



## About the author:

**MIKHAIL SHISHKIN** is one of the most celebrated Russian authors today. Born in 1961 in Moscow, he worked as a school teacher and journalist. In 1995 he moved to Switzerland, where he worked as a Russian and German translator within the Immigration Department and specifically with Asylum Seekers. His writing debut in 1993, *Calligraphy Lesson*, a short story translated into French and Finnish, has won him the Prize for the Best Debut of the Year. Since then his works – both fiction and non-fiction – have been translated into 35 languages and have received a large number of prestigious national and international awards, including Haus der Kulturen der Welt International Literature Award (2011), Premio Strega Europeo 2022, the Russian Booker Prize (2000), the National Bestseller Prize (2006), the Big Book Award (2006, 2011) and many others. Today Shishkin is a fearless critic of Putin's regime and Russia's aggression against Ukraine.

Mikhail Shishkin's prose fuses the best of the Russian and European literary traditions. The richness and sophistication of the language, the unique rhythm and melody of a phrase, the endless play with words and the nuanced psychological undercurrent are reminiscent of Nabokov and Chekhov. The change of narration styles and narrators within a text yield a fragmented, mosaic structure of composition that focuses on the language itself, recalling James Joyce's genius.

## *Selected Bibliography*

2019 — **Peace or War. Russia and the West**, *essays*

2017 — **Half-Belt Overcoat**, *short stories, essays*

2010 — **Letterbook**, *novel*

2005 — **Maidenhair**, *novel*

2002 — **Tracing Byron and Tolstoy in the Alps**, *novel*

2000 — **Russian Switzerland**, *essay*

2000 — **The Seizure of Izmail**, *novel*

1993 — **Calligraphy Lesson**, *short story*



## Complete list of prizes and awards



### Premio Strega Europeo 2022

Shortlisted for **Leipzig Book Fair Prize 2013**

### Haus der Kulturen der Welt International Literature Award 2011

### The Big Book Award 2011

### Halpérine-Kaminski Prize for the Best Translation 2007

Shortlisted for **Giuseppe Berto Prize 2007**

### Grinzane Cavour Prize 2007

### The Best Foreign Book of the Year of the 21st Century (China)

Shortlisted for **Bunin Literary Award 2006**

### The Big Book Award 2006

Shortlisted for **Andrei Belyi Literary Award 2006**

### The National Bestseller Prize 2005

### The Best Foreign Book of the Year (France) 2005

### Main Literary Prize of Zürich 2002

### The Russian Booker Prize 2000

### Globus Prize 2000

### Literary Prize of Canton Zürich 2000

### The Best Russian Debut of the Year 1994

## Selected quotes

One of the most prominent names in modern Russian literature.

*Publishers Weekly*

[Shishkin] takes Nabokov's remarkable linguistic flexibility but none of his arrogance; like Chekhov, he looks on humanity with humor and compassion. Shishkin's Baroque turns of phrases seem written out of necessity and joy rather than pretention; he respects his readers, he delights in language, and he does not need to show off.

*Madeleine LaRue*  
*The Quarterly Conversation*

If someone in this world has the right to claim the title of "the Sun of Russian Literature" it should be Mikhail Shishkin. <...> As soon as he finishes writing, delightful reviews and awards immediately follow. After

that — a new plunge into creative vortex until the next triumphant emersion.

*Galina Yuzefovich*  
*Expert*

Shishkin proves to be one of the most gifted authors of the Russian literary stage, especially because he manages to disregard fashion and create his own style and literary concept.

*Ulrich Schmidt*  
*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*

Shishkin's agile, inventive narration reveals his homeland anew, showing once again why he has become one of Russia's most valued storytellers — and an important new author in the West.

*Literalab*

**Halpérine-Kaminski Prize for the Best Translation 2007 (France)**

Shortlisted for **Giuseppe Berto Prize 2007 (Italy)**

**Grinzane Cavour Prize 2007**

**The Big Book Award 2006**

Shortlisted for **Bunin Literary Award 2006**

Shortlisted for **Andrei Belyi Literary Award 2006**

**The National Bestseller Prize 2005**

**The Best Foreign Book of the Year of the 21st Century (China)**



## Maidenhair

Nearly  
**70,000 copies**  
sold in Russia

“Maidenhair is a kind of book they give Nobel prize for. This novel is majestic ...” — this quote from Bookshelf Magazine is just a small fraction of praise the book has received in Russia, and rightly so. It is a brilliant novel that unquestionably belongs with the greatest works of Russian literature. It’s universal at its core — and not only because the action takes place across countries and historical epochs, virtually destroying boundaries. The whole novel is a metaphor of a resurrection of the soul — through the word. And through love.

Vagrius, 2005

Elena Shubina Publishing (AST), 2011

Novel

479 pp

*Translation rights sold*

English US Open Letter

English UK Quercus Books

Danish Batzer & Co

Swedish Ersatz

Estonian Varrak

Norwegian Forlaget Oktober

Greek Metaichmio

Slovenian DSP

German DVA

French Fayard

Italian Voland Edizione

Serbian Paideia

Bulgarian Fakel

Simplified Chinese People's Literature

Lithuanian Vaga

Polish Noir sur Blanc

Romanian Curtea Veche

Arabic Al Mada

Albanian Dituria

Spanish Impedimenta

The story begins in Switzerland — the narrator works at the local immigration office interpreting interviews with Russian refugees seeking asylum. They all tell stories — some came to Zurich from Chechnya, others from orphanages, some lost their houses in the war, or had parents murdered in front of their eyes, or were raped in prison with a mop handle, tortured, persecuted... They tell these stories for one reason, to stay. One horrid story follows another, in a chain of endless questions and answers. We don't know what's true and what's not any more but at the end it really doesn't matter whether it's really happened to them or not — it's enough to know that the stories are true. Now they have a chance to re-write their lives, to get a new beginning, to find their new true selves. The interpreter becomes the only link between the two worlds, the gatekeeper to the better life. Their lives will lead to their deaths. Unless he redeems them. Once again, with a word.

Between the interviews the interpreter writes letters to his son addressing him as Emperor Navuhodonozaur — letters that will never be sent, describing his life as a servant of the “Swiss Paradise Ministry of Defense.” He remembers his past, reviving and reliving the story of his doomed love, which resonates with other great love stories of world literature — Daphnis and Chloe, Tristan and Isolde.

In the meantime he reads Anabasis by Xenophon about the Persian expedition. And since the written word has the power to revivify the past, it is today that the Greek mercenaries retreat to the sea, march through the deserts and towns, cross over rivers — and meet a group of Chechenian refugees who come down from

the mountains, having sworn that they'd rather die than surrender to the Russians. Time becomes irrelevant, their meeting seems only natural, and so the Greeks and the Chechenians continue their journey together. Interviews, letters, memories, love stories, Greeks, Chechenians are linked in a single chain of events and human destinies, interwoven, resonating with one another, outside of time. Another distinctive voice in this chorus of voices is a fictional diary of Bella, or Isabella Yurjeva, a Russian romance singer, notorious beauty and socialite that the main character uses to write her biography — or to bring her back to life as he interprets his task. It's nothing more than a girl's private diary where she describes her childhood, her love affairs, her success, her ups and downs — but somehow it manages to depict a hole era from the pre-Soviet times till this day through the events of her 100-year long life.

In Maidenhair Shishkin demonstrates utter proficiency in various styles and manners of speech. The main character's line of work is by no means accidental — his interpreting skills are a metaphor for omniscience — and the real meaning of a Word — thus his almost obsessive desire to find the tomb of Saint Cyril, the creator of the Cyrillic alphabet, while in Rome. This is the alphabet of which his universe is made. The world is magic only because its story can be told. It's unpredictable and erratic, but what once existed will exist for ever. In the word.

Maidenhair is in many ways an autobiographical novel. Just like his main character, Mikhail Shishkin worked as an interpreter at an immigration agency.

Complete  
English translation  
available





## Maidenhair

### Selected quotes

A beautiful, powerful and fascinating book which will become a milestone not only in the history of Russian literature but in the development of Russian self-awareness.

**Bakhyt Kenzheyev**  
*Nezavisimaya gazeta*

The first reading of Maidenhair is like tipping the pieces of a 1000-piece jigsaw out of the box and turning them all picture-side up...

**Slightly Booklist**

Shishkin's work has been described as "refined neo-modernism." His dense, lyrical prose suggests the influence of Ulysses, but Shishkin objects that "Joyce doesn't love his heroes"; in Maidenhair love is the crucial answer to most of the hundreds of questions.

**Pheobe Taplin**  
*Russia Beyond The Headlines*

In short, Maidenhair is the best post-Soviet Russian novel I have read. Simply put, it is true literature, a phenomenon we encounter too rarely in any language.

**Daniel Kalder**  
*The Dallas Morning News*

Maidenhair is a great novel about a word and a language that becomes soft and obedient in the hands of a Master. It can create any other reality which will be more stunning and credible than the real world. The gap between a word and a fact, between reality and its translation to the human language is a real hotbed of internal tension in the novel.

**Maya Kucherskaya**  
*polit.ru*

Maidenhair is likely a work of genius... If Shishkin is right about the power of words to resurrect the dead, Maidenhair has all but secured his immortality.

**Christopher Tauchen**  
*Words Without Borders*

Meanwhile, Shishkin's work is not at all a philological novel for a literary coterie or a boring high brow read that reminds one of lapped milk. Although very different from Pavic's works, it could become just as famous.

**Vladimir Berezin**  
*Time Out*

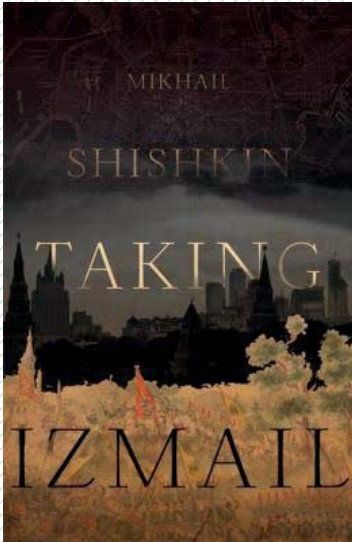
Maidenhair is a kind of book they give the Nobel prize for. The novel is majestic.

**Knizhnaya Vitrina**





Russian Booker Prize 2000



**Taking Izmail**

Novel  
 Vagrius, 2001  
 460 p

*Translation rights sold*

French Fayard  
 Italian Voland  
 German DVA  
 Romanian Curtea Veche  
 Macedonian Ars Lamina  
 Swedish Ersatz  
 Turkish Jaguar  
 Serbian Paladeia  
 Chinese CIP  
 Estonian Koolibri

**Full German and  
 French translations  
 available**

**English sample  
 available**

## Taking Izmail

A groundbreaking novel from Russia's most prominent contemporary writer. In this 1999 work, Mikhail Shishkin displays at full force the writing talents that have won him international recognition for books like Maidenhair and The Light and the Dark.

The Izmail of the title is a border fortress town, taken and lost by Russian forces numerous times in history.

Here it is taken as a metaphor for the task of mastering life itself, and the scope of the task is conveyed through a masterfully interwoven panoply of scenes from different times and settings in Russia: in this tour de force of structure, style, and scholarship the interaction of the scenes creates a genuine sense of the complexity of life.

As Mikhail Shishkin's father says to him in the autobiographical chapter Conclusion: 'This life, Mishka, has to be taken like a fortress!'

Among other things, Taking Izmail is a young writer's own brilliant storming of that fortress.

**One of the most prominent names in modern Russian literature**  
 – Publishers Weekly

**Random House**

Essays, German language  
 2019  
 384 pp

*Translation rights sold*

World English Quercus Books  
 Italian 21 Lettere  
 Swedish Fri Tanke  
 French Noir sur Blanc  
 Spanish Armaenia  
 Polish Noir sur Blanc  
 Lithuanian Vaga  
 Finnish WSOY  
 Norwegian Cappelen Damm  
 Estonian SA Kultuurileht  
 Romanian Curtea Veche  
 Slovakian Slovart  
 Croatian Tim Press  
 Japanese Hakusuisha  
 Dutch Querido  
 Spanish Impedimenta  
 Portuguese Relogio D'Agua  
 Czech Prostor

## Peace or War

### Russia and the West — A Path to Understanding

A unique insight into a foreign mysterious country nearby. Is there a reason to fear Moscow? Could Russia have any reason to distrust the West? How are the tensions between the East and the West fuelled? And could they be solved?

The award-winning writer Mikhail Shishkin shares his understanding of Russia and the West and the contrasts and tensions that have been exacerbated for several years. With his deep knowledge of Russia the writer explores how the epoch of peace and a supposed end of the East-West confrontation could come to the current crisis. Shishkin's love for Russia is uncompromised, yet he sharply criticizes Putin's authoritarian rule and the politics of the Kremlin. Personal insights, sharp political analyses, historical overviews make it a crucially important book in difficult times.

From the author: "This book is a collection of essays about Russia, written specifically for the western reader. Having lived in Europe for so many years helped me recognize the general misconceptions about Russia and Russians that western people often nourish.

This book is for the reader who refuses to accept clichés and platitudes as ultimate truth.

This book answers some of the most important "Russian questions". Why do 21st century westerners travelling the world write about my country as if it were

another planet? What is wrong with my country, and why? What is this whole notion of "Russianness"? Why do revolutions and attempts at democratic reforms only lead to new dictatorships? Why can't the West and Russia reach understanding, after centuries and centuries of war and peace? What does it mean to love Russia? Can one still believe in Russia, as Tyutchev once bequeathed?

The essays are devoted to such eternal topics as "the mystery of the Russian soul" (here is a spoiler: there is no mystery, only the lack of knowledge that adds to a mysterious glare); patriotism and tyranny; "Live not by lie" (but neither by the truth); "Neither the church nor the tavern"; "Russian universality" and hybrid wars; writers and power, and many others.

The future is a glove, and the past is a hand. This is a book about the future of Russia. Therefore, it has a lot of history. I explain to the Western reader its underwater, deep currents, invisible from the outside, but determining its course. Without this, the present of my country cannot be understood. The last two chapters are devoted to what awaits us in the coming years and in the not so distant future."

**Selected quotes**

Pleitgen and Shishkin, both sharing a deep knowledge of Russia, duel in a pointed exchange of views of both internal and external sides of things.

*Kölner Stadtanzeiger*

The long-time ARD reporter in Russia and USA and a Russian writer who won every important literary award in Russia, search together for possible ways of handling relations between the West and the East.

*Tagesspiegel*

The mysterious Russia: in his book, Mikhail Shishkin explains the nation that the West fails to understand.

*L'Union Sarda*

From as back as the 19th century the West have considered tsarist Russia as a "prison of people".

In his emotionally charged book, Mikhail Shishkin, revisits this concept and discuss it from the actual modern angle.

*La Repubblica*

Premio Strega Europeo 2022

Shortlisted for the Leipzig Book Fair Prize 2013

The Big Book Award 2011

Haus der Kulturen der Welt International Literature Award 2011



Elena Shubina Publishing (AST)

Novel, 2010  
412 pp

Translation rights sold

World English Quercus  
 Italian Lettera 21  
 German DVA  
 French Noir sur blanc  
 Spanish Lumen / Random House Mondadori  
 Japanese Shinchosha  
 Dutch Querido  
 Finnish WSOY  
 Finnish audioplay YLE  
 Norwegian Oktober  
 Swedish Ersatz  
 Danish Batzer & Co  
 Faroe Sprotin  
 Icelandic Bjartur  
 Serbian Paideia  
 Croatian Naklada Ljevak  
 Macedonian Antolog  
 Czech Vitrné mlýny  
 Slovakian Slovart  
 Polish Noir sur Blanc  
 Lithuanian Vaga  
 Latvian Jumava  
 Estonian Varrak  
 Romanian Curtea Veche  
 Hungarian Cartaphilus  
 Simplified Chinese Hunan People Publishing House  
 Arabic Arab Scientific Publishers  
 Albanian Fan Noli  
 Turkish Jaguar  
 Hebrew Kinneret  
 Estonian Varrak

Complete  
English translation  
available

## Letterbook

The internationally prize-awarded writer, Mikhail Shishkin, comes with a beautifully sad and bewitchingly lucid epistolary novel. The stories of two lovers told through their love letters through continents and epochs intertwine in an elaborate text about mysteries of life, acceptance of death, and, ultimately, about grasping the eternity.

This latest novel by Mikhail Shishkin is deceptively simple. A man. A woman. Their love letters. A summer house, the first love. Vladimir — Vovka-carrot-top and Alexandra — Sashka; he goes to war, she stays at home, living an ordinary life. Two people writing each other just about everything — their childhood, families, trifles of life, joys and sorrows — what could be more normal? Until we get to know things are not what they seem. The deeper readers emerge into the writing the more obvious it becomes that the time has been disunited, dissected and tossed together as in a children nonsense rhyme.

The time is indeed out of joint and only these letters bind it together restoring the world's order. She lives in the 60-s, he goes to the Boxers uprising in China at the turn of the twentieth century. He dies in the very first battle of this half-forgotten war of his own choosing ("What war? Doesn't matter. A war

has always been. And will always be. And people get injuries and killed. And death is real.") — but his letters continue to arrive. She gets married, carries and loses a child — and keeps writing to him as if these letters exist in a parallel universe, as if time doesn't matter — and neither does death.

This is a novel about the mysteries of life — and acceptance of death.

Shishkin is loyal to articulating his principle: the written word is the key, and so is love. "To exist you have to live not in your own mind that is so unreliable... but in the mind of another person, and not just any person but the one who cares if you exist."

Shishkin's sophisticated language and intricate style have won him major international literary awards and comparisons to the greatest authors of our time — and Letterbook firmly confirms this well-deserved reputation.

### Selected quotes

Shishkin is arguably Russia's greatest living novelist... his writing is richly textured and innovative and his themes are universal: love and death, pain and happiness, war and peace... Shishkin's writing is both philosophically ambitious and sensually specific, evoking the rain on a dacha roof, the smell of blossoming lime trees, or the stink of human corpses.

**Phoebe Taplin**  
*The Guardian*

Whatever the secret of the time scheme, and however magic-realist or metaphysical it might be, it contributes to the book's powerful treatment of love and the vividness of being alive, underscored by the reality of ever-present morality— Shishkin is a writer with a compelling sense of the skull beneath the skin.

**Phil Baker**  
*The Sunday Times*

There is a lyrical, poetic quality to much of Shishkin's writing... This is certainly the most complicated, protean book I've ever reviewed and one jammed with cultural allusions and ideas.

**Tibor Fischer**  
*Standpoint Magazine*

Shishkin's prodigious erudition, lapidary phrasing and penchant for generic play are conspicuous components of his art... These characteristics do indeed ally him with Nabokov, as he does have faith in the written

word... And yet, unlike Nabokov, Joyce and many of their postmodern acolytes, Shishkin is unabashedly and unironically sentimental.

**Boris Dralyuk**  
*Times Literary Supplement*

Mikhail Shishkin is the Ian McEwan of Russia. A prize-winning writer who enjoys stunning commercial and critical success, he's also a literary celebrity in a country that still knows how to celebrate its author-heroes. His latest novel, *The Light and the Dark*, in its brilliant translation, is striking proof that great Russian literature didn't die with Dostoevsky. A wonderful book: it is filled with wonder.

**Monocle Magazine**

It really does not matter if the lovers have ever met in person. The only witness who counts is the author — or, more precisely, his prose.

**Anna Aslanyan**  
*The Independent*

Striking... [Vladimir and Alexandra's] tales cohere into a portrait of Russians growing up too soon, enlisted in causes not their own, exemplified by Sashenka's belief in a second, disobedient self who lives out the dreams she can't.

**Publishers Weekly**