

*Olga Komarova*

## **Crime Does Pay: The Popularity of Contemporary Russian Detective Stories**

The last decade has witnessed great changes on the Russian literary scene. In the 90s the book market was invaded by popular Western literature, mostly in poor Russian translations. The ordinary Russian reader became acquainted with new and exciting types of literature: thrillers, detective stories and love stories. The public was fascinated, and these books proved a great commercial success. The market economy made itself evident on the literary market, and stimulated a lot of activity in this field. It did not take long for Russian publishers to discover the possibilities, and Russian names and titles made their triumphant entrance on the scene. For the first time in the history of Russian literature books were considered to be merchandise. These paperbacks, with their bright covers and exciting tales of crime, proved to be very profitable.

This demonstrated a triumph of mass culture which has recently become a subject of scholarly research, involving both sociologists and culture critics. They focus on how mass culture has influenced the general public, and on its role in society. They ask whether it has had a therapeutic or a damaging effect.<sup>1</sup> It has been said that “mass culture functions as a mechanism which frees a person from the great stresses of everyday reality, from feelings of fatigue and indifference, cruelty and aggression, despair and uncertainty, humiliation and fear.”<sup>2</sup> In the new Russian reality in which normal citizens have become easy prey for crime and corruption, entertaining literature gives welcome relief. This is a well-known effect, and

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<sup>1</sup> B. Yerasov: *Social'naja kul'turologija*. Moscow: 1997; K. T. Teplic: *Vse dlja vseh. Massovaja kul'tura i sovremennyj chelovek*. Moscow: 1996; N. Chrenov: *Social'naja psihologija iskusstva: Teorija, metodologija, istorija*. Moscow: 1998.

<sup>2</sup> B. Yerasov: *Social'naja kul'turologija*. Moscow: 1997, 414.

reflects Kafka's description of the detective novel as a kind of drug, which distorts life out of all proportion; it turns the world upside down. He used Ibsen's phrase, calling it "a pillar of the state."<sup>3</sup> The Russian sociologist Chrenov claims that when people lose faith in the authorities and are disappointed with the social elite, mass culture provides them with the illusion that there is a solution to all their personal problems.<sup>4</sup> This was exactly what happened in Russia in the beginning of the 90s when ordinary people lost their traditional moral values and were trying to understand what they needed for success in the new realities of life. Tired of the effort of making ends meet, after a long day of job hunting they turned to the kind of literature which did not demand concentration or intellectual effort. They wanted something which would give them relaxation and turn their thoughts away from the difficulties of everyday life.

### **Reflecting real life?**

It was in these paperbacks, that managed so quickly to portray kaleidoscopic changes in the life of the country and depict new relations between weakness and strength in society, that the readers sought an answer to the question of what was to be done. In these books they looked for an explanation of the new world order where cruel strength and corruption dominated at all levels of social life, and where the assertion of strength seemed to be the only viable response. These were new genres in Russian literature; thrillers which showed the reader a model of his new reality, where bloody crimes were ordinary events, and where the protagonists illustrated the new individualism necessary for survival. The readers discovered a frightening criminal world in which the individual must stand alone and be unscrupulous.

Very often these books do not have any literary merit; their attraction lies in simply showing the reader this changed world and the new criteria for social success. The plot is often quite primitive, although dynamic; the crimes are described in frightening detail, and there is no pretence of any psychological truthfulness. The main characters are supermen who survive the most dangerous wounds, and are practically immortal. This ensured the authors commercial success, but did nothing to enhance the literary standard of their work. Thus, in the tenth book in the series about Besheny, the author Victor Docenko resorts to recalling episodes from the previous

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<sup>3</sup> Gustav Janouch: *Gespräche mit Kafka*. Frankfurt a. M.: 1968.

<sup>4</sup> N. Chrenov: *Social'naja psihologija iskusstva*, 261–262.

novels instead of concentrating on character development. This book simply becomes a collection of schematic episodes that are not even convincingly arranged, and the main character does not have a trace of credibility. Books of this type are often left behind in the underground trains or on the buses. They are often obviously written in haste, their language is simple and introduces a lot of words and notions from criminal slang. We can see now, ten years later, that this slang is on its way into everyday language and even into the language of high-ranking state officials.

These books were written for a reader uninterested in and unaccustomed to reading high literature. At this point, literary critics claimed that “ordinary detective stories which depict a mystery, its detection and the answer to the mystery, are absent from the literary market.”<sup>5</sup> But this situation has quickly changed. Today we are witnessing a literary market which offers a variety of titles and authors who produce numerous detective stories of better literary quality. This article deals with some of the most representative names.

The first name to introduce is that of Danil Koretsky. The author is a high-ranking police officer and holds a teaching position at the Police Academy in the city of Rostov. In his novels he has created a typical provincial town – Tikhodonsk – which possesses all the characteristics of the new Russian reality. Koretsky is a very conscientious writer who uses his personal experience from his work in the police force and his knowledge of criminal realities in his novels. His books describe a wide spectrum of the criminal hierarchy, starting with criminals of the lowest grade and up to the established ones. The reader becomes acquainted with the system of bribing “the right people” and is given insight into a maze of relationships between the old generation of crooks who follow the unwritten laws of their system, and the new bandits who have no personal experience of life in prison and do not care about its code. The latter succeed in making a profit on purely legal activities, which is much more useful in today’s world.

The characters and background in Koretsky’s portrayal of legalized crime are interesting and convincing, the plot moves quickly, and the reader meets characters with whom he can identify. Koretsky builds up a model of reality, and gives the reader a positive hero to identify with. In order to achieve this, the reader must feel close to this hero, and sympathize with him. It is difficult, if not impossible for readers to identify themselves with a superman, and therefore, the main character is put into

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<sup>5</sup> Olga Slavnikova: “Supergeroi nashego vremeni”. *Znamja* Nr. 12, 1998.

situations that make him seem as ordinary as the reader. Only in this way can a character win the reader's trust and sympathy. Sometimes these characters have experienced violence in their childhood or come from the wrong background; all this helps to bridge the gap between hero and reader. We have just such a protagonist in Koretsky's *Operativny psevdonym*: an unemployed, unlucky worker, Ivan Lapin, wins the reader's sympathy because of the misfortunes he experiences in his private life and while job hunting.

After a nasty fall, Lapin discovers the truth about himself. As a secret agent he performs a number of heroic acts which all benefit the state, and the reader finds his actions credible. This is not only a revival of the patriotic ideal, it is also a way of encouraging the reader to believe in his own potential, in his own hidden strength and ability to change the circumstances of his own life. The main character's strength lies in his weakness.

The same mechanisms are at work in the main character of Koretsky's novels *Antikiller* and *Antikiller-2*. Lieutenant-Colonel Korenev, known to his enemies as "the Fox", is in deep conflict with his superiors and unhappy in his private life. It is a very complicated task for a writer to create a positive hero, while at the same time successfully depicting the corruption of state officials and the helplessness of ordinary people in a world where criminals are well organized and seldom punished. The main character wins the trust of the reader only when he fights "against everybody" as Koretsky's character does, and characteristically enough the author defines him as the "anti-killer". Koretsky is both inventive in the turns of his plot and convincing in his portrayal of different characters. The success of the TV-series based on *Antikiller* has helped boost his popularity.

## **Female voices**

Women authors have also established themselves in this genre. They have produced many novels that have won them a large audience. In fact, most of today's Russian crime literature is written by women. The first novels to appear on the market were those by Alexandra Marinina, also a former police officer. Her books demonstrate not only her close knowledge of day-to-day police work with its never ending stream of crimes, but also her knowledge of the backstage relations and routines of police investigation. Her dynamic plots and the verisimilitude of her details have made her books popular. The publishing house presents her in the blurbs as "a marvel in crime writing and a Russian Agatha Christie." But in her novels you will not find a Miss Marple or a Hercule Poirot. Her first main character was Major Stasov, a professional detective, who quarrels with his superiors

and starts working privately. Marinina takes the opportunity to show corruption inside the police force and in artistic circles in her novel *Cherny spisok*. The author has understood the desire of the ordinary reader to have a look at the world of glamour and to be convinced of the evil nature of the new Russians and their money. But what attracts readers the most is her intricate plots, the unpredictability of the main character's actions and private affairs, and the convincingly depicted minor characters.

However, Marinina is more often associated with her other main character. Anastasia Kamenskaya figures in a whole series of books. She is no superwoman; instead she is rather intellectual. The author uses references to Major Stasov and details from his life as a background in the stories about Kamenskaya to make the reader feel the flow of time, to make the illusion of real events stronger. The same trick is used when Stasov acts as the protagonist in other books. This also helps the author to vary her writing style and to fashion the atmosphere of the story around the main character. Anastasia (Nastya) is a well-educated, intelligent woman who is touchingly helpless with everyday chores such as shopping, cooking and washing, but extremely clever as an analyst in a police district office. Among the many human weaknesses she has, we discover an aversion to early rising, a love of black coffee, a dislike of weapons of all kinds and an inability to use them. In private she is taken care of by her husband, a talented physicist connected to a research institution. On one occasion Nastya reflects on their relationship:

They had known each other since the ninth form at school, but married only three years ago. It had taken them almost twenty years to understand that they were made for each other. They could have celebrated their silver wedding anniversary, but had in fact postponed their marriage until they were thirty-five. Suddenly Nastya became frightened at the thought that somebody could malevolently wish to snatch Ljoshka out of life. Out of life in general, and out of her, Nastya's, life. Though she dealt with death almost every day professionally, it had never before occurred to her that something bad might happen to her personally. And it was very probable. Nobody was protected from accidents. Nobody, not even the clever and the prosperous.<sup>6</sup>

Reflections like these are recognizable and familiar to the reader; it is easy to identify with Nastya. She is accident-prone like many other ordinary people.<sup>7</sup> The story of her romance and married life fascinates the public

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<sup>6</sup> Alexandra Marinina: *Prizrak muziki*. Moscow: 1998, 251. (My translation).

<sup>7</sup> Alexandra Marinina: *Smert radi smerti*. Moscow: 1998.

with its novelty – to begin with, Nastya and her partner are not officially married, and furthermore, their family life is somewhat unusual for the public, because it is still surprising to read about a family where the roles are so openly untraditional (with an understanding, nurturing husband and an absolutely helpless housewife). So we may say that Marinina introduces some feminist debate into her novels, and this undoubtedly adds to their success. Some of her novels about Nastya have also been turned into successful TV-serials.

At the same time, her novels are written with professional skill; she includes authentic details in her portrayal of her team of investigators. She describes their respect for their chief and their ability to joke about his seemingly old-fashioned investigative methods. There are amusing details which help to create a very convincing background for Nastya's clever deductions. Crime is of course present in her novels, but it is also evident that she believes in the ultimate victory of the police and in the good of man. Even when depicting tragic situations Marinina does not give up her optimistic worldview, and this is rather uncommon in Russian literature today. Her plots are constructed not only around the investigation of crimes but also around reflections on moral and social aspects of crime. The crime-scene descriptions are never too detailed; Marinina never aims at frightening her readers. Instead it seems as if she wants to encourage their faith in justice and the social order.

Marina Serova is the author of a quite different type of series. She is a newcomer, relatively speaking, but is already well known because she has found her niche in the market. She has introduced a new type of heroine to the public, the female super agent. Her stories (usually two in each volume) are about three protagonists with quite unusual professions. Tatyana Ivanova, the main character in one of the series, is a private detective who is highly skilled in the martial arts. Yevgenija Okhotnikova, in a second series, is a professional bodyguard with some military service experience; and the third protagonist, Julia Maksimova, is a secret service agent. These characters each borrow a few biographical elements from their author's life. Serova has a degree in law, she worked a few years in the office of Russia's Procurator-General, and is now an agent in one of the Secret Services. It is, as we see, not unusual for professional police officers in Russia to turn to writing crime stories.

Each of Serova's stories depicts an exciting episode in her main character's stormy life. All of her protagonists have small human weaknesses, which make them more vivid and real to the reader at the same time as we are impressed by their professionalism. Tatyana Ivanova likes to turn for help to Chinese dice, while Yevgenia Okhotnikova seeks help from her

aunt Mila, a very shrewd old lady who teaches law at a college. Julia Maksimova has a passion for collecting soft toys and for cooking exotic dishes when not engaged in some very risky mission which fully justifies her code name, “Bagira”.<sup>8</sup> A very clear distinguishing feature of these books is their patriotic theme. The protagonists’ actions are concentrated not only on investigating a single criminal case; the mystery very often turns out to be threatening society as a whole. Serova shows how dangerous her villains, these new unsympathetic “masters of life”, are. They are immoral criminals, and can be dangerous for the future of the country if they succeed in gaining political power.<sup>9</sup> It is also very interesting for an ordinary reader that the actions of the female super agents in critical situations are depicted with the convincing truthfulness of a professional. Russian provincial life provides an interesting background to their exploits. It is this combination of exotic professional knowledge, the skill of the main characters, (who are evidently inspired by the cinema character Nikita), and the patriotic undertone that makes these books a success with the public. However, Serova is not very innovative, and her literary style is marred by clichés.

Another popular name is Darya Dontsova whose books are written in a unique, humorous style. She plays on the readers’ desire to identify with her protagonist, an ordinary woman who is badly equipped for survival in these changed surroundings. She strives to make ends meet, and needs positive emotional support. The publishing house prints her books in a series dubbed “the ironic detective story.” The series is not clearly defined, but the advertisements speak of “the ironic attitude of the main characters to everything, including themselves.” The female protagonists all have amusing names, and the author starts each book by commenting on the name and telling about some of the fortunate developments in each character’s life.

Dontsova has produced almost three-dozen books, featuring three main characters. In one series the publishers tell us that the “investigation is carried out by Yevlampia Romanova, the dilettante.” A second series features “the private detective Darya Vasilyeva,” and in the third the main character Viola Tarakanova tends to get involved in extravagant situations in “the world of criminal passions,” to use the publisher’s formula. All this promises the reader a lot of thrills, a variety of crimes along with many familiar everyday situations. There are humorous and sentimental episodes

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<sup>8</sup> Serova succeeds in establishing associations to Kipling’s clever panther.

<sup>9</sup> Marina Serova: *Snaipera vyzvyvali?*; *Veselye pominki*; *Professional’naya intuicija*.

involving children and pets. Dontsova is at her best describing minor characters and making their stories and personalities an integrated part of her rather complicated and artificial intrigues. The covers of all of her books carry a common blurb claiming that “everything in her books is true; her main characters are partly modeled on her own life, her cats, dogs, children, and husbands. Her hobbies are knitting and baking, and in between – inventing crimes.”

All her female characters are fond of reading detective stories and regularly find themselves involved in complicated investigations where they receive miraculous help from their friends on the police force. Generally, the protagonist starts out simply trying to help out a friend in a difficult situation, but ends up setting off a chain reaction of thrilling experiences. Yevlampia Romanova and Darya Vasilyeva are ordinary Moscovites who are saved from everyday monetary troubles by their best girlfriend, who is rich and lives abroad. They take care of her children and pets and live in a world which is exciting for an ordinary reader because of its material opulence. Both Yevlampia and Darya have a lot of time to spend on their private interest in investigating mysteries. They have unrestricted access to uncountable dollars which they can use to bribe everybody they need to bribe and a lot of connections in this new world of rich business people and popstars.<sup>10</sup> In contrast, the third main character, Viola Tarakanova, has to work very hard to make ends meet and is thus closer to the reader in this respect. But her problems are usually solved in some miraculous way (How great is the reader’s belief in miracles!) and she even meets some nice, helpful people among the rich.<sup>11</sup>

Plots in Dontsova’s books are very intricate with a lot of surprising and highly incredible turns, but the readers willingly suspend their disbelief in order to get a glimpse of this bright, prosperous world. It is a world in which even crimes are exotic and differ greatly from sordid street crimes. The readers can count on a happy ending and the triumph of justice, and they enjoy the simple morals of the stories: “Thou shalt not kill; thou shalt not steal.”

Dontsova is not trying to impress the reader with her inside knowledge of the techniques of investigation; her attraction lies in showing seemingly ordinary, helpless characters against the background of a false and dangerous world. The readers accept the naive attempts of the protagonists to do good, and the stories reinforce their faith in the police and their optimism.

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<sup>10</sup> Darya Dontsova: *Dama s kogotkami; Prognoz gadostei na zavtra.*

<sup>11</sup> Darya Dontsova: *Nesekretnye materialy.* Moscow: 2002.

Her books demonstrate the author's personal knowledge of the world of haute couture and show business, and although she depicts this world in a detailed, clever way, she clearly does not like what she sees. The reader shares her feelings and together with her heroines turns away from the dirty, immoral life of the new "elite".<sup>12</sup>

Dontsova gives humorous descriptions of her characters' everyday misfortunes and ironically depicts their own understanding of their investigative abilities:

MacDonald's is the place where I think best. This may be due to their cholesterol-propped hamburgers, which nobody in my family likes; or it may lie in the loud cries for 'Mamma' which you hear around you. There is a certain inexplicable pleasure when you hear these cries, and know for certain, that they don't concern you.<sup>13</sup>

For the ordinary reader, staggering under the small troubles of everyday life, the portrayal of life in these books is comforting. It is a world where you can afford to have a large and somewhat chaotic family, help strangers and keep a lot of pets, get involved in unusual and mysterious events and even win in the end. All this functions as a pleasing fairy-tale which wards off depression and aids survival. Her books clearly have a therapeutic effect. Dontsova's books are well written, there are a lot of humorous details and funny situations and many accurate descriptions of characters and scenes. The minor characters are very lively, and the reader gets so interested in their lives that at times it is easy to forget the machinations of the main plot. This is perhaps the author's intention.

### **Towards some other genre?**

It is interesting how both in Marinina's and Dontsova's books we meet minor characters who write crime novels. Both Tatyana, Stasov's wife, and Natasha, Darya's wealthy best friend, are crime writers. Neither of the authors claim that their characters produce great works of literature, but in their own writing they are very thorough and professional. They pay great attention to the form of their books and to the credibility of the minor characters. Dontsova has such convincing descriptions of the trivialities of life, especially in her humorous descriptions of children and pets, that the reader becomes more engrossed in this part of the story than in the crime

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<sup>12</sup> Darya Dontsova: *Svoloch nenaglyadnaya*.

<sup>13</sup> Dontsova: *Nesekretnye materialy*, 288. (My translation).

plot itself. Because of this, these books seem to depart from the standard crime-mystery-solution scheme. In Marinina's latest novel, *Fantom pam-jati*, the main character is a writer, and the author dwells a lot on the essence and significance of writing detective stories. It looks as if both writers have reached a crossroad and want to try to go further.

### **Not only a game**

Boris Akunin is a special phenomenon in contemporary Russian literature. His first detective novel, *Azazel*, from 1998, was an overwhelming success, and he has published a dozen novels since then. His novels have been translated into many languages, and two of his novels have recently appeared in Norwegian translation. The first novel was introduced in the advertisements as "the start of a literary project which aims to present all the genre variations of the classical criminal novel." The novels are written in the literary manner of the 19th century, with a good sense of authentic detail and a sense of humor, and present several different protagonists. One series of novels is united by the character and exploits of Erast Fandorin and describes his life beginning with his first day at the police station as an errand boy. We later follow his efforts to help the Russian Royal family out of serious trouble, and he ends up as a high-ranking state official. His breathtaking adventures take place in a period of Russian history which Akunin has obviously researched thoroughly.

These books present convincingly characterized historical protagonists in language which reflects the historical period in which they are set. This is not surprising because the real name of the author is Grigorij Chkharishvili. He is a well-known literary critic and translator, and a connoisseur of Japanese language and culture. His novels are exceptional due to their bright literary style and exciting plots, which keep the reader in suspense to the very last page.

Another of Akunin's series is centered round the adventures of a nun, Sister Pelagiya. This series takes place in a provincial setting where crime is not as pervasive as in our globalized world. Sister Pelagiya's observations, rationality, common sense and knowledge of human nature are essential in solving these mysteries.

The third series describes the contemporary adventures of Nicholas Fandorin, the grandson of Erast, who comes from England to Moscow. He is interested in the history of his family and on his arrival in Russia he gets involved in strange, criminal events. His interest in his family's history

provides the author with a unique chance to merge the historic novel with the detective novel to create a new literary form.<sup>14</sup>

Akunin once said that “the reader expects more from fiction than a simple plot; he wants something more: taste, good style, and intellectual games.”<sup>15</sup> What is more, he points out that his novels contain underlying “subtexts” which are rife with intertextual connotations and historical and literary allusions. Akunin acknowledges his ambition to write books that are so entertaining and well written that “the reader will not hurry to hide the bright cover of the book from a curious gaze.”<sup>16</sup> He appeals to different types of readers and invites them to discover additional cultural information in the text. It is rather unusual for a writer of detective stories to find himself in the centre of a political debate, as is the case with Boris Akunin. Some critics have accused him of praising the Russian monarchy,<sup>17</sup> while others claim that he makes fun of it.<sup>18</sup> In any case, the plots of his novels are inventive, the mysteries not easily solved, and the author exalts such tattered virtues as honour, courage, loyalty and chivalry, to quote what Kingsley Amis once said about G. K. Chesterton.<sup>19</sup> This clearly appeals to the public too, because there is a crying need for convincing, positive characters and well-written, entertaining novels.

Akunin’s novels possess all the elements of the classical detective story: clever protagonists (Fandorin reminds us of Sherlock Holmes, while Sister Pelagiya is undoubtedly modeled on Father Brown), the presence of a friend and companion (Fandorin is accompanied by Masa, his Japanese manservant), the absence of unnecessarily bloody and violent scenes and very logical, elegant solutions to the mysteries. One may also find some parallels to stories written by Somerset Maugham, Robert Louis Stevenson, Arthur Conan Doyle and G. K. Chesterton. This is why some Russian critics claim that Boris Akunin has created the Russian counterpart to the post-Victorian detective novel in Britain. This is also a part of the author’s game with his reader: he lets the reader enjoy a feeling of superiority, because the reader has a retrospective view of history and thus knows more than the protagonist.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Boris Akunin: *Vneklassnoe chtenie*.

<sup>15</sup> Igor Zakharov, Besedy o zhanre: *Intellektual’nyj kapital*. Nr. 2, 13. Aug., 1998.

<sup>16</sup> Zakarov, o zhanre: *Intellektual’nyj kapital*.

<sup>17</sup> Boris Akunin: *Statskij sovetnik*.

<sup>18</sup> Boris Akunin: *Coronatsija*.

<sup>19</sup> Kingsley Amis (ed.): *G. K. Chesterton: Selected stories*. London: 1972, 20.

<sup>20</sup> More detailed analysis of Akunin’s novels may be found in Olga Komarova: “Staryj novyj russkij”. *Polyarnyj vestnik*. No. 4, Tromsø: 2002.

Detective novels in which an intricate plot and engaging story of detection are combined in an elegant, eloquent literary form have enjoyed both commercial and artistic success. The jury of Moscow's Annual Book Exhibition proclaimed Boris Akunin author of the best Russian novel of 2000. Darya Dontsova won the award in 2002.

It is evident that the genre of the detective novel satisfies the ordinary Russian reader's need to see a reflection of his own world. These books also support the reader's faith in the triumph of justice and help him to maintain his optimistic worldview. At the same time we can also observe that some authors are moving away from simply depicting crime and detection. Today they have introduced additional aspects of moral and social debate in contemporary Russian life into the genre and have thus crossed the border into "high" literature.