

# Frogs, Muses & Dostoevsky

## An Interview With Russian Writer Lara Vapnyar

by Mark Budman

If you want to find a good book in today's overcrowded market, you might feel like an Eastern European immigrant from the bygone Soviet era stampeding among other fellow immigrants in a Western grocery store. Or you might feel like you are running with the bulls in Pamplona. When you pass by a book with Lara Vapnyar's name on it, run no farther. And that's no bull.

Lara Vapnyar emigrated from Russia to New York in 1994 as an adult. They say if you begin learning a new language after 15, you will never succeed at it. In Vapnyar's case, they say wrong. She began publishing in English in 2002, in such writers' dream markets as *The New Yorker*, *Zoetrope*, and *Open City*. She published a collection of short stories, *There Are Jews in My House*, to critical acclaim. Gary Shteyngart, Louis Menand, and André Aciman bestowed praises upon her, but let me quote an Amazon reviewer, Ishuykina, from Brooklyn: "Vapnyar's writing is so light that you barely notice that you're reading." To me, that's the greatest honor a reader can confer on a writer.

Vapnyar's first novel, *Memoirs of a Muse*, will be published in 2006. Be ready for a stampede of book lovers and critics. TBR caught up with Vapnyar in February 2005 by phone.

**The Bloomsbury Review:** *I will start with the perennial question. You came to this country when you were 23. I take it you didn't speak English fluently, even if you studied it as a foreign language in school. They say that the cutoff age for a relatively effortless transition to another language is 15, but you, like Joseph Conrad and Vladimir Nabokov, began writing in a foreign language as an adult. Did you find the switch from Russian to English painful, or did it come to you as naturally as a set of new clothes or a new Internet provider?*

**Lara Vapnyar:** I've never written anything in Russian, and never thought of becoming a writer. The switch from no writing to writing was so shocking that it canceled out the shock of writing in a foreign language.

**TBR:** *You are pursuing a PhD in comparative literature. Even though you have not written fiction in Russian, how would you compare the two languages as the literary tool?*

**LV:** I miss the flexibility of Russian, the way you can invent new words in Russian by adding different suffixes and prefixes.

**TBR:** *I know what you mean. Весь берег был покрыт выкарабкивающимися лягушками—"The whole bank was covered with frogs crawling out of the water." "выкарабкивающимися" always beats "crawling out," right? Unless you are the editor of The New Yorker. They advise writers to write about what they know. Do you see yourself writing about Russia or the Russian community in America in the future, or do you see yourself transcending the ethnic boundaries (if they are indeed boundaries) and writing an all-American story?*

**LV:** I will always write about what I know, what I know emotionally, and I hope one day to write well enough so my writing would transcend boundaries to an all-human being story.

**TBR:** *You write in a powerful yet simple and relatively unadorned style. Did you try to delve into stylistic experiments just for fun? Short-shorts (flash)? Poetry?*

**LV:** I like to experiment very much, but I'm not serious enough about it, or I don't have confidence. The only poem I've ever written is called "The Ode to a Bottle of Champagne Bought on the Eve of Bush's Reelection." A horrible tear-jerking poem—I went through a whole box of Kleenex while I was writing it.

**TBR:** *Would you quote a line or two from this poem—as soon as I have my own box of Kleenex ready?*

**LV:** I'm too embarrassed to quote, but I can say that the most tragic part comes when the "lyric hero" finds out the results of the election just as she knocks over a bottle of champagne that her foolishly optimistic husband bought the night before to celebrate what he thought would be the results.

**TBR:** *I understand that you are writing a novel. What will it be about?*

**LV:** I just completed the novel. *Memoirs of a Muse*, due out from Pantheon in January 2006. It's about being a muse, among other things. Also about being and becoming American, and how recent immigrants see Americans.

**TBR:** *Is it hard to be a muse? Is an American muse different from all other muses? Tell us more. Let your readers bite their nails in anticipation or, as the Russian saying goes, "bite their elbows."*

**LV:** It's so hard to talk about my novel. It's about a modern Russian woman with a fixation on becoming a muse to a great writer. She hopes to fulfill this ambition here, in New York. Now, how do I make my readers "bite their elbows"? Perhaps by mentioning that there are 12 sex scenes in the novel and countless references to sex? But I have to be honest and say that not one of them describes good sex. This is one quote:

"When I went back to bed, I slipped my hand under the blanket. I didn't fantasize about the neighbor girl and her boyfriend. On the contrary, as soon as I got into bed I found the image of them repulsive. I fantasized, instead, about the dead writers, whose solemn faces lined the greasy pages of my schoolbooks. Gogol, Chekhov, Turgenev, Dostoevsky. Graying hair, prominent foreheads, knowing eyes. At times, the face of my writer suddenly turned into the face of one of the men I knew, and I'd put an end to my fantasy immediately. It was too weird, too shameful, to imagine how I would react the next time I saw that man. It was safer to stick with the dead.

"A dead writer would materialize in my room in his shabby—for some reason, I always imagined them shabby—nineteenth-century clothes and sit down on the edge of my bed with an expression so serious and so kind that it made me want to cry. He would gently sit me up, supporting my back with his hand, and press my hand to his chest. He would stroke my hair and my back and then unbutton my pajama top, slowly, button by button, whispering gentle words. Soon I was completely naked,

with a fully clothed dead writer in my bed (I didn't find the idea of a naked dead writer appealing), waiting for something wonderful to happen.

"After it was all over, the dead writer left my bed and my room, going back to the safe confinement of my textbooks."

This is another (my heroine is shown in the process of reading the memoirs of Dostoevsky's wife Anna Grigorievna):

"She sat bending over her work. She didn't raise her eyes, but she felt his presence. He was pacing back and forth, back and forth. The folds of his coat brushed against her back from time to time; his heavy feet made the floorboards creak. He sighed. He groaned. He murmured some unintelligible sounds. He looked at her—first without realizing that he was looking at her, but gradually becoming more and more aware of her. He stared at her delicate girlish neck. He took in the shape of her back, the color of her hair, the quick, firm movements of her hand, as he wove and spun the intricate patterns of his sentences. I found it hard to breathe. Yes, 'the other woman,' along with the man, had been dead for almost a hundred years, but that didn't make my jealousy any less real or less painful. I hated Anna Grigorievna. I hated her guts. I choked with rage when she described how Dostoevsky had called her affectionate names, bought her fruit and sweets, and declared his love on his knees (usually after he had gambled away yet another sum of money—but I was too flustered to notice those details at the time). Whenever I read that he had yelled at her or ignored her, I was filled with the sweetest joy."

**TBR:** *Do you feel that writing a novel gives you more artistic freedom than writing a short story because you are not bound by a 5,000- or 6,000-word limit anymore? Or perhaps it's like swimming in the ocean after a calm lake.*

**LV:** I expected that writing a novel shouldn't be very different from writing several short stories about the same characters, but it turned out so much harder. I was plagued by confinement rather than freedom, because every little part must have contributed something to the whole.

**TBR:** *But isn't this true about all writing—you can't beat around the bush in short stories either?*

**LV:** The problem for me was that I treated each of my 12 chapters as a short story, and then I had to make all 12 work together as a novel.

**TBR:** *The last question: Do you own a samovar or a hand-cranked meat grinder?*

**LV:** No, but I still own and even sometimes wear my Russian winter coat that I wore on the way to the U.S. ■

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INTERVIEWER: **Mark Budman's** fiction and poetry have appeared or are scheduled to appear in such literary magazines as *Mississippi Review*, *Virginia Quarterly*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Iowa Review*, *Turnrow*, *McSweeney's*, and in many other publications in the U.S., Canada, England, France, and Australia. *Exquisite Corpse* nominated him for the XXVI Pushcart Prize. He is the publisher of a flash (short-shorts) fiction magazine, *Vestal Review*, [www.vestalreview.net](http://www.vestalreview.net).