

Gambling, Debt, and Literary Fortune

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Andrew D. Kaufman, *The Gambler Wife: A True Story of Love, Risk, and the Woman Who Saved Dostoyevsky*. Riverhead Books, 400pp., \$30 cloth, \$18 paper.

Alex Christofi, *Dostoevsky in Love: An Intimate Life*. Bloomsbury Continuum, 256pp., \$35 cloth, \$15 paper.

IN JULY 1865, FYODOR DOSTOYEVSKY SIGNED A CONTRACT with the publisher Fyodor Stellovsky that obligated him to produce a new novel by November of the following year. If Dostoyevsky were to miss the deadline, the contract stipulated, he would forfeit the rights to and income from everything he wrote over the next nine years.

In the months that followed, Dostoyevsky concerned himself not with the novel he owed Stellovsky but with writing *Crime and Punishment*, the story of a poor student in Petersburg who, convinced he has the right to transcend the staid morality of his time and place, murders an old pawnbroker and her sister. *Crime* was serialized over the course of 1866 to wide acclaim, and it brought its cash-strapped author a regular income. But Dostoyevsky was still contractually bound to produce a separate novel for Stellovsky; a month out from the deadline, he hadn't written a single line.

Enter Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina, a 20-year-old stenography student whom Dostoyevsky hired to help him finish the manuscript for *The Gambler*, as the novel would be known. Anna's heroic efforts allowed Fyodor to finish the book in time, and soon after it was published, the two were married.

Andrew D. Kaufman begins *The Gambler Wife: A True Story of Love, Risk, and the Woman Who Saved Dostoyevsky* by narrating the initial encounter between Anna and the famous author. On the morning of October 4, 1866, Anna arrived at Fyodor's Petersburg apartment, where she was let in by the maid. "Two minutes later,"

Kaufman writes, “Dostoyevsky appeared. Without so much as a greeting, he commanded Anna to go to his study while he fetched tea. And then he was gone again.” When “the enigmatic fellow she’d encountered earlier reappeared,” Anna strived to project confidence. “This was a moment she had been anticipating longer than she might have cared to admit.”

The first meeting between employee and employer was a strained affair. Fyodor acted irritably and condescendingly toward Anna, criticizing her dictation skills and offering up misogynistic platitudes about women’s lack of fitness for work. Over the course of the month, however, Fyodor became gradually more impressed with Anna’s abilities as a stenographer, and work on the novel proceeded swiftly. The manuscript of *The Gambler*, the story of a young man who, like the author, was hopelessly addicted to roulette, was finished on October 29th and submitted the next day. Though not one of the author’s best-loved novels, its publication saw him through a time of professional crisis, and it most certainly would not have been finished if not for Anna.

Fyodor and Anna’s collaboration on *The Gambler* is also retold in Alex Christofi’s *Dostoyevsky in Love: An Intimate Life*. This short, unorthodox biography, despite its title, is not merely a chronicle of Dostoyevsky’s romantic history. (He’d been married and widowed before he wed Anna.) Christofi, a London-based writer and editor, intersperses Dostoyevsky’s correspondence, fictions and other written work to create a real-time psychological portrait of his subject.

The beginning of Christofi’s chapter on *The Gambler*, for instance, begins with a snippet from a letter Dostoyevsky wrote to a friend in July 1866: “I’m exceedingly anxious about Stellovsky, and I even see him in my dreams.” Christofi later reproduces a conversation in which Fyodor, elliptically, tries to gauge whether Anna could love a man like him, and inserts the following quote from *Crime and Punishment* as an aside: “Nothing in the world is harder than candor.”

The author puts this technique to use while recounting the great dramas of Dostoyevsky’s life: birth and upbringing in Moscow; membership in the radical Petrashevsky Circle; death sentence, last-minute commutation and exile to hard labor in Siberia; return from exile and repeated gambling binges abroad; battles against epilepsy and creditors; the literary successes. And, yes, his romantic history, including his marriage (and professional collaboration) with Anna. While Joseph Frank’s multi-volume biography remains the definitive life of Dostoyevsky, Christofi’s book is a well-crafted distillation of his life and work.

Kaufman, a lecturer in Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Virginia, does an admirable job in *The Gambler Wife* placing his subject in her milieu. Born in Petersburg in 1846, Anna came of age during a period of social awakening in Russia. She considered herself a

“girl of the sixties,” as feminists of her generation styled themselves in the wake of Emperor Alexander II’s campaign of social reform, which included the abolition of serfdom in 1861.

To establish context for Anna’s life and thought, Kaufman points to Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s 1863 novel *What Is To Be Done?*, which Kaufman calls a “bible” for Russian feminists in the 1860s. Chernyshevsky’s heroine is Vera Pavlova, a woman who flouts conservative Russia’s narrow expectations of her. Vera Pavlova, Kaufman writes, was “one of the earliest agents of women’s liberation in Russian fiction, exhibiting willpower, social consciousness, and the capacity for pragmatic action—the very model of a modern, emancipated woman.” Though Anna left no thoughts about the novel, published when she was 16, Kaufman writes that she “would almost certainly” have read it or at least been familiar with its ideals.

Anna and Fyodor were wed on February 15, 1867, in Petersburg’s Troitse-Izmailovsky Cathedral. From the start, Dostoyevsky proved a difficult man to be married to. At a family dinner a few nights after their wedding, he suffered a series of epileptic attacks. “What a dreadful night I spent,” Anna wrote of that evening. “It was then that I realized . . . the full horror of Fyodor Mikhailovich’s disease.” (Her memoirs are quoted to good effect in Kaufman’s chronicle.) Fyodor’s seizures, and Anna’s efforts to nurse him back to health, were a constant of their marriage—as were money troubles, exacerbated by Fyodor’s pathological gambling addiction. Yet so too was their fruitful literary collaboration, which also resulted in Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot* (1869), *Demons* (1872), *The Adolescent* (1875) and his masterpiece, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880).

In April, the newlyweds embarked on a honeymoon that was meant to last three months, but due to Dostoyevsky’s inability to pay back creditors, they wouldn’t return to Russia for four years. It was a period of financial desperation, as Dostoyevsky gambled away all their money in German spa towns. The couple’s despair was compounded by the death of their infant daughter, Sonya, in 1868. To say the marriage was tested would be an understatement; Anna would repeatedly pawn her clothing and jewelry to feed her husband’s habit and keep them financially afloat, even as Fyodor was sending overtures to his old flame Polina Suslova, who inspired *femme fatale* figures in a number of his novels. (Anna, in an effort to stave off an affair, began her own illicit correspondence with Polina.)

At one point during this long exile, Anna, who several times considered leaving her profligate husband before thinking better of it, took matters into her own hands. The title of Kaufman’s book takes on an additional meaning as he recounts a gambling play of Anna’s own. In Baden-Baden, after Dostoyevsky blew through a sum that had been set aside to pay the rent, she rushed to the casino to try her hand recouping the money her husband lost. Kaufman writes:

She staked a thaler on the first twelve numbers and won two. Then she bet on the last twelve, and won another two. That put her up by four thalers. Then she lost three times in a row, only to win back two thalers, then another four, then lose two, then win five. She was up by seven, now eight, or one hundred ten dollars in today's money. It was a terrific roll, she knew—just the time for her to quit the table, as she'd so often advised Dostoyevsky to do after a winning streak.

But then she started losing, after which her husband appeared, reprimanding her for being in the casino and bidding her to leave. Unlike Dostoyevsky, Kaufman points out, “she had managed to leave the tables with only one thaler less than she'd come with.”

In 1871, while the couple was living in Dresden, Dostoyevsky was struggling mightily to complete *Demons*, his response to the nihilist fervor he saw overcoming Russia's intelligentsia. The couple was in the familiar position of staking their livelihood, nay, their survival, on the success of a new novel. Anna, discerning how intertwined her husband's creative fire had become with his gambling addiction, took the audacious step of recommending he take a trip to the casino in Wiesbaden. “It was an enormous gamble,” Kaufman writes, “but the sacrifice was, Anna knew, essential.”

Of course he lost everything, but the episode seemed to finally reveal to him the true depth of his habit, that it threatened not only his marriage but the life of his wife. Before returning to Dresden, he wrote to Anna: “I'll remember this my whole life and bless you every time, my angel. No, now I'm yours, yours inseparably, entirely yours.”

Kaufman's book, ostensibly focused on Anna, reads for stretches at a time like a biography of the more famous husband, though given the comparative volume of available material about each, that's rather understandable. Anna truly comes into her own in the book's latter pages, which discuss her prowess as a publisher and businesswoman. The couple finally returned to Russia in the summer of 1871, and *Demons* was serialized over the following year. But money was still a concern, bidding Anna to research the financial prospects of starting a publishing business to bring out her husband's works. On January 22, 1873—“a day that Anna would proudly remember as the start of her career as a publisher”—a Petersburg newspaper ran an advertisement for a stand-alone volume of *Demons*. Bookstores began clamoring to carry it. Before the end of the year, Anna sold 3,000 copies; over the next couple of years, the solo edition of *Demons* netted a profit of 4,000 rubles—around \$55,000 in today's money.

In 1874, Anna brought out the first stand-alone edition of *The Idiot*, which had flopped when first serialized in 1868-1869 but now found commercial success. With Fyodor's gambling under control, and Anna's competence selling his works, the couple's money problems gradually began to dissipate. A new edition of

Notes From the House of the Dead, Dostoyevsky's autobiographical account of life in the gulag, published a decade before, soon appeared. "They were full partners now," Kaufman writes of husband and wife. "Beyond participating in his creative work as his stenographer, first reader, and editor, [Anna] also controlled all other aspects of their publishing enterprise: negotiating with paper suppliers, typesetters, printers, and booksellers, and handling almost all of their business correspondence." This fruitful arrangement continued until Dostoyevsky's death in 1881, a year after the publication of *The Brothers Karamazov*, one of the towering artistic achievements of world history.

Anna outlived her husband by 37 years, dying at the age of 71 in 1918. She spent her widowhood championing her husband's literary legacy. She brought out a volume of his collected works and successfully lobbied the government to amend a 1910 law stipulating that an artist's family would lose the copyrights on their forebear's works after thirty years. She would ultimately sell these copyrights to a publisher for the sum of 150,000 rubles.

Dostoyevsky worried about the direction Russia's radical movement was headed. Emperor Alexander II was assassinated by revolutionaries a month after Dostoyevsky's death. In 1917, the penultimate year of Anna's life, the Bolsheviks took power in Russia. Five days after the February Revolution commenced, Kaufman writes, the Bolsheviks broke into a sanitarium on the outskirts of Petersburg where Anna was staying. They were searching for a government official who they believed was hiding there. Anna had ample reason to be scared, seeing that she was the widow of "nineteenth-century Russia's most passionate voice for conservatism, a man who had spent the last decade of his life warning Russians against these very revolutionaries."

She pleaded with them not to hurt her. "Don't be afraid," the group leader responded. "We're not here for you. We know who you are and won't do anything bad to you." As he explained to another sanitarium guest: "We won't bother her. We respect Dostoyevsky." If not for Anna Snitkina, her famous husband's literary collaborator, who saw him through the throes of ill-health and a gambling addiction, and brought out his works to a wide readership, they likely would have felt different. 1