



Dersu the Trapper

Vladimir Arsenyev, Jaimy Gordon (Preface), Malcolm Burr (Translator)

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Vladimir Klavdievich Arseniev (1872-1930) undertook twelve major scientific expeditions between 1902 and 1930 in the Siberian Far East, and authored some sixty works from the geographical, geological, botanical, and ethnographic data he amassed. Among these, Dersu the Trapper has earned a privileged place in Russian literature. In this Russian counterpart to The Journals of Lewis and Clark and the novels of James Fenimore Cooper, Arseniev combines the precise observations of a naturalist with an exciting narrative of real-life adventure. Arseniev describes three explorations in the Ussurian taiga along the Sea of Japan above Vladivostok, beginning with his first encounter of the solitary aboriginal hunter named Dersu, a member of the Gold tribe, who thereafter becomes his guide. Each expedition is beset with hardship and danger: through blizzard and flood and assorted deprivations, these two men forge an exceptional friendship in their mutual respect for the immense grandeur of the wilderness. But the bridges across language, race and culture also have limitations, and the incursion of civilization exacts its toll. Dersu the Trapper is at once a witnessing of Russia's last frontier and a poignant memoir of rare cross-cultural understanding. Originally published in 1941, this English translation is reprinted in its entirety now for the first time.

Dersu the Trapper Details

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Author : Vladimir Arsenyev , Jaimy Gordon (Preface) , Malcolm Burr (Translator)

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From Reader Review Dersu the Trapper for online ebook

Kate says

I stayed up late reading this tender, touching, beautiful and sad classic memoir. The character of Dersu Uzala is a composite, according to the introduction, yet he is based on real people and is lovingly and beautifully portrayed, leaves a stamp on the imagination and made me want to go camping again! Written in the 19th C. and already, the essence of this book is Arsenyev's nostalgia and his loving wish to record for posterity this beautiful possibility -- a way of life, in harmony with the elements. It's as if he is leaving a trail for us to follow. A. is already conscious of a natural world under threat from the enslavement and oppression of native peoples, callously unnecessary hunting practices of so called "developed" cultures who lack compassion and a sense of interdependence. Arsenyev predicts the desertification of once naturally abundant ecosystems. Seems invaluable now to listen to voices like this -- the voices of the trees.

Mark Isaak says

Mostly a naturalist's travelogue through east Russian taiga around 1900, this book reminds me of Wallace's *The Malay Archipelago* with snow and ice. More significantly, it also has the character of Dersu, a native of the area who grew up fending for himself in the wilds. Much of the attraction of this book lies in descriptions of how Dersu reads the clues of the trail, the animals, and the weather, not merely with experience, but often with the logical inference one might expect from Sherlock Holmes.

Algernon says

Get out your man card and start punching:

- go on an expedition to the wildest Siberian forest: Check!
- go hunting for black bear by yourself: Check!
- come face to face with a Siberian tiger without your rifle at hand: Check!
- survive in the middle of a forest fire: Check!
- survive a flash flood after torrential rains: Check!
- survive a three day winter blizzard up in the Sikhote-Alin mountains: Check!
- eat boiled leather from the expedition harnesses: Check!
- get pestered by clouds of murderous gnats: Check!
- start a bromance with your native guide: Check and double Check!!!
- get a town named after you, complete with statue commemorating your exploits: Check!

Vladimir Arsenyev was a military officer, an explorer of the Far East, a scientist, a traveler, and a writer who organized several prospecting expeditions in the Ussurian taiga between 1902 and 1907. This book is based on the journals of these expeditions and is dedicated to the Nannai / Goldi hunter who acted as guide for Arsenyev's surveying crew.

(he looks a bit like Putin, doesn't he?)

There are three main attractions in the story for me:

1 - the descriptions of the pristine forests of Far East Asia, with their incredible wealth of plant and animal life, the rugged mountains, the marshes, the rivers full of salmon, the beaches inhabited only by seals and sea lions, the majestic tigers waiting to pounce almost on a daily basis. The few humans encountered on the trip are the original tribesmen (Udehei, Nanai, etc), the first Russian settlers brought there by the Great Transsiberian Railway, some Chinese and Korean trappers. Arsenyev style is mostly dry, a detached recounting of facts, but he is effective because this lends the authenticity of the eyewitness to the text. His emotions will become more transparent towards the end, as his friendship with Dersu gains steam.

2 - the constant danger of the journey, the fortitude and the dogged endurance of the team confronting a merciless environment with rudimentary equipment. As I already mentioned: floods, forest fires, blizzards, attacks by wild animals and / or insects, starvation or hypothermia are constant companions on the route. Arsenyev and his team are on their own and many times their survival is due only to the skills of one man: Dersu Uzala. Which brings me to

3 - the real star of the novel, Dersu Uzala, a simple man with basic needs and ancient wisdom inherited from his native ancestors. Old, small of stature and poorly dressed, he is more at home in the wilderness than any of his Russian employers. He is an exceptional marksman with a rifle but his real talent is to read the language of trees and the tracks of the animals, the patterns of the clouds and the winds. He is a survivor who chuckles at Arsenyev when he fails to spot a broken branch on the trail:

"Hm! Like a baby. See nothing, savvy nothing. Live in town. Want to eat - go buy. Live alone in mountains - soon die."

and at another time, when a Kazak wanted to shoot at a seal for fun:

"Don't shoot", he said quietly. "Cannot take it with us. It's bad to shoot for nothing."

He will save the officer's life at least twice: once when caught in the open by a forest fire and a second time at a dangerous crossing of a flooded river on an improvised raft. Arsenyev will come not only to respect him and to depend on his expertise, but to form a strong friendship with the diminutive guide, offering him the shelter of his home in Khabarovsk when the guide's eyesight begins to falter.

For me, the most important aspect of Dersu personality is his animist spirituality - his belief that every living thing has a soul and is talking gently to him, his view that nature is a garden to be nurtured or at least respected, and not an adversary to be conquered. He reminds me of Winnetou and Uncas Leatherstocking, with the important difference that Dersu is not an imaginary character. Here's the relevant quote, as narrated by Arsenyev:

During our meal I threw a bit of meat into the fire. Dersu pulled it out hastily and flung it to the ground. "Why burn meat?" he asked me with displeasure. "Tomorrow we go, and latter other people will come here. They can eat it."

"What people?" I ask in bewilderment.

"You don't know?" he asked in surprise. "Raccoon, badger or crow; if the crow does not, the mouse will; if

the mouse does not, the ant will. There are all kinds of people in the taiga."

If you don't believe my praises for this story, consider the fact that it was picked for screen translation by none other than **Akira Kurosawa**, his first non-Japanese-language film and his first and only 70mm film, shot mostly outdoors. Consider also that the movie won an Oscar for the best foreign language film. I have waited to read the book before renting the movie, but I plan to remedy this and get it into my player soon. I would recommend a second movie for readers who liked the book, dealing also with the dangers of prospecting into the immense taiga wilderness : **Letter Never Sent / Neotpravlennoye pismo [1960]**

[edit for spelling]

Tom says

I love this book and this film about the Russian Far East. Dersu is a member of the Gold tribe--a tribe of hunters of the Russian Far East. He becomes a tracker for the legendary, but also real, explorer V.K. Arsenyev. The encounters with tigers, seals, and just Arsenyev's encyclopedic knowledge of flora and fauna makes this a great story about nature, about friendship, and about what is lost when progress takes over. The book is a classic and deserves to be rediscovered and Dersu is a true hero. Five stars.

Jay says

For now, five stars, only because I can't give it six. Wow! What an amazing tale about an amazing man and amazing part of this planet. More later. Thank you, John Valient for turning me on to this incredible book.

Kurtbg says

This book is a chronicling of the Ussuri Taiga in east Russia of a surveyor for the railroad. Much like in *Dances with Wolves*, the author, Arseniev has a wish to see the Taiga before it completely disappears as civilization advances. The three journeys he takes occur in the early 1900's and include his exploits with a Taiga dweller known as Dersu. Dersu is a master at tracking animals, reading the weather and surviving in the the harshest of conditions. He befriends Arseniev in the first expedition, surreptitiously comes across him in the second, and then finally plan to meet for a third.

They face the challenges of the weather and the environment, animals such as bear, the Siberian tiger, mosquitoes and sable. The author's expedition teams face starvation, poachers, and the elements testing themselves and gaining an understanding of the Taiga.

I was turned to this by reading the book, *The Tiger*, By Jon Vaillant, which is an excellent chronicling of hunting a man-eating tiger in the Taiga.

Unfortunately, both Arseniev and Dersu met sad and tragic ends at the hands of the most dangerous animal.

Matthew says

I read this memoir of Siberian exploration because of Akira Kurosawa's superb film "Dersu Usala" which was based on it. Evidently it is or was a pretty well known book in Russia, but it reads exactly like a tale of adventure and discovery from a century earlier in the United States. It's a lot like reading about the Lewis & Clark expedition except that the explorers feel no shame in acknowledging how much the native saved their asses. V.K. Arseniev considered himself great friends with his Goldi guide Dersu. There's a lot of respect and admiration in his writing, as much for Dersu's determination to live just past the edge of the encroaching modern world as for the native wisdom without which Arseniev and the rest of his corps of discovery would have perished on several occasions.

John says

This is a great historical travelogue, a well born Russian officer exploring far eastern Siberia with a guide named Dersu. The area they are in is basically the part of Russia that is right next to China and Korea, the bit that's so far from Russia that it's really kinda crazy that it's even part of Russia, but it is. They get caught in blizzards and have run-ins with Siberian tigers and navigate icy rivers. Some of the first two expeditions drag a bit because Arseniev has this need to mention every tree and bird that he sees, and what the flowers looked like and what European flowers they resemble and what birds were in which tree and whether they were scared of him or didn't seem to care. That stuff should just be skimmed over though, unless you just adore Siberian botany or something. The real good stuff here is the window into what life was like in this area a hundred years ago.

I found it very interesting to think about the cross cultural stuff here. Arseniev is remarkably open to discussing the value of Dersu's native beliefs and animism, and he really puts the guy on a pedestal. He openly discusses the ways that the native way of life is superior to his 'cultured' background. But he does this partially because he spent his youth reading American frontier literature like 'Last of the Mohicans', and all kinds of other books that talked about American Indians as noble savages, and it was almost like he couldn't wait to get out to Siberia to find his own noble savages to write about. So off he went, and lo and behold, he found one.

Incidentally, Siberian tigers seem pretty badass. Can you imagine walking around the forest, not the jungle, just forest like we have in Maine and running into one of those things? No wonder the natives respected the hell out of nature. A mountain lion might kill someone once in a while, if it was starving, but these tigers will eat you soon as look at you.

Bryn Hammond says

I want to note the unobtrusive personality of the Russian officer, who tells us about the Gold he so admires and not about himself. He expresses freely that he feels like a child in Dersu's hands whenever the taiga turns frightening. He learns from him like a child, too, as Dersu laments the onset of the end for the taiga as she was. Expect to be saddened, but you're with a likeable guy who cares about what he sees and hasn't a macho bone in his body.

More by luck than judgement I read this alongside A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia's North Asian Colony 1581-1990, and that proved interesting.

Merrikay says

This book has been described as the Russian counterpart to [The Journals of Lewis and Clark], presumptuous, yet a helpful quick analogy for Americans. Arseniev was a Russian cartographer who undertook several expeditions in Siberia. His task was to map the territory and he also describes the plant and animal life of the area, as well as the people. This area is partially bordered by China, Korea and the Sea of Japan.

Dersu Uzala is a Nanai, called by the Russians Goldis, the indigenous people of the area here in Siberia and China. I simply had given no thought to indigenous people of most countries other than my own. Native Americans of course I knew about, some African tribes and South American tribes, Maori of NZ and Australia, Inuit, Degar (Montagnard) of course from Vietnam war, but heck my knowledge of world history from ANY period is pathetic. Thus my excitement over discovering Dersu. Dersu became the native guide for Arseniev's expeditions, and much, much more than that. They formed a strong and lasting friendship rooted in Dersu's profound humanity and generosity, and Arseniev's deep love and affection for Dersu. Dersu saved Arseniev's life many times. I am sorry to sound so cliche, but Dersu is truly one with nature, plants, animals, rocks, to the point of what some would call animism. This unity led to his understanding of and respect for life. He would not kill more than necessary to survive, nor overuse plants and taught the same to Arseniev. I enjoyed the descriptions of plants and animals and think any fan of [[John Muir]] would enjoy this book.

This is also an action story as you can imagine attempting to survive in the wild and desolate area would be. However, maybe most of the threats to their survival came from men. There were also descriptions of the different groups of people contacted on this trip and Dersu knew the helpful way to interact with each group, according to their customs and behaviors. He also knew which one to avoid!

I have read some about the indigenous groups I mentioned above, but now of course I want to study these groups from each continent. Wouldn't that make a great discussion group and a great reading list? I want to revisit my anthropology classes and learn it all again.

The meeting of Dersu with modern society of the time (1907 era) and the resulting interaction is of course an inevitable part of this story.

I also got the movie of Dersu from Netflix and it was excellent. Five stars for book and movie! One of my all time favorites.

M. says

Arsenyev's work is a hidden jewel in Russian literature with its simple yet poetic depiction of the immense grandeur of nature, perilous yet humbling adventuring and relationship with an expectational character of endearing inconsistencies and a gorgeous world view.

The reports into the landscapes and many numerous native and migrated peoples of the Ussurian Taiga are truly spectacular crossing many languages, races and cultures.

Safae says

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J.M. Hushour says

One of the superlative works of exploration and/or survey, as well as a touching story of how modern mores pretty much ruined anything.

Arseniev, the author, recounts here three expeditions he did along the Sihote Alin (and hinterlands) between the Russian frontier and the Sea of Japan in the 1900s. Dersu was his guide and friend, one of those almost mystical dudes who can read intent, age, and health from spoor and know a person by their tracks. None of this Hollywood Aragorn-patting-grass-where-hobbits-made-love: no, Dersu the Trapper was the real dilly, an unfortunate kind of human that fantasy and culture have ruined by taking their banality and making it something fantastic, while their counterparts in politics have seen to it that they are properly destroyed and forgotten.

Arseniev and Dersu battle tigers, bandits, and nature, while Dersu points up what an infant Arseniev and the other Russians are when it comes to reading the world around them.

A classic that makes we want to vanish with my berdianka into the wastes above Lake Hanka!

Clare says

An account of surveying expeditions sounds like dry reading but this definitely was not the case with this book. V. K. Arseniev wrote about several of his expeditions to the far eastern reaches of Russia in the early 1900's with a balanced mix of descriptions of the flora and fauna of the region and the adventure of the trek. At one point he and his men meet Dersu, a native of the area, who truly spent his life living off the land. Dersu could read the terrain and the weather like others could read a book and had a respect for nature that is seldom seen in today's world. He became a valued member of the team, even saving Arseniev's life at one point. During the survey Arseniev would see signs that some animal populations were being depleted because of over-hunting and trapping. He worried about how this would affect the fauna in the future. Writing about living in such close harmony with nature and living off the land, taking only what they needed, emphasizes how most people today are distanced from the natural world. After finishing this book I wondered how much of that pristine forest is left today and how the animals are faring.

Katya Reimann says

This is an extraordinary book. A 'classic,' in Russia, but... really a classic by any measure. Akira Kurasawa was inspired by this book to make his Oscar-winning movie *Dersu Uzala*, (1975), George Lucas was inspired by the syntax Arseniev puts in Dersu's mouth to create his character Yoda. The recent bestseller *Tiger*, (2010) by John Valliant, (also a lovely book) clearly takes its inspiration from Arseniev.

There's a wonderful page up by Chad Garcia, titled "Watching *Dersu Uzala*," which describes Kurasawa's relationship to the material. Kurasawa's movie was the first complete work he produced after a suicide attempt. I'd say--read Chad's page. No need for me to crib those thoughts here, when Chad has already written them so finely.

This said, my first reaction on reading the text? It was deep gratitude that I did not find the material to be "dated." I love Dersu's story so much that I'd bought extra copies for several friends. I knew *I* would love it--but what a pleasure to read those first paragraphs, those first pages, and know that my 'share'--it was going to be a good one.

The narrative is a factual account of Arseniev's three surveying trips in the coastal area north of Vladivostok--but the story is so much larger. Friendship, the slow terrible impact of one culture upon another, the slow terrible impact of human culture upon nature...

How can one expect this book, written by a man who was born the son of a serf? From what source does such human sensitivity arise?

"Sometimes it happens that the mountain and forest have such a cheerful and attractive appearance that one would be glad to linger there for ever. In others mountains seem surly and wild. It is a strange thing that such impressions are not purely personal and subjective, but were felt by all the men in the detachment... In that spot there was an oppressive feeling in the air, something unhappy and painful, and the sensation of gloom and ill-omen was felt by us all."

This book--when I read a book like this... what I want to do is... slink away, close the door to my study, and start writing. The charge I feel, reading the descriptions, the sentences; the feeling that courses through me, knowing that I am learning something new, yet something so connected to so much of what I have thought before.

So much about reading is that spark, that sense that one has made an acquaintance of a book at a time and place where the connection one has with one's reading... can be so strong.

I'm so grateful to have met this book and to have been able to read it in this way. And such a strong book--in this case I know my feelings are not mine alone.
