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esharp@gla.ac.uk

The Russian Woman's Guide to Surviving the Post-Soviet Era: From Detective Fiction to *glamurnoe chtenie*

Joanne Shelton (University of Bath)

The purpose of this paper is to examine the way in which popular literature written in response to the new market system has offered Russian readers, in particular women, more than just escapism from everyday life in the post-Soviet period. In order to investigate the impact of popular literature on the Russian reading public, I intend to examine the different genres which are particularly well liked by female readers, all of which can be considered variations of formula literature.[1] The genres on which I focus are detective stories, romantic fiction and the most recent phenomenon, *glamurnoe chtenie* (literature of glamour), the definition of which will be explained in the course of this paper. Through highlighting some of the features that make them more than merely popular literature, I will show that these popular genres serve a greater need, outlining the skills that women require in order to cope with life in twenty-first century Russia. I will attempt to explain the relevance of these different genres to the position of literature in Russia today and, in a wider context, identify the importance of this particular area of literature in relation to high culture. To conclude, I will comment on the extent to which the emergence of 'women's writing' can be interpreted as a process of adaptation of Western models to the Russian market.

[1] For further discussion of formula literature and its key characteristics, see Radway (1991).

In the course of research on this aspect of popular literature, it became clear that the works that are most widely read by women are responsible for a significant proportion of the total books read. In Russia, 82 per cent of females aged 25 to 49 claim to read on a regular basis (Mickiewicz 1999; Levina 2001, cited in Menzel 2005, p.45) and the impact that these readers have on the types of books that are most widely read can be seen by responses to the question 'Do you read creative prose and, if so, which genre do you prefer?' (Dubin 2007a). Respondents placed *zhenskie detektivy* top, followed closely by *zhenskaya proza* (women's writing) or romantic fiction (Dubin 2007a). These genres have retained their popularity since the late 1990s. By 1998 Russian romantic fiction was established as a strong second to detective fiction (Dubin 1998, cited in Cherniak 2005, p.154) and 70 per cent of women admit **to** having a certain 'fondness' for these romantic works (Musik & Fenko 2002, cited in Cherniak 2005, p.154). As these statistics reveal, literature remains a valuable source for understanding Russia, and the changes to literary content have led to significant debate among some Russian critics regarding the value of popular literature and whether it is worthy of academic study.[2] The study of popular literature in Russia is relatively new when compared with scholarly interest in the subject in the West (Lovell and Menzel 2005, p.7). Yet reasons for studying Russian popular literature are much the same as those for studying the Western variant, that popular literature is 'what the unsophisticated reader has chosen for pleasure' (Neuburg 1977, p.12). Neuburg goes on to suggest that 'popular literature offers us a

[2] For further discussion about the importance of popular literature on the Russian literary scene, see Chuprinin (2004), Latynina (2001), and Dubin (1998).

window […] upon the world of ordinary men and women' (1977, p.12) and thereby gives the academic an insight into the 'average' person's reaction to a particular event or situation in his or her country.

However, before exploring the role of the more popular genres amongst female readers in today's Russia, it is necessary to examine earlier traditions of writing for women. Prior to 1917 there were significant attempts made to target the literate female audience. As Cherniak (2005, p.151) points out in her article *Russian Romantic Fiction*, the first literary journal for women, *The Fashionable Monthly or the Library for Ladies Toilette* (ed. Nikolai Novikov) appeared as early as 1779 and throughout the eighteenth century various works aimed at noblewomen were published. Interestingly, these works already appeared to fit into a 'self-help' category of sorts. Books such as *A Lady's Album or A Fortune-Telling Book for Entertainment* (cited in Cherniak 2005, p.151), which appeared in the early 1800s, gave advice on understanding people's characters according to their appearance. Although many of these works were in translation, ideas about finding a suitable husband or how to wear the latest fashions were concerns relevant to these readers, regardless of their nationality.

In the nineteenth century, women could find recommendations for suitable reading material in the journal *Rassvet*, written in order to 'enlighten women, so as to make them better wives and mothers' (Heldt 1987, p.3). Yet female writers who enjoyed a degree of success in the 1830s did not remain in favour with the reading public much beyond the time in which they lived,

and never achieved the levels of popularity of their French and English counterparts (Heldt 1987, p.2). Heldt points out that any strong female characters in Russian works have been constructed as:

> a marvellous given of nature, a being in whom not only her own and her family's future, but the future hope of Russia resides. (1987, p.12)

In many cases these works were not written for women and they could not hope to achieve what Heldt has termed the 'terrible perfection' (1987, p.5) detailed in these texts. In addition these texts were written by men in an attempt to define their own masculinity and as a result could not truly be considered writing for a female audience even if they were about women (Heldt 1987, p.2).

After 1917 the allegedly 'trivial' sentiments previously expressed in works for and by women could not be tolerated or endorsed by the Soviet leadership:

> Soviet women were supposed to dedicate themselves to the cause of socialist construction, not to their own emotional and sexual drives. Women's primary loyalty was to the collective or to their family, not to themselves. (Cherniak 2005, p.152)

Between 1934 and the mid-1980s any work which did not adhere to the tenets of Socialist Realism was considered to be irrelevant or even dangerous for the Soviet reader and a frivolous waste of time. Arguably, the Soviet leaders' attitude towards women writers and writing for women, although more extreme, is not dissimilar to that taken towards women's writing in other countries: that it is always

less important and inferior to works written and read by men (Wells 2006, p.68).

The debate surrounding the value of women's writing is another paper in itself, but it is a point to be remembered when considering post-Soviet attitudes to women's writing and the rather unfortunate moniker that has been forced upon it: the somewhat derogatory term, *zhenskaya proza*, translated as 'women's prose'. This term encompasses all texts written by women from 'high' literature to 'pulp', and includes works of Russian romantic fiction and the latest phenomenon: *glamurnoe chtenie*. The prominent sociologist of literature Boris Dubin (2007b) has suggested that works are defined as *glamurnoe chtenie* if they have been recommended by reviewers in glossy magazines and that these texts are not solely concerned with reaching a mass audience, but also with being fashionable. In addition, *glamurnoe chtenie* works should not weigh the reader down; they should not be too heavy, too long, or too deep. There is a degree of overlap in the content of Russian romantic fiction and *glamurnoe chtenie* and, arguably, some of the works that fall into this area can be equated with the concept *chick lit.* (Of course, there are differences between the Russian and English variations of *chick lit,* one of the most notable being the difference in tone; there is more humour and a greater sense of self-deprecation in the Western novels when compared to the Russian equivalents, as if the situation that these Russian women find themselves in is serious, not simply to be laughed at).

Since the early 1990s, detective fiction has become one of the most popular genres in post-Soviet Russia. Detective fiction did exist

prior to 1991, but its form and content were very different from the stories which appeared after the collapse of the USSR (Koreneva 2005, p.69). The contemporary detective novel genre encompasses a variety of different styles, from the hard-boiled *boeviki* with a good helping of gore, sex, and crime, to Boris Akunin's widely read retro-style murder mysteries. However, it is in what Dubin (2007c) has defined as the 'softer variation', the *zhenskie detektivy*, or female detective stories, that started to appear and have been most popular from the mid-1990s onwards that we are interested.

Although categorised as *zhenskie detektivy,* there are differences in the works of this genre which relate to the female protagonist, the investigator of the crime. Koreneva (2005) identifies three main character types. The first of these, and perhaps the least common, is the employee of the state security system. Aleksandra Marinina's heroine, Anastasiya Kamenskaya, is the most widely recognised example of this type of female detective. She is described as middle-aged, negligent of her appearance and incompetent in domestic affairs. The focus of Marinina's novels is not so much the unravelling of the crime as the exploration and investigation of the particular social problem that resulted in the perpetration of this crime in the first place (Koreneva 2005, p.87). Theimer-Nepomnyashchy suggests that it is precisely this 'overt confrontation with the anxieties and threats posed by the instability of life in Russia' that draws readers towards Marinina's novels by making these concerns 'manageable and therefore less frightening' (1999, p.182). Secondly, Koreneva (2005) identifies the woman private detective who features in Marina Serova's works. In contrast to Marinina's heroine, the woman private

detective is far more concerned with her appearance. Details about the length of time she spends in the shower and looking in the mirror, the way that she applies her make-up and what she wears, are all described in depth (Koreneva 2005, p.89). Finally, there is Dar'ia Dontsova's heroine, or the 'pure amateur', an ordinary member of the public who becomes interested in, and wants to help the victim of the crime (Koreneva 2005, p.92).

In a personal interview of 2007, Dubin identified the key components of the *zhenskie detektivy* genre as the issues that arise in the course of everyday life: the opportunities for finding a husband, creating a family and bringing up children. In his view, as a result of the trials of daily life, the heroine inevitably falls into a *kriminal'naya obstanovka* and the remainder of the story is devoted to how, using her female strengths, she is able to extract herself from this situation. The depiction in these *detektivy* of the ways in which the characters coped with the pressures and instability of the Yeltsin era was one of the fundamental reasons why women started to read these novels in the first instance (Dubin 2007c). If we return to Cherniak's point about the Soviet notion that women ought to be devoted to the collective or to their family, it is not surprising that people were even prepared to turn to literature in order to cope with the difficulties of day-to-day life in the 1990s. They had few other means of dealing with the hardships that Yeltsin's reforms had thrust upon them and these texts were not so much about solving crimes as providing women with a self-help manual on surviving the transition to the post-Soviet world. However, many readers did not read the *zhenskie detektivy* simply for practical advice on how to make ends meet when

their wages were not paid, or how to create some semblance of order when the surrounding situation was chaotic. These variations in the personalities and lifestyles of the female protagonists are not about telling a different story; instead they increase the likelihood of a female reader finding a character with whom she can identify. After all, these works focus on the heroines and their lives, rather than on untangling and solving the crime that was committed.

Although Yeltsin is no longer in power and the old issues about stability and surviving from one day to the next have passed, the popularity of *zhenskie detektivy* has not decreased, but according to Dubin (2007c) their role as 'self-help' manual may have been usurped by other genres. He also suggests that women in Moscow are no longer so worried about what to do if their wages are not paid or if there is uncertainty over housing – these fears have subsided thanks to the greater stability of the Putin era, and other, more personal concerns have taken over. Modern-day anxieties include retaining their female independence, where to meet a suitable husband, and whether or not they meet the exacting standards of the capital's most fashionable citizens. Such issues are addressed by Russian romantic fiction in which the elements of 'self-help' are evident. Gudkov and Dubin (cited in Cherniak 2005, p.159) suggest that romantic fiction gives women the opportunity to 'test the limits of the permissible in the controlled and secure environment of an artificial world'. Further to this, Cherniak points out that some works of romantic fiction offer 'new norms for women's behaviour and identity' (2005, p.161). Titles include *The [Woman] Trader* and *The [Woman] Banker,* advertised as 'everything the reader needs to

know about "women in the new Russia"' (Cherniak 2005, p.161). As if such advertising were not enough to make readers believe that they are learning about life in the new, capitalist Russia, then passages which echo popular articles on psychology and self-help manuals offer a stark contrast to the Soviet notion that women should work only for the collective:

> Women's independence is not about empty chatter. I'm not trying to turn you into a feminist. But you mustn't forget about yourself. It is possible to have a happy family life and to keep your own personality. To do your own thing and earn your own money. Because material dependence really chains you down. (Mareeva cited in Cherniak 2005, p.190)

The difference between Russian romantic fiction and Western romantic fiction is worth noting, as it further emphasises the priorities that Russian women have in the present climate. Unlike Western romantic fiction, where the obligatory happy ending often sees the couple disappearing into the sunset for a blissful future together, Russian romantic fiction can quite easily reach its conclusion with the heroine remaining cheerfully single: the point in Russian romantic fiction is not necessarily to have found a man, but to have found an acceptable level of independence and moved on from your original starting point. Cherniak (2005, p.161) illustrates this with her reference to Natal'ia Levitina's novel, *Intimnye uslugi* [n.d.], in which the heroine moves from the provinces to work in Moscow as a cleaner, marries a businessman, works as a secretary and waitress after her marriage fails and finally becomes a successful

model. (In both the Western and Russian versions, good looks are essential!)

This shift in Russian romantic fiction away from the traditional ideas of 'self-help' leads us to the relatively new concept of *glamurnoe chtenie*. This new type of text, defined by Dubin (2007c), is concerned as much with being fashionable as it is with reaching a mass audience. The 'self-help', directive element of *glamurnoe chtenie* is much the same as the features of romantic fiction mentioned above, but there is an emphasis on fashionable labels, trendy establishments, and appropriate behaviour.

It is entirely possible for a romantic fiction novel also to be *glamurnoe chtenie* and this is illustrated in Oksana Robski's text *Casual: A Novel* (2006), which charts the story of a 30-something heroine who has to find her own means of survival after her adulterous husband is murdered. In an attempt to retain the lavish lifestyle to which she has become accustomed and to remain as fashionable as her friends the heroine enters the buttermilk production industry. In Robski's novel there is a fair degree of reliance on male characters: the heroine calls on a variety of men to help her out. She asks Oleg to find and kill her husband's murderer, she relies on Vanechka, an old flame, to take her out for dinner and flirt with her, and she persuades her husband's former colleague, Vadim, to sell her buttermilk in his shops. However, Robski's heroine is not infallible and she makes the mistake of trusting Boris, the sales manager of her buttermilk business, who disappears, leaving her to deal with the debt in which he has left the business. Although Robski's novel focuses on the experiences of a woman trying to

make her way in contemporary Russia there is a strong message that Russia is still controlled by men and that a woman who aspires to be independent might struggle if she is not prepared to turn to men for help. Yet Robski's heroine never feels indebted to the men she asks for assistance; they simply provide a means for her to overcome an obstacle and she has no problem with taking advantage of people and situations in order to maintain her extravagant lifestyle.

The emergence of *glamurnoe chtenie* suggests that Russian romantic fiction is moving away from self-help and into the realms of what readers should be aspiring to if they want recognition from others. There is an emphasis on status and possessions: on the material objects that are required in order to make the right impression and facilitate any movement up the social scale. Russian romantic fiction has achieved such popularity that it has begun

> actively to provide a model of reality that shaped the values, preferences and notions of status held by the reading public. (Cherniak 2005, p.159)

More recently, Russian romantic fiction has evolved from a story of progression up the social ladder to describing the particular designer goods needed to accompany this elevation in status (including a poodle whose fur is dyed on a regular basis in order to be colour co-ordinated with its owner's outfit (Robski 2006, p.200)). Ideas about the necessary material possessions for social climbing are further influenced by celebrities, and the lives that they lead affect the reader's perception of the world. Dubin (2007c) suggests that the success of Eduard Bagirov's novel *Gastarbeiter* (2007) was due, in part, to the media and discussions about Bagirov's novel on popular

talk shows. It seems that a celebrity need only endorse a text for its success to be almost guaranteed (Dubin 2007c). As readers now have a far greater choice of material than they did prior to 1991, contemporary writers must find a way to make their work of romantic fiction or *glamurnoe chtenie* stand out from the others that are available, and celebrity endorsement certainly helps to raise the profile of a new novel. Yet there is another dimension to be taken into consideration when looking at *glamurnoe chtenie* in comparison with romantic fiction and that is the question of by whom it has been recommended. In order for a text to appear on the *glamurnoe chtenie* shelves in Moscow's largest bookshop, *Dom Knigi,* it must have been recommended by a journalist in one of the glossy magazines such as *Afisha* or *Elle* (Dubin 2007c). In post-Soviet Russia, even reading is now about fashion: a book has less chance of selling well if it is not regarded as fashionable.

In order to reach a conclusion, I return to the questions set out in the introduction. What relevance do these genres have to Russian readers today? Are these texts really giving women the tools to cope with life in post-Soviet Russia, or are writers describing lifestyles and possessions which the average reader cannot hope to acquire? If the latter is a more accurate description, then why are these novels so successful, and what is the impact of their success on Russian literature today?

In the West it has been suggested that those who read *chick lit* and romantic fiction are the 'direct beneficiaries of the women's liberation movement' and that in fact these books attempt to replace the 'negative images of female singleness – waste, desiccation, and

barrenness – with affirmative models' (Harzewski 2006, p.37-8). Clearly, in Russia, women's experiences have been somewhat different. Heldt even goes as far as to suggest that 'the most famous feminist novels in Russian literature have all been written by men' and that the

> remarkable heroines of Russian literature appear, not in feminist novels, but rather in works generally conservative on political issues pertaining to women. (1987, p.3)

In so far as aspects of Western feminism have arrived in Russia, they have been changed and adapted, as so many Western phenomena are, into Russian variations. It may be more accurate to suggest that romantic fiction and *glamurnoe chtenie* are associated with escapism, rather than the reader's need to affirm that her lifestyle is acceptable in modern-day Russia. Although the queues of the Soviet era have long since disappeared, there is still a notable difference between the income of Moscow's *noviye russkiye (nouveaux riches)* and the average Russian's wage. The success of g*lamurnoe chtenie* is due to the insights that it gives the reader into the apartment, the car, and the lifestyle of the *novye russkie*.

In the last fifteen years, women's literature has become more mainstream than it ever was in the Soviet era. Popular literature, with its formulaic patterns, has been embraced by readers, even if some Russian critics continue to struggle with its overwhelming success. Radway suggests that formula literature has

> been defined most often by its standard reliance on a recipe that dictates the essential ingredients to be included in each new version of the form. (1991, p.44)

This suggests that the publisher and the reader are both in agreement on the content of the material that appears in popular literature. Readers are already familiar with the content when they buy a novel that falls under the romantic fiction heading, and publishers know that they are almost guaranteed to sell books of this genre. Lovell (2005, p.16) argues that formula literature might lose its force rather quickly, yet in an attempt to maintain their popularity with readers who want a recognisable theme, but a different story, writers modify and adapt their works in order to fit the contemporary scene.

Although Radway (1991) is writing about her understanding of the popularity of romance novels in America, the reasons that she gives for their popularity seem relevant to the situation in contemporary Russia. Firstly, she observes that a greater number of women than men read and therefore have greater influence over the reading matter that sells the best. This statistic is reflected in post-Soviet Russia, with 82 per cent of women claiming to read on a regular basis compared to 68 per cent of men (Mickiewicz 1999; Levina 2001, cited in Menzel 2005, p.45). Secondly, reading prose romance is an enjoyable way of spending one's time given that significant numbers of women wish to repeat the experience (Radway 1991, p.44). Clearly, we can see that there is a certain degree of relevance in studying the genres aimed at women, if only because they are so widely read.

Yet the question remains: what is the importance of this type of literature on a wider scale? The prevalence of these types of

literature could support the view that people are turning away from 'high' literature. Some critics, both Russian and Western, have suggested that the emergence of popular literature has meant that little of literary value has been published in the post-Soviet period.[3] Other critics claim that writers have simply been searching for the genre that will produce the best sales for the least amount of work, and perhaps that readers are looking for a text that will not require too much effort on their part (Dubin 2007c). Dubin (2007c) argues at length that one of the key elements of so-called 'fashionable literature' is that it does not bog the reader down, that he or she can read it and move on without giving it a further thought. One of Doris Lessing's fundamental criticisms of prose romance in the West was that it was 'instantly forgettable' (cited by Harzewski 2006, p.30). Yet it appears that this is exactly what Russian readers want from the contemporary literature that they pick up to read as an escape from their everyday lives.

In a sense, this prevalence of genre literature, particularly the *glamurnoe chtenie* which has more recently emerged, can be seen as part of the crisis in Russian literature that was so often lamented in the early 1990s. Yet to suggest that the success of popular literature for women is part of a crisis is inaccurate. The success of women's writing in both popular and 'high' literature is a phenomenon to be celebrated, particularly as for the majority of the Soviet era there was a general absence of literature for women that was not about improving the socialist standing of the USSR. Perhaps the

[3] Both Latynina (2001) and Shneidman (2004) suggest that in spite of the removal of censorship, Russian writers have not succeeded in producing any works of comparable merit with texts written during the Soviet era.

emergence of popular literary genres including *zhenskie detektivy* and romantic fiction is something of a 'normalisation' process: women are finally being catered for as legitimate consumers of a legitimate product. Of course, when discussing the term 'normalisation' a certain degree of care must be taken not to imply that the Western model is the norm to which Russia is aspiring. However, the emergence of a form of democracy and capitalist market system would suggest that trends in Russia are likely to be influenced by patterns seen in the West, even if they are adapted in different ways.

The Russian and Western markets are similar in that the number of women who read on a regular basis is greater than the number of men who regularly read, and therefore women have a more significant influence on what is being published and which genres top the bestseller list. The popularity of genre literature is a further point for comparison. In the immediate post-Soviet period Russian publishers found that those detective novels that had sold well in the West were extremely popular with Russian readers. Writers also recognised that Russian readers enjoyed these translated detective novels and as a result post-Soviet writers attempted to modify the themes of Western popular literature to suit their readers with crimes committed and solved in the familiar surroundings of Moscow's suburbs, rather than in faraway London or Los Angeles (Brodsky 2001).

Further alteration of Western genres into Russian variations saw the evolution, as outlined earlier in this paper, of the hard-boiled *boeviki* and the 'softer' *zhenskie detektivy*. The adjustments made to other popular genres demonstrate that this process is not the

'normalisation' of Russian popular literature, but the adaptation and 'russification' of genres that have proven popular in the West and in translation in the Russian market. Just as we have seen with the translated works of the eighteenth century which were relevant to women regardless of their nationality, so too is it possible to see that there are elements of contemporary popular culture which transcend geographical boundaries, and concerns that women have in the West are equally likely to be worries shared by women in Russia. Although there are similarities between Western *chick lit* and Russian romantic fiction and *glamurnoe chtenie* in both the content of the material and the reception that they receive, it is important to note that the methods of presenting them and the reasons for reading them may be quite different.

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