

□ Contemporary
Literary Criticism

CLC 389

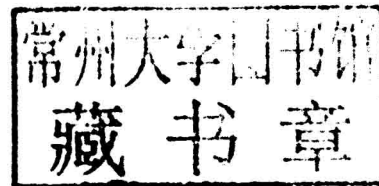
YEARBOOK 2014

Volume 389

Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook 2014

A Retrospective Covering the Year's
New Authors, Prizewinners, and Obituaries

Lawrence J. Trudeau
EDITOR



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Contemporary
Literary Criticism
Yearbook 2014

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Preface

Contemporary Literary Criticism Yearbook is part of the ongoing *Contemporary Literary Criticism (CLC)* series. After a ten-year hiatus in which no *CLC Yearbook* volumes were published from 1998-2007, the *CLC Yearbook* volumes are now published once annually, beginning with Volume 280, a literary retrospective of 2008. *CLC* provides a comprehensive survey of modern literature by presenting criticism on the works of novelists, poets, playwrights, short-story writers, scriptwriters, and other creative writers now living or who died after December 31, 1999. Volumes published from 1973 through 1999 include authors who died after December 31, 1959. A strong emphasis is placed on including criticism of works by established authors who frequently appear on syllabuses of high school and college literature courses.

To complement this broad coverage, the *CLC Yearbook* focuses more specifically on a given year's literary activities and features a larger number of currently noteworthy authors than is possible in standard *CLC* volumes. *CLC Yearbook* provides students, teachers, librarians, researchers, and general readers with information and commentary on the outstanding literary works and events of a given year.

Format of the Book

CLC Volume 389: Yearbook 2014, which includes criticism on fourteen authors, is divided into three sections—"New Authors," "Prizewinners," and "In Memoriam" entries.

New Authors—This section introduces six writers who received significant critical recognition for their first major work(s) of fiction during 2014 or whose work was translated into English or published in the United States for the first time. Authors were selected for inclusion if their work was reviewed in several prominent literary periodicals.

Prizewinners—This section begins with a list of literary prizes and honors announced in 2014, citing the award, award criteria, the recipient, and the title of the prizewinning work (if applicable). Following the listing of prizewinners is a presentation of four entries on individual award winners, representing a mixture of genres and nationalities.

In Memoriam—This section consists of critical essays, reminiscences, tributes, retrospective articles, and obituary notices on four authors who died during 2014. In addition, an Obituaries section follows the four "In Memoriam" entries. The Obituaries provide brief biographical information on other deceased prominent literary figures who died during 2014.

Organization of the Book

The *CLC Yearbook* consists of criticism drawn from literary reviews, general magazines, newspapers, websites, books, and scholarly journals. *Yearbook* entries variously contain the following elements:

- An **Author Heading** in the "New Authors" and "Prizewinners" sections cites the name under which the author most commonly wrote, and the title of the work discussed in the entry (if applicable); the "In Memoriam" section includes the author's name and birth and death years. The author's full name, pseudonyms (if any) under which the author has published, nationality, and principal genres are listed on the first line of the author entry.
- A brief **Introduction** to the author and his or her work precedes the reprinted criticism in the "New Authors" sections.
- A **Biographical Information, Major Works, and Critical Reception** section contains background information that introduces the reader to the author or work that is the subject of each "Prizewinners" entry and each "In Memoriam" entry.
- A listing of **Principal Works** is included for all entries in the "Prizewinners" and "In Memoriam" sections.

- The reprinted **Criticism** represents essays selected by editors to reflect the spectrum of opinion about a specific work or about an author's writing in general. The criticism is typically arranged chronologically, adding a useful perspective to the entry. In the "New Authors," "Prizewinners," and "In Memoriam" sections, all titles by the author being discussed are printed in boldface type, enabling the reader to more easily identify the author's work.
- A complete **Bibliographical Citation**, designed to help the user find the original essay or book, precedes each selected piece of reprinted criticism.
- Critical essays are prefaced by brief **Annotations** explicating each piece.
- An annotated bibliography of **Further Reading** appears at the end of each entry and suggests resources for additional study. In some cases, significant essays for which the editors could not obtain reprint rights are included here. **Cross references**, presented as boxed material, following the Further Reading list provide references to other bibliographical and critical sources on the author in series published by Gale.

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The *CLC Yearbook* also includes the following features:

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A **Cumulative Nationality Index** lists all authors featured in *CLC* by nationality, followed by the number of the *CLC* volume in which their entry appears.

A **Cumulative Topic Index** lists the literary themes and topics treated in the series as well as in other Literary Criticism Series.

An alphabetical **Title Index** accompanies each volume of *CLC*. Listings of titles by authors covered in the given volume are followed by the author's name and the corresponding page numbers where the titles are discussed. English translations of foreign titles and variations of titles are cross-referenced to the title under which a work was originally published. Titles of novels, dramas, films, nonfiction books, and poetry, short-story, or essay collections are printed in italics, while individual poems, short stories, and essays are printed in roman type within quotation marks. All titles reviewed in *CLC* and in the other Literary Criticism Series can be found online in the *Gale Literary Index*.

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When citing criticism reprinted in the Literary Criticism Series, students should provide complete bibliographic information so that the cited essay can be located in the original print or electronic source. Students who quote directly from reprinted criticism may use any accepted bibliographic format, such as Modern Language Association (MLA) style or University of Chicago Press style. Both the MLA and the University of Chicago formats are acceptable and recognized as being the current standards for citations. It is important, however, to choose one format for all citations; do not mix the two formats within a list of citations.

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Wesley, Marilyn C. "Anne Hébert: The Tragic Melodramas." *Canadian Women Writing Fiction*. Ed. Mickey Pearlman. Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1993. 41-52. Rpt. in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. Ed. Jeffrey W. Hunter. Vol. 246. Detroit: Gale, 2008. 276-82. Print.

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New Authors

Yelena Akhtiorskaya

Panic in a Suitcase

Ukrainian-born American novelist and essayist.

The following entry provides an overview of critical response to Akhtiorskaya's novel *Panic in a Suitcase* (2014).

INTRODUCTION

Panic in a Suitcase is the highly praised first novel by Yelena Akhtiorskaya, who was born in Odessa, in the Soviet Union, in 1985 and immigrated to Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, with her family when she was seven years old. She received an MFA from Columbia University and was awarded a Posen Fellowship in fiction. Set in Brighton Beach and Odessa, *Panic in a Suitcase* follows three generations of the Nasmertov family. The novel is divided into two parts, the first focusing on Pasha, an aloof poet of some renown and the last Nasmertov still living in Odessa, and the second on his niece Frida, who immigrated with the rest of the family to the United States when she was a child. The novel opens in 1993, as the family prepares for Pasha's first visit to Brighton Beach. His mother, Esther, has been diagnosed with breast cancer, and the family hopes to convince him to relocate permanently to America.

After Pasha's arrival, the family takes trips that reflect their life in the old country, going first to the beach at Coney Island—reminiscent of that in Odessa—and then to a lakeside cabin in upstate New York that evokes memories of their beloved summer dacha. In Manhattan, Pasha catches up with immigrant friends, visits flea markets and museums, and attends literary functions. Though he enjoys the experience and pledges to begin his application for immigrant status, deep down he knows he will remain in Odessa. As Pasha's sister, Marina, drops him off at the airport for his return flight, she realizes that she and the rest of family actually prefer that Pasha remain in Ukraine, maintaining their connection to the homeland.

When Esther takes a turn for the worse the following year, Pasha returns. Despite knowing that the visit complicates his chances for immigration, the family continues to encourage Pasha's relocation. Hoping to secure Pasha employment in the United States, his father, Robert, secretly sets up a meeting with a Harvard professor interested in translating a volume of Pasha's poetry into English. Robert hopes also to introduce the professor to Frida, whom the family hopes will follow in her grandparents' footsteps and become a doctor. The idea backfires when Frida has a tantrum and the professor turns out to be a drunk. Later

in the trip, Pasha returns from an evening spent with several New York writers to find that Esther has died. After the funeral, he returns to Odessa and the issue of his immigration is dropped.

The second part of the novel is set in 2008. Frida, now in her mid-twenties, is visiting home on summer break from medical school. Lonely, insecure, and frustrated with her studies, she begs Marina to allow her to visit Odessa to attend the wedding of Pasha's son, Sanya. Marina and the rest of the family eventually give in, on the condition that Frida will closely monitor conditions in Odessa, Pasha's lifestyle, and, most important, the state of the dacha.

In Odessa, Frida stays in the gloomy apartment shared by Pasha, now the most eminent yet maligned literary figure in the city, and his second wife, Sveta, whom he met in New York during his first visit. Frida is barely able to venture into the city before Pasha informs her that he and Sveta will soon be leaving to attend a literary conference in Georgia, that the dacha has been abandoned, and that Sveta's brother and his family will be vacationing at the apartment while the couple is away. On the morning of Pasha and Sveta's departure, Frida learns that Sanya's wedding has been called off. She soon runs afoul of Sveta's family and wanders aimlessly around Odessa until she finds herself outside the dacha, which is blocked from view by a large locked gate.

Overcome with exhaustion and desperation, Frida collapses and is accosted by Pasha's ex-wife, Nadia, who has taken over the dacha. Nadia opens the gate for her, revealing a dilapidated structure and an overgrown plot of land. She explains that her cousins, who are "sickly from Chernobyl," have been using the estate as a sanatorium. When Nadia falls asleep, Frida flees to a crowded beach. While she is swimming, her cell phone and money are stolen. When she returns to Pasha's apartment, she learns that Sanya and his fiancée have reconciled. Frida determines that she will not return to medical school and will deliberately miss her flight back to the United States.

Despite enjoying the conference, Pasha experiences frustration after he alienates himself during an interview by criticizing the majority of the poets there. He calls Frida and, for the first time, candidly describes his disappointment with life in Odessa and his realization that the works for which he regularly receives praise are from early in his career. Frida informs Pasha that Sanya's wedding is back

on, and he resolves to leave the conference early and return to Odessa.

Panic in a Suitcase subverts what Maureen Corrigan (2014; see Further Reading) called “the classic coming-to-America tale.” In a 2014 interview with NPR (see Further Reading), Akhtiorskaya characterized the work as an “anti-immigrant immigrant novel,” noting that she sought to complicate the idea that a new country offers “incredible opportunities and it’s so much better than the old place and you just forge ahead.” Though Pasha develops an affection for American culture, he is ultimately unable to shake the impression that his “fellow countrymen hadn’t ventured bravely into a new land, they’d borrowed a tiny nook at the very rear of someone else’s crumbling estate to make a tidy replication of the messy, imperfect original they’d gone through so many hurdles to escape, imprisoning themselves in their own lack of imagination.” Frida has a similarly sobering experience in Odessa. Though the city “had more obligatory sights than London, Paris, and Rome combined” according to her family, she regards Odessa as “a backwater town, delusional province, cultural wasteland.”

As Yevgeniya Traps (2014; see Further Reading) observed, the novel ultimately suggests that “time and place do not necessarily change the fundamental facts of personality and of self-conception.” Near the end of his visit, Pasha admits that he had decided against immigrating well before arriving in Brighton Beach. His opinion that decisions are the inevitable result of “inchoate stirring forces” is contrasted with Frida’s realization that the “illusion of destiny” stems from denying one’s ability to anticipate and actively influence events. While her trip is equally, if not more, disappointing than Pasha’s, Frida resolves not to take “solace in the thought that at least it was meant to be so,” but instead to forge from the experience a positive outcome.

Panic in a Suitcase has received widespread critical acclaim, earning a spot on most respected notable-books-of-the-year lists. Stephanie Shapiro (2014; see Further Reading) called it a “polished and accomplished first novel,” comparing Akhtiorskaya’s sense of humor to that of Vladimir Nabokov and the Marx brothers. Carlo Wolff (2014) praised Akhtiorskaya’s “linguistic gifts,” but took issue with her “frequent shifts in focus and viewpoint.” Nonetheless, Wolff described *Panic in a Suitcase* as worthwhile for its “weird contemporary take on the classic Russian novel.” While Traps expressed reservations about critical comparisons between *Panic in a Suitcase* and the novels of Nabokov, she predicted that Akhtiorskaya “may well write a true masterpiece and soon.”

Hollis Beach

PRINCIPAL WORK

Panic in a Suitcase. New York: Penguin, 2014. Print. (Novel)

CRITICISM

Carlo Wolff (review date 2014)

SOURCE: Wolff, Carlo. “Brand-New World, Same Old Family: In *Panic in a Suitcase*, Yelena Akhtiorskaya Pens a Funny Tale of Russian Emigrés.” Rev. of *Panic in a Suitcase*, by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* 24 Aug. 2014: B5. Print.

[In the following review, Wolff lauds Akhtiorskaya’s humor and “linguistic gifts,” but takes issue with her “frequent shifts in focus and viewpoint.” Nonetheless, Wolff describes *Panic in a Suitcase* as “a weird contemporary take on the classic Russian novel” that is “worth slogging through.”]

Like some traditional Russian meals, Yelena Akhtiorskaya’s debut novel “**Panic in a Suitcase**” is a matter of many courses. And like those feasts, it’s worth slogging through (the caviar and vodka are great in that country, but the main dishes can be overcooked) for dessert. Reaching the end is worth the journey, though the trip can be taxing.

“**Panic in a Suitcase**” is a dense, baroque fiction about the Nasmertov family in its native Odessa and in Brighton Beach, Brooklyn, the family’s more challenging, if more promising, new home. It’s a lyrical, funny and scattered novel.

The Nasmertov around whom “**Panic**” [*Panic in a Suitcase*] revolves is Pavel Robertovich, or Pasha, a neurotic poet of girth, hypochondria and appetite. Pasha’s sister, the thrifty Marina, deplores his lack of ambition; Frida, Marina’s restless daughter (and likely an autobiographical ringer for the author herself), admires her uncle. The relationship between Frida and Pasha is among the more deftly crafted plot lines in this complicated, occasionally vexing book.

“**Panic**” spans 20 years in exploring cities with much in common: a seaside locale, retail as Russian in Brooklyn as in Ukraine, close-knit, cramped Jewish families, a fatalistic but nourishing sense of humor.

While there is much to admire, particularly the language, Ms. Akhtiorskaya overstuffs her book, tracking one person, then another, then a third. The characters are well developed, but the frequent shifts in focus and viewpoint hobble the book’s drive.

I read this with interest and admiration—Ms. Akhtiorskaya, who is under 30, writes like an old soul, making “**Panic**” a weird contemporary take on the classic Russian novel—but felt a bit lost if I put it down for a few days. Still, it always drew me back in.

Launched with Pasha’s first visit to the United States, capped by the imminent Odessa wedding of Pasha’s son Sanya (whom we never get to know), “**Panic**” attempts to bridge the gap between the old (Odessa) and the new

(Brighton Beach). Ms. Akhtiorskaya clearly feels at home in both.

Frida, too, feels at home, as in a gathering in Brighton Beach, where Frida meets a friend and unwinds, plopping herself into a beanbag chair:

The other beanbag chairs were occupied by youngish intellectual types who exhibited in equal measure Odessa humor, Petersburg interests (sans pretensions), Moscow cosmopolitanism (without the coarseness of hard consonants), and New York transit proficiency; who watched Tarnovsky films and played chess (and would finally succeed in teaching her how); who listened to Pink Floyd and Vysotsky and could recite whole stanzas of *Eugene Onegin* but never went on too long doing so, choosing instead to dance a little, European style, inside the beanbag fortress; who had jobs in the sciences but whose passions lay in art and literature; who got together every weekend in a casual but never obligatory manner and considered this gang, this kompaniya of theirs, a second family, sort of the way her parents considered their kompaniya.

There's a whole social milieu here. There's also a very long sentence. The two speak to Ms. Akhtiorskaya's gift—and to what complicates the book.

Ms. Akhtiorskaya can be funny, too, which helps. When Frida arrives in Odessa for Sanya's wedding, her half brother Volk meets her at the airport. The airport is challenging:

Her heart intensified its drum as she charged at the automatic doors separating her from Odessa air, like Moses marching at a sea that didn't split. Momentum brought her cheek up against the glass. Peeling herself off, she stepped back, dumbstruck. Volk whipped out a pocketknife. He inserted the blade into a crack between doors and flipped his wrist, creating a space that his fingers could squeeze through, and proceeded to very unautomatically pry apart the doors.

“Panic in a Suitcase” effectively paints the picture of family that is anything but smooth, and for the most part, Ms. Akhtiorskaya's unique linguistic gifts reflect and even illuminate her rough-textured worlds.

Thomas Chatterton Williams (review date 2014)

SOURCE: Williams, Thomas Chatterton. Rev. of *Panic in a Suitcase*, by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. *San Francisco Chronicle* 7 Sept. 2014: NM6. Print.

[In the following review, Williams claims that in *Panic in a Suitcase* Akhtiorskaya “approaches the fundamental experience of exile with tenderness and satiric wit.” He characterizes the novel as an examination of “why you can't go home again.”]

Border-controlled fact informs fiction again in Yelena Akhtiorskaya's spirited first novel about a family of Ukrainian immigrants who relocate from Odessa to Brighton Beach. Akhtiorskaya herself arrived in the Little Odessa

section of Brooklyn when she was 7. Her narrative, which bounces back and forth between the two countries, opens in 1993 and spans a decade and a half in the lives of the Nasmertov family, all of whom have immigrated to America except for Pasha, an indecisive, childlike 40-year-old favorite son, who “doesn't tie shoelaces or own a cell phone” and has managed to stay behind. But at his sister's prodding, he, too, makes the trip to Brooklyn to visit their cancer-stricken mother. Pasha is presented in Akhtiorskaya's typically rich prose: “sickly from the outset, the dysfunction lying in the vital organs (heart, lungs), nose and ears disproportionately large for the head, head abnormally large for the body, premature stains under the eyes, spooky immobility of gaze, vermicelli limbs, metabolic peculiarities.” He is also described as “a literary man . . . the greatest poet—not just in Odessa, mind you, but in all of the former SSSR!” Akhtiorskaya approaches the fundamental experience of exile with tenderness and satiric wit from the perspective of an un-victimized family struggling to make it in America but with the means and, once the Soviet Union falls, freedom to return home should they wish to. Later on, when Pasha's young niece, Frida, now an uninspired medical school student, attends her cousin's wedding in Odessa, she finds herself in “a city, a nation, a society, perhaps a whole culture in decay,” alienated in the mythologized land of her family's collective imagination. There are many reasons, and not all of them tragic, Akhtiorskaya wryly shows, why you can't go home again.

FURTHER READING

Criticism

Akhtiorskaya, Yelena. “Out of Ukraine, This ‘Suitcase’ Packs an Immigrant's Story with Humor.” Interview by Ari Shapiro. *National Public Radio*. Natl. Public Radio, 29 July 2014. Web. 15 July 2015.

Calls *Panic in a Suitcase* an “anti-immigrant immigrant novel.” Akhtiorskaya also discusses the autobiographical elements of *Panic in a Suitcase* and the changes that have occurred in Odessa since her youth.

———. “Interview with Yelena Akhtiorskaya.” Interview by Diana Filar. *Blue Mesa Review* 31 (2015): n. pag. Web. 15 July 2015.

An extensive interview that focuses mainly on the autobiographical aspects of *Panic in a Suitcase*. Akhtiorskaya reveals that she is working on a second novel that “involves the same characters, the same family.”

Block, Lisa. Rev. of *Panic in a Suitcase*, by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. *Library Journal* May 2014: 64. Print.

Praises Akhtiorskaya's “beautiful prose” and refreshing perspective on the immigrant experience. Block calls *Panic in a Suitcase* a “touching and darkly funny first novel.”

Charles, Ron. Rev. of *Panic in a Suitcase*, by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. *Washington Post*. Washington Post, 22 July 2014. Web. 15 July 2015.

Describes *Panic in a Suitcase* as “the great immigrant story drained of its inspirational hype.” Charles lauds Akhtiorskaya’s prose for its “Slavic accent and sense of humor pickled in Eastern European endurance.”

Corrigan, Maureen. “*Panic in a Suitcase* Puts a Fresh Spin on a Coming-to-America Story.” Rev. of *Panic in a Suitcase*, by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. *Fresh Air*. Natl. Public Radio. WHYY, Philadelphia, 24 July 2014. Radio.

Comments on the lack of plot in *Panic in a Suitcase*, describing it as “a multitude of exuberant set pieces about modern émigré life.” Corrigan identifies Akhtiorskaya’s “offbeat way with words” and subversive handling of “the classic coming-to-America tale” as the novel’s primary strengths.

Shapiro, Stephanie. “From Russia with Love—and Duct Tape.” Rev. of *Panic in a Suitcase*, by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. *Buffalo News* 23 Nov. 2014: 34. Print.

Observes that “stereotypes never appear” in *Panic in a Suitcase*, which she calls a “polished and accom-

plished first novel.” Shapiro compares Akhtiorskaya’s sense of humor to that of Vladimir Nabokov and the Marx brothers.

Traps, Yevgeniya. “No Need to Panic, This Novel Is a Pleasure and a Revelation: Yelena Akhtiorskaya’s Debut Isn’t as Nabokovian as Some People are Saying, but It Is Surprisingly Woolfian.” Rev. of *Panic in a Suitcase*, by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. *Forward* 29 Aug. 2014: 15. Print.

Applauds *Panic in a Suitcase* as an “unexpectedly refreshing” work written in “crystalline prose prone to humor and insight.” Traps notes that the novel is primarily concerned with “the ways in which time and place do not necessarily change the fundamental facts of personality and of self-conception.”

Waclawiak, Karolina. “Some Assimilation Required.” Rev. of *Panic in a Suitcase*, by Yelena Akhtiorskaya. *New York Times* 17 Aug. 2014: BR24. Print.

Characterizes *Panic in a Suitcase* as a moving exploration of the “immigrant duality” between assimilation and taking refuge in a “facsimile community” in an adopted country. Waclawiak praises Akhtiorskaya’s humor and “crisp and gorgeous” prose.

Additional information on Akhtiorskaya’s life and works is contained in the following sources published by Gale: *Contemporary Authors*, Vol. 366; and *Literature Resource Center*.