

instance, contain numerous errors—though none, it should be noted, that are central to her argument.

While such passages could have been written with more care, Tammy Bruce is too clever and courageous a writer to ignore. Her fly-on-the-wall account of the Left offers insights one would be hard pressed to find elsewhere. Most noteworthy is her discussion of why so few who enter the Left's victim cult escape as she has. "When your victimhood is your empowerment, recovery is the enemy," Bruce concludes, "and working on 'individual change' becomes counterproductive, even dangerous to your identity."

*Daniel J. Flynn is the author of Why the Left Hates America: Exposing the Lies That Have Exposed Our Nation's Greatness.*

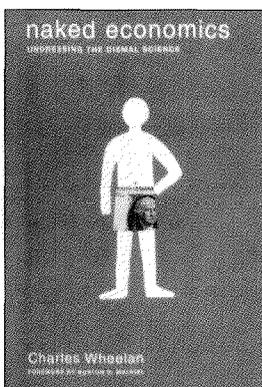
## ECONOMICS LAID BARE

By Aaron Steelman

*Naked Economics: Undressing the Dismal Science*

By Charles Wheelan

W. W. Norton, 288 pages, \$25.95



When I tell people I work in the Federal Reserve System, they often joke, "Great. Can you print me some money?" And then comes the serious part: "I

don't really know much about economics. It seems like a foreign language to me."

This is unfortunate, but understandable. Economics has become highly mathematical. Even Milton Friedman, whose work did much to establish economics as a "positive science," admits that he has trouble keeping up with the

increasingly quantitative literature. In an interview with *Reason* magazine, he described the new techniques as "all different from ours. I'm not an expert in them anymore; I really couldn't deal with this material on the level on which they are dealing with it, although I can understand the thrust of what they're doing."

Mathematical techniques have helped us understand the world in a way that would not have been possible otherwise. But it must be remembered that statistical manipulation is not at the heart of economics—a point Charles Wheelan makes in *Naked Economics: Undressing the Dismal Science*. "I offer only one promise in this book: There will be no graphs, no charts, and no equations. These tools have their place in economics," he writes. "But at bottom, the most important ideas in economics are intuitive. They derive their power from bringing logic and rigor to bear on everyday problems."

Wheelan does an especially good job of explaining the most fundamental idea in all of economics: Resources are limited and people try to make the most of what they have. Writing in the sometimes-cheeky style of *The Economist*, where he used to work as the magazine's midwest correspondent, Wheelan notes, "However large our paychecks, we can spend them on a staggering array of goods and services. When you bought this book, you implicitly decided not to spend that money somewhere else. (Even if you shoplifted the book, you could have stuffed a Scott Turow novel in your jacket instead, which is flattering in its own kind of way.)"

But money is not our only resource, Wheelan points out. Just as important, if not more so, is our time. "At the moment, you are reading instead of working, playing with the dog, applying to law school, shopping for groceries, or having sex. Life is about tradeoffs, and so is economics."

Wheelan makes plain another key point: Many of the consequences of a decision are not always immediately obvious. A famous example involves the minimum wage. By raising it, you make

low-skilled workers better off, right? Some of them, perhaps. But you might also put some of them out of work if their skills do not warrant higher pay. As the French economist Frederic Bastiat put it, one needs to consider both the "seen and unseen" consequences.

And while economics can tell us much about the consequences of a given policy, it cannot tell us whether that policy is desirable. That is a question for philosophers. Similarly, economics does not proscribe a set of ethical values for individuals. One need not play the role of *homo economicus*—one can act beneficently toward others without turning the market on its head.

"Americans give over \$200 billion to assorted charities every year. We hold doors open for strangers. We practice remarkable acts of altruism," Wheelan notes. "None of this is incompatible with the basic assumption that individuals seek to make themselves as well off as possible, however they happen to define that."

Wheelan is a strong supporter of the free market. But he sees an important role for government in establishing and enforcing the rules of the game, and for providing certain services that the market will not provide on its own. His view of what constitutes a "public good" is expansive, though, and goes well beyond such classic examples as national defense and police protection. He thinks parks and scientific research require public funding, but he doesn't explain why clever entrepreneurs could not provide those things as well or better than government. In addition, Wheelan spends much time discussing the supposed evils of sports utility vehicles. True, they may emit more pollutants than the typical car—and, as a result, impose larger-than-average "externalities." But his concern about SUVs borders on preoccupation and seems to violate the value neutrality he extols elsewhere in the book.

These are minor quibbles. Overall, *Naked Economics* is an excellent book. Those who have been turned off by

economics in the past should give it a try before throwing in the towel for good.

Aaron Steelman is an analyst at the Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond. The views expressed here are his own.

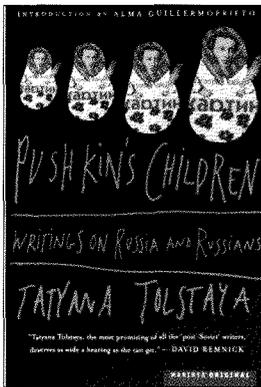
## RUSSIAN SOUL FOOD

By Randy Boyagoda

*Pushkin's Children: Writing on Russia and Russians*

By Tatyana Tolstaya, translated by Jamey Gambrell

Mariner Books, 256 pages, \$15



Shortly after the Bolshevik Revolution, Osip Mandelstam declared: “Russian history travels along the brink, along a ledge, over an abyss, and is on the verge of

falling into nihilism at any moment.” With *Pushkin's Children*, Tatyana Tolstaya renders the continued relevance of Mandelstam’s judgment robustly clear. Even as Russia teeters through its most recent advance to the brink of chaos, this collection announces another Russian writer with impeccable literary ancestry and impressive cultural acumen, one highly qualified to denounce neatly simplistic views of her nation.

The 20 pieces that comprise *Pushkin's Children* cover a ten-year span, from 1990 to 2000. In most of them, Tolstaya’s considerations of books on Russian history, politics, and culture act as springboards into her own ideas on these subjects. The power of the Russian matriarchy; the centuries-old practice of terror-driven, authoritarian rule; the end of communism and the post-Soviet era; twentieth-century poverty and economic chaos; the

iron-fisted reigns of Stalin and Lenin; the eternal beauty of St. Petersburg; the centrality of food and vodka to the Russian soul and psyche: Tolstaya treats these recurrent themes in a gregarious style; her pages teem with Russian life felt and written about in a deeply charged way.

Tolstaya’s method is to reveal the personal imprint on large-scale events, whether it be children blithely eating caviar like porridge during a currency crisis, or her niece complaining of Lenin’s body in its mausoleum, “There’s nothing to see. He’s all yellow and dried up.” Her reviews of books on or by Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin allow her to stress the proximity of the private and political that she contends is as much a feature of Russian life as the distance between ambition and achievement. Considering Yeltsin’s autobiography, *The Struggle for Russia*, Tolstaya provides the melancholy image of a befuddled man, angry that he cannot land the presidential helicopter to admire a pretty stream because, as an aide reminds him, the president must always be mindful of “the nuclear button” under his thumb.

Stronger feelings arise in essays on fellow writers. Tolstaya nearly deifies Joseph Brodsky in a remembrance—contradicting her general opposition to the Russian tendency to revere the nation’s writers as prophets. She reverts to form in two merciless essays on Alexander Solzhenitsyn. Tolstaya argues that the man responsible for awakening “the conscience of an entire generation” with his *Gulag Archipelago* has since become a loudmouthed, irrelevant curiosity for Russians and Westerners alike.

In other essays, Tolstaya rectifies historical and linguistic errors committed by Western writers analyzing post-Soviet Russia, and draws attention to the many instances of Russian politicians sanctimoniously riding anti-Soviet sentiment to greedy gain. She reflects on the Soviet era of restriction and stability: “The truth is that communism was both of these things, and some people saw only its dark

side, while others, more simple, were content with the rosy side.” Attempts to understand and improve Russia require complex vision, and Tolstaya damns in particular those too blinkered by left-wing politics to perceive this.

One of the most arresting pieces in the collection is her meditation on Vladimir Putin’s rise to power. Here, we witness a rare sight: an intelligent, contemporary writer willing to avow considered support for the political leadership of her nation. Tolstaya provides a canny rationale for why Putin’s KGB background makes him an effective Russian president, and then chastises “left liberals” who “are throwing rotten tomatoes from behind the fence they have constructed around their idea of democracy.” Myopic idealism, Tolstaya argues, blinds too many members of the contemporary Russian intelligentsia to the real potential in Putin’s rule. This essay was written in 2000; one wonders how the author would update it in the light of Putin’s actions in Chechnya, Iraq, and elsewhere. In other essays, Tolstaya makes abrupt reversals in her estimations of both Gorbachev and Yeltsin as events dictate, indicating a degree of magpie contrariness to which Putin may be subjected in her future writings.

Though tenacious, cynical, and at times contradictory, Tolstaya displays a generous love of all things Russian. *Pushkin's Children* allows us to listen in on her version of what she calls “the most cherished Russian tradition of all: the endless ‘kitchen conversations’ about world politics, the Tatar yoke, the fate of Russia, and the enigmas of the Russian soul.” Like the land and people she reveals to us, the writer rambles and confounds at times, yet remains nothing short of enthralling.

Randy Boyagoda is a Ph.D. candidate in English at Boston University. He writes frequently on literature and culture.

