



Learning from a master writer

How to Write Like Chekhov: Advice and Inspiration, Straight From His Own Letters and Work, edited by Lena Lenček and Piero Brunello. Da Capo Press, 256 pages. Paper, \$14.95.

By Erika Dreifus

BORN IN 1860, Anton Chekhov is remembered today as a masterful playwright and short-story writer. His work is widely anthologized, and he has inspired countless literary descendants. Fortunately for us, Chekhov, who lived only 44 years, also left a legacy of correspondence in which he offered advice that applies not only to the writers and editors of his own time, but also to those living in ours.

In this book, Lena Lenček and Piero Brunello have done something others have tried before them: mined Chekhov's correspondence for advice on the craft of writing. What's new and particularly noteworthy in this volume is a focus on lessons to be learned from a close reading of *The Island of Sakhalin*, a work of nonfiction reportage that emerged from the doctor-writer's travels to a Russian penal colony.

How to Write Like Chekhov comprises two parts. Part one ("Theory") includes Chekhov's explicit advice on writing as directed to his correspondents, including other writers seeking his take on their work. In a Jan. 3, 1899, letter to Maxim Gorky, for example, Chekhov advocated simplicity in descriptions of nature: "Your nature descriptions are artistic; you are a true landscape painter. However, your frequent comparisons to humans (anthropomorphism)—the sea breathes, the sky looks on, the steppe basks in the sun, nature whispers, speaks, weeps, and so on—these kinds of personifications make your descrip-

tions somewhat monotonous, a touch saccharine, vague; in descriptions of nature, vibrancy and expressivity are best produced by simple techniques, for example: using simple phrases such as 'the sun set,' 'it got dark,' 'it started to rain,' and so on."

Again, others have cited such words of wisdom before (and it may be worth considering that parts one and two were published separately in the original Italian version edited by Brunello).

Part two ("Demonstration") is where this book offers its most significant contribution. Divided into three subsections—"The Project," "The Report" and "Actual Writing"—"Demonstration" suggests how to construct a work of investigative nonfiction by examining how Chekhov assembled *The Island of Sakhalin*. As Brunello explains in his introduction, this part of the book "is especially addressed to writers who, like Chekhov, are interested in discovering, exploring, and understanding the unknown. The modus operandi of his voyage of discovery is useful not only to writers who make long journeys and wish to write about them but also to those who want to understand life closer to home."

Chekhov's pre-journey correspondence reveals, for example, that before embarking on his trip he conducted considerable research and wrote up material that did not require field research. Excerpts from these letters lead Brunello to suggest steps other writers might follow, including "read and summarize" and "write up the notes."

Matters become increasingly interesting when we read letters Chekhov sent while traveling to and through Sakhalin and text that appears to be drawn

from his actual report. Brunello evidently believes that if we attend closely to how Chekhov conducted his field research, we'll glean some useful tips on how to pursue similar work.

So Chekhov's description of a local wedding moves Brunello to suggest the usefulness of attending a similar event and observing "what people are wearing, their ages, rituals, conversations, and social roles." And a Chekhovian paragraph about messages scratched into benches prompts Brunello to highlight how instructive studying graffiti may be. Other tips attached to relevant excerpts from Chekhov's Sakhalin work include "save receipts, schedules, and fliers," "study the climate," "take a census" and "quantify."

The Sakhalin material also provides advice on the actual writing process, encompassing both logistics and craft. In one letter, for instance, Chekhov tells a correspondent that delaying his post-journey writing on Sakhalin "would be dangerous because my impressions of Sakhalin are already evaporating, and I risk forgetting a lot"; from this, Brunello highlights the importance of writing "while your impressions are still fresh." And with a wrenching excerpt in which Chekhov describes witnessing a prisoner's flogging, Brunello points to the power of the writer sharing his emotions in the narrative.

It's difficult to predict the degree to which any reader will finish this book and "write like Chekhov." But it's equally challenging to think of a nobler goal.

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