

precision

A doctor takes the pulse of contemporary small-town Russia in this collection of short stories



© Alamy

Jana Bakunina YESTERDAY

Russia. The provinces. Our time. Maxim Osipov's collection *Rock, Paper, Scissors and Other Stories* (translated by Boris Dralyuk, Alexandra Fleming and Anne Marie Jackson), is just the ticket to tear the reader of Russian literature away from the epic tomes of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Unlike Guzel Yakhina or Lyudmila Ulitskaya, contemporary Russian writers who tend to explore the 20th century in their fiction, Osipov's stories reflect the unpolished Russia of today.

The collection includes 12 stories with a kaleidoscope of characters and settings as diverse as Russia itself. Meet musicians, actors, doctors, entrepreneurs and a disillusioned priest. Find yourself on a train "pulling apart a chicken" in a story titled "Moscow-Petrozavodsk". Or stay a while in Eternity, a mining town in the far north of Russia in "After Eternity: The Notes of a Literary Director". What's it like? "It's beautiful here; a joyless, central Russian sort of beauty."

Osipov's writing is as precise as a surgeon's cut. He is a doctor (like Chekhov and Bulgakov) and practises in Tarusa, a small town 90 miles outside Moscow. The characters he draws show how intimately he gets to know people through his profession. There is also a lack of sentimentality in the way Osipov narrates their lives – another doctor's trademark, perhaps.

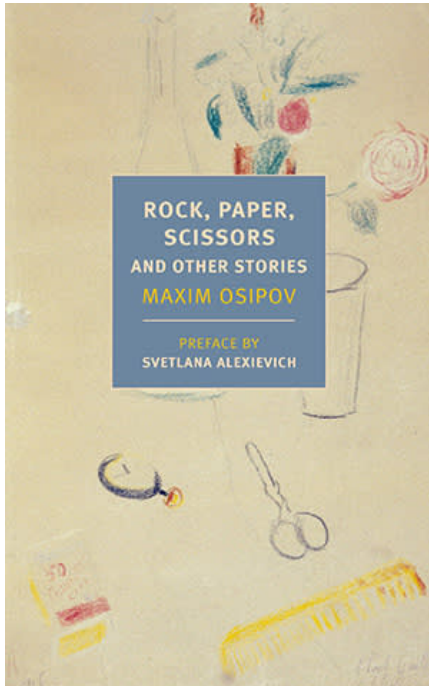
"Rock, Paper, Scissors", the title story, is set in a sleepy town somewhere in central Russia. A solitary 40-year-old teacher had a soft spot and high hopes for his former student who went to study in Saint Petersburg. Alas, her life met a tragic end. The girl's mother Ksenia who runs a *pelmennaya* (a dumpling restaurant) and practically the entire town, hopes to find solace in Christian piety. Meanwhile, Ruhshona, a Tajik migrant, gets arrested for killing a town governor who attempted to rape her.

The three central characters appear to have little in common at the beginning of the story but they reminisce about the Soviet Union and its long-lost ideals – a leitmotif in today's Russia – and yearn to find meaning in life in the midst of monotonous small-town existence.

Short stories are, of course, notoriously difficult to get right. Many of these works never quite develop: they tease the appetite but don't fill you up. Yet Osipov has a knack for finding multi-layered characters. Perhaps the most accomplished story is "Polish Friend". It's short and elegantly

poignant. Its protagonist devotes her life to music. She makes compromises to become the best violinist she can be. She even invents an excuse — a fictional Polish friend — and misses out on parties at the weekend. The Polish friend adds a little mystery — “an affectation” — to the heroine’s otherwise disappointing life. And then one day fate introduces her to a nice man from Poland who asks her on a date.

It may feel strange that Osipov does not weave politics into his stories. It is though an accurate portrayal of ordinary Russian sentiment today. People have bold dreams when they are young, then settle for colourless lives and shuffle from one day to the next. Like a good doctor, Osipov finds the right balance between brutal honesty and reassuring comfort. And that is the best a patient, or a reader, can hope for.



Rock, Paper, Scissors and Other Stories, by Maxim Osipov, *NYRB Classics*, RRP\$17.95/RRPE11.99, 304 pages

Join our online book group on Facebook at [FTBooksCafe](#). Subscribe to [FT Life](#) on YouTube for the latest FT Weekend videos