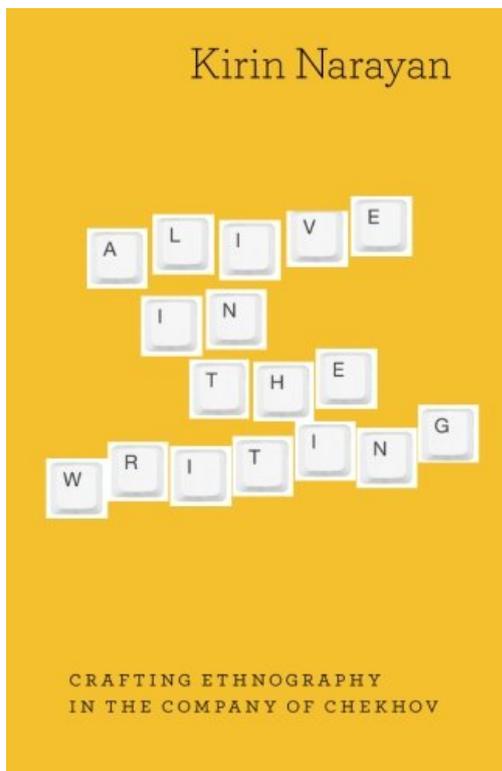


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## Review

“[Kirin Narayan] has written a brief and brilliant book about what it means to be an ethnographer, and how to do it responsibly, and better.”  
(James Wood *The New Yorker*)

“I was skeptical about whether the writings of a nineteenth-century Russian playwright and storyteller, inspiring as they might be, could offer much assistance in the more prosaic task of crafting academic texts. Nevertheless. . . . I decided to read on anyway. I am glad I did. Chekhov, at least in Kirin Narayan’s deft hands, proved to be a surprisingly solid source of advice for the ethnographic writer.” (James Staples *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*)

“Narayan’s short book can easily be read as a manual, and some (especially those with less experience to assure them that the doldrums do eventually pass) will find it useful for precisely that purpose. But it is much more than that. Narayan’s excitement at meeting Chekhov across the literature-ethnography divide and the rich array of beautiful ethnographic writing together forcefully remind us that ethnographic writing is never simply a descriptive exercise. As I read through the book, I was repeatedly struck by the sense of familiarity both with the dilemmas faced by Narayan’s chosen authors and with the exuberant outbursts with which they leaped across the constraints of a scholarly discipline to recapture the insights of fieldwork. If a doctoral student will find practical guidance and encouragement here, for a seasoned ethnographic writer the relief comes in the realization that there is company in those seemingly lonely moments when one struggles to render into comprehensible prose the powerful presence in all fieldwork of the inchoate, the imponderable, and—what is sometimes the result of ethical concerns for the protection of one’s informants—the unsayable.” (Michael Herzfeld *American Anthropologist*)

“*Alive in the Writing* is a gem of a book. Insightful and lively to read, it is of use to both beginning and seasoned ethnographers, as well as to anyone who wants to improve his or her writing about social life. . . . Inspired by her own work as an anthropologist and folklorist, Narayan draws on Chekhov’s life and his ethnographic work, Sakhalin Island, as well as the works of other ethnographers, to offer an imaginative, engaging, and highly useful series of exercises and advice to make ethnographic writing come alive.” (Elizabeth Fine *Journal of Folklore Research*)

“Chekhov’s unique ability to be a scientist and an artist, a medical doctor and a writer, to always be present in his writings as an observer and narrator, unfailingly compassionate, but never overbearing, makes Chekhov a role model to which we can all aspire. After reading Narayan’s book, you may want to run out and read Chekhov before you sit down to do any of your own writing. I do not think Narayan would find this upsetting at all. Perhaps it is even what she intends. I have always heard it said that you write as well as what you read. Bravo to Narayan for reminding us of this crucial truth. She has clearly learned deeply from her muse. Her writing sparkles with all the glittering qualities of Chekhov’s work—brevity, precision, audacity, and the desire to tell things as they are, and to do so with love, humor, and abiding curiosity for what makes human beings such endlessly interesting creatures.” (Ruth Behar *Current Anthropology*)

“Balm for the loneliness and torment of the ethnographic writer, this manual by one of the most distinguished offers the user a personal writer's workshop, at once charming, therapeutic, and practical. The author's mother, her most astute reader, asks: ‘A lot of people have no problem writing. The bigger thing I'd like to know is, do you have any thoughts on how to put all the different little bits together?’ With the help of Anton Chekhov, her muse and obsession, Narayan does.”--George Marcus, author of *Ethnography through Thick and Thin* (George Marcus 2011-11-22)

“Narayan skillfully weaves the story of Anton Chekhov’s visit to Sakhalin Island and its literary/ethnographic result, deftly chosen excerpts from contemporary ethnographic writing, and her own experience as anthropologist and teacher to create an insightful and above all helpful set of thoughts, tips, and exercises for anyone writing ethnography themselves. Read it and use it, you won’t find anything better.”

(Howard S. Becker, author of *Writing for Social Scientists*)

"The sustained interaction with Chekhov's life, work, and writing practices is unusual for a book devoted to craft, but it's a very productive and enjoyable through-line. The author weaves together rich examples from anthropological texts, and these examples collaborate beautifully with her inquiry into Chekhov's artistry and with the writing exercises she presents. Elegant in their simplicity and sensibleness, the exercises invite readers to experiment, and they help translate theoretical concepts into concerns that writers of all levels share."

(Michele Morano 2011-11-22)

“With a deft touch and an unlikely muse (Anton Chekhov), this consummate writer and reader of ethnographies has turned her deep appreciation of the craft and its promise into a gift for anthropologists. Narayan offers models of and models for ethnographic writing that will inspire us. I am eager to teach the book, but just as eager to learn from it.”--Lila Abu-Lughod, author of *Writing Women’s Worlds* (Lila Abu-Lughod 2011-11-22)

“*Alive in the Writing* is simply a delight to read. It walks its talk. It is rich in exercises to develop an ethnographic writer's talents and surprising in its stories of Chekhov as ethnographer. Narayan's marvelous manual for writers (and readers) of ethnography as well as creative nonfiction will be a cornerstone for much-needed courses in writing culture.”--Renato Rosaldo, coauthor of *Culture & Truth* (Renato Rosaldo 2011-11-22)

“Wise, lucid, loving—this guidebook of savvy illuminations will instruct and inspire students, teachers, and all those lost and found in the writing process.”--James Clifford, author of *On the Edges of Anthropology* (James Clifford 2011-11-22)

#### About the Author

Kirin Narayan is the author of *Storytellers, Saints, and Scoundrels*, *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon*, the novel *Love, Stars, and All That*, and the memoir *My Family and Other Saints*, published by the University of Chicago Press. A former Guggenheim fellow, she is professor of anthropology at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

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