Volume 19: 134.) This description is variously translated as "an enormous wood mushroom with a thin stem and up-curling top" (Aylmer and Louise Maude, 1938); "a huge birch mushroom with a thin stalk and curled-up edges" (Rosamund Bartlett, 2014); and "a brown mushroom with a curled lip, on a slender stem" (Marian Schwartz, 2014).

"Come here, little ones! There are so many!" she was saying in her sweet, deep voice.

Seeing Sergey Ivanovitch approaching, she did not get up and did not change her position, but everything told him that she felt his presence and was glad of it.

"Well, did you find some?" she asked from under the white kerchief, turning her handsome, gently smiling face to him.

"Not one," said Sergey Ivanovitch. "Did you?"

She did not answer, busy with the children who thronged about her.

"That one too, near the twig," she pointed out to little Masha a little fungus, split in half across its rosy cap by the dry grass from under which it thrust itself. Varenka got up while Masha picked the fungus, breaking it into two white halves. "This brings back my childhood," she added, moving apart from the children beside Sergey Ivanovitch.

They walked on for some steps in silence. Varenka saw that he wanted to speak; she guessed of what, and felt faint with joy and panic. They had walked so far away that no one could hear them now, but still he did not begin to speak. It would have been better for Varenka to be silent. After a silence it would have been easier for them to say what they wanted to say than after talking about mushrooms. But against her own will, as it were accidentally, Varenka said:

"So you found nothing? In the middle of the wood there are always fewer, though." Sergey Ivanovitch sighed and made no answer. He was annoyed that she had spoken about the mushrooms. He wanted to bring her back to the first words she had uttered about her childhood; but after a pause of some length, as though against his own will, he made an observation in response to her last words.

"I have heard that the white edible funguses are found principally at the edge of the wood, though I can't tell them apart."

Some minutes more passed, they moved still further away from the children, and were quite alone. Varenka's heart throbbed so that she heard it beating, and felt that she was turning red and pale and red again.

To be the wife of a man like Koznishev, after her position with Madame Stahl, was to her imagination the height of happiness. Besides, she was almost certain that she was in love with him. And this moment it would have to be decided. She felt frightened. She dreaded both his speaking and his not speaking.

Now or never it must be said—that Sergey Ivanovitch felt too. Everything in the expression, the flushed cheeks and the downcast eyes of Varenka betrayed a painful suspense. Sergey Ivanovitch saw it and felt sorry for her. He felt even that to say nothing now would be a slight to her. Rapidly in his own mind he ran over all the arguments in support of his decision. He even said over to himself the words in which he meant to put his offer, but instead of those words, some utterly unexpected reflection that occurred to him made him ask:

"What is the difference between the 'birch' mushroom and the 'white' mushroom?"

Varenka's lips quivered with emotion as she answered:

"In the top part there is scarcely any difference, it's in the stalk."

And as soon as these words were uttered, both he and she felt that it was over, that what was to have been said would not be said; and their emotion, which had up to then been continually growing more intense, began to subside.

“The birch mushroom’s stalk suggests a dark man’s chin after two days without shaving,” said Sergey Ivanovitch, speaking quite calmly now.

“Yes, that’s true,” answered Varenka smiling, and unconsciously the direction of their walk changed. They began to turn towards the children. Varenka felt both sore and ashamed; at the same time she had a sense of relief.⁵

In love and in mushrooming, so much depends on timing!

Tolstoy must have loved mushrooms, right? He wrote with such evocative detail of them; his spirited little fictional children proudly collect them; Tolstoy’s wife, Sofia Andreevna Tolstaya, had a recipe for duck with mushrooms: he or their children must have enjoyed that dish--at least until 1885, when Tolstoy became a vegetarian. Sofia, the dynamo of their large, sometimes happy family, supervised the planting of a birch grove that became the best site for mushrooming at their estate.

But as it turns out, we learn from Sofia’s younger brother, Tolstoy himself “did not take part in the mushroom sport, a very favorite entertainment at Yasnaya Polyana, but he was able to encourage others to do it.”⁶ Up to age fifty or so, Tolstoy’s passionate sport was hunting *animals*, but from early manhood to the end of his long life he took daily long walks or rides through the woods. He usually gazed inward, upward or into the distance, leaving the mushrooms to others.

5 Leo Tolstoy. *Anna Karenina: A Novel*, Volume 2. Translated by Constance Garnett. New York: McClure, Phillips and Co.; 1901; 143-145.

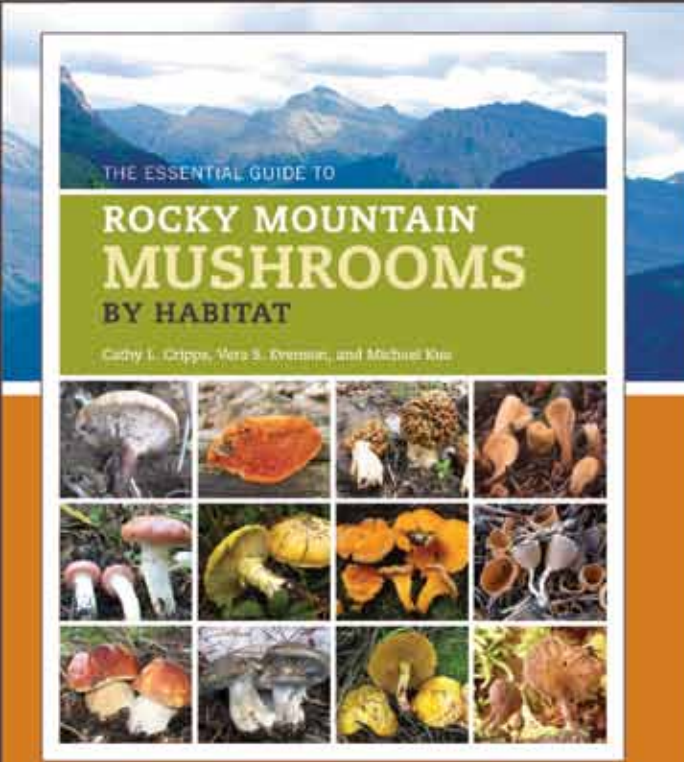
6 S. A. Bers. *Vospominaniya o Graf L. N. Tolstom (Remembrances of Count L. N. Tolstoy)*. Smolensk, Russia; 1894; 24. †

MUSHROOM

Cool as water,
Plucked of stem,
It floats in my two hands
Like some sea thing
Blind and twisted up
From the refrigerated
dark.
Velvet nuzzle nose,
It stains my fingers
Like tea leaves,
Like wet earth.
If I touch too hard,
It breaks,
Flings off
Its feathered gills
Fine as confetti.

O Sea Thing!
O Portabella!
Skulking into the night
Like your poisoned
cousins.
Against my tongue,
Above the sizzling skillet,
You are all white trout
And rubbery tire,
Forgotten sometimes,
Forbidden
Never.

Kathryn Winograd
Colorado




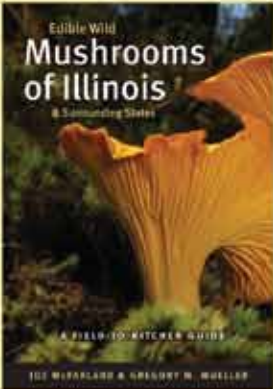
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