THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF RUSSIAN LITERATURE

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The Market

BRADLEY A. GORSKI

Russian literature became modern, one might argue, only when it formed a relationship with a market beyond the tsarist court. Aleksandr Pushkin's (1799–1837) transformation of the Russian language into a modern literary instrument capable of creating not only paeans to monarchical power but also encyclopedias of Russian life hinged on his appeal to a commercial audience. Indeed, literature's very claim to autonomy from power – an autonomy gained through agonistic struggle during Pushkin's own lifetime and recorded in many of his canonical poems – relies on the ability to reach a broad-based consumer public. The professionalisation of the writer, as Irina Reyfman has demonstrated, undergirds not only the Golden Age of Russian poetry but also the late-nineteenth-century age of the Realist novel, when serialised fiction became a major subscription generator for Russian periodicals (see Chapter 2.4).[1] The interactions between writer and commercialised audience were perhaps nowhere more direct in this era than in Fedor Dostoevskii's (1821–1881) *The Diary of a Writer* (*Dnevnik pisatelia*, 1876–7, 1880–1), a periodical written entirely by Dostoevskii and published and sold by his wife, Anna Snitkina-Dostoevskaia, all for material compensation. Economic pressures and direct engagement with his audience pushed Dostoevskii to hone many of the traits that would be associated with market-facing literature in years to come: sensationalism, seriality, and an endless stream of new content.

As literacy grew in the late imperial period, the book market grew alongside it, investing the mass reader with a power that Jeffrey Brooks calls 'a genuine manifestation of consumer sovereignty'.[2] For the first time in Russian literary publishing, in Brooks's view, consumption drove

1 Irina Reyfman, *How Russia Learned to Write: Literature and the Imperial Table of Ranks* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2016).

2 Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Literature, 1861–1917* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), p. xvii.

production and not the other way around. Newly literate consumers bought the wood-print booklets known as *lubok* literature alongside serialised novels, and publishers sought more of the same, creating Russia's first wave of mass literature (see Chapter 2.5). After the 1905 revolution and the attendant weakening of censorship, the burgeoning readership began to show an unmistakable preference for imported genre literature, often with western heroes and settings. The 1917 revolution brought an end to tsarist censorship and, in the following decade, the introduction of relatively free trade, while early Soviet literacy campaigns transformed reading into a truly mass pastime. As more workers learned to read, however, the new Soviet state became concerned that they spent their leisure time not with edifying literature but with commercialised entertainment from the decadent west, and several solutions were proposed. Recalling that 'Marx, as is generally known, read crime novels with great enthusiasm', Bolshevik leader Nikolai Bukharin, for instance, suggested producing socialist analogues of genre fiction. An interesting plot, he argued, could be filled with any ideological content. 'The bourgeoisie knows and understands this. . . . We do not yet have this, and this must be overcome.'[3]

Though a rash of so-called red Pinkertons answered Bukharin's call, another solution ultimately won out: the state-sponsored aesthetic doctrine of Socialist Realism (see Chapter 1.8). In its attempt to 'produce a literature that would be internationally acclaimed as literature yet remain accessible to the masses', the socialist cultural authorities turned to the masses themselves.[4] Library patrons, book buyers, and newly literate citizens expressed their reading preferences in a series of surveys that, as Evgeny Dobrenko has shown, contributed directly to the formulation of Socialist Realism and its topoi. Readers, it seemed, wanted plot-based realistic fiction with a positive central hero – traits that were borrowed from imported mass fiction.[5] Thus, somewhat unexpectedly, the early twentieth century's market forces directly informed the socialist aesthetic that would dominate literature for the rest of the Soviet era.

3 Nikolai Bukharin, 'Kommunisticheskoe vospitanie molodezhi v usloviiakh Nep'a' [Communist education under the conditions of NEP], *Pravda*, 14 Oct. 1922, 2, quoted in Boris Dralyuk, *Western Crime Fiction Goes East: The Russian Pinkerton Craze 1907–1934* (Boston: Brill, 2012), p. 26.

4 Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*, 3rd edn (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 42.

5 Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997).

Indeed, the state never fully stamped out market forces and, in the waning years of the Soviet Union, market ingresses appeared from all edges of Soviet literature. Work published abroad – *tamizdat* – had been subject to (and beneficiary of) international markets since at least November 1958 when an English translation of Boris Pasternak's (1890–1960) *Doctor Zhivago* (first pub. in Milan, 1957) knocked Vladimir Nabokov's (1899–1977) *Lolita* (1955) from atop the *New York Times* Best Seller list. At home, Soviet publications dedicated to foreign literature had to contend not only with Soviet censors but, starting in 1973, also with international copyrights and royalties (see Chapter 2.7). By the late 1980s, the new imperatives of Glasnost and Perestroika allowed for the publication of long-suppressed authors, both foreign and domestic, and the circulations of Soviet thick journals rose to dizzying heights. Though the millions of copies of the journal *New World* (*Novyi mir*, 1925–) circulated ostensibly outside the market, even within the Soviet system the pressures of consumer demand had become clear.

Nor were they resisted. Though the unmistakable dominance of the market would come only after Perestroika – and that era is the focus of this chapter – something very close to market-based popularity began to surface through new voices and even new genres before the 1980s had even come to a close. Liudmila Petrushevskaia (1938–), for instance, was counted among the 'discoveries' of the last Soviet years. Though she had been a relatively well-known figure on the fringes of Moscow's literary world – several of her plays had been performed in official theatres and she co-wrote the animated film *Tale of Tales* (*Skazka skazok*, 1979) – her own prose was published only in the late 1980s. Petrushevskaia's uncompromising vision of everyday (and especially family) life became emblematic of the new genre known as *chernukha*, a pessimistic realism characterised by 'often sadistic violence . . . against a backdrop of poverty, broken families, and unrelenting cynicism'.[6] In Petrushevskaia's story 'Revenge' (*Mest'*, 1990), for instance, a woman tries to kill her neighbour's baby out of unmotivated spite; the neighbour, in turn, fakes her own baby's death in order to drive the original aggressor to suicide. Though not overtly political, such works flew in the face of state-mandated optimism. Not only was *chernukha* allowed to appear in the last Soviet years, its popularity clearly showed that consumer demand – and not official priorities – was already shaping literary innovation.

6 Eliot Borenstein, *Overkill: Sex and Violence in Contemporary Russian Popular Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), p. 11.

Paper

Just as Glasnost was easing censorship on new genres like *chernukha*, market reasoning made a separate foray into the publishing industry through its material substrate: paper. Despite the world's largest timber reserves, Russia had struggled with paper production not only throughout the Soviet period but much earlier as well. Before the eighteenth century, all Russian paper had to be imported. While domestic paper mills began to emerge under Peter I (r. 1682–1725), it wasn't until the late nineteenth century that cheap wood-pulp paper would make print material a viable market commodity. But even then the problem was not solved, and throughout the Soviet era paper shortages continued to dog the state. In the last years of Perestroika, a long-simmering question was finally posed: just because there was not enough paper for what the state wanted to publish, did that necessarily mean there was not enough for what people wanted to read? One attempt to answer this question came in a 1990 article by Tatiana Zhuchkova that appeared in the major publishing industry weekly *The Book Review* (*Knizhnoe obozrenie*) under the title 'Not enough paper, or . . . Print runs and demand' (*Ne khvataet bumagi ili . . . Tirazh i spros*). It used statistics gathered from library patrons to show that state publishing priorities did not at all correspond with reader preferences. Unpopular authors like Nikolai Garin-Mikhailovskii (1852–1906) and Dmitrii Mamin-Sibiriak (1852–1912) were published in millions of copies, while writers in high demand, such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008) and Vladimir Voinovich (1932–2018), appeared in mere thousands of copies. Most concerningly for the article's author, 'No paper has yet been found for an edition of the poetry of the long-suffering Nobel laureate Joseph Brodsky.'[7] A better alignment between print runs and demand (a transparent proxy for the market laws of supply and demand), the article implied, could improve late Soviet publishing, suggesting a market cure for an ailing socialist culture.

That same year, the Soviet government adopted the Law on Printing (*Zakon o pechati*, 12 June 1990), which not only finally lifted the last censorship restrictions but also allowed for the creation and registration of private publishing collectives without prior approval from the state. Unlike Soviet legacy publishers, the new collectives were not guaranteed paper from state producers but had to buy on the newly created *birzha*, or wholesale market.

7 T. Zhuchkova, 'Ne khvataet bumagi ili . . . Tirazh i spros. Mnenie spetsialista' [Not enough paper or . . . print runs and demand. The opinion of a specialist], *Knizhnoe obozrenie* [The book review], 2 March 1990, 5–6.

Consequently, for the new collectives, sales had to fund the purchase of new paper – a point which may seem obvious in retrospect but was far from the norm in late Soviet publishing. The need to buy paper, in turn, pushed new publishers to print what customers would actually buy (rather than what they wanted to print), introducing capitalist thinking into the publishing world before the end of the Soviet era. Soon, even state publishers were drawn into the capitalist logic of 'print runs and demand', and by the second half of 1991, Soviet-era stockpiles were brought to market and long-time paper shortages showed signs of easing. Prices tumbled, and by January 1992, *The Book Review* reported: 'the groans of "there's not enough paper" have somehow disappeared . . . There is enough paper. . . . Paper turns up when it's needed and where it's needed.'[8]

Publishers and Places

If the proliferation of new publishers helped release hoarded paper, it also unleashed a kind of chaos. Between 1991 and 1992, 456 licenses were granted to new publishers, and by 1994, more than 6,500 publishers were registered and working. Spurred by profits and often piracy, the astonishing growth of private publishing acted quickly to fill the lingering demand for previously censored and other difficult-to-acquire books and soon set about creating and exploiting new market niches. Those publishers who proved adept, like the St Petersburg house Severo-Zapad, often cultivated semi-legal and certainly informal structures for the acquisition of raw materials and distribution of final products. In the absence of reliable distribution outside the city, one editor recalled, the press loaded trucks with thousands of copies of the latest pulp fiction and sent them out to the provinces, where workers would sell them for cash at open-air markets until the inventory was exhausted, at which point they would drive back to St Petersburg to repeat the process.

While such informal networks and local distributors managed to supply readers in and around the capitals to a certain extent, they failed to reach much farther than 100 kilometres outside of any major publishing centre. Stavropol, for instance, a city in the north Caucasus 1,500 kilometres from Moscow, found itself all but cut off in the 1990s. Though its half a million residents had been served by a Dom Knigi (House of Books) state bookshop in the late Soviet years, by the end of the 1990s, the building had been

8 Tat'iana Ivanova, 'Sekret dvukh protsentov. Vstrecha s vitse-prezidentom kontserna "Bumaga"' [The secret of the two per cent. A meeting with the vice-president of the 'Paper' conglomerate], *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 17 Jan. 1992, 5.

repurposed as a makeshift emporium for everything from cosmetics and cell phones to internet plans, cactuses, washing machines, and children's clothes. 'The formerly spacious rooms, now divided up by the pedlars' kiosks', according to one local observer, 'leave the impression of a communal apartment in an old gentry home'. Meanwhile, those in the know bought their books under a staircase in the local university from a man named Kolya Tuzu, 'the only person in the city who brings in anything you could call books'.[9] Tuzu, and unlicensed merchants like him elsewhere, would drive to large cities, buy books at markets, and resell them in the provinces, creating vital but tenuous bibliographic connections between publishers and publics outside the capitals.

Even within the capitals, the new situation presented challenges. Huge markets, the biggest forming at Moscow's Olympic Stadium in 1993, served as chaotic distribution centres for the new popular literature. Print runs in the hundreds of thousands would sell out to retail firms – both newsstands and bookstores – within half an hour. The same market, however, also sold directly to consumers, with four levels of book stalls doing rapid business throughout the week, even as the corridors filled with discarded packing material from wholesale deliveries.

Without reliable distribution networks or exclusive access to inventory, bookstores had to compete with book stalls on street corners and with the wholesale markets themselves. Many closed, and those few that survived were forced to innovate. The former Knizhnyi Mir (Book World) in Moscow, for instance, changed its name to Biblio-Globus in 1992 and introduced a 'new philosophy', with expanded offerings including office supplies, music, films, and even jewellery, echoing the transformation of Stavropol's Dom Knigi. More presciently, it promised a computerised catalogue of its holdings and opened a 'cultural centre' – a first-of-its-kind performance space within a Soviet legacy bookstore – to host poetry readings, book presentations, round tables, and other events. Within the next year, another store – Moskva (Moscow) – introduced self-service shopping and soon added book signings and readings of its own. Such changes suggested that the successful post-Soviet bookstore would need to become more than a retail outlet where one could acquire books by asking for a title. It would need to be a new kind of space, one that hosted events inviting readers into the book world along with technologies and services to help them navigate its dizzying offerings.

9 Denis Iatsutko, 'Chtivo: Stavropol'. *Zapiski iz kel'i*' [Pulp: Stavropol. Notes from the monastery], *Topos. Literaturno-filosofskii zhurnal* [Topos. A literary-philosophical journal], 22 Feb. 2002, www.topos.ru/article/151, accessed 15 July 2021.

The Bestseller

The dizzying offerings meant that the industry as a whole – not only readers but publishers and booksellers as well – needed a whole new epistemology, a new way of knowing the book world for the capitalist era. In the first post-Soviet years, *The Book Review* began to publish a new, nearly weekly 'operational glossary' filled with terms like *privatizatsiia* (privatisation), *reiting* (rating), and *konversiia* (conversion), terms necessary for articulating and absorbing the new market realities pervading publishing. In this context, no term was more influential than 'bestseller'.

Simply transliterated into Cyrillic, the term *bestseller* became a powerful focaliser for the market dreams of the book industry as it aspired to modernise Russian publishing and bring it into closer alignment with its western counterparts. 'Defining the bestseller in our country is a difficult task, almost hopeless', ran an editorial comment in *The Book Review*. 'For in other countries the most bought, the most read, the most printed book, and the book most desired for reading, all of these are one and the same concept: the BESTSELLER. With us, all too often one thing is desired for reading, another is read, a third is published, and as for what people buy, well . . .'[10] According to this logic, the bestseller – an apparently transparent indicator of reader demand – was invested with the power to bring supply in line with demand and to transform post-Soviet publishing into a mature market for culture.

Over the ensuing years, the bestseller pursued precisely this goal. In weekly lists published between 1993 and 1998, *The Book Review* undertook Russian publishing's most sustained attempt to measure and publicly represent reader demand, unmatched before or since. The bestseller lists, which began as small notices in the bottom corner of page two or three of a given issue, soon blossomed into full-page features splashed across the newspaper's centrefold. As the printed lists grew in size, they revealed unexpected truths about consumption habits. Though publishers often expected high-brow literature to sell as well as it had during the heady days of Glasnost and Perestroika, by the post-Soviet era readers had already shifted preferences. It was not newly uncensored literature but previously unavailable genre fiction, self-help, and celebrity biographies that topped bestseller lists in the early 1990s.

Just as in the early twentieth century, readers in the 1990s showed strong preferences specifically for *imported* mass literature. But instead of turning

10 G. Nezhurin, 'Superbestseller-90' [Superbestseller-90], *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 11 Jan. 1991, 16. Capitalisation in original.

away from the foreign sources of the bestseller, as the Soviet government had done in the 1920s, post-Soviet publishers embraced them. Several launched series of new and old translations with titles like World Bestsellers (*Mirovoi bestseller*), Bestsellers of Bygone Days (*Bestseller bylykh vremen*), and World Library of the Bestseller (*Vsemirnaia biblioteka bestsellera*), variations on mid-century 'great books' collections or Maksim Gorkii's (1868–1936) World Literature series (*Vsemirnaia literatura*, 1919–24, which printed the best works of the eighteenth through twentieth centuries from across the globe) but reimagined for the market age. *The Book Review* encouraged this kind of international thinking, printing bestseller lists from abroad opposite its own rankings in order to hint at what publishers might pursue next. Soon, however, translation was not enough, and Russian publishers and writers looked for ways to create a domestic bestseller. A flurry of articles with titles like 'What Is a Bestseller?', 'Anatomy of a Bestseller', and 'The Magic of the Bestseller' attempted to demystify the power of the category, while an ongoing feature, 'The Formula for Success', offered strategies for creating bestsellers from scratch.

By the mid-1990s, several Russian authors had adopted genre conventions from best-selling imports and transformed them into domestic sensations that successfully blended foreign plotting with Russian realia. The first wave of homegrown bestsellers brought western crime fiction into contact with post-Soviet urban decay and supercharged the genre with testosterone-inflected plot lines that Helena Goscilo distils as 'bedding women and pulverizing men'.[11] Though centred on crime, bestsellers along these lines – like the Mad Dog (*Beshenyi*) series by Viktor Dotsenko (1946–) – borrowed more from Rambo than from Sherlock Holmes and revealed an implicit preference for the most violent forms of aspirational justice.

Perhaps in response to this hyper-masculine vision of law and order, a new genre emerged that would come to dominate bestseller lists over the next years: the 'women's detective' (*zhenskii detektiv*).[12] These mystery novels – whose protagonist, author, and intended audience were all women – plunged into the grittiest depths of the Russian nineties with a pluck and determination that upended the bestseller's regressive gender norms. The protagonist

11 H. Goscilo, 'Big-buck books: Pulp fiction in post-Soviet Russia', *Harriman Review* 12.2–3 (1999), 9.

12 See Mariia Cherniak, 'Zhenskii detektiv: Tvorchestvo A. Marininoi i vektory razvitiia zhanra' [The women's detective: The work of A. Marinina and the vectors of the genre's development], in *Massovaia literature XX veka. Uchebnoe posobie* [Mass literature of the twentieth century. A textbook] (Moscow: Flinta, 2009).

of Aleksandra Marinina's (1957–) blockbuster novels, Anastasiia Kamenskaia, for instance, combines a lack of concern for her own sexuality (unless necessary for her work) with a tenacious work ethic, incisive logic, and crackerjack computer skills to unspool vast conspiracies. Though Kamenskaia, who works for the police, invariably solves each novel's mystery, she is often powerless to stop the criminal mastermind at its centre, and many of Marinina's novels end not with violent confrontations but with philosophical acceptance of lawlessness and the weakness of state power. Marinina (and others, such as Daria Dontsova (1952–) and Polina Dashkova (1960–)) proved even more popular than Dotsenko and his ilk, shifting the terms of the genre from action to psychology and the mode of confronting injustice from violence to intellect.

Instead of waiting for a talented author to adapt the bestseller, some Russian publishers attempted fabrication. Certain features of the bestseller, as one 'Formula for Success' article (written by the British scholar Donald Rayfield) suggested, are 'easier to predict than the internal strength of an author. They can even be artificially created.' A certain 'mysterious character' of the author was recommended, alongside international settings and characters, sensationalism, and seriality.[13] Russian publishers soon took up the challenge, assembling author collectives to write market-oriented mass fiction that would be published under foreign-sounding pseudonyms. When the popular Mexican soap *Simply Maria* (*Prosto Mariia*) ended its run on Russian television in 1994, for instance, one such collective produced a continuation 'translated' from the Spanish called *Forgive Me, Maria!* (*Prosti, Mariia!*), which spent several weeks on the bestseller lists that year. On the heels of *Gone with the Wind*'s popularity, a Minsk-based collective published a series of (unauthorised) sequels with titles like *Scarlett's Last Love* (*Posledniaia liubov' Skarlett*, 1994) and *Rhett Butler's Son* (*Syn Retta Batlera*, 1995), all bestsellers appearing under the pseudonym Dzhuliia Khilpatrik.

Such curiosities should not simply be relegated to the *Kunstkamera* of literary history: the strategies developed through these imitative bestsellers – pseudonymous authorship, borrowed genre tropes, and international flair – not only characterised short-lived bestsellers but also pervaded the literary mainstream through authors like Leonid Iuzefovich (1947–). When a new literary prize was introduced in 2001, it chose for its first winner Iuzefovich's *The Prince of the Wind* (*Kniaz' vetra*, 2000), the third book in

13 D. Reifil'd, 'Chto-takoe bestseller?' [What is the bestseller?], *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 16 May 1995, 6, 12.

a series of mystery novels that bore all the traces of the bestseller's influence. This particular prize, called the National Bestseller and introduced with a logo that was simply a bar code, sought to bring market logic into the realm of high literary fiction. The National Bestseller's explicit commercial orientation, however, only revealed the market logic that subtended prize culture throughout the 1990s. The decade's most prestigious prize – the Russian Booker – was launched, according to its own publicity materials, 'to support serious literature in the conditions of the contemporary market, to help it become competitive in store windows that are filled with glossy covers, and to once again open a path to readers'.[14] By attempting to counteract the draw of glossy bestsellers, such literary prizes in fact adopted their market logic. The Russian Booker, the National Bestseller, and other prizes promised expanded print runs, media exposure, and ultimately sales, suggesting that (market-based) success – and not some extra-market promotion of literary quality – was the end goal of the prize process. In this way, the consumer-orientation that characterised the bestseller spread even to the 'serious literature' that these prizes intended to support. This pervasive orientation towards the market not only affected literary commerce, but also made markets, commodification, and success into major thematic concerns in post-Soviet literature.

Success

In one of the decade's most scandalous novels, Vladimir Sorokin's (1955–) *Blue Lard* (*Goluboe salo*, 1999), classical Russian literature is at once commodified and violently deformed. At a genetic laboratory in the Far East (and near future), clones of Lev Tolstoi (1828–1910), Dostoevskii, and several other classic authors are chained to desks and made to write. The torturous 'script-process' deforms their bodies but produces a substance called blue lard with supernatural properties. As this valuable commodity – produced by but immediately dissociated from literature itself – circulates through the novel's world, it traces a path through the genres that defined the 1990s bestseller: romance, thriller, occult and alternative history, even erotica. As literary worlds in each of these genres are created and immediately discarded, the narrative follows only the lard, and the reader is caught in a para-literary

14 *Russkii Buker. Literaturnaia premiia. 1992* [The Russian Booker. A literary prize. 1992], Buklet [Pamphlet] (Moscow, 1992).

system that prizes the exchange value of the commodity while rejecting any artistic creation along the way.

But if Sorokin's invocation of canonical literature mounts a critique of the post-Soviet commodification of literature, a countervailing tendency simultaneously worked to make market-based success acceptable, and even respected, in mainstream literature. No author did more to foster success culture among the literary establishment than Grigorii Chkhartishvili (1956–), the co-editor of the prestigious journal *Foreign Literature* (*Inostrannaia literatura*, 1955–). Under the pseudonym Boris Akunin, Chkhartishvili wrote a series of wildly popular mystery novels set against a pastiche of late imperial Russia with plenty of clever references to Russian history and the literary canon. From mass fiction, Chkhartishvili borrowed not only plot devices but also pseudonymous authorship, seriality, and exotic locales (all enumerated as essential to the bestseller's 'formula for success'). His ability to marry all these components with an elegant prose style and erudite allusions made the Akunin novels into what one critic called the first genre fiction that was not 'embarrassing for an intelligent person to hold in his hands'.[15] Just as in Sorokin's *Blue Lard*, here too the literary heritage acts as a playful backdrop. But instead of mounting a critique, Akunin's work made mass fiction acceptable to the elite. As Chkhartishvili himself asserted, his success meant that 'it is no longer considered shameful to write detective stories'.[16] No longer literature's dirty word, success – popular, market-based success – became an acceptable and even a prominent vector of authorial aspirations.

Chkhartishvili's promotion of success goes beyond his use of genre tropes to achieve popularity. Success characterises the very universe of his novels. Chkhartishvili's first (and still most popular) novels feature the detective-protagonist Erast Petrovich Fandorin who, through a combination of wit, doggedness, and charm (and in conformity with genre expectations), unfailingly unfurls the criminal plot at the centre of each novel. Like Marinina's protagonist Kamenskaia, Fandorin works for an ultimately impotent state and the criminals often slip away. But Fandorin is rewarded throughout the series with the external markers of success. A one-time penniless orphan, he rises through the imperial table of ranks (see Chapter 4.3) from the lowly fourteenth rank in the first book to the fifth rank by book six. In other words,

15 Konstatin Bocharov, 'Orkestr v kustakh' [An orchestra in the shrubs], *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 3 April 2000, 16.

16 Vanora Bennett, 'Akuninization: *The Winter Queen* by Boris Akunin', *Times Literary Supplement*, 16 May 2003, 32.

Chkhartishvili places Fandorin in a reliable meritocracy, a system designed to recognise good work and reward it with success.

Chkhartishvili's vision of benevolent meritocracy and uncomplicated success struck a chord with a reading public already deeply invested in success culture at the time. By the late 1990s, according to the sociologist Boris Dubin, a straightforward vision of success had become a central trope of Russian culture. Arguing that the 'American success story' had emerged especially from television commercials, Dubin writes that this new master plot presents scenes which 'follow one after another according to a single model of "action-reward"', suggesting a 'utopia of social order' in which positive actions are always rewarded and in which one can 'in a very simple manner bring order into life, and control it with elementary and generally understood . . . methods'.[17] Such a social utopia is at the heart of the mystery genre as exemplified in Akunin's novels and others. Not incidentally, it also formed the very foundation of capitalism's post-Soviet promise.

In reality, post-Soviet Russia witnessed, at best, a perverted version of this capitalist dream. Alongside the social decay, chaos, and crime that characterised the 1990s (and provided the backdrop for its gritty crime fiction), capitalism also held out the promise of extreme social mobility – previously inconceivable success for those with the wherewithal to make their own fate. Such upward mobility became the central theme of a new genre that appeared in the 2000s, so-called glamour prose (*glamurnaia proza*): stories that glorified social climbing, the concerns of the rich, and the glossy exterior of high-end materiality. Most prominently represented by novels such as Oksana Robski's (1968–) *About Loff/on* (*Pro Liuboff/on*, 2006) and Sergei Minaev's (1975–) *Soulless* (*Dukhless*, 2006) – both titles are written half in Russian and half in English and are hence bilingual wordplays – glamour prose took the 'American success story' to its post-Soviet extreme and, in many cases, began to critique its inner emptiness.

But perhaps the novel that captures the market age better than any other is Viktor Pelevin's (1962–) *Generation 'P'* (*Generation 'P'*, 1999). The novel charts the astronomic rise of its protagonist Vavilen Tatarskii through the advertising industry. The master genre of the market age, advertising proves to be a proleptic mode of writing that has the power to change the world, to make itself come true. A product presented as desirable generates desire; representing success creates success; and Tatarskii, who at first only pretends to be an

17 Boris Dubin, 'Novaia russkaia mechta i ee geroi' [The new Russian dream and its heroes], in *Slovo–pis'mo–literatura* [Word–writing–literature] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2001), pp. 200–11.

advertising guru, becomes one. His preternatural insight into the workings of advertising leads him to see the entire world as a simulacrum created by television. If people used to believe that reality was the material world, he reasons, now they believe 'that reality is the material world as it is shown on television'.[18] 'Our mind and our world are the same thing', he concludes, and so the world itself – and not only free-market capitalism – is infinitely manipulable through advertising.[19] Not only does Tatarskii quickly rise from post-Soviet poverty to society's upper echelons, he even reaches the heights of political power. By the end of the novel, Pelevin shows that not only consumption but politics and even mystical higher powers are manipulated by the simulacra accessible through the secrets of advertising.

It is no accident that it is precisely advertising and consumer capitalism that lead Pelevin (and his protagonist) to these classically postmodern insights, insights that echo the theories of Jean Baudrillard and Fredric Jameson at least as much as they do those of the advertising experts Pelevin quotes. If earlier iterations of Russian Postmodernism – from Venedikt Erofeev's (1939–1990) *Moscow–Petushki* (*Moskva–Petushki*, 1969–70) to Andrei Bitov's (1937–2018) *Pushkin House* (*Pushkinskii dom*, comp. 1964–71) to Pelevin's own earlier work – played on the Russian literary canon and Soviet traditions of pervasive propaganda, logocentrism, and the instability of the historical record (see Chapter 1.9), then a more popular (and populist) postmodern novel was born of the capitalist transition. The postmodernism of the market age, in other words, was exemplified, if not inaugurated, by Pelevin's generation-defining novel, in which previously unthinkable success in the new capitalist environment provides not only material riches but also great power and deep insight into the true workings of the world.

Authorship

Pelevin's exemplary novel of the market age begins not with greed or material need but, perhaps unexpectedly, with the protagonist's literary aspirations. Still in the late Soviet era, Tatarskii dreams of becoming the next Pasternak. He enrols in the Literary Institute and is well on his way to devoting 'his creative labours to eternity', when the Soviet Union suddenly disintegrates.[20] It is not so much the political end of the USSR, however, but a metaphysical crisis that destroys his literary dreams: he finds that the

18 Victor Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (New York: Penguin, 2002), p. 81.
19 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, p. 33. 20 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, p. 3.

eternity he wanted to address in his work began to 'curl back in on itself and disappear'.[21] Eternity turns out to be nothing more than a product of collective belief, and, what is more, that belief 'could only exist on state subsidies, or else – which is just the same thing – as something forbidden by the state'.[22] The novel's opening chapter ends with a judgement on Tatarskii's poems, but one that could be extended to 'literary labours' more broadly: 'with the collapse of the Soviet Union, they had simply lost their meaning and value'.[23]

The crisis of authorship that Pelevin diagnoses affected all corners of Russian literature. State subsidies disappeared. The Writers' Union lost all power. Circulations of Soviet-era periodicals collapsed. Writers who had found 'official' success in the Soviet Union were no longer guaranteed an outlet to readers. Just as destabilising, the state's repressive apparatus disappeared, and those who had published in *tamizdat* or *samizdat* were faced with both new opportunities and new challenges as they sought to publish domestically under market conditions (see Chapter 2.9). Even the practices of 'writing for the desk drawer' or defiantly *not* writing lost all meaning when they were no longer positioned against the state. To repurpose the Formalist critic Boris Eikhenbaum's (1886–1959) observation of 1927, the question of 'how to write' was once again eclipsed in the 1990s by the question of 'how to be a writer'.[24] The modes of writing and publishing engendered by the bestseller provided one possible answer, but those writers whose work – for reasons of genre, sensibility, or difficulty – did not easily fill available market niches had to find different pathways to readers. Consequently, authorship itself changed. From a (largely imagined) solitary creator of texts, the author became an active, online, multimedia, and often celebrity phenomenon. Even the highly pedigreed writer, beloved of the older generation, Tatiana Tolstaia (1951–) found renown not only through her prose but at least as effectively through her literary talk show, *School for Scandal* (*Shkola zlosloviia*). Sorokin has worked in every genre imaginable, including visual and performance art; created a pavilion at the Venice Biennale; and has even written librettos commissioned by the Bolshoi Theatre. Liudmila Ulitskaia (1943–) mobilised her literary celebrity to launch a series of children's books on tolerance. Petrushevskaia sings cabaret. And one of the most indefatigable

21 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, p. 4.
22 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, p. 5.
23 Pelevin, *Homo Zapiens*, p. 5.
24 Boris Eikhenbaum, 'Literaturnyi byt' [The literary environment] (1927), in *Moi vremennik: Slovesnost', nauka, kritika, smes'* [My chronicle: Words, science, criticism, miscellany] (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo pisatelei Leningrada, 1929).

forces in post-Soviet letters, Dmitrii Bykov (1967–), is not simply an author – though he has written award-winning novels, biographies, essays, and poetry; he has been something closer to an impresario of literature and literary performance. He has hosted television and radio broadcasts, written rhyming op-ed columns, befriended and supported up-and-coming authors and poets, cast opinions on everything from politics to prose, and marshalled his fame to mould Russian literature past and present. For Bykov, writing has been anything but a solitary task; it has been one part of active cultural engagement that omnivorously consumes all available media, modes, and genres.

Though Bykov's energy has been unparalleled, his approach is not unique. Many of those he has championed have taken up several of his strategies of multimedia audience engagement. Perhaps one of the most interesting cases of this new authorial mode is Aleksei Ivanov (1969–), a Ural writer who burst onto the literary scene with a series of best-selling historical novels in the early 2000s (championed by Bykov, among others). Like many writers, Ivanov has brought his novels to the screen, writing adaptations and even starting his own production company. But beyond that, Ivanov conceived his work *Gold of the Rebellion* (*Zoloto bunta*, 2005) as a multimedia project from the beginning, creating the novel, a screenplay, and a video-game scenario simultaneously. For several years Ivanov hosted a festival of medieval reconstruction in the northern Urals based on another of his novels, *The Heart of the Parma* (*Serdtse parmy*, 2003), and he has lobbied government tourism boards throughout the region to feature aspects of his works as local attractions. The ambition of Ivanov's entire project, which he calls a 'corporation called Aleksei Ivanov', approaches a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Ivanov's 'corporation', however, aspires to a diffuse totalisation, not meant to overwhelm all the senses at once but instead to encourage sustained and repeated audience engagement in various modes and at different times and places.

Audience engagement is a key component to authorship in the market age, and no format is better equipped to facilitate continuous interaction than the internet and social media. By the 2000s, no post-Soviet author could survive without a personal website, and many of the decade's most interesting new writers first found audiences digitally. Though online literature, especially poetry, proliferated throughout the 1990s as internet access spread, it was not until the advent of social media, and specifically LiveJournal, that the internet proved capable of bringing new voices to the surface on a significant scale (see Chapters 2.11, 3.11). Among the first authors to emerge from LiveJournal fame was Evgenii Grishkovets (1967–). An actor,

screenwriter, director, and musician as well as a writer, Grishkovets first gained national attention through a one-man show performed in his hometown of Kemerovo and posted online. Soon Grishkovets's LiveJournal page was filled with admirers of the recording who became avid readers of a quickly growing blog that not only delved deeper into the memories and personality at the heart of the original performance but also analysed the online medium and the modes of communication it encouraged. Furthermore, Grishkovets effectively translated the confessional style of his one-man show into online prose, pioneering a playfully sincere tone that made a viable mode of internet celebrity out of what Dmitrii Prigov (1940–2007) called the 'new sincerity', or a return to direct, emotional expression after the irony and play of postmodern experimentation. Grishkovets's internet presence was so successful that it led to stage and screenwriting invitations, film roles, and print publications, not only of novels and short stories but also of eight volumes (as of 2020) collected directly from his LiveJournal posts.

Russia's most popular contemporary poet, Vera Polozkova (1986–), also rose to prominence through LiveJournal, and her trajectory shows a mode of authorship that pushes audience engagement to another level. From Polozkova's earliest LiveJournal posts in 2003, she exploited not only the intimacy of the medium but also its social functionality. She tagged other users, often incorporating them into her poetry or prose, and asked them to respond in kind. Many of her followers posted creative responses, often in verse, to which she unfailingly responded with encouragement. Some followers gave her direct feedback, suggesting at times that a line was too obvious or clunky, while others contributed to the blog itself, which became a collaborative poetic space led by Polozkova. By 2008, her page had attracted more than 10,000 followers. Soon she was performing her poetry to sold-out crowds of thousands in Moscow and St Petersburg. When she finally printed her first bound collection of poems, it sold out its first two print runs within the year, instantly making her Russia's best-selling poet.

Polozkova's mode of audience engagement might be thought of alongside fan fiction as exemplary of 'prosumer' literature. Blurring consumption and production, 'prosumption' (a term coined by Alvin Toffler) is characteristic of online and social media such as YouTube and Facebook in which all users collaboratively consume *and* produce the site's content.[25] Dmitrii Vodennikov (1968–), who launched his LiveJournal in 2004, has cultivated his own online

25 Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: Bantam Books, 1980).

following through constant interaction with his readers, often creating new posts *about* recent comments, weaving his online text from the fabric of commenters' words. Linor Goralik (1975–), whose online presence has been prolific and multifaceted since the mid-1990s, has experimented with diverse literary personae, genres, and tonalities, all in interaction with her thousands of followers. The prosumer literature practised by these writers draws in audiences by recognising that they may not be content consuming literature from afar; rather, they wish to see themselves as poets in their own right. And in turn, the authorial persona cultivated online is that of an aspiring writer in constant dialogue with her audience, always in a state of becoming. The metatext of these authors' online personae become compelling Bildungsromans: portraits of the artist in the age of internet celebrity. They are stories of aspiration, hard work, and eventual recognition – that is, capitalist-era success stories – that encourage the mimetic desire of their audiences. As audience members both participate in those stories through their own comments and contributions and follow the stories through the digital traces they leave behind, their mimetic desire translates into market value, available once again for capitalisation through concert tickets, book sales, and media appearances.

Literature beyond the Market

The marketisation of literature and the power of the mass consumer has been the subject of critique from the very early post-Soviet years. The literary critic Natalia Ivanova lamented the demise of the great Russian novelist under market conditions in her elegiac essay 'Death of the Gods' (*Gibel' bogov*, 1991). In 1993, Moscow hosted an International Congress in Defence of the Book, which advocated (unsuccessfully) for market protections for 'publications with high social and cultural value'. Later in the decade, the sociologist Mikhail Berg bemoaned the disappearance of the Soviet underground and the avant-garde art developed there. Without a space free from the homogenising influence of the market, Berg argued, consumer-age literature effectively 'blocks the recognition of the value of innovative impulses'.[26] Under market conditions, anything too radical sells poorly and soon dies. Either government protections or an underground avant-garde might provide a space of autonomy from the market, where

26 Mikhail Berg, *Literaturokratiia. Problemy prisvoeniia i pereraspredeleniia vlasti v literature* [Literaturocracy. The problem of accumulation and distribution of power in literature] (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2000), p. 26.

innovation could be fostered for its own sake, safe from the demands of the mass consumer. Like government intervention, however, the underground could not survive under post-Soviet conditions. It had positioned itself largely against the state, and once the Soviet Union no longer existed, it lost meaning and withered away. If a new space of literary autonomy was to be created, it would not position itself primarily against the state but against the market.

By the mid-2000s, several new models for literary creation did just that. In a 2004 manifesto, a collective of St Petersburg poets and artists called Chto Delat (What is to be done; see Chapter 1.10) described Russia's cultural landscape as dominated by 'consumers' conception of pleasure' and the 'cynicism of commodity-monetary relations, [which] pervade society from top to bottom'. In answer to the group's eponymous question, they proclaim, 'It's time to stop considering how best to correctly and effectively sell ourselves – we need to learn to simply give [ourselves] away.'[27] The same year, the poet Kirill Medvedev (1975–) publicly renounced copyright over his own texts. More recently, Pavel Arsenev (1986–) travelled Russia teaching audiences 'How to Not Write Poetry', turning Vladimir Maiakovskii's (1893–1930) post-revolutionary version ('How to Make Verses' (*Kak delat' stikhi*, 1926)) on its head. In 2012, when the leading arts and culture site OpenSpace.ru found itself badgered by a nexus of state power and capital, its editorial board – led by the poet Mariia Stepanova (1972–), who has spent her career finding ways *not* to rely on the market – started the first crowdfunded Russian media outlet, Colta.ru. Though less politically explicit, the aspirations of Colta's funding model are no less radical than those of the New Left. Indeed, when Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, Colta first suspended its operations and then found itself blocked by increasingly repressive censorship. The state, at least, seemed to see the extra-market arts and culture website as politically dangerous. All of these writers and activists have sought ways to exist outside of (and against) the capitalist paradigm of market-age literature. They have developed publishing and dissemination models that rely on donations, that create 'crafted' chapbook-style texts from cheap materials, and that bring together like-minded activists and artists to build distribution networks outside of the market. By setting loose such innovative energies, these extra-market efforts have not only begun to

27 Chto Delat, 'Chto delat'?' [What is to be done?], *Chto delat'? Gazeta novoi tvorcheskoi formy* [What is to be done? A newspaper of a new creative format] 1 (2004), 2, https://chtodelat.org/category/b8-newspapers/c1-1-what-is-to-be-done/, accessed 15 Aug. 2017.

carve out a place beyond the hegemony of capitalism in culture but have torn through the consumer imperative and opened a pathway into a new space where literature might be able to flourish beyond the market.

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