**IL’F AND PETROV**

**IL’F, Il’ia Arnol’dovich (ИЛЬФ, Илья Арнольдович) (pseud. of FAINZIL’BERG, Iekhiel-Leyb Ar’evich) (1897-1937), and PETROV, Evgenii Petrovich (ПЕТРОВ, Евгений Петрович) (pseud. of KATAEV, Evgenii Petrovich) (1902-1942)**



Il’f and Petrov at work (1932) - a widespread, but obviously posed, image

The writing duo collectively known as “Il’f and Petrov” is best known for two early Soviet satirical novels featuring the wisecracking con artist Ostap Bender, *The Twelve Chairs* (*Dvenadtsat’ stul’ev*, 1928) and *The Little Golden Calf* (*Zolotoi telenok*, 1931). They also collaborated on screenplays, short stories, essays, novellas, newspaper columns, and an American travelogue, as well as publishing individually. Both the Russian Orthodox Petrov and the Jewish Il’f were born and raised in the cosmopolitan port city of Odessa, renowned for its humor and vibrant Jewish culture. After enduring WWI and civil war in “hungry Odessa,” both moved independently to Moscow in 1923 and wrote for humorous publications, including the newspaper *Gudok* (*The Steam Whistle*) along with Petrov’s brother Valentin Kataev, Mikhail Bulgakov, and Yuri Olesha. After the success of their Bender novels, they started writing for Pravda in 1932, which sent them to travel the United States by car in the winter of 1935-1936, resulting in the travelogue *One-Story America* (*Odnoetazhnaia Amerika*, 1937). Their art’s ironic quotation and ambivalent intertextuality deeply influenced Russian everyday and literary language. Il’f died in Moscow in 1937 of tuberculosis. Petrov continued to write and became a war correspondent during WWII; he died in a plane crash outside Sevastopol in 1942.

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Kukryniksy’s caricature of Il’f and Petrov

**Timeline of Lives and Most Significant Works**

1897: Il’f born in Odessa to the family of a low-level bank clerk; eventually graduates from a technical school

1902: Petrov born in Odessa to the family of a history teacher; eventually graduates from a classical *gymnasium*

1920-1923: Petrov works as a correspondent for UkROSTA (the Ukrainian Telegraph Agency) and as a police detective. Il’f participates in Eduard Bagritsky’s group *Kollektiv poetov* (*The Poets’ Collective*) along with lifelong friends Valentin Kataev (Evgeny Petrov’s older brother) and Yuri Olesha, and holds various jobs, from draftsman to worker at a grenade factory to government clerk

1923: Both Il’f and Petrov move independently to Moscow and begin writing for small periodicals, including *Gudok* (The Steam Whistle)

1924: Il’f marries Marusia Tarasenko; they eventually have a daughter, Aleksandra

1925: Il’f travels to Central Asia for *Gudok*

1927: Il’f and Petrov vacation together with Mikhail Rozanov in the Caucasus, Crimea, and Odessa, then write *The Twelve Chairs* in the fall of 1927

1928: *The Twelve Chairs* is serialized in the monthly magazine *30 dnei* (30 Days); first book edition appears later this year. Petrov travels in Italy

1928-1929: publication of story cycles “*Neobyknovennye istorii iz zhizni goroda Kolokolamska*” (*Unusual Stories from the Town of Kolokolamsk*) and “*1001 Den’, ili Novaia Shakherezada*” (*1001 Days, or a New Sheherazade*) in the short-lived satire magazine *Chudak* (*The Odd Fellow*)

1929: Il’f studies photography. Petrov marries Valentina Griunzayd; they eventually have two sons, Petr and Il’ia

1930: Il’f and Petrov travel to Central Asia for the grand opening of the transcontinental Turksib railway. With Sigizmund Krzhizhanovsky, they write subtitles for director Iakov Protazanov’s popular film comedy *St. Jorgen’s Day* (*Prazdnik sviatogo Yorgena*)

1931: *The Little Golden Calf* is serialized in *30 dnei*

1932: first book edition of *The Little Golden Calf* appears after being initially refused for publication. Il’f and Petrov hired by *Pravda*. Publication of satirical feuilleton “KLOOP” and subsequent verbal warning from their *Pravda* editor

1932-1933: publication of announcements for the third Ostap Bender novel, *The Scoundrel* (*Podlets*), which was never written

1933: Il’f and Petrov visit the infamous Belomor Canal construction site with an official writer’s delegation. Publication of collection *How Robinson was Created* (*Kak sozdavalsia Robinzon*)

1933-1934: sent as *Pravda* correspondents on a PR trip with the Black Sea Fleet to Turkey, Greece, and Italy; they return via Austria, France, and Poland

1935-1936: car trip through the United States, from New York to California and back

1936: film director Grigoriy Aleksandrov releases the hit comedy *Circus* (*Tsirk*), based on a popular vaudeville written by Il’f, Petrov, and Kataev, but the three remove their names from the credits due to differences of opinion with Aleksandrov. Photo-essay “American Photographs” (*Amerikanskie fotografii*), with Il’f’s photos, serialized in *Ogonek*

1937: publication of *One-Story America* (*Odnoetazhnaia Amerika*). Il’f dies of tuberculosis in Moscow. Petrov travels as a correspondent to the Far East

1939: Petrov publishes excerpts from Il’f’s notebooks. Petrov joins the Communist Party and becomes Deputy Editor of *Literaturnaia Gazeta* (*The Literary Gazette*)

1940: Petrov becomes editor of *Ogonek*

1940-1942: Petrov writes “Correspondences from the Front” (*Frontovye korrespondentsii*), the anti-war play *Peace Island* (*Ostrov mira)*, and humorous screenplays

1942: Petrov dies in a plane crash outside Sevastopol while covering WWII

1944-1945: excerpts from the Bender novels published in the series “The Little Library of the ‘Red Army Soldier’ Journal” (*Bibliotechka zhurnala ‘Krasnoarmeets’*)

1948: Bender novels are published as part of a jubilee series, “Library of Selected Works of Soviet Literature, 1917-1947,” released by *Sovetskii pisatel’* (The Soviet Writer), the publishing house of the Soviet Writer’s Union

1949: *Literaturnaia gazeta* attacks *Sovetskii pisatel’* for publishing “undeserving” works “such as those of Il’f and Petrov.” The Secretariat of the Writer’s Union, under pressure from the Party censorship organ Glavlit, resolves that the Bender novels are “slander against Soviet society”

1961: publication of Il’f and Petrov’s canonical five-volume *Collected Works*

1967: a handful of Russian articles and books attack Il’f and Petrov for collaborating with Stalin’s anti-intellectual campaign. Vladimir Nabokov praises Il’f and Petrov’s writing and the “standard of complete independence” to which they adhered in their novels

1969: director Mikhail Shveitser’s film adaptation of *The Little Golden Calf*

1971: director Leonid Gaidai’s film adaptation of *The Twelve Chairs*. American director Mel Brooks’s film adaptation of *The Twelve Chairs*

1976: director Mark Zakharov’s television adaptation of *The Twelve Chairs*

2005: director Ul’iana Shil’kina’s television adaptation of *The Little Golden Calf*

2008: television personalities Vladimir Pozner, Ivan Urgant, and Brian Kahn collaborate on a book and television series recreating *One-Story America*

Il’ia Arnol’dovich Il’f (pseudonym of Iekhiel-Leyb Ar’evich Fainzil’berg) was born in 1897 in Odessa. Two of Il’f’s three brothers were artists, and Il’f himself became a talented photographer; he is noted for his use of detail in both visual and verbal mediums. Evgeny Petrovich Petrov (pseudonym of Evgeny Petrovich Kataev) was also born in Odessa, in 1902. Petrov, whose older brother Valentin Kataev was an influential writer, had a talent for languages and the piano and a lifelong interest in opera. Both Il’f and Petrov moved independently to Moscow in 1923 and began writing for various light magazines and newspapers, notably *Gudok* (The Steam Whistle), along with Mikhail BULGAKOV, Kataev, Yuri OLESHA, and others.

Il’f and Petrov vacationed together in June of 1927, quickly writing their first joint novel, *The Twelve Chairs* (*Dvenadtsat' stul'ev*, 1928), shortly thereafter. This picaresque adventure introduces us to Ostap Bender, a fictional NEP-era con man in hot pursuit of a hidden treasure; he is now among the best known characters in Russian literature. The sequel, *The Little Golden Calf* (*Zolotoi telenok*, 1931), satirizes bureaucrats, bureaucratic purges, and the “Great Break” (*Velikiy perelom*), Stalin’s 1929 radical change in economic policy, and took far longer to write. In it, Bender claims to have “very serious differences of opinion with Soviet power,” covertly amasses a fortune, and attempts, unsuccessfully, to emigrate.

The Bender novels are so rich in contemporary *realia* that they’re recognized as “encyclopedias of Soviet life.” They are also notable for their combination of broad and complex humour, their ambiguous narrative voice, achieved in part by sophisticated play with various levels of discourse, and for their desacralizing, ironic quotation of contemporary slogans, advertisements, and speeches. Both novels were enormously popular with readers, but met with mixed critical response; *The Little Golden Calf* was even temporarily banned from publication. Plans to write a third Bender novel never came to fruition. Decades later, the novels’ mode of ironic quotation influenced Vasily Aksenov, Venedikt Erofeev, and other writers who subverted the Brezhnev era’s ideological manipulation of language.

In 1932, Il’f and Petrov were hired by *Pravda*. They wrote popular vaudevilles, plays, and screenplays, and traveled extensively as representatives of Soviet literature, while continuing to produce short stories and feuilletons for *Pravda* and other periodicals. Of special note is their column “The Belles-Lettres Corner” (*Ugolok* *iziashchnoi slovesnosti*) commenting on the turbulent literary scene preceding the creation of the Soviet Writers’ Union in 1934.

Their last main work was the travelogue *One-Story America* (*Odnoetazhnaia Amerika*, 1937), describing their car trip through the United States. Their many letters home from the trip give insight into their personal lives and the difficulties of the journey. Both Il’f and Petrov also kept notebooks for much of their lives, although only Ilf’s were widely published. Their partnership ended on April 13, 1937, when Il’f succumbed to tuberculosis. Petrov continued to write and became an influential editor. He died in a plane crash on July 2, 1942 as he was returning from covering the front.

 Though Il’f and Petrov wrote individually as well as together, under pseudonyms and their own names, the Bender novels remain their main legacy. They have a dramatic reception history: the novels went from being banned in 1949 as “slander on Soviet society” to being hailed as “classics of Soviet satire” after Stalin’s death, while a Stagnation-era surge in Il’f and Petrov’s popularity was accompanied by accusations that they wrote “to order” for the regime.

Dozens of aphorisms from the Bender novels have entered the spoken Russian language as “winged words,” placing Il’f and Petrov alongside MAYAKOVSKY, Griboedov, Pushkin, and Gogol as the most quoted Russian writers. Il’f and Petrov were, in their own words, the union of a “mysterious Slavic soul” and a “mysterious Jewish soul” who rejected any word or phrase that they both thought of at the same time, reasoning that these formulations would be too common. This artistic rigor, practiced during the relative freedoms of the NEP (New Economic Policy) era, produced some of the most lasting monuments of early Soviet prose.

From the Bender novels:

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| Money in the morning, chairs in the evening. | Утром деньги, вечером стулья. |
| You provide the gasoline, we’ll provide the ideas. | Бензин ваш — идеи наши. |
| I am no cherub, of course. I don’t have any wings. But I honor the Criminal Code. It’s my weakness. | Я, конечно, не херувим. У меня нет крыльев, но я чту Уголовный кодекс. Это моя слабость. |
| Those bandits Marx and Engels made a fine mess of things! | Вот наделали делов эти бандиты Маркс и Энгельс! |
| You are an interesting person! Everything in your life is in order. It’s amazing, how you can be so happy and still be a free man. | Интересный вы человек! Все у вас в порядке. Удивительно, с таким счастьем — и на свободе. |
| How much is your opium for the people? | Почём опиум для народа? |
| But in Arbatov you have nothing to lose but your extra chains. | А в Арбатове вам терять нечего, кроме запасных цепей. |
| There aren’t people like this around anymore, and soon there won’t be any left at all. | Таких людей уже нет и скоро совсем не будет! |
| Don’t make a cult out of food. | Не делайте из еды культа. |
| We’re strangers at this feast of life. | Мы чужие на этом празднике жизни. |

**References and Further Reading**

The most important work on Il’f and Petrov, that of Yuri Shcheglov, has yet to be translated into English. This and much of the best Russian-language scholarship is in the form of commentaries; these are listed under “critical editions and diaries.” There is still no complete collection of Il’f’s, Petrov’s, or Il’f and Petrov’s works.

**Secondary Literature: Articles**

Fisher, Anne O. “Foreword,” in Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, *The Little Golden Calf*, trans. Anne O. Fisher. Montpelier: Russian Life Books, 2009, pp. 13-31. An overview of the novel’s significance, reception history, and previous translations.

Fitzpatrick, Sheila. “The World of Ostap Bender,” in *Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 2005, pp. 265-281. A leading historian documents how the fictional con man Ostap Bender was drawn from the contemporary Soviet context.

Nakhimovsky, Alice. “How the Soviets Solved the Jewish Question: The Il’f-Petrov

Novels and Il’f’s Jewish Stories,” *Symposium*, Vol. 53, No.3, Summer 1999, pp. 93-111. The best scholarly treatment of the Jewish themes in Il’f and Petrov’s works.

Siniavsky, Andrei. *Soviet Civilization: A Cultural History*. Trans. Joanne Turnbull. New York: Arcade Publishing, 1988, pp. 174-182. The famous Russian writer and dissident provides the best explanation of why Ostap Bender is “Soviet reality’s leading representative.”

Zholkovsky, Alexandr. “Dreaming Right and Reading Right: Five Keys to One of

Il’f and Petrov’s Ridiculous Men.” *Slavic Review* 48, No. 1, Spring 1989, pp. 36-53. One of the best explications in English of Il’f and Petrov’s poetics.

**Secondary Literature: Books**

Milne, Lesley. *Zoshchenko and the Ilf-Petrov Partnership: How They Laughed*. Birmingham Slavonic Monographs, No. 35. Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 2003. A useful overview of Il’f and Petrov’s lives and works and how these compared to those of Mikhail Zoshchenko.

Préchac, Alain. *Il’f et Petrov témoins de leur temps. Stalinisme et littérature*. Vols. 1-3. Paris: L’Harmattan, 2000. Vol. 1: Vie et oeuvre, I et Chronologie bilingue; Vol. 2: Vie et oeuvre, II; Critique; Conclusions; Vol. 3: Annexes, tables de matieres. An exhaustive reference providing a full annotated bibliography of works written by Il’f and/or Petrov under any name, and of criticism of their work; includes biographical sketches and timelines for both authors and studies of all the major works.

Shcheglov, Iurii K. *Romany Il’fa i. Petrova. Sputnik chitatelia*. Third ed., corrected and expanded. Saint Petersburg: Izdatel’stvo Ivana Limbakha, 2009. Comprehensive analysis of the Bender novels’ intertextuality and quotationality from the foremost scholar of Il’f and Petrov’s works.

**Reception Studies**

Ianovskaia, Lidiia, “Nash drug Il’f,” in *Zapiski o Mikhaile Bulgakove*. Holon: Izdatel’stvo Moriia, 1997, 41-73. The first Il’f and Petrov scholar sketches out the authors’ reception history and describes the difficulties she faced in researching them (see also her articles and her 1963 monograph, *Pochemu vy pishete smeshno? Ob I. Il’fe i E. Petrove, ikh zhizni i ikh iumore*).

Kurdiumov, Avel’ Adamovich (pseud. of Iakov Lur’e), *V kraiu nepuganykh idiotov. Kniga ob Il’fe i Petrove*. Paris: La Presse Libre, 1983. The definitive explication of Il’f and Petrov’s reputation and reception history.

**Major Editions and Diaries (when of just one author, indicated in parentheses)**

*Dom s krendeliami. Izbrannoe.* (*The Building with the Curlicues. Selected Works.*) (Il’ia Il’f). Comp., forew. A. I. Il’f. Moscow: Tekst, 2009. Previously uncollected works by Il’f.

*Dvenadtsat’ stul’ev. Avtorskaia redaktsiia.* (*The Twelve Chairs. Authorial Redaction*.) Ed. A. I. Il’f. Moscow: Tekst, 2001.

*Kak sozdavalsia Robinzon. Fel’etony i rasskazy.* (*How Robinson was Created. Feuilletons and Stories.*) Comp., comm. A. I. Il’f. Moscow: Tekst, 2007.

*Moi drug Il’f*. (*My Friend Il’f*) (Evgenii Petrov) Comp., comm. A. I. Il’f. Moscow: Tekst, 2001. A. Il’f’s commentaries to Petrov’s text and notes, as well as documents and articles on the coauthors’ reception history.

*Neobyknovennye istorii iz goroda Kolokolamska. Rasskazy, fel’etony, ocherky, p’esy, stsenarii.* (*Unusual Stories from the Town of Kolokolamsk. Stories, feuilletons, essays, plays, screenplays.*)Comp., forew., comm. M. Dolinskii. Moscow: Knizhnaia palata, 1989. Intended by Dolinskii to be the “sixth volume” of the 1961 *Collected Works*.

*Odnoetazhnaia Amerika. Pis’ma iz Ameriki. Fotografii Il’i Il’fa*. (*One-Story America. Letters from America. Il’ia Il’f’s Photographs*.) Comp., intro. A. I. Il’f. Moscow: Tekst, 2003.

*Sobranie sochineniia v 5-i tomakh.* (*Collected Works in 5 Volumes)* Ed. K. Simonov et al. Moscow: GIKhL, 1961. Although compiled with ideological considerations in the foreground, still the canonical edition.

*Zapisnye knizhki, 1925-1937. Pervoe polnoe izdanie.* (*Notebooks, 1925-1937. First Complete Edition*.) (Il’ia Il’f) Comp., comm. A. I. Il’f. Moskva: Tekst, 2000.

*Zolotoi telenok. Avtorskaia redaktsiia.* (*The Little Golden Calf. Authorial Redaction*.) Comp., comm. A. I. Il’f. Mosow: Tekst, 2003.

*Zolotoi telenok. Pervyi polnyi variant romana. Podgotovka teksta i vstupitel’naia stat’ia M. Odesskogo i D. Fel’dmana*. (*The Little Golden Calf. First complete version of the novel. Introductory article and textual preparation by M. Odessky and D. Fel’dman*.) Moskva: Vagrius: 2000. The accompanying articles and commentaries interpret the novel’s political, historical, and ideological context (see their companion edition of *The Twelve Chairs*, also published by Vagrius).

**Biographies**

A. I. Il’f. *Il’ia Il’f, ili Pis’ma o liubvi. Neizvestnaia perepiska Il’fa. Biograficheskii ocherk, kommentarii*. (*Il’ia Il’f, or Letters About Love. Il’f’s Unknown Correspondence. Biographical essay, commentaries.*) Moscow: Tekst, 2004.

**Other Resources**

<http://pjanse.home.xs4all.nl/Ilf-Petrov/index.html>

**Anne O. Fisher, Translator**

Image references:

1. a widespread, but obviously posed, image of Il’f and Petrov at work-

http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a5/Ilf\_Petrov.jpg

2. Kukryniksy’s caricature of Il’f and Petroв

<http://evrofilm.com/velikij-kombinator-satiry-i-yumora.html>

3. a non-posed picture:

<http://www.lechaim.ru/ARHIV/126/leyb.files/image006.jpg>

4. Petrov holding the 1932 translation of The Little Golden Calf by Charles Malamuth:

<http://fakty.ua/user_uploads/images/articles/2012/07/03/150166/03s11%20petrov.jpg>

5. Il’f holding an early edition of The Twelve Chairs:

http://www.sinykova.ru/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/ilf.jpg