

Title: “Furmanov voodushevliat i ukrepliaet, a *Dvenadtsat' stul'ev* naoborot razvinchivaiut”: Reader Letters to Il'f and Petrov and the Persistence of Soviet Discourse
Author: Anne O. Fisher, Williams College

This paper analyzes 67 archived reader letters to the writers Il'ia Il'f and Evgenyj Petrov.

First, comparing trends in reader letters to the publication history of the two Bender novels reminds us of the capital-centric nature of publishing and the resultant regulatory effect on provincial reading. Reader letters show that before 1934 many provincial readers hadn't heard of the Bender novels and knew Il'f and Petrov primarily as journalists. This change can be traced back to the landmark 1933 editions of both Bender novels released by the publishing house *Federatsiia* and is itself dependent on the coauthors' 1932 breakthrough into major publications such as *Pravda* and *Literaturnaia gazeta*.

Secondly, reader letters also show that there is unexpectedly little crossover between fans of the Bender novels and fans of Il'f and Petrov's journalism, which reflects the two different writerly functions the coauthors were seen to fulfill: readers of the Bender novels usually felt comfortable offering praise, criticism, or suggestions as what Sheila Fitzpatrick has called “citizens,” while readers of the journalism more often turned to the coauthors as “supplicants.” This divide is analyzed in terms of perceived agency, both that of readers vis-à-vis writers, and that of writers vis-à-vis state institutions.

Finally, reader letters reveal that readers expressed their own personal, sometimes divergent interpretations of the Bender novels using official critical categories and terminology. Thus, reader response to the novels shows both the persuasiveness of Soviet ideological rhetoric and the resilience of readers, resulting in what Roger Chartier has called the “dialectic between imposition and appropriation, between constraints transgressed and freedoms bridled” that characterizes early Soviet reading.

Chartier, Roger. *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe between the 14th and 18th Centuries*. Trans. Lydia G. Cochrane. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994.

Fitzpatrick, Sheila. “Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s.” *Slavic Review* 55. 1 (Spring 1996): 78-105.