

GRIGORY RYZHAKOV



THE READER'S MINI-GUIDE TO

NEW
RUSSIAN
BOOKS

The Reader's
Mini-Guide
to
New Russian Books
by
Grigory Ryzhakov

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Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, previously forbidden books finally found their readers. Solzhenitsyn and Bulgakov became household names, while the new voices of Russian literature remained obscure both within Russia and internationally, with a few exceptions like Victor Pelevin and Vladimir Sorokin.

This book is an attempt to create a first comprehensive guide to modern Russian literature. While classical and Soviet Russian literature has been covered elsewhere, there is a gap in the public awareness of new Russian books.

This guide is by no means complete, but rather a trial version. When I started working on it, I realized what a colossal responsibility I'd taken on. There are over a thousand titles that caught my eye, and writing about them would have taken me years. So, instead I decided to focus on books that are now available in English translation and have received some critical acclaim. There are a few books I've included for which no translation is available yet, but I hope it's a temporary situation. In the future, I plan to update and expand this guide, so I will rely on my readers' feedback on this work.

This guide is primarily aimed at readers interested in Russian books and Russia in general, but I also hope it will be

useful for academics, translators and publishers. The overall structure of this guide is a mini encyclopedia that contains chapters, each of them representing a literary genre. The vast majority of books translated from Russian can be described as literary fiction, which is not very helpful for readers. So, in my guide I base each of my genre chapters on the themes of the books I discuss.

In the Appendix, I have provided you with tables listing all the books mentioned in the guide and their genre; some books inevitably ended up as multi-genre and therefore are mentioned in several tables for your convenience. I have also put in links to the online retailers, where these books can be found. In addition to that, I have given you links to many other resources about modern Russian literature. Certain divisions of modern Russian literature are not covered here: poetry, dramaturgy, non-fiction (except for biographies), horror and children's literature. I'm not familiar with these areas much and I didn't find that many translations either. Hopefully, either my colleagues or I will be able to fill these gaps in the near future.

Finally, I would like to point out that I am a molecular biologist by profession. In my free time, I write fiction and blog on various topics, including Russian literature. In recent years, I have received multiple e-mails from readers asking me about new Russian books. This guide is my attempt to quench

this thirst for knowledge about Russian literature and to introduce post-Soviet literature to wider international audiences. To make this guide read not completely like an encyclopedia, I have tried connecting book descriptions with Russian life to tell a story where possible.

Russia has a controversial political image, and I think Russian literature can show the essence of our country far better than any media sword-fights. My intention here has been to inform readers about Russia through the prism of Russian stories rather than express my views. The challenge for me was not to spill out the plot, but rather to give brief descriptions and discuss underlying themes in a concise manner.

Thank you for finding the time and the desire to open up to new Russian books. I very much hope you will find some absolute gems in these pages.

Modern Russia: 1990s, Putin's era and office prose

Life in Russia in the 1990s was an interesting phenomenon. Born in 1980, I witnessed all the turbulence that our country was subjected to by our clueless, incompetent and power-thirsty politicians. Danger, grotesque, reforms, instability, surrealism, excitement, opportunities are all words that come to my mind when I think about the transforming of post-Soviet Russia. With Putin's ascension to the Kremlin's throne, Russia became a safer and more stable place. The war in Chechnya was over. The economy found its rails to develop, although in a fuel-skewed way, thanks to the rising oil prices. At the same time, the government seized the control of mass media, restricting freedom of speech, while failing to control corruption, which spread like wildfire on all levels. Money concentrated in big cities and, as in any capitalist country, the well-to-do office class arose.

In German Sadulaev's *Maya Pill*, an office manager, Maximus Sevenfriday, works for a frozen food conglomerate that deals with customers from all over the world. One day he goes through a mis-sent delivery finding pink pills, which he promptly takes. They enable Maximus to get inside people's minds and explore his Khazar roots. A satirical view of the office and pop culture is mixed here with mythological tales

of Khazaria. I don't know what these pills mean as a metaphor, but portraying life in modern Russia is a psychedelic enterprise even without them.

The most celebrated specimen of office prose is probably Victor Pelevin's *Homo Zapiens* (or *Babylon*) that has been recently adapted for screen. The main protagonist, Vavilen Tatarsky, a literary institute graduate, tries to find his place in the changing Russia of the 1990s. He starts his career path by working at a kiosk, then making up taglines for adverts, and slowly turns into a copywriter using drugs to broaden his imagination. A series of events lead him to take up esotericism and related spiritual practices. Climbing the ladder of the advertising industry, intimately linked to the organized crime like everything else in the Russia of 1990s, Tatarsky finds out secrets of international politics, gets involved in a secret society and ends up the spouse of an ancient goddess, Ishtar. Tatarsky's very life, the mode of behavior he acquired called *orannus*, is a verdict on humankind as a civilization. We have lost faith in God, and science has simply become a tool; we have tried other things like communism and fascism, but ultimately succumbed to capitalism and money. *Orannus* is all about the consumption of money and material things and ignoring anything that is not linked to money. Tatarsky's life is a growing enslavement in materialism. I think this theme is painful for Russian authors

in particular. In communist Russia, people aspired to build a perfect state of harmony, peace and community where mutual help, technical and cultural progress were the ultimate goals. Russia failed miserably at turning this utopic dream into reality, and the country became a Wild West lookalike where money and power combined to become the Biblical golden calf that everybody started to worship.

In Olga Slavnikova's novel called *Light Head*, the main character, Maxim, is also an office manager; his company sells chocolate. One day, strange bureaucrats notify him that he needs to shoot himself in order save millions of people. The thing is his head somehow distorts the Earth's gravitational field, causing multiple global disasters such as tsunami and earthquakes. Maxim isn't excited about dying so soon. Why should he die, so others might live? Things get nasty when the whole town marches out in protest against him and a shoot 'em up game appears on the Internet, in which one has to kill a character looking very similar to Maxim. This fictional situation is a perfect platform on which to tackle a number of philosophical issues: are we personally responsible for bad things happening in the world, should we sacrifice ourselves for the good of others, and are we morally obliged to do that? In this light, the title *Light Head* can be a metaphor for indifference. People live ordinary lives without interfering in global things, thinking they don't owe anything to anybody.

They watch the world burn, thinking the fire will never reach them. Many people in modern Russia are like that: they are tired of wars and revolutions. They just want to enjoy this new period of relatively peaceful existence, minding their own business. This book offers much food for thought and it will also dazzle you with its rich, metaphorical prose.

Let's take a look outside Russian office life. In Alexei Ivanov's *The Geographer Drank His Globe Away*, 37-year-old biologist Victor Sluzhkin becomes a geography schoolteacher due to lack of money. He's quite immature, despite his new role and being married and having a child. He's drooling over many women, including one of his pupils, a fourteen-year-old girl. Victor is a troublemaker too and an alcoholic; drinking is a way to fit in the reality he's struggling with. Many people have found it difficult to adapt to the post-Soviet era capitalism. The novel culminates with his class attempting to sail down a dangerous river on catamarans, while he's away looking for shelter from the torrential rain with his female pupil. The time is the turbulent 1990s, and the book is praised for its uncompromising realism of portraying the Russian school environment of that period.

Another work of neorealism is *Minus*, written by Roman Senchin. It is set in the early 1990s, this time in a small town, Minusinsk. The main character is an alcoholic and a womanizer too. He works in the technical department at a

local theatre, sleeps with actresses, drinks and dreams of a better life in the capital. It paints a bleak portrait of a Russian province: people drink to evade hopelessness. The 1990s were a scary time indeed, and readers should appreciate that the oil dollars rarely reached people beyond Moscow and a few big cities in Russia.

In *Skunk: a Life*, Peter Aleshkovsky explores morality in the post-Soviet Russia. Son of an alcoholic and promiscuous mother, Skunk is a small Northern-town boy who thieves and spends money on delicacies that he consumes alone in a hiding place. The story of Skunk is a metaphysical journey of a Russian commoner going through murder, spiritual catharsis, love and alcoholism. Far from being light-hearted, it's still a fascinating adventure and quite a contrast to the stories about intelligentsia.

Pavel Sanaev's autobiographical novel, *Bury Me Behind the Baseboard*, is another story of a wrecked childhood in the changing Russia. Totalitarianism on the small scale of a family. Eight-year-old Sasha Saveliev lives with his grandparents and gets 'lovingly terrorized' by his grandmother, who uses him as a live doll to avenge the world for all the suffering it has brought on her and to feel superiority at least over somebody. She tries to cure his non-existent disease, and forbids him any entertainment. She doesn't allow her daughter to look after Sasha, thinking that his mother has chosen to focus on his

‘psychic vampire’ stepfather. The granny goes further by making Sasha hate his mother. The granny loves Sasha, who is a metaphor, however unintentional, for a little man, the way Stalin loved Russia. And there is only one way to escape from such love: it takes years of waiting.

So far, I’ve given you examples of books on Russian commoners living in misery, but don’t despair. Here’s a book about new rich Russians dwelling in the Moscow district of Rublevka, written by Oxana Robski and called *Casual*. The main character is an oligarch’s wife and the mother of a young daughter, a proud and superficial woman. When her husband gets murdered, she ‘orders’ the death of a man who, she thinks, killed him. In the meantime, straight after the funeral, she starts dating another man. Revenge is carried out, but the ‘target’ turns out to be innocent. Oops! The real killer of her husband is nearby, and needs to be eliminated. And to mess things up more, her late husband’s lover is giving birth to his child. You may think this is all vulgar, but then social satire was invented to show our world this way. The rich cry too, but I can hardly sympathize with someone who is cold, calculating and immoral, however much trouble they are in. It makes an interesting read though.

Two other significant novels relevant to this chapter and set in the 1990s and Putin’s era are Andrei Rubanov’s *Do Time, Get Time* (reviewed in *Prison Prose*) and Zakhar

Prilepin's *Sankya* (reviewed in Political Fiction).

Debut (modern fiction by young authors)

Modern Russia cannot be described by mature authors only. History is a filter distorting our view on reality. Young Russian people see things in a different way. Their outlook on Russian life is not affected by memories of the totalitarian state; they grew up during the Gorbachev era, or later. A publishing house, Glas, has been translating works of the young generation of Russian authors. An anthology, *Squaring the Circles*, contains stories by winners of the Debut Prize. This collection is the entry point into the world of new post-Soviet literature and it gives us a unique opportunity to compare the voices of Soviet and post-Soviet generations.

Glas has also published standalone books by the Debut winners and nominees, for instance, Irina Bogatyreva's *Off The Beaten Tracks*, which features stories of Russian hitchhikers.

Alexander Snegirev's *Petroleum Venus* is a tragicomedy exploring themes of love and parenthood. Fyodor is a young architect and the father of Vanya, a boy with Down's syndrome, who finds a peculiar painting in the debris at the scene of a car crash, which sets the events into motion.

The impact of the new Wild West capitalism on Russian young people is explored in Igor Saveliev's *Mission to Mars*. The red planet here is the unattainable ideal, a new reason for

existence after the Soviet bubble's rupture.

Anna Lavrinenko's *Yaroslavl Stories* is an example of new provincial prose. These coming-of-age stories set in Yaroslavl, a middle-sized city on the River Volga, represent a multi-faceted view of how the economic collapse and westernization, including cultural imports from the US, have affected the post-Soviet generation living in the provinces.

A Chechen author, Arslan Khasavov, won the Debut Prize in 2009 with *Sense*, a story of a youth in a political revolt. Society is sniggering at idealism, pushing it into radicalism. Similar stories of young people left to their own devices are explored in *Mendeleev Rock*. The title novella by Andrei Kuzechkin, *Mendeleev Rock*, is a stereotypical youth-in-revolt story. The main character, an ex-rock group leader, meets thugs and nerds, spiritual conmen and kleptocrats while trying to find his place in life. In the second novella written by Pavel Kostin, *Rooftop Anesthesia*, a bored young man climbs down from deserted skyscrapers on a rope, becoming a local celebrity and inspiring a following. Alcoholism is not the sole form of escapism, and this daredevil fad is still very much a thing in Russia.

And finally, I'd like to mention Lisa Alexandrova-Zorina's *The Little Man*, shortlisted for the Debut and Nos literary prizes. It is a story of social protest, strangely compared to Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* by critics.

Young Savely accidentally kills a chief mobster, and neither his wife nor the police want to protect him, so he hides in the forest and befriends the Saami, deer breeders. Transformed, he comes back to his town and kills off all the other corrupt chiefs in there.

A Robin Hood in modern Russia.

The Soviet Period

It is impossible for people who never lived in Russia to fully understand the Soviet experience. I think many non-Russians know plenty of negative things about the Soviet Period. Fiction is based on conflict, and the Soviet life had enough of that, but it also had a great deal of light and happiness and do bear this in mind. I even have a joke about it: whenever I read tragic stories written by Alexander Solzhenitsyn, I realize that my life is actually pretty good in comparison. A horrible thing to admit, I know. The Russian literary export tends to be grim, but real life is more colorful.

There seem to be more light and shade in women's prose, perhaps because of its focus on feelings and family values. Many authors who write about that time lean towards politics or historical analysis of the Soviet legacy, while Ludmila Ulitskaya focuses on people. Her books are about the fates of families and how the Russian socialist totalitarianism affected them. Some of these stories are autobiographical, like *Childhood*, while others fictional – *The Big Green Tent* and *The Kukotsky Case*. The pseudo-documentary style of storytelling makes Ulitskaya's books act as chronicles; at times as educational reading, yet no less emotional thanks to the well-flowing Marquez-esque narrative.

The Big Green Tent is one of her most ambitious works, an epic portrayal of the life in post-World War II Soviet Union. Here we read about the horrific scenes of Stalin's funeral, the hope of Khrushchev's political meltdown, the stifling atmosphere of distrust, fear and despair of the Brezhnev era, the fate of the intelligentsia (the intellectual class) emigration, dissidents and finally the circulation of forbidden and censored literature known as *Samiizdat*. Ulitskaya gives an explanation on why Russia of this period had been so literature-centric, 'Life outside the book space was somewhat humiliating, but in the books a live thought quivered, along with feeling and knowledge.' This book is a fictional encyclopedia of that time.

I have found a few other authors writing about the Soviet century on epic scale. In Alexander Terekhov's *The Stone Bridge*, a son of one of the People's Commissars kills his classmate, a fourteen year old diplomat's daughter, supposedly out of jealousy. It is 1943. Yet is that how that happened in reality? Sixty years later, an ex-KGB agent starts his own investigation. In this book we have a mixture of a pseudo-documentary literary fiction and a historical detective novel about a case of the Nazi-inspired secret club inside a Kremlin school. *The Stone Bridge* seriously divided readers across Russia: some have found the book too lengthy and dull to read while others appreciated the panoramic view of the Stalin era.

Vasily Aksyonov's *Generations of Winter* is as yet undiscovered by the international readership but is perhaps more palatable and impressive *Dr. Zhivago's* 'lookalike' set in Soviet Russia from 1925 to 1945 and centered on the love-lives of the Gradov family. The central themes are tragic fates of Russian intelligentsia and the horrors of both World War II and the Gulag. War and totalitarianism keep destroying families nowadays; so this book remains relevant and will hopefully find its audience.

Irina Muravieva's *The Nomadic Soul* is set in Russia during World War I and the Russian Civil War and it follows the life of an aristocratic family. Other stories in the book pertain to different Russian historical periods, from the Great October Socialist Revolution to modern times. Muravieva's prose is often described as polyphonic and vivid; she explores the themes of love and friendship in the country torn apart by war and despotic rule.

Igor Sakhnovsky's *The Vital Needs of the Dead* is an intellectual thriller-adventure and a coming-of-age novel, which follows a life of a small town boy, Gosha Sidelnikov, and his first love of an older woman, Rosa, which guides him in his adult life. Sexual relationships of a man with late XXth century Russian history in the background are not what you expect from a book on Soviet life, especially going by the famous one-liner, 'There's no sex in the USSR'. Not just this

theme but also the inventive language that the author uses in his prose, due to being a philologist by education, makes him a distinct voice amongst his contemporaries.

The Soviet period is now clearly a ripe subject for historical and philosophical rethinking and speculation. Some authors, like the scandalous historian Victor Suvorov even claim that Stalin's USSR actively prepared to invade Europe and strike Hitler first. No wonder that the whole USSR phenomenon came under the scrutinizing eye of Dmitry Bykov, Russia's most prolific poet, prose writer, essayist, teacher, journalist and TV persona. In his most ambitious work, *Living Souls*, Bykov offers a speculative and satirical view on the future of Russia through the prism of alternative history. It's a devilishly witty read, perhaps too witty at times. I must admit, I'm jealous of Bykov's quick and sharp mind.

Coming-of-age stories set in the USSR are a very popular genre at the moment. Eugene Yelchin's *Arcady's Goal* is a story of a young boy, Arcady, sent to children's home when his parents were declared to be enemies of the state. It's a story about character-building. Arcady is obsessed with soccer and the game may be his only way to survive in the oppressive country.

A soccer player is also the main protagonist of Vladimir Kozlov's novella, *Number Ten*. The young Valery has to abandon his dreams of a football career after an injury. He

returns to his home town in Belarus and gets mixed up with the local criminals. Another book by Kozlov, *A Diary of a Perestroika Kid*, has just been released in English. It's another coming of age story, rather bleak, also set in Belarus in the 1980s.

I grew up in the opposite side of the country and yet I could relate to many episodes of the Soviet childhood, which Kozlov described in this book. Strangely, I remember the 1980s with a smile on my face. I did see the country was falling apart, but I still had the happiest childhood one could think of: hiking trips, fishing, snowball fights and skiing, travelling in the countryside with friends, swimming in the sea, playing hide-and-seek in abandoned construction sites. Then I recall the gloom and upsurge of crime in the 90s, but that was when the country was no longer the USSR. So, why in many Russian books is Soviet life so depressing, full of conflict, crime and tragedy? Would nobody read a happy-go-lucky Russian novel? The Russian literary brand is suffering, angst and grit. This started with Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *Karamazov Brothers*, and it is hard to bring up a different image of Russia, especially considering what people are constantly seeing in the news.

However happy I was as a child, I do remember one annoying thing about the 1980s: the queues. Vladimir Sorokin's first novel, *The Queue*, is made of dialogues of

people standing in a stereotypical Soviet queue. Nobody knows exactly what he or she is doing in it, but if there's a queue then there must be something valuable at the end of it. Queues were a common landmark of Soviet reality; it was normal to stand in one for hours, sometimes for few days for food or clothing. People did not just wait in them, they lived in queues, exchanging their views on life, politics, culture, making friends, confiding, arguing. Readers call *The Queue* an encyclopedia of *Zastoi* (the standing still Brezhnev era).

Other notable books set in the Soviet period include Asar Eppel's *The Grassy Street*, a collection of stories about a Moscow district, Ostankino.

Some of you are probably wondering how I could forget about Victor Pelevin's *Omon Ra*, Oleg Pavlov's *Captain of the Steppe* or Victor Erofeyev's *Good Stalin*. I have decided to separate life and politics and therefore included these titles in the chapter dedicated to political fiction.

Women and Love

If something was chosen to represent the pride of Russia, it would definitely be the beauty, intelligence, resourcefulness and resilience of Russian women. And luckily for us, modern women's prose is well translated.

Firstly, I'd like to introduce you to anthologies of short stories published by Glas. Starting with these books is the best way to sample fiction from various authors before trying their novels. *A Will and A Way*, *Nine* and *Women's View* are three collections by Russia's top female writers, including Rubina, Muravieva, Petrushevskaya and Ulitskaya. *Russian Drama* presents the works of four emerging Russian female playwrights, while *Still Waters Run Deep* features stories by women in their 20s and 30s. *War and Peace* is a gender juxtaposition anthology, focusing on Russian life after Perestroika. In the *War*, the male authors present their stories about the Russian army and the Chechen War, while Julia Latynina exposes corruption in the Russian Caucasus. In *Peace*, five female authors contribute stories of everyday life, with love, children and family being central themes here.

The Armenian author Nina Gabrielyan has written stories that are full of tragic surrealism that is presented to the reader, as if in compensation, through vivid and juicy prose.

In the *Master of the Grass*, a short story collection, Gabrielyan explores loneliness and solitude, along with the fears, dreams and obsessions that are associated with each of them. Each of the stories has a different plot and characters: a narcissistic man, an elderly Armenian couple's memories of their tragic past, a lonely woman speaking to her flat. The uniting theme and the atmosphere connect all of these stories into one reality.

Dina Rubina, a Russian-Israeli author born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, has captured hearts of Russian readers with her bright, colorful writing style, reminiscent of the grand bazaar in Istanbul. Rubina is self-critical; she once said of herself that she lives in a state of a permanent 'creative crisis'. In my opinion, this is a sign of the never-ending writer's growth. Several of her books have been adapted for screenplay. Although female protagonists and women's life are often central to her fiction such as in novels like *Leonardo's Handwriting* or *On Sunny Side of the Street*, her most known work translated into English remains the award-winning *Here Comes the Messiah*, set in the modern-day Israel. The focus here is not political, but human. The book is satirical and surreal; as an outsider who came to live in Israel at a mature age, Rubina had the required distanced viewpoint to portray the absurdities of life in the West Bank.

On Upper Maslovka is a signature work of women's prose

from Rubina. In it, Anna Borisovna is an 87-year-old yet vigorous woman with a stingy, sarcastic tongue, who used to be a famous sculptor, characterized as being ‘(...) rude as a drunk pathologist’. Peter is a young theatre director, failing to make it big in the art world. Their creativity brought the two together, but their love is far from platonic. Such a case of people falling in love despite being generations apart from each other is not uncommon; however, here it is complicated by Peter’s unfulfilled ambitions and the occupational hazards of the characters’ intellectual class, such as cynicism and existential angst. Rubina’s works are available in many languages, including Polish, German, Hungarian and French.

This theme of love and creativity is also explored in Maria Stepanova’s book, *The Women of Lazarus*, which follows the life and three loves of Lazarus Lindt, a genius nuclear physicist. It starts straight after the Russian revolution, in 1918. Lazarus is like a son to a childless couple, Marusya and Sergei Chaldonov. Yet he loves Marusya as a man, with an unrequited love of which she is not aware. When he becomes a famous scientist Lazarus falls for young Galina and yet once again it is a love that is not meant to be. Sometimes, there can only be one love that occupies a man’s heart. Lazarus is devoted to science but fate bestows upon him a gift, reincarnating Lazarus’s genius in his granddaughter Lidochka. French and German translations of this award-winning novel

are now available.

I have already mentioned Ludmila Ulitskaya and her novels in the chapters covering the Soviet Period and family life. Many of Ulitskaya's protagonists are women. In *Sonechka*, an innocent librarian falls in love with a man who becomes her husband, and her love is as pure as in most romantic books she's been reading, devoid of egoism. The reality may be grey, but Sonechka lives in the bright world of words. Maybe it's not silly escapism. As the reality we live in, we create ourselves. Another novel by Ulitskaya, *Medea and Her Children*, is set in Crimea. Medea is an old childless woman and yet is head of a big family, maintaining harmony within it with her love and wisdom.

Another modern literary Titan of Russian women's prose is Irina Muravieva. Her books often contain parallel plots, rhythmic prose, synesthesia and spirituality. Two of Muravieva's novels have been translated into French, the first being *Le Journal Intime de Natalia* (*Natalia's Diary*) is a sad story of solitude of an abandoned and impoverished woman, whose only loyal friend is her old dog. The second is *Portrait de Bindo Altoviti* (*Altoviti's Portrait*), a story of an ex-pat family that moved from New York to Moscow: a mother and a daughter, love and suffering, love and death, and a new Christ. The novel has Muravieva's inherently poetic and melodic language, well suited to balance the overwhelming

emotions of its characters with a philosophical tone.

A celebrated St Petersburg's author Yelena Chizhova had won the Russian Booker in 2009 with her novel, *The Time of Women*, recently translated into English and German. Antonina, a female worker from the country, comes to conquer Piter (the Russian nickname for St Petersburg), but there she is seduced by a handsome man, gets pregnant and eventually dies, leaving his daughter for upbringing by three grannies, neighbors in the communal flat. Antonina's baby girl Suzanna grows up, becoming an artist, and along with her story we learn about lives of her 'mothers' who survived the Bolshevik Revolution, World War II, the siege of Leningrad and Stalinism.

Probably the most scandalous book written about Russian women is Victor Erofeyev's *Russian Beauty*. The novel was written in the early 1980s, but it was published a decade later and quickly found international fame, having been translating into over twenty languages. In this story, after a failed marriage, a young bisexual woman, Irina Tarakanova, comes from the country to Moscow to work as a fashion model. She is also a prostitute, who used to be repeatedly raped by her father as a child. Irina likes perverse sex and has many lovers. After a scandalous pornographic photo-shoot, Irina loses her job and decides that her life in Russia is awful. She performs acts of exorcism, running naked in the wild and

getting very sick. Not to give away any more spoilers, I'll just say that things spiral out of control, with the story ending in the most decadent way. I ask myself this question over and over again: why is the world so fascinated with postmodernist horror stories coming from Russia? Is this Russian girl an allegory of the country itself plagued by wars and revolutions, raped by Bolsheviks and Stalinism, exorcised by propaganda and given a hope of a glorious afterlife by its Church? In Russia or elsewhere, beauty may have an ugly side.

Finally, I would like to mention Anna Babyashkina's speculative fiction novel *Before I Croak* that had won the Debut Prize in 2011. Set in the near-future Russia in 2039, where people are still using social networks like Facebook and Live Journal, the story focuses on an ambitious pensioner called Sonya who was sent by her son to a retirement home, the Mounds. Sonya finds similar minded contemporaries who have grand ambitions to write the next Great Russian Novel. The author called her book a letter to our generation from the future. Maybe it was meant to show uselessness of our urban generation, spending life on the Internet, and our not-so-bright future, which reminds us of the present. Is this a hint of another *Zastoi* taking over our society (a Soviet era of Stagnation under Brezhnev's rule 1964-1982)? Or is it simply a seasonal hibernation? At least once a century, the overbearing Russian bear (alliteration intended) needs his

sleep.

Family Life

When I started doing research on this chapter, I was puzzled. Apart from several books by Ludmila Ulitskaya, I found the entire body of modern Russian family prose has been ignored by translators. Is there no interest outside Russia in the contemporary *Anna Karenina*?

Though I mainly focus on translated reads in this guide, for educational purposes I will give you a brief digest of this genre, which is very much thriving in Russia.

I will start with Ludmila Ulitskaya, whom I also mention in the chapters on Soviet life and women's prose. She is a world-famous author of books portraying family life in Soviet Russia. Ulitskaya has this mesmerizing writing style; you become completely immersed in her stories. I also think that mature audiences, people who have experienced parenthood themselves, are more likely to enjoy her books. *Medea and her Children* is a family story set in Crimea, while *The Kukotsky Case* is a philosophical and tragic story of a gynecologist, named Kukotsky, and his family. This latter, and another of Ulitskaya's novel, *Sincerely Yours, Shurik*, are also portraits of Soviet intelligentsia. In *Shurik*, Ulitskaya shows a typically Russian thing: a man is a child who is constantly surrounded by women, often predatory, who can sense a

‘podkabluchnik’, a softie who can be manipulated by demanding females, from a mile.

Irina Muravieva explores themes of love, fate and family in her fiction. *Angel’s Day* tells the love stories and spiritual journeys of three generations (1930s, 1950s, our time) of a Russian emigrant family. Passions are mixed up with hunger, drugs, wars and revolutions. Muravieva’s *The Girl* is another family story about a woman born and educated in the Russian Empire and tells of her fate spanning the shaky decades of the Soviet period.

Boris Vasiliev is a classic of Soviet literature, mostly known for his historical novels. *The House that Grandfather Built* is the story of an aristocratic family, the Olexins, torn apart by the First World War and the Civil War and then dragged through the times of military communism in Russia. Readers adore this book. They point out its exquisite prose and the realistic portrayal of characters and the historical era the story was set in. The book is one of several that tell us about this family; the others, for instance, *Were and Weren’t*, *Take Away My Sorrows*, are set in the nineteenth century.

Alexandra Marinina, a lawyer and a criminologist who has authored over thirty scientific publications, is famous in Russia for her police investigation series, but she has also written family sagas: *A View From Eternity* and *The Crimes of the Honest Life*. These are considered to be more genre fiction

rather than novels of culture; still, the author explores themes of feminism, democracy and corruption. Thus, in my opinion, her books have literary value and make a big impact on our society since they enjoy an impressive readership.

Another purely genre author specializing in family stories is Masha Traub. Her novels include *The Fallen Woman*, a book about a curious granddaughter who uncovers her family's sad secrets, and *A Bad Mother*, a novel about what is to be a mother in Russia. Traub's stories are close to the Russian reality, and are not embellished for sentimental effect. Perhaps this is an influence of Masha's second occupation: journalism.

Russian women's prose is hardly known for its well-developed male characters, yet it is exactly this quality which, according to many of her readers, gives Anna Berseneva an advantage over her competitors. A journalist and philologist as well a mother of two, Anna lost a leg whilst rescuing her child from a car crash. Yet, despite the challenges in her life, she has continued being a proactive and successful woman, having authored over twenty novels. Anna considers herself a genre author, but I think her books are a genuine reflection of Russian family life and will be of interest to international audiences. As well as standalone books, Anna writes family sagas, *Ermolovs* and *Grinevs*.

Svetlana Pavlova's *The Pursuit of Happiness* is about a

modern Russian family: a successful orchestra conductor and his muse, who is a housewife, and their daughter, a director of a publishing house. The family faces creative challenges, tensions with state bureaucracy, love and sins.

The previously mentioned Dina Rubina also writes family and love stories. *On The Sunny Side of The Street* is set in Tashkent, one of the capitals of the Soviet Orient. The city here is as much the main character of the novel as its heroine, a painter called Vera. Another family drama written by Rubina is *Petrushka Syndrome*. It is about puppets and puppeteers. The story moves crazily from location to location, from Sakhalin to Prague, from Lviv to Jerusalem; an apt illustration of Shakespeare's line, 'All the world's a stage'.

Yuri Buida is definitely the writer to translate. He is a great stylist, and his detective stories dazzle readers both on plot and language levels. Buida's novella, *Poison and Honey*, is the story of Osor'in's family headed by a formidable and resourceful female, Tati, who will stop at nothing to protect her family. This is an intelligent, stylish read, as is anything else written by this author.

Rebinder's Effect by Yelena Minkina-Taicher is one of those unfortunate great books that are somehow overlooked by book awards committees. At its core is the troubled path of the Katenin family. Here you'll find curious characters who go through GULAG, orphanages, forbidden love, nuclear

physics, and repressions. Love, loss, secrets and regrets are overflowing in this hidden gem. Maybe a screen adaptation would give this book a second life.

Yelena Katishonok is a Latvian-born philologist who immigrated to the US. She authored three novels: *There Once Lived an Old Man with His Wife*, *Against the Hour Hand*, and *Where the Man Goes*. The first two are a rather introspective family saga dilogy, with an emphasis on the irrational side of the Ivanov family. The authentic use of archaic vernacular language boosts the literary impact and deepens the story's setting here. This novel is where twisted plot addicts and literary style connoisseurs happily unite. *Where the Man Goes* is a miniature model of the Soviet history. The novel portrays generations of people populating one house, and the dynamics of their relationships. Not quite a family saga, but as a fictional model of a micro-nation it serves the same purpose.

The Saga of Poor Goldmans by Yelena Kolins encompasses the life of a Russian Jewish family in the second half of the twentieth century with competing siblings, jealousy juxtaposed to family ties, wealth to poverty, and there is a love triangle for a dessert.

Grigory Ryazhsky came to literature from the film industry; he's written and produced many features. Writing for screen helps to embrace a technical side of creative writing, namely story structure, and perhaps this is the reason why the

prose of Ryazhsky enjoys wide popularity. *The Not Boring Security Prison* is a classical family saga of a Marquez-esque scale. *The House of Exemplary Order*, nominated for the Russian Booker Prize in 2014, tells the story of Semyon Mirskoi, a great Soviet architect, who went through fame, poverty and GULAG. *The Lunio Brothers' Divertissement* is a story of survival. Concentration camps and Leningrad's blockade during World War II were amongst things that have scarred the Girshbaum family. Dmitry Veresov's *The Chronicler* presents us with a similar intrigue: three stories are set in Kiev in 1918, 1960s' Leningrad and modern-day Berlin. One thing ties them together. *The Chronicler* is another classical family saga.

To finish my review, I give you some unconventional examples of family prose. Alexander Chervinsky's *Shishkin's Forest* is a family satire. The Nikolkins, a fictional family here, have a real life prototype – an infamous Russian intelligentsia family – so you keep guessing what's real and what's been made up by the author.

The characters of *Dancing Rota of The Water*, written by Sergey Kuznetsov, live in a modern metropolis and hardly suspect they belong to one big family. An aristocrat turned KGB man, a female sniper, a shoe shop worker, an aquarium business owner and a scientist: they may be all separated by time but their fates are connected into a knot of Russian history. Yelena Arseniyeva's *Spring Never Came* is set during

World War II in Russia. Love sometimes goes beyond any cruelty. Olya falls in love with an NKVD (KGB) officer who wrecked her family. I definitely smell a screen adaptation here. Vladimir Kunin's *The Night With An Angel*, despite its title, is not erotica but a mythical parable. The fallen Angel tells the story of a Russian Jewish family to a writer. Maybe, this is just a metaphor for imagination?

As you can see, the Russian family prose genre is so diverse that everybody can find something that strikes their fancy. Although translations for most of these books are yet to materialize, I hope this short list is at least useful to my Russian-speaking readers.

Psychological Novel

Fyodor Dostoevsky is the Russian brand-name of psychological novels. His legacy is so great that no modern Russian author has received international recognition in this genre. Are there any contenders for the throne of modern psychological fiction?

In 2009, Mariam Petrosyan's debut novel *The House That...* was published and became a multi-award-winning literary sensation. People argued what genre it belongs to: stories of an orphanage for disabled children as told by them could be classified as young adult fiction; mystical elements of the novel also make it a work of magic realism. The stories are reflections of the kids on the nature of the house they populate, on their place in the orphanage hierarchy and on life and death. These are also the tales of survival, bravery and cowardice. Based on the unparalleled insight into children's psyche, I categorize this book as a psychological novel.

The House is a micro-model of our world, our society, where three types of the law operate: an institutional regime installed by the adult staff, a prison-like codex of the orphanage community and social Darwinism. To see the world through these kids' eyes, to dream, to fear, to fit in and rebel like them - this is the journey this books sends you on.

It's exciting to see the unending individuality in each of the characters, the way they talk and interact with each other; such depth is not often seen in adult characters of great literary novels. The author treats every character as unique; the attention to detail here is striking. I sometimes felt that the world of the House was more real than our reality.

Quite a polar example of psychological prose in terms of age is Andrei Gelasimov's *Rachel*, in which the main character is an old philology professor who married his former student. But the young wife doesn't want to be with him anymore, he falls ill and only old friends are there to help. The time is 1990s: Russia is turmoil, where can this charming abandoned loser find solace and joy? *Rachel* is a psychological portrait of the ageing Soviet intelligentsia in changing Russia, a touching and ironic read.

Russians tend to spend an awful lot of time by thinking about their country's history, about its existential path. Some people can't cope with this and become mentally ill. No wonder that in some of the greatest books like Victor Pelevin's *Buddha's Little Finger*, which I discuss in a chapter on magic realism, the setting is someone's crazed mind.

Vladimir Sharov's novel, *Before and During*, is set in a psychiatric clinic in Moscow where its narrator Alyosha writes down stories of people he has known, including other

patients. The result is a historical phantasmagoria featuring themes of Russian Jews, Russian revolution and the secret of Stalin's birth. The novel is centered on three lives of Madame de Stahl, who could procreate by herself, and her numerous and often famous lovers. *Before and During* caused a stir upon its publication for its parallels between Bolshevism and Christianity. The book features the Great October Revolution, Tolstoy's brother being eaten by the great master himself in his mother's womb and later reborn as Tolstoy's son, a Swiss encounter between the impressionist composer Scriabin and the futurist politician Lenin. Is all of that set in a madhouse? I'm not sure.

Women's prose, which is reviewed in a separate chapter, often deals with characters' inner world and therefore can be classified as a subgenre of psychological prose. Many men write about women, while the opposite is not typical for Russian fiction. Yet, there are exceptions. A relationship between two British men is explored in *Avalanche*, a psychological drama by a London-based Russian émigré author Xena Semikina. Nick and Mike are a part of a crew investigating the physiological effects of being buried in avalanche, such as hypothermia and hypoxia. What starts off as a friendship, gradually transforms into an inexplicable bond between the men, which threatens to destroy both of them.

Sometimes, overcoming prejudices, personal fears and misunderstanding may be harder than surviving a natural disaster. Our mind is a snowed mountain. Watch out.

If I could think of one author, firmly occupying the niche of psychological novel, it would be Oleg Pavlov. The Moscow-born writer had once worked as a prison-camp guard in Kazakhstan in his youth and drew parallels with his own experiences when reading Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*, which became Pavlov's main literary influence. Both *Matiushin Case* and *Captain of the Steppe* with central characters conscripted to serve at prison camps seem autobiographical. But this thought is devastating if the author himself indeed had to go through this inner suffering verging on insanity. Imagine if you would an innocent soul forced to serve as a demon in hell; undoubtedly crude but the closest analogy I could come up with. Pavlov's prose is maybe a form of self-therapy, but it is also undoubtedly a literary vaccine aimed at preventing a re-infection of a Soviet-like virus.

Another Pavlov's book, *Asystole*, portrays the bleak, lonely, loveless life of an artist. If love creates the meaning, then what is to be done when this love is not achievable? Could the pain of living, the pain of realizing an aimless and hopeless existence only be rescued by love, the very same thing that saved Dante from madness? *Asystole* is by no means an easy read both in terms of its language and message. It

brings you to a sad and dark place, where a tormented soul resides. It makes you think that perhaps we are all tormented, but in self-preservation we constantly distract ourselves with small everyday worries.

The Russian Booker and Solzhenitsyn literary prizes have recognized Pavlov's confessional prose. This is not an example of a pleasant read. Yet, as suffering cleanses, I'm sure Pavlov, like Solzhenitsyn before him, has a vast audience outside Russia.

Religion

In 2012 an unlikely book took the bestseller charts in Russia by storm, easily outselling its close competitors. It is a collection of stories about life of the Russian Orthodox Church called *Everyday Saints and Other Stories*. In some of these, the author, Archimandrite Tikhon, described his path of becoming a clergyman and his early life in the Pskov-Pechora monastery. Parables and sermons are a usual part of such books, which are quite abundant in Russia. So what made *Everyday Saints* stand out? Archimandrite Tikhon gives us a clear and authentic portrayal of the monastery life with humor, drama, a very human perspective. In fact, some stories of the clergymen here are told in a most unvarnished way. They often contain angry outbursts and foul language; they seem almost anti-religious.

Indeed, Archimandrite Tikhon doesn't try to convert anyone. Instead, he shows everyday life of 'invisible' saints and people's path to faith.

The literary establishment regarded the author's prose with a high esteem too, pointing out logical and elegant structures of his stories. A writer Alexander Prokhanov even called the book's genre monastery prose. *Everyday Saints* are now available in translation in many languages, including

French, Polish, German and Chinese.

Now imagine a story collection about the Russian Church, penned by a philologist and literary critic. There is one and it is Maya Kucherskaya's *Faith and Humor*. It was quite a bold decision to write and publish it, knowing the daunting and opinionated Russian readership. Behind all the humor, sometimes very black, there is genuine sincerity and appreciation of the church life here. In one of the stories, *The Good Man*, Kucherskaya features different priests: one an alcoholic, another a nonbeliever, and along with a thief, homophobe and misanthropist, there is also a saint. Many of these short stories are parables with a real life story behind it. For instance, there is one about an Orthodox hedgehog that was baptizing a squirrel, and it drowned. Russian Church in Kucherskaya's stories is diverse and complex as life itself. Many considered the book's humor rather poisonous, I think it's therapeutic. Perhaps, Kucherskaya simply shows that faith should not be equaled to people of faith who are sinners like everybody else. A job in a religious institution doesn't make one a saint or superior human being.

Quite a different view on religion is presented in Ludmila Ulitskaya's *Daniel Stein, Interpreter*. Daniel Stein was a Polish Jew who survived Holocaust by working as an

interpreter for the Gestapo and after the war he moved to Israel and became a priest. What a life! The book can be considered as a fictionalized biography, as it is based on the real-life Carmelite priest. Here one can find some curious interpretations of Biblical myths and, of course, the Holocaust is also discussed. The novel is mainly about people who met Brother Daniel and stories of their scarred lives.

A theme of faith is touched in Evgeny Vodolazkin's award-winning *Laurus*, a semi-historical novel set in the fifteenth century Russia. The main character is a healer who has lost his beloved and decides to live life for her and, in atoning self-sacrifice, to help sick, unhappy and lost people. This is a book about true Russian spirituality that reminds me of Andrei Tarkovsky's film, *Andrei Rublev*. The God question has always been central in Russia, and *Laurus* shines by tackling it once again, this time, with eclectically styled prose featuring Old Russian language. A philologist and specialist in ancient Russian literature, Evgeny Vodolazkin, the author of *Laurus*, gives a curious definition to a Russian character in this novel, 'He is senseless and relentless, and any business in his hands may end up as a mortal sin.'

Post-Soviet Russia is an eclectic spiritual space. Officially dominated by the Orthodox Church, the country nevertheless is still very much a realm of atheism, which is a

legacy of the scientific communism. And what religion would find such soil fertile, – a nontheistic one.

Buddhism is quite popular in Russia, where it is a native religion in several regions like Buryatia and Kalmykia. The attractiveness of this faith is that it gives every person a chance for enlightenment, a chance to reach a state of nirvana and become a superhuman, a God.

Of all modern writers, Victor Pelevin has probably done the most to adapt Buddhism to Russian mentality. The critics even say that the author's interpretation of it, in mild terms, is very much wrong. In *Buddha's Little Finger* and *The Sacred Book of the Werewolf*, Russian history and politics in relation to life of the ordinary person are viewed through the prism of Buddhism and Russian humor. I can only guess to what extent either of those can be translated into another language.

In *t*, a fantasy detective story featuring Zen Buddhist and Confucian doctrines along with Count Tolstoy as a main hero and a sleuth, literature itself becomes an object of philosophical dissection. Pelevin doesn't take religion too seriously though; maybe this is what makes him so Russian. How can one take life, this bizarre thing, so seriously? Check out this quote from *t*, 'Our mind is a crazy monkey, running towards profundity. And the thought that our mind is a crazy monkey, running towards profundity, is nothing else but a skittish attempt of the monkey to correct her hairdo on the

way to the abyss.’

If this is too deep for some, there is always another Russian means to reach enlightenment, which doesn’t require much intelligence – vodka.

Humor

Along with aforementioned despotism, vodka and revolutions, Russia has a long tradition of humor and satire. You may have heard of Gogol's *The Government Inspector* or *The Little Golden Calf* by Ilf and Petrov, or Zoshchenko and Teffi. The question is who are their successors now?

As expected, most of the translated books in this genre are rather dark. The best example is Andrei Kurkov who writes in the crossing of genres: crime, political fiction and humor of a pitch-black variety. In *Death and Penguin*, one of Kurkov's best-known books, the main character Victor adopts a penguin from Kiev Zoo after they announced that they have no food left to feed animals. Victor tries to get by as a journalist, but the only articles he's asked to write are obituaries, and gets involved in a conspiracy. Who would have thought this job was that dangerous? Victor is depressed, thinking about the fate of the newly independent Ukraine, and so he drinks heavily. The presence of the penguin that follows Victor like a shadow or waits to be fed is unclear. Is he symbolizing a passive, mute and lonely Soviet individual who has failed to adapt to the new life after the collapse of the Soviet Union? You may think there's no humor in this story at all, well it's just as dark and bitter as Victor's and Ukraine's

life plagued with hopelessness. And let's not forget about the penguin: a wingless bird trotting to the cemetery is ludicrous and grotesque.

Speaking of animals, Fazil Iskander's *Rabbits and Boa Constrictors*, which I discuss in a chapter on dystopian fiction, is a fine example of humor working as an essential element of allegoric stories.

Valery Ronshin's *Living A Life* is a collection of stories with pitch-black dark humor and mysticism and, of course, absurdity that you can find in books by Roald Dahl and Daniil Kharms. Similar to Dahl, Ronshin is a popular author of children's literature. Ronshin is also featured in *Beyond the Looking Glass*, an anthology of satirical fiction, which includes works of other modern authors: Alexander Selin, Grigory Kruzhkov and Ludmila Shtern.

A striking contrast to Kurkov or Ronshin is Mikhail Veller, a popular writer and media figure in Russia. His humor is full of light and vigor. Veller writes short stories and essays, and he is very scrupulous about self-editing. I guess writing great humor requires such an attitude. *The Legends of Nevsky Prospect* is a collection of hilarious stories, all snapshots of the Soviet reality. Of course, they are only funny if you get Veller's Russian jokes like this one, "Ten men have fallen into a pile at a woman's feet, yet she picks the one who just stood

nearby, looking the opposite direction.’

Veller’s humor can often be crude and vulgar, yet, hands down, he notices and relentlessly exposes little details of our life and makes me laugh, and that’s what counts.

Types of humor books I can definitely relate to are about a clash of cultures and national mentalities. Andrei Ostalski’s *English Rules: A Russo-British Comedy of Errors* is all about cultural codes and habits of English and Russian people. An educated Russian émigré named Sashok is married to a British woman; they live with her parents in the outskirts of London. He’s got a shitty job, for which he’s over-qualified, and then, on top of his difficult relationship with the in-laws, he gets mixed up with a Russian mob. Oh ho. The funniest thing about Sashok is his never-ending analysis of his own and other people’s behavior, his complex of not being fully adapted to British life, though he certainly comes across as more British than Russian.

Many people in Russia still assume that life in Europe and the US is almost a paradise. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the mass emigration westward ensued. This interesting phenomenon becomes satirized in Vladimir Lorchenkov’s *The Good Life Elsewhere*. The book is set in the ex-Soviet state of Moldova that is considered the poorest country in Europe. A common way to the EU ‘paradise’ there is to get a Romanian passport. In the *The Good Life Elsewhere*, a

group of villagers dream of moving to Italy, some of them doing pretty unusual things to make this come true: one guy transforms his tractor into a seaplane to travel there. But though one can physically escape their motherland, changing one's mentality is a lot harder.

I would like to conclude with Tatiana Moskvina's *Shame and Purity*, shortlisted for the National Bestseller prize. This is my favorite book in the whole post-Soviet literature. It is full of truth about life in modern Russia, yet it made me feel optimistic and not depressed. I absolutely loved the characters, a folk-singer Egle and her friend Andrei, who's lost himself over her, the impossible Katarzhina who would do anything to get rich and famous. Andrei here is akin to Prince Myshkin – a symbol of a silly purity, telling off his love, Egle, to preserve integrity and not to succumb to the siren song of fame. 'If there's nobody to sing to– sing for nobody,' he says. 'Sing for yourself, for God, for the Sun. And people will find a way to you, to the real you.'

If Egle may have been swayed, there's no cure for Katarzhina, who is a source of unbearable shame to her mother. If people like Katarzhina are thriving in Russia, does that mean the moral integrity is becoming an atavism? As long as there are writers like Moskvina, there is hope.

Prison Life

A theme of imprisonment is well discussed in Russian literature. This started with Pushkin, Lermontov and other poets of Russian Golden Age who often criticised Tsars, the autocratic Russian State and the lack of freedoms for serfs and other poor people. For their liberal writing these poets were often sent into exile to remote parts of Russia.

I grew up on Sakhalin Island (situated just north of Japan), which used to be a prison island until the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Anton Chekhov visited the island in 1890, stayed there for three months and wrote a book called *Sakhalin Island*, in which he told us about horrific and degrading state of the people that had been 'living' there.

As we all know the fall of the monarchy in Russia didn't put an end to oppression of Russian people. After the devastating First World War and several years of Civil War and the Red Terror there was a relatively peaceful period of the New Economic Policy. Russian produce reached the pre-World War I levels and the people were hopeful. Yet Stalin, who seized power after Lenin's death, started a new era of

oppression by ordering the organisation of a network of prison camps called the Gulag. Millions of innocent Russian people, including famous scientists, doctors, and artists were tagged as “enemies of the Soviet people” and sent to these camps along with real criminals. Alexander Solzhenitsyn described the scale of the atrocities of the Gulag in his epic novel, *The Gulag Archipelago*. Another author, Varlam Shalamov, documented his Gulag experiences in *Kolyma Tales*. Later on, Sergei Dovlatov wrote an autobiographical story *The Zone: A Prison Camp Guard's Story* telling us about his work as a guard in a Soviet prison.

The modern Russian prison prose is not abundant in translation. Undeservingly, very little media exposure received Leonid Gabyshev's *The Air of Freedom*, a tale of a teenager who served a term in a Soviet prison in the 1960-70s. The story describes his quest for freedom, complicated by perverted women and a psychiatric ward.

Gennady Trifonov explores a topic of homosexuality in prison in his prison romance novel, *The Net*. Quite a rare read for Russia, where writers mostly ignore LGBT issues. This one has so far been ignored by translators as well.

Of course, there is also a bestseller here and not necessarily due to its literary quality. Mikhail Khodorkovsky, the number one political ex-prisoner and Putin's main

opponent, shares his impression on Russian jails in *My Fellow Prisoners*.

This chapter would be incomplete without mentioning a truly legendary prisoner of Putin's era, Eduard Limonov. A famous scandalous poet, journalist and the right-wing political activist (an ex-chief of the National Bolshevik Party) had been in prison several times, where he put his time to a good use and wrote a number of books including *My Prisons* and *Captured by Dead Men*. Limonov is a person of a great influence in Russian literary and political establishments. He immigrated to the US in the 1970s, where worked in New York for the Russian Word newspaper. There he produced a famous novel *It's Me, Eddie* on the punk culture. In 1991, he returned to Russia and became involved in various extremist activities. Limonov's biography by Emmanuel Carrere had won Prix Goncourt, the most prestigious literary award in France, in 2013.

Limonov's had a big influence on Andrei Rubanov, who rose to literary stardom with his autobiographical debut novel, *Do Time Get Time*. The story set in Russia in the 1990s is about a crooked businessman who is imprisoned for tax fraud. We expect a usual grim Russian novel here, but get something quite vigorous and heroic like *The Shamsbank Redemption* or *Shantaram*. Indeed, Rubanov's character represents a changing Russia. He doesn't crumble in the hostile environment, but

revisits his life and turns this awful experience into something beautiful. A book.

Biography

As you may have noticed, the translated Russian prison prose leans towards autobiographical. I have also reviewed other biographical books elsewhere in the guide, for instance, Ludmila Ulitskaya's *Daniel Stein. Interpreter*, a story of a Carmelite priest (in the chapter on religion).

Many people who read my blog are not necessarily interested in modern Russian literature, but rather in the country and its life and history. Therefore, I have included this chapter of non-prison themed biographical non-fiction, though the Gulag and mental institutions are featured in these books too.

Born In Siberia is an autobiography of a Soviet woman called Tamara Astafieva, in which we learn about her family history since 1917 until the present times. Astafieva grew up in a remote village on the Trans-Siberia Railway line in 1937. After finishing school, Tamara became a journalist, which helped her to learn things that many Soviet people couldn't know and to meet and become friends with foreigners. She talks about the World War II and Stalin's Gulag that took away many members of her family. This is both a memoir and a personal view on the history of the USSR.

Eduard Kochergin's *Christened with Crosses* is another

autobiographical novel set in Russia in 1940-1950s that won the National Bestseller Award in 2010. Kochergin's character is a kid who runs away from the 'care' unit for 'children of the enemies-of-the-state' in Omsk. He intends to reach his native Leningrad, which is thousands kilometers away. The run took him six years; he was caught and run away again, he learned survival and new skills on the way from making tattoos to making playing cards. Here we read about horrid caretakers in children's cares and the kindness of people who helped the boy to survive. A Russian child who beat the prison state against all odds is an apt logline, in my opinion. All this makes *Christened with Crosses* an unusual novel of education.

Sadly, the majority of recent biographies translated from Russian are dedicated to famous people, mostly writers and politicians. And yet, Russia has produced brilliant scientists, engineers, teachers and doctors- people who actually nurtured the country to its greatness, all of whom go mostly unsung. Aren't they worth writing about? Of course, one has to cover the basics first, by that I mean The Kremlin.

Vladimir Lenin: How to Become a leader is a biography of the first Soviet ruler, a detailed yet comprehensible work shedding new light on the persona of one of the greatest political thinkers of the XXth century. It's written by Vladlen Loginov, a specialist on the early Soviet history, who has particularly focused on the Great October Revolution, Lenin

and Russian Civil War.

A period of Russian history, the wild 1990s, that connected *perestroika* and Putin's advent is covered in Boris Minaev's book, *Boris Yeltsin – The Decade that Shook the World*. The reigning president of Russia, Vladimir Putin, is uncovered in two biographies available in English. Two journalists, Alexander Korobko and Chris Hutchins, wrote one of them, simply titled as *Putin*. There's a lot in it about Putin, the private person: his family, friends, what he thinks about oligarchy, what he likes, and what stirs emotion in him or whom he'd ask for help. The second book, a national bestseller called *The Man without a Face: The Unlikely Rise Of Vladimir Putin*, written by a journalist celebrity Masha Gessen, is focused on politics. It follows Putin's first steps on his path to power and also includes some material on his pre-Kremlin years.

As if counterbalance her attention to the Kremlin, Gessen has recently published a book on the most notorious Russian protesters of the past decade. It is called *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot*. Masha Gessen has also penned *Perfect Rigour*, a book on the Russian genius mathematician, Grigory Perelman, who had solved the Poincare conjecture and declined to accept the Fields Medal for this breakthrough of the century. The author, like all of us, was keen to find out why did he ditch the Fields? Finally,

Masha Gessen has also written her family memoir, *Ester and Ruzya: How My Grandmothers Survived Hitler's War and Stalin's Peace*.

Another prominent biographer, Pavel Basinsky, has become well known for his works on lives of Russian masters. *Leo Tolstoy – Flight from Paradise* chronicles Lev Tolstoy's remaining days. *Passion of Maxim Gorkey. Nine Days After Death* is a story of the famous proletarian author, whose life and work were a subject of Basinsky's Doctoral dissertation.

Lev Danilkin's biography of the Russian cosmonaut *Yuri Gagarin* (translated into Italian) was published in Russia in 2011, fifty years after Gagarin first flew into outer space. This book is an entertaining collage rather than a documentary chronicle, consisting of fragments of journalist investigations, memoirs and fiction books on the Soviet space program. Danilkin also discusses Gagarin as a symbolic figure, a part of the Soviet 'religion'.

Two books about a Soviet film director, Andrei Tarkovsky, have recently been published. *A Life on the Cross*, written by a sociologist Lydmila Boyadzhieva, explores the persona of the master and how he managed to fit, seemingly conflict-free, into the Soviet reality. The second book by Layla Alexander-Garret is called *Andrei Tarkovsky: The Collector of Dreams*. This one is not a biography, but a diary that the author kept while being Tarkovsky's on-site interpreter during

the filming of *The Sacrifice*, Tarkovsky's final masterpiece. Nothing reveals a genius more than observing him at work.

This list of titles is so short, but one has to remember that non-Russian biographers have written on prominent Russians too.

Military and War

The recent Chechen Wars have left scars on Russia, and while many of them are invisible, it is they which hurt the most. In *Thirst*, Andrei Gelasimov tells a story of a young soldier named Kostya who returned from Chechnya and tried to live a normal life. Not only he's scarred by the war, he's let down by his parents. He used to draw; now he repairs flats and drinks vodka. But will it repair him? He's not violent; he's just locked up in his mind. With time comes healing and there's eventually a glimpse of hope: friends from the army and relatives help him to find the way back through pain, loneliness, and his auto-portrait in the end is a metaphor of revival.

German Sadulaev is a Chechen author who talks about the troubled recent history of his homeland in *I Am Chechen*. This book is about the Chechen identity, the moral and ethical rules in their society. It unveils shocking facts about the Chechen War, which can't be learned about from the Russian TV. It's vivid and lively prose, with descriptions of nature and local customs to demonstrate the author's love of his land. And the painful topic of the Russo-Chechen relationship won't leave you indifferent.

The Chechen theme continues in the debut novel by

Zakhar Prilepin, *Pathologies*. Egor Tashevsky is a Russian soldier fighting in Chechnya. He is horrified when he realizes that his enemy is not just a military man, or a terrorist, but it can be any civilian from child to old man. ‘Clearing’ Grozny, killing one after another, has its toll. In *Pathologies*, scenes of the war are alternated with Egor’s romantic thoughts and his childhood memories, which only magnify the effect of the horror. One can never learn as much about the two Chechen Wars from history textbooks and newspapers as from these books.

Prilepin himself served in the Special Forces and participated in the Chechen campaign of 1996 and 1999. And he’s alive to tell the story. What happened to some of these soldiers after Chechnya is shown in Prilepin’s follow-up novel, *San’ka*, discussed in the next chapter.

The post-war life is a central theme in another book by Andrei Gelasimov, *Gods of the Steppe*, which is set in summer 1945 in a Russian village Razgulyaevka, near the border with China. The central character is a boy called Pet’ka. He befriends a captive Japanese doctor, Hirotaro, at a nearby foreign prisoners-of-war camp. The two destinies unravel before our eyes – the tandem of vigorous youth and experienced wisdom. We learn about Hirotaro’s family and Pet’ka’s hardships of growing up amongst his often-cruel peers. Readers and critics have debated the authenticity of

children's violence portrayed here. As someone who grew up in the Russian Far East, I support the author in that such violence was and still is not uncommon, at least, in these parts of Russia. Hirotaro's story is fascinating on its own: he writes a diary for his sons describing the life of his kin since his families' samurai rituals of the seventeenth century. You get a juxtaposition of two cultures, two mentalities. The Far East is a rare setting in world literature, yet other two novels spring to mind about this region – Haruki Murakami's *The Wind-Up Bird Chronicle* and J.G. Ballard's *Empire of The Sun*. The three would make a great topic for a cross-cultural study.

As for other military and war fiction, many award-winning authors writing in this genre still await their international recognition. To name but a few: Alexander Prokhanov's *Crimea, Seven Books, The Chechen Blues, The Last Soldiers Of The Empire*, Vladimir Makanin's *Asan, The Victor* by Andrei Volos and Ilya Boyashov's *White Tiger*.

Two Alexanders, Pokrovsky and Terekhov, share their experiences serving on a Russian nuclear submarine and in the army, respectively, in *Sea Stories/Army Stories*, while the Soviet Army veteran Oleg Yermakov tells readers in *Afghan Tales* about experiences of Russian soldiers and civilians during the Soviet campaign in Afghanistan.

Recently, a new war erupted in the post-Soviet continent. Vasily Aksyonov wrote his dystopian novel, *The*

Island of Crimea, in 1979, but I still decided to include it in this guide, since Crimea became a key geopolitical spot in 2014. In this novel, we are shown an alternative history of Russia. During the Civil War, the Whites retreat to the Crimea pursued by the Reds (Bolsheviks). Time passes, the Soviet Union avoids being involved in World War II, but the Crimea becomes a rich, capitalist country, in a state of military neutrality with the decaying Soviet Russia. The main character, a Crimean journalist and aristocrat, Andrei Luchnikov, comes up with the idea of unity with Russia. He organizes a political party in order to get to the local parliament. In the climax, Soviet troops enter the Crimea, and Luchnikov realizes his mistake too late. I hope the current situation with Crimea will be resolved in a more optimistic manner.

The ongoing conflict in Eastern Ukraine has taken thousands of lives already. It is perhaps still too fresh to make sense of it and write a book about it. Yet, if you are looking for an analysis of this turmoil between Russian and Ukraine, you may find it in Andrei Kurkov's *Ukrainian Diaries*. Here we get an insider's story, as Kurkov is a long-time resident of Kiev.

Political Fiction

It is dangerous to investigate the current ruling class in Russia: the tragic deaths of Sergey Magnitsky and Anna Politkovskaya are persuasive enough. Yet, there is no taboo anymore on discussions of the Soviet period politics. A clear indication of that is *Good Stalin*, an autobiographical novel of ex-dissident Victor Erofeyev, which became a bestseller in Russia. Born in the family of a prominent Soviet diplomat, this author witnessed the rule of Stalin who favored Victor's father. However, Erofeyev's underground literary activity resulted in him being banned from publishing until 1988 and termination of his father's political career. Erofeyev's novels are widely translated and have won international literary awards. He should not be confused with the Soviet satiric writer, Venedict Erofeyev, the author of *Moscow-Petushki*.

As the Soviet Union has long since become history, the time has arrived to reflect on social, political and economic changes that Russia has gone through in 1980-1990s. In regard to this, I can definitely relate to at least the first half of Sergey Shargunov's *The Book With No Photographs*. We're both born in 1980. Our childhoods still occurred in the Soviet state, while our adolescence in the new, dramatically transforming capitalist Russia. We were both admitted to

Lomonosov Moscow State University. Shargunov studied journalism, while I did biology. In his autobiographical book he drew a portrait of our generation. Shargunov has been actively involved in politics, going to Chechnya, South Ossetia and Kyrgyzstan, covering events of war and revolutions on the spot. All of that and many more chronicles and analyses of key events in post-Soviet Russia can be found in this book. Shargunov continues his journalist and political activity collaborating with a fellow writer Zakhar Prilepin.

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, many of the satellite states didn't have it any easier than Russia. Tajikistan was plunged into a civil war, with many local Russians forced to leave the country. A geophysicist by occupation, Andrei Volos had lived in Dushanbe in Soviet and transitional times and saw the uneasy transformation of Tajikistan, which he documented in his novel, *Hurramabad*, which had won the AntiBooker Prize in 1998. Central themes of the novel are relationships between nations.

Zakhar Prilepin elaborates on this theme of nationalism in his award-winning novel, *Sankya*. The main protagonist Sasha Tishin is a mediocre young man from a remote Russian village. He is a member of a far-right organization called The Founding Fathers, FF (or the union of the founders). Headed by Moscow-based radical intelligentsia activists, the FF has built presence in many Russian regions aiming to shake up the

cleptocratic Russian establishment. The FF activists organize marches that turn into riots involving vandalism. The only people portrayed in the novel who nurture and ‘found’ Russia are Sankya’s grandparents and his poor mother who toils inhumane hours at work. All this ‘youth-in-revolt and his mother’ dramatic storyline in *Sankya* reminds me of Maxim Gorky’s masterpiece, *Mother*. A century passed and Russian history has gone full circle.

Political messages become more allegorical as we move on to Victor Pelevin, Russia’s most influential author. His philosophical and postmodernist prose is layered with cultural and political references. And many of his books can be considered as satirical political thrillers. *Omon Ra* is a short novel telling a story of boys who dream of becoming cosmonauts. Some of them are picked for space training program. During their training, the boys learn that the Soviet rocket can only go to the Moon with humans inside it being part of the overall mechanism. A human-powered rocket – what an apt metaphor of the Soviet State that was built on people’s hopes, blood and bones.

One boy finds out that their mission is a lie, while others aren’t so lucky, though sometimes ignorance is a blessing. The dream turns into an absurd horror story. Yet even in the face of death, these boys, however brainwashed, remain human, discussing the music of Pink Floyd and

sharing their inner-most thoughts.

The Sacred Book of the Werewolf is Pelevin's view on Russian state at the beginning of Putin's era. The story is narrated by the main protagonist, in this case – an ancient werefox appearing in human form as a teenage prostitute called A-Khuli (which can be translated from Russian as 'why the hell?'). A-Khuli has a love affair with a 'werewolf with epaulets', which is a common name in Russia for KGB and police staff involved in corruption and other crimes. A female protagonist attempting to grasp the ultimate truth of life is rare for Russian fiction. The language here is often colloquial and crude, yet it's full of great observations and discussions that don't take away from the story. I'll give you a couple of quotes.

'A thought of a beautiful girl is your thought. But a beautiful girl – is God's thought.'

'How can one feel joy for somebody else?' 'One should not want anything for oneself.'

Pelevin's books are a joy for culturologists, linguists and Russia enthusiasts. They are literary layer cakes, where bitter can lead to sweet or sour.

It is easy to miss hidden gems of this genre when everybody is discussing Pelevin's impressive bibliography. So, please, make a note of Alexander Terekhov's *The Rat Killer*. In this novel, two pest control specialists receive an order to

eradicate rodents in the central part of a provincial town that has been preparing to the visit of important guests – the Russian President and the UN Secretary. One of the characters becomes involved with the devilish scheme. In the horrific reality portrayed here, human society is likened to its rodent counterpart, in their greed and malice, which I think is unfair to the cute rodents. If you've enjoyed Bulgakov's novel *Master and Margarita*, you may want to try this one.

Other notable Russian works of political fiction, including Vladimir Sorokin's *The Day of the Oprichnik*, *The Sugar Kremlin* and *Telluria* and Olga Slavnikova's *2017*, belong to a trendy genre of dystopian fiction.

Utopia and Dystopia

Human technical progress threatens to destroy nature with the advent of global industrialization, nuclear weaponry and other formidable things humans brought in. But perhaps Soviet Communism and European Nazism, dictatorships that keep terrifying the world, had biggest impacts on this genre. One could have thought that utopia and dystopia should be a well-represented genre in Russian literature. However, the list is rather small: we have Chernyshevsky's *What's To Be Done*, Zamyatin's *We*, Strugatsky Brothers' and Platonov's novels in the XXth century and that's about it. The post-Soviet literature, freed from the state censorship, gave us many brilliant reads, half of them are already available in translation. This means that this particular genre of Russian literature is what foreign publishers, and hopefully readers, want.

I'll start with a classical dystopian science fiction, often dismissed by literary snobs as genre fiction for plebs. Yet, commercially these are one of the best-exported titles of Russian fiction.

Dmitry Glukhovsky debuted with a post-apocalyptic novel, *Metro 2033*, that became a smashing bestseller in Russia in 2007 and later a very popular video game. The book has

since been widely translated. Its sequel, *Metro 2034*, was equally successful. The Metro Universe is set in the post-nuclear Earth with the remaining human population hiding in dungeons; the biggest of them being the Moscow Underground (metro). All the tube stations are like mini-countries, while the tunnels in-between are dark places of chaos. In *Metro 2033*, one of the stations, VDNH, and maybe the whole of mankind, is in danger, and an ordinary guy named Artyom has to travel across the entire Metro system to save his people. In the sequel novel, another tube station, ironically named after the Crimean military base, Sebastopolskaya, became cut out of the main metro system. And as always the world is in need of a hero.

In his latest novel, *The Future*, Glukhovsky has indeed touched upon the future of Europe. What if people became immortal? Would we become a happy society? Or it will be highly stratified society ruled by dictators? And what is the price that we'll have to pay for immortality? Overpopulation. *The Future* is a gripping, passionate, adrenaline-packed and philosophical story, and ultimately it's about love- powerful, unforgiving and all forgiving. It's a *bona fide* blockbuster, hands down.

If Glukhovsky's approach is very serious, many Russian dystopias have a satirical tone. Ilya Boyashov's *Armada* is

somewhat reminiscent of Noah's Ark story. A country sent out a suicidal fleet to attack and destroy America, yet, while on the way back they realize that the whole landmass has disappeared. What would several thousand men do? Literary references, farce, religion and philosophy are intertwined in this miniature fictional model of our society.

Another clever satire on the modern world where the laws of physics were substituted with laws of magic is Ilya Nosyrev's *The World Map*. This absurd and extravagantly written book tells about adventures of a knight called Ronald and a monk named Brother Jehuda, who possesses an infrared vision. Have you seen zombies in a class struggle? Did you know that gravity is dependent on the falling person's IQ? This is what a fantasy novel should be in my opinion: quirky, fun and thought provoking.

Some dystopian stories describe daunting things that are already happening now. Victor Martinovich, *Paranoia*, is like *1984*: here and now, everything being watched by Big Brother. *Paranoia* boasts a sophisticated literary style; it has been compared to the prose of Joyce and Nabokov.

Dmitry Bykov's *The Evacuator* is a love story set in Moscow plagued by almost daily terrorist acts. She is a Muscovite, he is an alien, what is to be done?

Bykov's *Living Souls* is his most celebrated work. A bold

vision of the near-future Russia that after losing its oil ‘trump-card’ turns to war. Bykov analyses Russian history in a curious ethnological manner. Some critics considered the English translation as a bit over-explanatory, not quite preserving the individual flavor of Bykov’s writing, but that’s a matter of opinion.

Russia is big yet many books are based in Moscow or St Petersburg. And yet the reader loves exotic locations. How about the Ural Mountains, famous for their precious stones, the land described in Bazhov’s fairytales? Olga Slavnikova set her dystopian novel *2017* here, but called the mountains Riphean, its ancient Greek name. 2017 marks a centenary of the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia. In Slavnikova’s novel the centenary’s merry celebration turns into another ugly and violent revolution. Yet this phenomenon of the cyclical Russian history is only a backdrop for the central love story. The main character Krylov is a historian and the precious stone enthusiast (Danila the Master in Bazhov’s fairy tales). His ex-wife is a capable entrepreneur owning a funeral-home business. Krylov’s new love, Tanya, the Stone Lady, is the antipode of Tamara, skinny and ephemeral (Bazhov’s the Lady of the Copper Mountain). The plot of *2017* is full of twists, yet the prose is slow and exquisitely metaphorical. It is by no means an easy read; it

makes you think about material and spiritual world and why people tend to choose one or the other. Krylov is man of both and Tanya and Tamara are dragging him in opposite directions. Here we have love, treasure hunt, revolution, philosophy and beautiful writing. *2017* is an entertaining read that doesn't patronize your intelligence.

Fazil Iskander is an Abkhazian writer, a classic of Soviet and modern Russian literature, whose writing is known for unparalleled humor and satire. His novella, *Rabbits and Boa Constrictors*, is a fairytale allegory of the Russian state, whose notorious figures are recognized in these rabbits, boas and anacondas. The allegory helps to dissect the psychology and mechanics of the dictatorship state, with its bureaucracy and the submissiveness of its inhabitants. 'Their hypnosis is our fear', one of the rabbits realizes. This book can be viewed as a Russian cousin to Orwell's *Animal Farm*.

In Anna Starobinets's *The Living* the future world is like one organism where information is the most important commodity. All the inhabitants are completely immersed in this virtual reality called Socio (an allusion to our modern day smartphones, web2.0 and social networks). The Living world is everlasting and everybody is immortal and has a unique ID in this world. It doesn't matter who is your biological

ancestor, what is more important is who you were in your past life, before the Pause. No borders, religion, countries, nations, just the Living. Yet one day somebody is born without ID, a treat to the Socio and the Living.

Vladimir Makanin's *Escape Hatch* is a novella juxtaposing two worlds – one is a fragile refuge of intelligentsia, existing in the form of an underground bunker, and the rest of the world is the over-ground city, devastated by wars and conflict, the escape hatch is all that connects them. The book reminds me of the phrase, 'an ostrich buried his head in the ground'. If we hide ourselves from the world, eventually there'll be no way back. The narrowing escape route is a metaphor of a painful extinction of a beautiful animal that failed to adapt to the abruptly changing environment.

The most common type of a post-apocalyptic novel features a deadly virus, and a good example is Yana Vagner's *Vongozero*, now available in French translation. *Vongozero* is a story of a family struggling to survive in Russia crumbling amidst a deadly flu pandemic. The novel was initiated as a series of blog posts on Live Journal, a popular social media network, and it's definitely the people's choice. If you fancy a daunting and realistic thriller à la *28 Days Later* sans zombies with a Russian setting, here you are. N.B. Get your

vaccinations in time.

Of course, the modern giant of Russian literature Vladimir Sorokin can't be forgotten when it comes to dystopia, a genre he's been writing in the recent decade. *The Day of the Oprichnik* portrays Russia in 2027. The country looks like the military dictatorship of Ivan the Terrible, with the Oprichniki (a medieval KGB) terrorizing the population. The novel is written in a stylized prose mimicking archaic Russian, which adds to the political satire. On one hand, the absolute monarchy, xenophobia, Oprichniki self-rule and repressions are all metaphorical glimpses into Russia's various horrible eras, on the other – they are an ever-present part of Russia's socio-political landscape. These historical parallels emphasize the fact that Russia has, in fact, never changed in its core and attitude to people.

The novel was followed by *The Sugar Kremlin*, a collection of short stories set at the same time. Both books are considered a diology; they have won prestigious awards in Russia and were nominated for the International Booker Prize in 2013. In his latest book, *Telluria*, Sorokin goes on with the absurdist and satiric trend: the novel is set in the middle of the XXIst century and follows the fate of both Russia and Europe that were plunged back into a medieval dark age. Orthodox communists and Crusaders, centaurs and cynocephali (dogheads), everyone's mind is not on God's Kingdom but

the Republic of Telluria (aka Russia split into feudal bits) and its magic metal that brings happiness and unites the land.

Another giant of Russian post-modernist literature, Victor Pelevin, has a couple of dystopias in his backlist. *The Yellow Arrow* is a railway-themed allegorical novella. The train, a metaphor of Russia, which encompasses the entire world for all the characters, is headed towards a crumbling bridge. If Russia has ever known quiet periods, they were just ebbs, receding worries, before the tsunami.

S.N.U.F.F. is another dystopian novel by Pelevin, in which the future world lives either in a poor Slavic Urkaina or the rich democratorship country, Big Byz (or Byzantium). The main character and narrator, Damien Karpov, an operator of an armed flying autopilot video camera and is involved with a robotic woman, Kaya. Two Urkainians, Grym and Chloya, enter their lives and an absurd love drama begins. Profanity and neologisms, homophobia, misanthropy and acrid satire in anything I've forgotten to mention are here to challenge readers. Certain things in the book appear too trashy and vulgar to be called art, but that's how it is: what, to some, is bad taste is to others postmodernism.

Tatiana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* is probably the most elegantly written dystopia I've ever encountered. Tolstaya is a living master, the golden standard of Russian language. Here we see the world after a nuclear apocalypse; most of

technology, culture and language are wiped out. In a post-nuclear Russian village (called Fyodor-Kuzmichsk that once was Moscow) people live like animals, and often look like ones with atavisms like horns and tails appearing amongst the folk, but the scariest thing is the Slynx, a forest-dwelling monster and a metaphor for fear of the unknown. The remaining books found after the Explosion are taken from people and stored in a book depository, where Benedict, the main protagonist, works: he reads books and copies them by hand for preservation purposes, selecting them randomly, from children literature to specialised technical guides. He likes Olenka, another scribe working in the depository, and they get married. Olenka is a daughter of the Chief Sanitar, most powerful man in the village, so Benedikt is positioned as a successor. And that's when the plot starts to thicken.

Reading a lot doesn't mean understanding of what's written. Benedict is unable to educate himself enough to see the world around him and, despite being obsessed about books, he still lives like a caveman. So people who govern and have access to all the information don't necessarily preserve our culture.

Andrei Rubanov's *Chlorophilia*, now available in German, stands out amongst its cousin novels about bleak future because of its inventive setting. The XXIInd century Moscow, where all the Russian population now lives, is

plagued with giant green stems of an unknown origin that ascend for hundreds of meters overshadowing the old landscape. The pulp of the plant is edible and has invigorating and other psychotropic properties. Poor people, the underclasses and junkies live on the ground, while the more privileged you are the higher you reside, closer to the sun. The rich people from China, who rent the Siberian land, occupy the top. Savely Herz, a journalist, secretly taking the highly purified stem to energise himself, has it all: a successful career, a beautiful woman and an apartment at high elevation. Yet, he's about to find out things that will shake the country and threaten his own life. The book reminds me of *The Day of Triffids*, a story of the man versus nature. It's also a story of sin and atonement. Man uses nature the way he wants; he is unaware of the consequences or simply thinking he can outsmart everyone. Well, we can only outsmart ourselves.

Science Fiction and Fantasy

Science fiction is probably the most popular genre of modern Russian literature. The dominating subgenres are space and military fiction, magic realism or weird fiction, urban fantasy, dystopia and classical (including Slavic myths-inspired) fantasy.

I mention Maria Galina's *Iramifications* and Petrushevskaya's *Scary Tales* in the chapter on magic realism. Marina and Sergey Dyachenko write in the same subgenre, but their fiction, recognized by a number of international science fiction awards, is more plot-driven. Their novels are often set in the cities and therefore can be categorized as urban fantasy.

In *Vita Nostra* we see the main heroine Sasha Samohina being admitted to a strange Institute of Special Technologies. The tutors there seem more like grammar rules than people, and the leaving exams transform students into new, supernatural entities. On one hand, this university's life is normal – drinking, parties, dancing, student fights; on the other – it forces Sasha to reflect on life and prepare to cross the border into the daunting unknown. No more is left to be said to avoid spoilers.

The Scar's main protagonist Egert Soll is a young soldier

who is punished by a mysterious wanderer for killing a scholar: he gets a scar on his cheek and a curse that makes him an utter coward. Looking for ways to destroy the curse, Egert enters a university where he falls in love with Toria, a girl whose fiancée he murdered. The curse leads him to betray her love. What is Egert left to do? *The Kirkus Review* wrote on *The Scar*, ‘... a truly spellbinding work even audiences jaded by standard US/UK fantasy will devour’. I wouldn’t go into comparisons, but the book indeed deserves its critical acclaim.

Age of Witches is based on the Carpathian folk stories and set in a fictitious Slavic-like land. A young uninitiated witch called Ivga wants to be a common human, but is unable to change her nature, which she conceals from everybody, including her fiancée Nazar. Her secret remains safe until the inquisitor Claudius Starzh pays them a visit, and she’s forced to flee the house. Ivga has two options ahead of her: a humiliating registration that will make her safe for society or an initiation, which will turn her to a powerful witch without human feelings. And then she meets Claudius again... *Age of Witches* is a Slavic fantasy about an impossible love and its consequences.

The current king of Russian science fiction is Sergey Lukyanenko. His most recently English-translated novel, *The Genome*, is an intergalactic adventure that gradually descends

into a murder mystery. In the book, genetic modification of humans is a reality, but it brings many complications as it affects not just the physiology but the human psyche too, for instance, the ability to love. As in everything that Lukyanenko writes, here we find a well-orchestrated plot and a philosophical, often poetic prose.

A troubled love is at the core of Lukyanenko's most celebrated urban fantasy series, *The Watch*. The first two episodes, *The Night Watch* and *The Day Watch* were adapted to screen and brought world-wide recognition to the author. Modern day Moscow is not just a home for millions of regular people, but also to the Others, who look like humans but are vampires with supernatural powers who are pledged to the Dark or the Light, the forces that co-exist under a shaky truce, which is about to shatter. Anton, a member of the Light street patrol, encounters a woman called Svetlana who will become a Great Witch. What will prevail: his love to Svetlana or his son, Egor? Can he undo curses of his loved one and his own? And what duty to choose – a father's or the Light's when his son becomes a Dark Other? *The Night Watch* is followed by *The Day Watch*, and then *The Twilight*, *The Last* (featuring Edinburgh's dungeons) and *The New*. *The Watch* series is the Russian *Twilight* with grit instead of drama.

Moscow is a common setting in other modern novels that I further discuss in the chapter on dystopian fiction. In

Rubanov's *Chlorophilia*, the Russian capital is afflicted with giant stems harboring a hidden menace for the unsuspecting connoisseurs of the soft plant tissues. In Glukhovsky's *Metro 2033* and its sequel, *Metro 2034*, the Moscow tube network becomes a battleground for the remaining groups of people who survived the nuclear apocalypse.

Russia has a long tradition of fantasy that has its roots in the folklore, then later in fairytales by Bazhov, Novopoltsev, Yershov and few others. The classical sword-and-sorcery fantasy is widely represented in modern Russian fiction, but only a few titles have been translated.

Awarded the Best European SF writer in 2004, Nick Perumov had come into limelight in 1993 with his epic *The Ring of Darkness*, set in Tolkien's Middle Earth, the work that many considered as a foundation of Russian fantasy. It was quite a controversial story, because of Perumov's discussions of the moral viewpoints in Tolkien's books; the author has even been (verbally and physically) assaulted by Tolkien's fans. Later on, Perumov sensibly went on to invent his own worlds, including the Ordered Universe, which became a popular series. *Godsdoom* is Perumov's first novel translated into English about an exiled wizard who spent centuries studying magic and is now ready to challenge not just other mages but the gods themselves.

Alexei Pehov's *The Chronicles of Siala* has been enjoying wide popularity both in Russia and abroad. The trilogy starts with *Shadow Prowler*, in which dark forces unite under the banner of the Nameless One and prepare to war with the great city of Avendoom. And who's to stop them, surely not a master thief, Shadow Harold (Garreth in the original Russian version)? Yet, Harold's stealth and cunning are exactly the right qualities to get a valuable magical artifact and bring back peace to the Kingdom of Siala. The only minor obstacles are merely that something worse than death stands in his way, not counting hordes of murderers, fierce demons and annoyingly distracting sidekicks such as a beautiful Elvish princess. In the second book, *Shadow Chaser*, things get nastier: a long-dead mage inhabits Harold's head, and now one has to figure out the meaning behind all those Houses of Power, Pain, Love and Fear; as if running away from all the enemies who are after the Key to the legendary Hrad Spein, to which Harold is unfortunately linked by magic is not enough. Oh well, at least there are plenty of changes of scenery, and one of the sights is the Forest of Zagraba, the original dwelling of Gods. In the final, *Shadow Blizzard*, book, Harold and company have reached the dungeons of Hrad Spein, but now Harold has to go in on his own and fight the lieutenants of Nameless One himself, the H'san'kors. Who knew thievery could be so tediously littered with occupational hazards?

In the following tetralogy, *Winds and Sparks*, Pehov creates an even more complex world of Hara, populated by different races, creatures and wizards and torn apart by wars between dark mages. Ancient knowledge has been lost and turned into myth, but one day the Damned unearthed it again only to reignite the deadly battle. Gray and Layan, a couple of ex-assassins, aided by Harold, the master thief introduced in the previous trilogy, and two warriors Luk and Ga-nor, have to evade bounty hunters and stop the Damned from plunging the world into further darkness.

Nicknamed as the ‘Russian G.R.R. Martin’ Pehov delivers one elaborated epic fantasy after another. Pehov’s fans outside Russia will be thrilled to know that he has penned three more tetralogies after this one and is currently working on a new one. *The Chronicles of Siala* is available in English, Spanish, German, Italian, Dutch, French, Estonian and Czech, while *The Cycle of Wind and Sparks* has so far been translated into English and German.

There is a subgenre of Russian science fiction that is quite cerebral and aimed at more literary centric people. Inventive prose and philosophical reflections are the hallmarks of it, yet the plot is as engaging as in genre fiction. Some people call it intellectual fantasy; an example of it is Anna Starobinets’s dystopia *The Living*, as reviewed earlier, and the bestselling series *The Labyrinths of the Echo* by Max Frei,

which is a mixture of mystery and urban fantasy. Max is a nondescript loser, a glutton and a dreamer, ending up in a parallel world where he becomes a secret police sleuth. His boss Juffin gives him difficult tasks of hunting down criminals who happen to be mages. Max has an inborn gift of magic in him, but quirky humor and a philosophical attitude to life are far more formidable weapons in his arsenal, which come in handy in his hair-raising adventures. To give you a flavor of the *Echo* series, here a quote from the first book, *The Stranger*, ‘There’s nothing easier than doing the impossible. You just have to imagine what you must do, and then completely turn off your brain. When you come to your senses, that impossible thing is already behind you.’

We have a saying in Russia, ‘The eyes are scared, but the hands are working.’ That’s what I felt like when I set to review the entire post-Soviet literature in a nutshell and create this guide. Mind you, I did keep my brain on... well okay, most of the time.

Mystery, Crime, Adventure

In this chapter, I present to you novels that often have elements of all three of these genres. The most popular books in Russia are probably detective stories; many of them are set in Tsarist Russia. You'll definitely learn many exciting things about Russian history and the way people used to live in the Russian Empire from these books.

Boris Akunin is a Celebrity Author in Russia and he's widely translated around the globe. He's mostly known for his two historical detective book series, *Erast Fandorin* and *Pelagija*, featuring a male and a nun sleuth, respectively. Akunin has an amazing erudition and attention to detail, yet he somehow excels at avoiding info-dumps and keeps the plot rolling in a gripping way. Akunin used to translate Japanese fiction into Russian and he's also written many non-fiction books on history and philosophy.

Leonid Yusefovich's *Harlequin's Costume* is set in the late nineteenth century in St Petersburg. The legendary secret police chief Ivan Putilin investigates a murder of a top diplomat. Failure may cause a war. Putilin is a real historical figure, which makes the book even more interesting. Other books in this series, *The Rendezvous House* and *Prince of The Wind*, await their translation.

Dark humor stories of Andrei Kurkov often featuring murder plots can also be considered as adventures. Spies, mafia and intelligence agencies as in Le Carré's novels coupled with a touch of the surreal à la Bulgakov's *Master And Margarita* is Kurkov's trademark. I would start with *Death and The Penguin* and *Penguin Lost*. What do you think the bird is doing in Russia?

Humor and crime are also essential ingredients of Andrei Gelasimov's *The Lying Year*, a story about a rich Russian who hires a ne'er-do-well office worker called Mikhail to teach his teenage son Sergey 'how to be a man'. Naturally, Mikhail screws up by falling in love with Sergey's love interest, Marina, who looks like Audrey Hepburn. Mikhail has to lie, lie and lie his way out to survive. But he's not the only liar as he finds out when he gets mixed up with crooks. *The Lying Year* is a light, lively yet psychological read reminding us of what a fun rollercoaster life can be.

Somebody asked me the other day whether Russians have succumbed to the cat craze too. Cats are adored in Russia as much as dogs. No wonder that Ilya Boyashov's *The Way of Muri* has become the people's bestseller. Muri is just a cat that has lost his owners in Bosnia during the recent war. He travels around Europe dealing with animals, people and supernatural creatures. What is he searching for, a new home and his previous owners? What are you looking for in your

life? Do you know where are you heading? Home? What is home? Are we looking for shelter and comfort, or something more? And when we lose everything, where would we go? Muri's path is a satiric allegory of a personal quest for meanings. Cat lovers, you should be warned: cats aren't shown in the best light here.

The chapter here wouldn't be complete without a Killer Thriller, Sergei Kuznetsov's *Butterfly Skin*, a terrifyingly visceral tale set in modern-day Moscow. A female journalist Xenia sets up a trap for a serial killer only to discover her own dark side. Not scared enough? You should be. Since scaring you is not my forte, I will wrap up.

Other noteworthy new Russian books than can be categorized as crime fiction I have reviewed elsewhere in this guide: Alexander Terekhov's *Stone Bridge*, a retro-detective on an NKVD case (The Soviet Period); Oxana Robski's *Casual* about crooked new Russians and Peter Aleshkovsky's *Skunk* on teenage crime (Modern Russia); Max Frei's *The Labyrinths of the Echo*, a fantasy crime detective series (Science Fiction).

Intellectual Literature: Postmodernism, Magic Realism, Philosophical and Metaphysical Fiction

So far, I attempted to stratify all the Russian books based on their plots and themes. Yet, there is also another way to do it: it is according to their artistic ambitions. Literature as any other art has two extremes: pure entertainment (like the most of genre fiction) and pure art (some works of literary fiction). Most books are somewhere in between. Genre fiction plays on our feelings, on our primal brain that is especially reactive to food, sex and violence (a safety disturbance). Literary fiction works in a more cerebral way. Readers get engaged through intellectual incentives. In such books, we appreciate discussion or formulation of ideas directly or via sub-textual messages, cultural references. Literary fiction's primary aim is not to entertain our animal brain but our intelligence.

There is a whole layer of Russian literature difficult to categorise, hence, the clumsy title for this chapter. Postmodern literature features an eclectic mixture of writing elements and styles, including fragmentation, unrealistic

events, and several types of narrative. Magic realism can be considered a sub-genre of it, with the only distinction from realism – the inclusion of unnatural or fantastic elements. Philosophical fiction deals with questions such as why is everything the way it is, while metaphysical prose is a type of philosophical fiction mostly dealing with supernatural things. Some consider them as synonyms. The boundaries here are blurred.

Most of Russian books I mention in this chapter can be categorised as all of that. Therefore, I have put them all in this hybrid chapter on intellectual literature. Obviously, I don't mean to say that humorous, religious or political books are not intellectual, but they are just much easier to define in a genre of their own.

If you want to grasp the mentality of modern Russian people, at the risk of going mad, you may want to read Victor Pelevin. He is number one Russian author who explores Russian history, politics and society in his post-modernist works. *Buddha's Little Finger* is a manifesto of Russian Zen-Buddhism, though it also contains Confucian doctrines. Zen or not Zen, in the country with the communist past where atheism was the norm, the Buddhist worldview is an

alternative for those who couldn't convert back to traditional Christianity.

Petr Pustota (Peter the Void) is the main protagonist in *Buddha's Little Finger*. We meet him in an enlightened state: he's in a madhouse receiving treatment for his mental illness. His other personality believes that he lives during the times of Civil War in Russia, in 1919, where he's been spiritually guided by the Red Army commander, Vasily Chapayev, and fallen in love with a beautiful machine gunner and Chapayev's deputy, Anka.

Petr's new treatment is designed as a collective hallucination between him and his inmates at the asylum. He learns about Simply Maria, a guy whose other personality is a girl from a Mexican soap opera, and her adventure with the Terminator, a bizarre story symbolising an "alchemical" marriage between Russia and the West. Stories of other inmates are equally depressing, especially if we interpret them as scenarios of Russia's future fate.

Petr's doctor claims his patient's mind healed. When Anka wipes out all existence with her metaphorical weapon, a clay machine gun supposedly containing Buddha's finger, Petr grasps the idea of the Void. We all exist in this Void and are made of it, and we don't know why, since we can't know

something that is the Void, Nothingness. This is my interpretation, however imprecise, of Petr's realisation of his enlightenment.

This novel is a clever political satire on contemporary Russian history and the way Russian history repeats itself: the wild times of Civil War are likened to the post-communist era of 1990s. And since it repeats itself, we may as well take it philosophically. There are no borders between dreams and reality, sanity and madness, past and present, there is only the Void.

Victor Pelevin's *The Helmet of Horror* is the Internet-era version of the myth about Theseus and Minotaur, so as you gather it is a work of magic realism. Eight people meet in a chat-room, each of them is held captive in an isolated room within a computer, and they need to find out a way of the labyrinth (possibly an allegory of the Internet addiction). It's a short but thought-provoking read. To take off the Helmet, one needs to know one is wearing one. Self-awareness and the ability of look at your own life like it's somebody else's are rare and dangerous, as any way to freedom is.

As exemplified above, modern Russian literature has long abandoned, with few exceptions, the tradition of classical realism, and our new authors, as their colleagues in other

countries, have been experimenting with narrative forms. Yet the sheer ambition of analyzing the world, of the global direction of mankind, remains a key signature of Russian literary fiction.

Many consider Vladimir Sorokin a direct successor of old masters like Tolstoy, yet his shocking, often repulsive prose is not for weak-minded. *The Ice Trilogy* is a myth developed around the Tunguska meteorite that landed in Siberia in 1908. One of the people, named Bro, who found it, the Ice, has woken up and felt his purpose to summon his kin scattered around the Earth by stroking them in the heart with the Ice and wake them up to the Light, to end the world. It sounds like a fantasy pre-apocalyptic novel, yet its allegoric nature, historical and literary allusions, and graphic details including pornography, feces and ultra-violence further magnify the impact of author's absurd prose, making it a work of post-modernist fiction. Sorokin's writing is also a master class in stylized prose for literary connoisseurs and minds who enjoy being challenged.

Another example of postmodernism is *Maidenhair* by Mikhail Shishkin. Here we have interwoven stories from different historical periods: from ancient Persia to modern day Switzerland and, of course, Russia with its wars, revolutions, Chechen crisis and Soviet times. It's a philosophical book about enduring love, challenged by life and death. Once again,

the language, justifiably compared to Nabokov's, is what immediately captures the reader's attention here. It is full of metaphors; it feels re-invented from scratch.

I've been to one of Shishkin's talks in London, and I remember him saying, 'The Russian language is my enemy. I'm fighting against it constantly.' It's difficult to say whether it is Shishkin who challenges the Russian language or vice-versa, yet when you read his novels you know that he, indeed, doesn't take any word for granted. Readers comment that it takes an effort to get through the initial chapters before you start getting into it and can fully enjoy Shishkin's writing. I think this is the case with unique and extraordinary novelists who like to experiment rather than follow the usual story-telling blueprints.

Modern generations tend to mythologize the Soviet past. Perhaps, this is an attempt to grasp what happened in the country they've grown up and how come it was so different from the one they live in now. Mikhail Yelizarov's novel *The Librarian* had won Russian Booker Prize in 2008. It is a story of an 'eternal student', an under-achiever, who becomes involved in the war between so-called 'libraries' for books of a middle-ground Soviet author Gromov, because the books have supernatural properties. They may just depict ordinary lives of the *kolleboz* workers (Soviet collective

farmers), but readers who read them while following certain rules develop extraordinary powers. Who knew those frail grannies could make the fiercest warriors when ‘indoctrinated’ or ‘possessed’ by books? When one has such ‘libraries’, one doesn’t need a professional army. Russian pulp fiction has never been so literature-centric.

Yuri Buida’s novella *Zero Train*, known in Russia as *Don Domino*, is set in a train station in the middle of nowhere. The main ‘protagonist’, an NKVD man who has so much evil in himself that he spreads doom around him, and the people who man the station and run the daily train service of unclear purpose all create a haunting, Kafkaesque picture of the Soviet Russia under Stalin’s rule. The language itself here is gloomy and oppressive, phrases like ‘cold boiled potato’, ‘women who smell like cabbage’, ‘hope is poison’, ‘grinds tragedy into ashes’. *Zero Train* is a literary antidote for neo-Stalinist sympathies. It’s easy to forget what you’ve never been through.

The main characters of Maria Galina’s *Iramifications* (the original title is *Givi and Shenderovich*) are shuttle traders: they buy goods in Turkey and bring them to Odessa, Ukraine, for re-sale. On one of their trips to Istanbul they meet a tourist called Givi whom they mistake for their long-disappeared business partner. The three keep facing one dodgy bunch of people after another, time-travel to a mythical and exotic city

of Iram where they become involved in court intrigues. The author apparently wanted to create a modern version the tale of Sinbad the sailor. *Iramifications* is an intelligent adventure, with elements of fantasy and esotericism, swarming with cultural references, and ultimately this novel is about friendship.

Ludmila Petrushevskaya is an author and playwright who recently became known in the West after her *A Woman Who Tried To Kill Her Neighbor's Baby: Scary Fairy Tales* won a prestigious World Fantasy Award in 2009. In this collection Petrushevskaya explores the dark sides of the human soul. Death, disease, bleak existence, ghosts surround haunted characters, but how real are they? The writing itself is simplistic and bare, like an abandoned haunted house. Petrushevskaya skillfully utilizes Russian reality as a fruitful soil for her scary stories.

Other notable works in the magic realism genre include Victor Erofejev's *Russian Beauty* (reviewed in the chapter on Women' Prose), Vladim Sharov's *Before and During* (reviewed in Psychological Fiction) and Tatiana Tolstaya's *The Slynx* (reviewed in Dystopian fiction).

Andrei Bitov's *The Symmetry Teacher* is a curious work of metaphysical fiction. The author claims that the novel is an echo, a vague reminiscence or re-construction of a British novel, the title and the author of which Bitov has since

forgotten. Maybe this admission of near-plagiarism is a literary game. Here we have a post-modern construction of interconnected stories centered on an obscure and ambitious writer. Literary citations are abundant in *The Symmetry Teacher*, for instance, there's Bulgakov's devil showing a man he meets in a park Shakespeare's legs and images of the fall of Troy. *The Symmetry Teacher* is about literature and life being each other's metaphors. I quote, 'Life is a piece of writing that the living never read to the end.'

I have always wondered why Russia is so mysterious for the rest of the world. One of the reasons could be that the never-ending chain of historical cataclysms moulded the country into a symbolic powder keg that can explode any moment. It is changing fast and the best way to grasp the new Russian mentality without traveling there is to read the books. Besides, we have the whole new generation of terrific storytellers as yet undiscovered by the international readership. Researching this guide helped me to discover new amazing authors. And now, after reading it, you can go and discover yours. Have an amazing adventure!

Russian Literature: Recommended Resources

New Russian books and related news:

- Russian Literature Online <http://www.rus-lit.org/>
- Lizok's Bookshelf <http://lizoksbooks.blogspot.co.uk/>
- Russian Literature of Google Plus
<https://plus.google.com/communities/101040245089114166452>
- Read Russia <http://readrussia.org/>
- Russian Beyond the Headlines: Literature
<http://rbth.co.uk/literature>
- Chtenia (magazine) <http://www.russianlife.com/chtenia/>
- Russian Institute of Translation
<http://institutperevoda.ru/?lang=eng>

Russian Culture:

- Calvert Journal <http://calvertjournal.com/>
- Russian Life <http://www.russianlife.com/>

Publishers of Russian Books:

- Glagoslav Publications <http://www.glagoslav.com/>
- Glas: new Russian Writing <http://www.glas.msk.su/>

About the Author

Grigory Ryzhakov is a Siberian expat living in the UK and doing biomedical research. When not in the lab, he writes fiction and composes music.

To connect with Grigory, please visit his blog at <http://www.ryzhakov.co.uk>

Twitter: @GrigoryRyzhakov

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/GrigoryRyzhakov>

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Writing a review is the best way to thank an author for his hard work and spread the word amongst other readers. If you enjoyed this story, please do leave a review for it, however short, on Amazon Kindle, Goodreads or any other place. Thank you!

Grigory Ryzhakov - The Reader's Mini-Guide To New Russian Books – The List of Titles with ISBNs

Russian title	Corresponding English (or another foreign language) title	ISBN-10 (ISBN-13 or ASIN) of available works in translation
PRISON/GULAG		
Эдуард Лимонов - По Тюрьмам	Eduard Limonov - My prisons (Mes Prisons)	274277811X (FR)
Андрей Рубанов Сажайте и вырастет	Andrei Rubanov - Do Time, Get Time	1905847319 (EN)
Леонид Габышев - Одеян или Воздух Свободы	Leonid Gabyshev - The Air of Freedom	B00M3OZP9M (EN, ASIN)
Геннадий Трифонов - Сетка. Тюремный Роман	Gennady Trifonov - The Net. A Prison Romance.	
Михаил Ходорковский - Тюремные Люди	Mikhail Khodorkovsky - My Fellow Prisoners	014197981X (EN)
FAMILY		
Людмила Улицкая - Медея и ее дети, Казус Кокочкого	Ludmila Ulitskaya - Medea and Her Children, Sincerely Yours, Shurik (Sinceramente Suyo, Shurik)	0805211446 (Medea, EN), 8433971115 (Shurik, ES)
Дина Рубина - Синдром Петрушки, На солнечной Стороне Улицы	Dina Rubina - Petrushka Syndrome, On The Sunny Side of the Street	
Ирина Муравьева - День Ангела, Барышня	Irina Muravieva - Angel's Day, The Girl	
Борис Васильев - Были и Не Были, Дом Который Построил Дед , Утоли Мои Печали	Boris Vasil'ev - Were and Weren't, The House That My Grandfather Built, Take Away My Sorrows	
Светлана Павлова - Гонка За Счастьем	Svetlana Pavlova - The Pursuit of Happiness	
Александра Маринина - Взгляд Из Вечности, Преступления Правильной Жизни	Aleksandra Marinina - A View From Eternity, Crimes of The Honest Life	
Юрий Буйда - Яд и Мед	Yuri Buida - Poison and Honey	
Елена Катишонок - Жили были Старик Со Старухой, Против Часовой Стрелки, Куда Уходит Человек	Yelena Katishonok - There Lived An Old Man With His Wife, Against The Hour Hand, Where The Man Goes	
Елена Минкина-Тайчер - Эффект Ребиндера	Yelena Minkina-Taicher - Rebinder's Effect	
Маша Трауб - Падшая Женщина, Плохая мать	Masha Traub - The Fallen Woman, The Bad Mother	
Анна Берсенева - серии о Ермоловых и Гриневых	Anna Berseneva - Ermolovs, Grinevs (series)	
Елена Колина - Сага О Бедных Гольдманах	Elena Kolina - Saga about Poor Goldmans	
Григорий Рязский - Дом Образцового Содержания, Дивертисмент Братьев Лунио, Колония Нескучного Содержания	Grigory Ryazhsky - The House of the Exemplary Order, The Lunio Brothers' Divertisement, The Not Boring Security Prison	
Дмитрий Вересов - Летописец	Dmitry Veresov - The Chronicler	
Александр Червицкий - Шишкин лес	Aleksandr Chervinsky - Shishkin's Forest	

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Сергей Кузнецов - Хороводы Воды	Sergey Kuznetsov - Dancing Rota of the Water	
Елена Арсеньева - Несбывшаяся Весна	Yelena Arsen'eva - Spring Never Came	
Владимир Кунин - Ночь с Ангелом	Vladimir Kunin - The Night With An Angel	
Роман Сенчин - Елтышевы	Roman Senchin - The Eltyshevs	
MILITARY AND WAR		
Герман Садулаев - Я - Чеченец	German Sadulaev - I am a Chechen	9780099532354 (EN)
Андрей Геласимов - Жажда, Степные боги	Andrei Gelasimov - Thirst, Gods of the Steppe	1611090695 (Thirst, EN), 1611090733 (Gods, EN)
Александр Проханов - Семикнижие, Чеченский Блюз, Последний Солдат Империи	Alexander Prokhanov - Seven Books, The Chechen Blues, The last Soldier of the Empire	
Александр Покровский. Александр Терехов - Армейские рассказы	Alexander Pokrovsky/Alexander terekhov - Sea Stories/Army Stories	571720079X (EN)
Олег Ермаков - Афганские рассказы	Oleg Ermakov - Afghan Tales	0688123945 (EN), 2226055851 (FR)
Захар Прилепин - Патологии	Zakhar Prilepin - Pathologies	2845451350 (EN)
Владимир Маканин - Асан	Vladimir Makanin - Asan	9029578513 (NL)
Илья Бояшов - Белый Тигр	Ilya Boyashov - The White Tiger	
Олег Павлов - Капитан Степи	Oleg Pavlov - Captain of the Steppe	1908276185 (EN)
Василий Аксенов - Остров Крым	Vasily Aksyonov - The Island of Crimea	0091597005 (EN)
Андрей Курков - Дневник Майдана	Andrei Kurkov - Ukraine Diaries	1846559472 (EN)
Андрей Волос - Победитель	Andrei Volos - The Victor	
PSYCHOLOGICAL NOVEL		
Андрей Геласимов - Рахиль	Andrei Gelasimov - Rachel	161109075X (EN)
Владимир Шаров - До и вовремя	Vadim Sharov - Before and During	1907650717 (EN)
Олег Павлов - Казенная Сказка, Дело Матюшина, Асистолия	Oleg Pavlov - Asystole, Captain of the Steppe, The Matiushin's Case	9789491425264 (Asystole, EN), 1908276185 (EN), 1908276363 (EN)
Виктор Пелевин - Чапаев и Пустота	Victor Pelevin - Buddha's Little Finger	141002328 (EN)
	Xena Semikina - Avalanche	B00J2XS6FC (ASIN, EN)
Мариам Петросян - Дом в Котором	Mariam Petrosian - The House That ... (Dom, w ktorym...)	8378856712 (PL)
Magic realism and psychedelic ficiton	Magic realism and psychedelic ficiton	
Владимир Сорокин - Лед	Vladimir Sorokin - The Ice Trilogy	1590173864 (EN),
Михаил Шишкин - Венерин Волос, Письмовник	Mikhail Shishkin - Maidenhair, The Light and The Dark	1780871082 (The Light, EN), 1934824364 (Maidenhair, EN)
Татьяна Толстая - Кысь	Tatiana Tolstaya - The Slynx	1590171969 (EN)
Людмила Петрушевская - Страшные сказки, Время - Ночь	Ludmila Petrushevskaya - Scary Fairy Tales, Time: Night	0143114662 (Scary, EN), 0810118009 (Time Night, EN)
Владимир Шаров - До и вовремя	Vadim Sharov - Before and During	1907650717 (EN)

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Виктор Пелевин - Шлем Ужаса	Victor Pelevin - Helmet of Horror	1841958891 (EN)
Михаил Елизаров - Библиотекарь	Mikhail Elizarov - The Librarian (Il Bibliotecario)	1782270272 (EN), 8865640111 (IT)
Виктор Ерофеев - Русская Красавица	Victor Erofeyev - Russian Beauty	0670836060 (EN)
Мария Галина - Гиви и Шендерович	Maria Galina - Iramifications	571720082X (EN)
Юрий Буйда - Дон Домино	Yuri Buida - Zero train	1903517524 (EN), 8415509170 (ES)
Андрей Битов - Учитель Симметрии	Andrei Bitov - The Symmetry Teacher	0374535310 (EN)
MODERN LIFE AND OFFICE PROSE		
Роман Сенчин - Минус	Roman Senchin - Minus	5717200838 (EN)
Виктор Пелевин - Generation П	Victor Pelevin - Homo Zapiens	0142001813 (EN)
Ольга Славникова - Легкая Голова	Olga Slavnikova - Light head	8860442877 (IT)
Герман Садулаев - Таблетка	German Sadulaev - Maya Pill	1564789063 (EN)
Андрей Рубанов - Сажайте и Вырастет	Andrei Rubanov - Do Time Get Time	1905847319 (EN)
Алексей Иванов - Географ Глобус Пропил	Alexei Ivanov - The Geographer Drank His Globe Away (Le géographe a bu son globe)	2213632731 (FR)
Оксана Робски - Casual	Oksana Robski - Casual	0061189375 (EN)
Петр Алешковский - Жизнеописание Хорька	Peter Aleshkovsky - Skunk, A Life	5717200331 (EN)
Павел Санаев - Похороните Меня За Плинтусом	Pavel Sanaev - Bury Me Behind the Baseboard (Seppellitemi dietro il battiscopa)	1499227868 (EN), 8874522894 (IT)
DEBUT (YOUNG AUTHORS)		
	Squaring the Circle (anthology)	5717200862 (EN)
Лиза Александрова Зорина - Маленький Человек	Liza Alexandrova-Zorina - The Little man	5717201249 (EN)
Андрей Кузечкин - Менделеев-Рок	Andrei Kuzechkin - Mendeleev Rock	5717200897 (EN)
Павел Костин - Анестезия Крыш	Pavel Kostin - Rooftop Anesthesia	5717200897 (EN)
Арслан Хасавов - Смысл	Arslan Khasavov – Sense	5717200935 (EN)
Анна Лавриненко - Ярославские рассказы	Anna Lavrinenko - Yaroslavl Stories	
Ирина Богатырева - Автостоп	Irina Bogatyreva, Igor Savelyev, Tatiana Mazepina - Off the beaten tracks	5717200927 (EN)
Игорь Савельев - Терешкова Летит на Марс	Igor Saveliev - Mission to Mars	5717201214 (EN)
Александр Снегирев - Нефтяная Венера	Alexander Snegirev - Petroleum Venus	571720096X (EN)
DYSTOPIA		
Татьяна Толстая - Кысь	Tatiana Tolstaya - The Slynx	1590171969 (EN)

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Владимир Сорокин - Теллурия, День Опричника, Сахарный Кремль	Vladimir Sorokin - Telluria, Day of the Oprichnik, The Sugar Kremlin	0374533105 (Oprichnik, EN), 3453406893 (Oprichnik, DE), 3462042262 (Sugar Kremlin, DE)
Виктор Пелевин - S.N.U.F.F., Желтая Стрела	Victor Pelevin - S.N.U.F.F., The Yellow Arrow	811213242 (Yellow Arrow, EN)
Виктор Мартинович - Паранойя	Victor Martinovich - Paranoia	
Илья Носырев - Карта Мира	Ilya Nosyrev - The World Map	
Илья Бояшов - Армада	Ilya Boyashov - Armada	
Владимир Маканин - Лаз	Vladimir Makanin - Escape Hatch	0375701087 (EN)
Ольга Славникова - 2017	Olga Slavnikova - 2017	9781468301212 (EN)
Фазиль Искандер - Кролики и Удавы	Fazil Iskander - Rabbits and Boa Constrictors	1468309706(EN)
Анна Старобинец - Живущий	Anna Starobinets - The Living	1843913771 (EN)
Яна Вагнер - Вонгозеро	Yana Vagner - Vongozero	979-1092145274 (FR)
Дмитрий Быков - Эвакуатор, ЖД	Dmitry Bykov - The Evacuator, Living Souls	1846881269 (Living Souls, EN)
Андрей Рубанов - Хлорофилия	Andrei Rubanov - Chlorophilia	8445000020 (ES), B00KG63XBG (ASIN, DE)
Дмитрий Глуховский - Метро 2033, Метро 2034, Будущее	Dmitry Glukhovsky - Metro 2033, Metro 2034, The Future	1481845705 (2033, EN), 1473204305 (2034, EN), 3453315545 (DE) , etc.
THE SOVIET PERIOD		
Борис Васильев - Были и Не Были, Дом Который Построил Дед , Утоли Мои Печали	Boris Vasil'ev - Were and Weren't, The House That My Grandfather Built, Take Away My Sorrows	
	Eugene Yelchin - Acady's Goal	1250068142 (EN)
Владимир Козлов - СССР: Дневник Пацана с Окраины, Десятка	Vladimir Kozlov - USSR, Number 10	989961516 (EN), B00KBCFB7O (No.10, ASIN, EN)
Борис Акунин - Аристономия	Boris Akunin - Aristonomia	
Людмила Улицкая - Детство 45-53, Зеленый Шатер	Ludmila Ulitskaya - The Big Green Tent, Childhood	0374166676 (Green Tent, EN), 5717200374 (Childhood, EN)
Владимир Сорокин - Очередь	Vladimir Sorokin - The Queue	1590172744 (EN)
Игорь Сахновский - Насущные нужды умерших	Igor Sakhnovsky - The Vital Needs of the Dead	1909156175 (EN)
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Дмитрий Быков - ЖД	Dmitry Bykov - Living Souls	1846881269 (EN)
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Андрей Остальский - Английские Правила	Andrei Ostalski - English Rules: A Russo-English Comedy of Errors	1291557636 (EN)
	Beyond The Looking Glass (anthology)	5717200293 (EN)
Михаил Веллер - Легенды Невского Проспекта	Mikhail Veller - Legends of the Nevsky Prospekt (Légendes de la Perspective Nevski)	2882500653 (EN)
Владимир Лорченков - Все Там Будем	Vladimir Lorchenkov - The Good Life Elsewhere	1939931010 (EN)
Валерий Роньшин - Избранное	Valery Ronshin - Living A Life	5717200609 (EN)
Фазиль Искандер - Кролики и Удавы	Fazil Iskander - Rabbits and Boa Constrictors	1468309706(EN)
Андрей Курков - Смерть и Пингвин	Andrei Kurkov - Death and the Penguin	186046945(EN)
Татьяна Москвина - Позор и Чистота	Tatiana Moskvina - Shame and Purity	
POLITICAL FICTION		
Владимир Сорокин - Теллурия, День Опричника, Сахарный Кремль	Vladimir Sorokin - Day of the Oprichnik, Sugar Kremlin, Telluria	0374533105 (Oprichnik, EN), 3453406893 (Oprichnik, DE), 3462042262 (Sugar Kremlin, DE)
Виктор Пелевин - Ахули: Священная Книга Оборотня	Victor Pelevin - The sacred Book of the Werewolf	0571227988 (EN)
Ольга Славникова - 2017	Olga Slavnikova - 2017	9781468301212 (EN)
Захар Прилепин - Санька	Zakhar Prilepin - Sankya	178384017X (EN)
Герман Садулаев - Я-Чеченец	German Sadulaev - I am a Chechen, Maya Pill	1564789063 (Maya Pill, EN), 9780099532354 (Chechen, EN)
Сергей Шаргунов - Книга Без Фотографий	Sergey Shargunov - The Book With No Photographs	1782670513 (EN)
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Андрей Волос - Хуррамабад	Andrei Volos - Hurramabad	5717200560 (EN)
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Евгений Водолазкин - Лавр	Evgeny Vodolazkin - Laurus (Lauro)	8861923666 (IT)
WOMEN AND LOVE		
Дина Рубина - Синдром Петрушки, На солнечной Стороне Улицы, Белая Голубка Кордобы, Почерк Леонардо, Синдикат	Dina Rubina - A White Dove of Cordoba, Leonardo's Handwriting, On the Sunny Side of the Street, Petrushka's Syndrome, The Syndicate,	8377581639 (Bialy golabek z Kordoby,PL), 837319875X (Na Gornej Maslowce, PL)
Нина Габриэлян - Хозяин Травы	Nina Gabrielyan - Master of the grass	5717200668 (EN)
Людмила Улицкая - Медея и Ее Дети, Сонечка	Ludmila Ulitskaya - Medea and Her Children, Sonechka	0805211446 (Medea, EN), 0805241957 (Sonechka, EN)
	Still Waters Run Deep (anthology)	5717200951 (EN)
	A Will and A Way (anthology)	5717200293 (EN)
	War and Peace (anthology)	5717200749 (EN)
	Nine (anthology)	5717200633 (EN)
	Women's View (anthology)	7777775650 (EN)
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Ирина Муравьева - Дневник Натальи, Портрет Биндо Альтовити	Irina Muravieva - Le Journal Intime de Natalia, Portrait de Bindo Altoviti	2877112616 (Le Journal, FR), 2877112802 (Altoviti, FR)
Мария Степнова - Женщины Лазаря	Maria Stepnova - The Lazarus Women (Les Femmes de Lazare)	236569067X (FR), 9462370559 (NL)
SCIENCE FICTION		
Людмила Петрушевская - Страшные сказки	Ludmila Petrushevskaya - Scary Fairy Tales	0143114662 (Scary, EN), 0810118009 (Time Night, EN)
Дмитрий Глуховский - Метро 2033, Метро 2034, Будущее	Dmitry Glukhovsky - Metro 2033, Metro 2034, The Future	1481845705 (2033, EN), 1473204305 (2034, EN), 3453315545 (DE) , etc.
Сергей Лукьяненко - Дозоры (серия), Геном	Sergey Lukyanenko - The Night Watch series, Genome	0062310097 (Night Watch, EN), 1497643961 (EN)
Алексей Пехов - Хроники Сиалы (серия), Ветер и Искры (серия)	Alexei Pehov - The Chronicles of Siala, The Cycle of Wind and Sparks (book1, Chasers of the Wind)	0765363674 (Siala, book 1, EN), 0765370158 (Winds and Sparks, book 1, EN)
Марина и Сергей Дяченко - Vita Nostra, Шрам	Marina and Sergey Dyachenko - Vita Nostra, The Scar	B00A7GP5ZW (Vita Nostra, ASIN,EN), 0765380250 (EN)
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Борис Акунин - Эраст Фандорин (серия), Сестра Пелагия (серия)	Sister Pelagia and Erast Fandorin series	0812968778 (Fandorin, book 1, EN), 0812975138 (Pelagia, book 1, EN)
Макс Фрай - Лабиринты Эхо (серия)	Max Frei - Stranger (book 1, The Labyrinths of Echo series)	0575089741 (Book 1, EN)
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BIOGRAPHY		
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