FOREWORD REVIEWS THE INDIE WE LOVE.

Literary

Night of Denial: Stories and Novellas
Ivan Bunin
Robert Bowie, translator
Northwestern University Press
978-0-8101-1403-6
(August 17, 2006)

This author 1870—1953), who won the Nobel Prize in 1933 for his fictionalized autobiography *Life of Arseniev*, and whose *The Elaghin Affair and Other Stories* was translated by Bernard Guerney, remains too little known and appreciated in America. This is surprising: in recent years Thomas Marullo, translator/editor, and Ivan R. Dee, publisher, brought readers the highly engaging *Russian Requiem, 1885—1920**, *From the Other Shore, 1920*—1933*, and *The Twilight of Emigré Russia: 1934—1953*—all drawn from Bunin's letters, diaries, and fiction.

Bunin was a consummate man of letters. Born into a once rich but later financially-strapped family, he retained a hint of the patrician, though harsh realities forced him into modest employments until the Revolution forced him into exile. Before he was twenty, he began publishing poems and sketches of country life; he met Tolstoy and also Chekhov and Gorky these two became close friends), and later Nabokov, who admired his work. Both he and Nabokov kept ahead of the Bolsheviks; both left from Odessa for the West. Bunin, who settled in France, wrote scholarly studies of Tolstoy and Chekhov and broad-market works on Russia. Best known were *Cursed Days* 1908), a searing memoir of the Revolution; *The Village* 1910), in which the raw harshness of rural life is unsentimentally presented, and "The Gentleman from San Francisco" 1922), a penetrating short story on the transitoriness of power and personality. Bunin continued to write until he was eighty, when he completed *Portraits and Memories*.

Now Robert Bowie professor emeritus of Russian, Miami University, Ohio) and Northwestern University have rendered the author and literature a signal service in presenting *Night of Denial: Stories and Novellas*, a memorable selection of Bunin's writings. A number have been translated previously and a collection translated by Graham Hettlinger appeared in 2002. Bowie differs from his predecessors in undertaking a critical edition of forty stories, for each of which he provides interesting and illuminating notes. In addition, his ninety-page

afterword is a first-rate essay on Bunin, his fluid narrative structures, his psychological acuity, his “cruel talent,” his strengths, weaknesses, and influences—and his empathetic understanding of the Slavic soul. In addition, he analyzes and critiques a number of the major stories.

Bunin could never sunder his emotional ties to his homeland and many of his stories are set in pre-Revolutionary Russia; these capture a gentler life now brutally shattered, highlighting the Russian peasant aphorism *Chelovet chelovetku zwer* “Man is an animal to man”) that sees trust and decency as useless qualities. “Drydale,” one of the longest and most evocative stories, recounts the history of a family and its home in the provinces, shattered by distrust and dissension, pregnant with love found and lost, and the inescapable pull—despite decay and decline—of the house that was once an entire world to its inhabitants. Contrasting with this rich exploration and evocation of the events and outcomes of country life is the clinical economy of “On the Night Sea,” in which two men find themselves on the same ship; the one having many years ago won away the cherished wife, now dead, of the other. Their discussion of their feelings and the refinements of suffering is beautifully handled.

Bunin’s work frequently reflects the inextinguishable sense of loss that has always been the Russian exile’s portion: gone forever the meadows and trees, the fragrance of flowers, the shaded pavilion-like houses with their broad verandahs, welcoming portals and gracious occupants, living their secluded lives with burning intensity.

Life in exile provided very different themes. “In Paris,” published in 1940, but recapturing an earlier time, is a gem. A man’s chance meeting with a woman, their instinctive acceptance of each other and lack of false prudery disprove the maxim that “*Rien n’est plus difficile que de reconnaître un bon melon ou une femme de bien.* Nothing is more difficult than recognizing a good melon or a good woman.)” The morality of Old Russia yields effortlessly to the hunger of body and soul in unpuritanical Paris, where lonely exiles crave connection.

Bunin’s Russian is said to be notoriously difficult, and a non-Russian speaker would be rash to pronounce on the technical qualities of Bowie’s translation. Certainly it resonates with fluency and grace; very occasionally a phrase strikes an odd note “humor of billingsgate” might be more easily understood as “the language of a Billingsgate fishwife”). This book is clearly a labor of love; it will be deservedly cherished by every reader it introduces to the remarkable Ivan Bunin.