



0. THE REAL EMMA - Story Preface

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Anna Grigoryevna Snitkina, who became Fyodor Dostoevsky's wife on February 15, 1867.

With less than a month to go before *The Gambler* was due, Dostoevsky worked on one novel during the day and another (*Crime and Punishment*) at night. His personal gambling experiences, and his tumultuous relationship with Polina, provided him with the substance of his new story.

It took a fictional rendering for Dostoevsky to achieve what had eluded him in real life, however. The novel's intense love-hate arguments were real; Polina's devoted love of the self-destructive gambler, Alexei Ivanovich, was not.

Anna Snitkina took Dostoevsky's dictation most days between noon and 4 p.m. As their working partnership blossomed, the young stenographer felt free to tell the novelist exactly what she thought of his story and characters.

She didn't think much of the gambler whose moral weakness and addiction to roulette seemed quite unforgivable. Dostoevsky (prophetically of their married future) told Anna a man could have a strong will but still find the roulette table irresistible.

Early in the novel, Alexei argues with himself (all quotes are from the Constance Garnett translation) over his true feelings for Polina:

...'Do I love her?' And again I could not answer it, or, rather, I answered for the hundredth time that I hated her. Yes, she was hateful to me. There were moments (on every occasion at the end of our talks) when I would have given my life to strangle her! I swear if it had been possible on the spot to plunge a sharp knife in her bosom, I believe I should have snatched it up with relish. And yet I swear by all that's sacred that if at the Schlangenberg, at the fashionable peak, she really had said to me, 'Throw yourself down,' I should have thrown myself down at once, also with positive relish. ("The Gambler," pages 14-15.)

Is it any wonder that years later, likely after her husband's death, Anna scratched out some of Dostoevsky's reflections (written before he met his wife) about his love for Polina Suslova? (Anna also burned Polina's letters. What survives is Suslova's book about her relationship with the writer.)

One wonders what Anna thought of Dostoevsky's own character as she transcribed phrases like:

It is true that only one out of a hundred wins, but what is that to me? (p. 17)

...why deceive onself? Gambling is a most foolish and imprudent pursuit! (p. 18)

...of late it has become horribly repugnant to me to test my thoughts and actions by any moral standard whatever. (p. 20)

They [some roulette players] sit with papers before them scrawled over in pencil, note the strokes, reckon, deduce the changes, calculate, finally stake and - lose exactly as we simple mortals who play without calculations. (pp. 29-30)

Despite knowing the story she transcribed was, to some extent, autobiographical, Anna had a positive reaction to the plot of a 'new' story. She recalled it in her Reminiscences:

*'Who is the hero of your novel?'
'An artist who is no longer really young - about my age.'
'Oh, tell me, tell me about him, please.'*

And, like an answer to my prayer, there followed a dazzling improvisation. Never, either before or since, have I heard him deliver such an animated and inspired narration. The longer he kept it up, the more clearly I realized that it was his own life he was telling me about, with a few changes here and there concerning people and background.

As he spoke, everything he had told me earlier in fragments was here gathered into a whole. Only now did I receive a detailed, uninterrupted account of his relationship with his deceased wife and his relatives.

Thereafter followed the real reason for telling Anna the 'novel's' plot:

'And then what happens is that this artist, at this decisive moment in his life, meets a young girl who crosses his path, a girl of about your age, or perhaps a couple of years older. Yes, let's call her Anya, so as not to have to use the word 'heroine' all the time. Anya's a pretty name...But is it really possible that this young girl, so distant from him in age and temperament, could ever come to love this artist of mine? Wouldn't that be a psychological impossibility? Yes, it's that that I'd like to hear your opinion about, Anna Grigoryevna.'

Anna had a ready answer:

'Why should it be so impossible? If this Anna is, as you say, not a frivolous coquette but a girl with a good and sensitive heart, why should she not fall in love with your artist? What does it matter that he's sick and poor? It's not wealth or outer lustre that count! And she wouldn't be making any sacrifice either. If she loves him, she'll be happy too, she doesn't need to feel the slightest remorse about it.' I spoke with great warmth. Fyodor Mikhailovich looked at me, moved.

Finally Dostoevsky got to the point of the conversation:

'You really think she could love him all of her life?' He said nothing for a while, just stood there, seeming to hesitate. 'Put yourself in her place,' he said at last, in a trembling voice. 'Imagine that it is I who am this artist, that it is I would have entrusted my love to you and asked you to be my wife. What would you say to that?'

Fyodor Mikhailovich was in a state of such confusion and anguish that I finally understood that all this was not simply a question of literary entertainment, and that I would deal his pride and self-esteem a terrible blow if I were to give him an evasive answer.

Then I looked into his dear, anxious face and said: 'I would say that I love you, that I will love you all my life!'

For the next fourteen years, Anna took Fyodor's dictation. During these 'Miraculous Years,' Dostoevsky wrote what are still among the most respected novels in the world.

But what of *The Gambler*? Did the novelist meet his impossible deadline?

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-REAL-EMMA-Alex-and-Emma>

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Media Stream



Anna Snitkina

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Anna Snitkina - Photograph

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