

A Scholar's Legacy

THE
JUNGLE
BOOKS



An expert on 19th-century Russian fiction brings to publication a manuscript begun by her mother

by Dennis Nealon, M.A. '95

Robin Feuer Miller has literally come full circle since her adventurous days in the spring of 1963, when, at 15, she wandered the grounds of Yasnaya Polyana, the Russian estate where the great Leo Nikolayevich Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace*.

Today, Miller, dean of arts and sciences and professor of Russian and comparative literature at Brandeis, is set to have published by Cornell University Press *Tolstoy and the Genesis of War and Peace*, the edited, completed version of a manuscript begun by her late mother, noted Tolstoy scholar Kathryn B. Feuer. Coedited by Miller and Donna Tussing Orwin, a Tolstoy scholar who is an adjunct professor of Russian literature and member of the Center for Russian and Eastern European Studies at the University of Toronto, the work is an examination of

rough drafts that were intended for but never published in *War and Peace*. "The novel that we see in *War and Peace* is really just the tip of an iceberg," Miller notes. In working on her mother's manuscript, Miller discovered that the published version of *War and Peace* is only a fraction of what Tolstoy left behind. In the five years (1864-69) that it took Tolstoy to write the 1,400-page novel, he experimented with many alternative plot lines and scenes. The book rivals other literary masterpieces for its cast of characters and sheer expansiveness.

Tolstoy and the Genesis of War and Peace took Miller and Orwin nearly a year to complete. Orwin, who lent her expertise to update references and modernize the transliteration of Feuer's original manuscript, states that when published, the 304-page book will give its readers access to previously unpublished documents.

"It's going to be invaluable to English speaking students of the novel," she said. Gary Saul Morson of Northwestern University called the work "the best thing ever done on how

Tolstoy wrote *War and Peace*...You see the seams and joints in the novel."

Kathryn Feuer, undoubtedly, would be happy to know that. Feuer would also be happy to know that her daughter has followed in her literary footsteps. Miller is an internationally recognized expert on 19th-century Russian fiction and the European novel and author of *The Brothers Karamazov: Worlds of the Novel* (1992) and *Dostoevsky and The Idiot: Author, Narrator, and Reader* (1981). While she teaches a course at Brandeis on Tolstoy and *War and Peace*, Miller's specialty is Dostoevsky. Though Miller says she never would have imagined it as a young woman, her "impossibly eccentric" mother instilled in her a love for Russian literature and scholarly pursuits, and exposed her daughter to the myriad complexities of living as an intellectual in a sometimes dangerous land in uncertain times.

Miller's mother began her research 32 years ago at Yasnaya Polyana, when, as a graduate student, she was given unprecedented access to Tolstoy's works. It



Tolstoy at the time of the writing of *War and Peace* (above)

Part of Tolstoy's personal library at Yasnaya Polyana, the estate where he wrote *War and Peace* (left)

was at that time that Feuer presented Miller with a small copy of *War and Peace*, suggesting she read it while they were in Russia. But the 15-year-old resident of California, intent on behaving like a "regular" young woman, wanted nothing to do with it. Instead, Miller sometimes attended lectures that her father, a professor of philosophy and social science, delivered at the Academy of Sciences in Moscow, or roamed around the estate's grounds while her mother painstakingly pored over Tolstoy's words.

Miller remembers watching her mother at work on the manuscript, in Russia and in Berkeley. Her memories are vivid; her mother hammering away at the typewriter with two fingers, clad in a black slip, surrounded by her ubiquitous cloud of cigarette smoke and the seemingly endless mounds of paper and heavy Russian volumes spread out on the floor.

Though Feuer's manuscript on *War and Peace* earned her a Ph.D. in Slavic language and literature (with distinction) from Columbia University in

1965, it was never published. Miller believes that her mother had many personal reasons for not doing so, including a desire to move immediately to other projects. But Miller also explains that her mother published many things in her lifetime, and that Feuer's decision to keep this work private was part of an ethos of fear and trepidation that formed from her contacts with dissidents in the Soviet Union and the KGB's reaction. It was, after all, the height of the Cold War, and Feuer and her husband, Lewis, had befriended anti-Soviet scholars and intellectual dissidents who, to say the least, were not popular with the government. In 1963, on poet Anna Akhmatova's behalf, one of them convinced Feuer to smuggle out of the Soviet Union Akhmatova's *Requiem*.

Later that same year, Kathryn Feuer and Miller, then 16 years old, were held by the KGB, in what Miller feels was an attempt to manufacture a reason to arrest an American. She recalls that the agents may have been trying to force her mother into signing some kind of statement regarding dissidents and her association with them. "In those days they could detain anyone, including foreigners like us," says Miller. She vividly remembers the train stopping and being

suddenly surrounded by KGB agents. Miller and her mother were then hustled off the train and detained in a field at gunpoint. Two hours passed before they were allowed to continue on their journey, finally reaching Helsinki safely, then returning to the United States.

It was not until many years later, in the spring of 1994, two years after her mother died, that Miller's attention returned to Feuer's manuscript and that she resolved to publish the work. Miller, who like her mother attended graduate school at Columbia, says she had never read the work closely until that moment. "It just sat there," says Miller. "People said to me, 'you really should get this out, you should make this into a book.' I was sitting at my desk and just thought that it was time. I had to do this."

Miller feels working on the book reconnected her with her mother. "Working on her manuscript was just an astonishing experience for me," she said. "It was an unexpected and intense new stage in our relationship. I remember how Mary Shelley read the work of her mother, Mary Wollstonecraft, after her mother's death. I always used to mention that fact when I would teach Shelley's *Frankenstein*, but it has new meaning to me now." ■

Rebecca