

Conference Paper

Modern Russian Literature: Between the Assessments of the Experts and the Requests of the Audience

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Abstract

This article describes some of the features of contemporary Russian literary processes. Contemporary Russian literature presents vast number of authors and works. The literary process is going on intensively, but it lacks is no distinct core, a certain vector. Also, there is a serious need to explore the differences between expert opinions in literary sphere (influential critics, literary awards) and the reading habits of the public. This article presents an attempt to compare two approaches to modern Russian literature: by the expert community, and by popularity at the market. To determine opinions of expert community, nominations and literary awards were chosen. To assess demand from the public, sales leaders and market ratings were explored. By comparing data on expert opinions and requests from a mass audience, we can identify two lines of assessment: the line of incoherence and the line of coherence. The results show complex intertwining between serious literature and mass market in modern Russian literary process.

Keywords: literary process, modern Russian literature, reader.

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1. Introduction

Modern literary process is a phenomenon that doesn't have a certain vector in its development, as well as a unified core that determines its worldview. Assessment of this phenomenon is becoming increasingly complicated because literary critique is slowly moving away from independent expertise and turning into "advertising", a way of marketing promotion of literary works on the book market. We can pose a question – is professional literary community moving in the right direction or can it be torn away from its readers? Let's try and answer this question by comparing and contrasting assessments of experts with requests of the audience.

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2. Materials and Methods

It is worth noting that in this article we analyze only the Russian segment of literary process because the main goal of this research is to establish in what the direction the Russian literary process is progressing.

As an approach to determining the level of assessments by the expert community of modern literary works, we have established the principle of official nomination – those works that were highly commended by the experts and nominated for major Russian literary awards and competitions. In the course of 2012 to 2018, there were 130 works of such kind.

For the purpose of this research I analyzed the ratings of literary works sales (top 50 positions) to identify requests of the audience. The relevant data has been taken from website Pro-Books.Ru. “Book ratings” service of website Pro-Books.ru automatically sorts information about book bestsellers in 11 places that sell books and yields obtained results as composite ratings Top sales both in published editions and electronic were analyzed. Since the main focus of this article is modern Russian literary works, we didn't take into consideration foreign literary works. Preliminary research singled out 143 published works and 101 electronic works.

3. Discussion

As a result of comparing data on expert opinions and requests from a mass audience, we can identify two lines of assessment: the line of incoherence and the line of coherence.

3.1. Line of incoherence.

These works were highly praised by the experts: Vladimir Sharov *Vozvrascheniye v Egipet* (Bolshaya Kniga, 2013, Russian Booker, 2014); Leonid Yuzefovich *Zimnyaya Doroga* (Bolshaya Kniga, 2015, Natsionalny Bestseller, 2016); Aleksander Terekhov *Nemtsy* (Natsionalny Bestseller, 2012, Kniga Goda, 2012); Kseniya Buksha *Zavod Svoboda* (Natsionalny Bestseller, 2014, Kniga Goda, 2014); Svetlana Alekseyevich *Vremya sekond-hand* (Bolshaya Kniga, 2014, Kniga Goda, 2014, Nobelevskaya Premiya po literature, 2015); Lev Danilkin *Lenin: Pantokrator solnechnykh pylinok* (Bolshaya Kniga, 2016, Kniga Goda, 2017); Maria Stepanova *Pamyati pamyati* (Bolshaya Kniga, 2018, Nos, 2018); Olga Slavnikova *Pryzhok a dlinu* (Kniga Goda, 2018, Yasnaya Polyana, 2018);

Alexey Salnikov *Petrovy v grippe i vokrug nego* (Natsionalny Bestseller, 2018, Nos, Prize of Critical Community, 2017).

Analyzing the contents of the abovementioned literary works we can determine a rather steady trend in expert assessments: over 80% of works bring up, in one way or another, the question of Russia in the 20th century, its cultural memory and cultural experience of several Soviet generations. These works harmoniously combine the fictional with the non-fictional.

If we take a closer look at the book's structure, we will find that it consists of 3 parts with 9 chapters, 10 chapters and 4 chapters accordingly. In the first two parts chapters intersperse with *non-chapters*— authentic family letters, documents that had preserved their voices. Photos and objects of everyday life are built around these letters... [1] –

L. Oborin, a Russian poet, translator and literary critique comments on M. Stepanova's novel *Pamyati pamyati*. This kind of structure that uses archival documents, interviews materials, photographs in the storyline of the novel gives greater urgency to cultural memory by posing existential questions to the readers that help them to understand more about their own life and its way: "How can we talk about memory when cataclysms of the 20th century did everything in their power to break the chain of historical events in our perception?" Marianna Hirsch, a scholar and a professor at Columbia University uses the term post-memory to talk about the language that we have now in our conversations about memory. This word chronologically precedes post-truth – both of them stipulate that we cannot get in touch with the live phenomenon without prefix "post". The name itself, *Pamyati pamyati*, evokes associations with a genre of obituary. The obituary should awaken our memories, so how can we deliver a eulogy to the memory itself? [1]

Importantly, that these literary works are almost unknown to the mass audience and you cannot purchase them from the shelves in bookshops. Possibly, the difference in assessment can be explained by the fact that the abovementioned works appeal to historical documents and include archival materials. These literary works have a great potential for the development of national literature, as well as for understanding significant historical changes but that is why they aren't easy and pleasurable to read and aren't popular among average readers.

The only exception in our opinion is presented by the works of O. Slavnikova *Pryzhok v dlinu* and A. Salnikova *Petrovy v grippe i vokrug nego*. Novel *Pryzhok v dlinu* poses a question if people with disabilities can lead a full-on life using easily comprehensible

storyline and it is highly likely to soon hit the tops of the sales. *Petrovy v grippe i vokrug nego* is an experimental novel in keeping with the spirit of post-modernist literature, which was already assessed by experts and proficient community of readers. “The book of the only not well-known to the public finalist of *Bolshaya Kniga* award, Aleksey Salnikov, residing in Ekaterinburg, is a rare and unique example of literary work in Russian literary process that doesn’t need any allowances made for young age or lack of experience, since it is a complete result”. Novel *Petrovy v grippe i vokrug nego* was originally published in Volga journal and it can be accessed for free on the Bookmate website, where about one thousand and a half people had read it (if we take an original edition of the new author and compare it with one thousand and a half is a very good beginning). Publishers “have been ignoring Salnikov but I would like to think that they will wake up just in time to notice him because books that are so bright and fresh appear once in 5 years if you get lucky” – says G. Yuzefovich, literary critique about this Russian novel [2].

Having covered the position of experts we would now like to address those works which re highly popular among the mass reader (Table 1).

TABLE 1: Literary works in terms of sales leaders

Author	Literary work	Ratings
Dina Rubina	<i>Russkaya kanareika</i>	Top-50 in 2014-2015, position 1 in 10456 ratings, Top-50 in 2016-2017, position 20 in 781 ratings
Boris Akunin	<i>Chernyi Gorod</i>	Top-50 in 2013-2014, position 3 in 2468 ratings; Top-50 in ebooks in 2012-2013, position 1 in 461 ratings;
Boris Akunin	<i>Boh I shelma</i>	Top-50 in 2015-2016, position 4 in 1402 ratings; Top-50 in 2014-2015, position 31 in 2068 ratings, Top-50 in ebooks In 2016-2017, position 21 in 26 ratings
Boris Akunin	<i>Ognennyi perst</i>	Top-50 in 2014-2015, position 12 in 4502 ratings; Top-50 in 2013-2014, position 20 in 4043 ratings; Top-50 in ebooks in 2015-2016, position 36 in 11 ratings;
Aleksandra Marinina	<i>Oborvannye Niti</i>	Top-50 in 2013-2014, position 9 in 7305 ratings; Top-50 in 2012-2013, position 25 in 4288 ratings; Top-50 ebooks in 2013-2014, position 17 in 338 ratings; Top-50 ebooks in 2012-2013, position 10 in 192 ratings;
Dmitry Glukhovsky	<i>Buduscheye</i>	Top-50 in 2013-2014, position 37 in 285 ratings; Top-50 ebooks in 2015-2016, position 21 in 20 ratings;
Sergey Lukyanenko	<i>Novyi dozor</i>	Top-50 in 2012-2013, position 23 in 4382 ratings; Top-50 in ebooks in 2014-2015, position 31 in 32 ratings;
Tatyana Ustinova	<i>Kovcheg Marka</i>	Top-50 in 2014-2015, position 35 in 1844 ratings; Top-50 in ebooks in 2016-2017, position 45 in 2 ratings;

These works from the table are in high and constant demand with the audience, nevertheless they are nowhere around the shortlists of national literary awards and most

of them can be attributed to pulp novels. It is important to stress that the audience is also on the look out for “serious literature” that is mostly evaluated very ambivalently by the expert community. Aleksander Zhurov, a literary critique and an author of literary journal “*Noviy Mir*” published a critical review of the *Russkaya kanareika* trilogy by D. Rubina (an absolute sales leader in 2014-2015): “A book that so wanted to become a spy novel, a love novel, a family saga, a serious apprehension of history and generally speaking a certain kind of generalized bestseller for middle class housewives that turned into a tasteless parody of serious literature”. The unknown user of one of the websites expressed it in a more straightforward way: “It is Daria Dontsova for intellectuals”. We can paraphrase it: “It is Daria Dontsova for those who would like to feel that they are intellectuals”.

3.2. Line of coherence

Having highlighted a certain disbalance between the assessments of modern literature by experts and average readers, we can still note that there is a similarity in their opinions regarding a series of literary works. These works have many awards and they kept first positions in sales ratings for several years in a row (Table 2).

4. Conclusions

Each of the listed works deserves special attention but the limitations of this preview article allow us to focus only on one example – the last novel of D. Bykov *Iyun*. The novel saw light in the publishing press of Elena Shubina in 2017 and received one of the most prestigious awards almost right after its publishing (see table 2) and got to the tops of sales. The novel is about Stalin era before the war and it consists of practically three autonomous parts. It goes very well along with the trend that was highlighted when characterizing the assessment of expert community – reflecting upon historical past and cataclysms of the 20th century through the eyes of individual literary characters. “... witchcraft-style, scary <...> full of meanings subtext that reveals the connection between the Stalin era and our days makes *Iyun*, written by Dmitry Bykov, a book that is truly significant, fantastic and worthy of most careful reader’s attention” [4].

Such match is a proof that these two types of writing – serious literature and literature for average readers – aren’t autonomous within modern literary process but are intertwined with each other. Russian mass reader is keen on serious literature, as well as

TABLE 2: Composite table of literary works

No.	Author	Name	Awards	Sales Ratings
1	Viktor Pelevin	iPhuck 10	Premiya Andreya Belogo (2017)	Top-50 in 2018-2019, position 47 in 132 ratings; Top-50 in 2017-2018, position 8 in 1140 ratings
2.	Evgeny Vodolazkin	<i>Lavr</i>	Bolshaya Kniga 2012; Yasnaya Polyana 2013; Kniga Goda 2013	Top-50 in 2017-2018, position 32 in 476 ratings; Top-50 in 2016-2017, position 39 in 384 ratings
3	Zakhar Prilepin	<i>Obitel'</i>	Bolshaya Kniga 2013; Kniga Goda 2014	Top-50 in 2015-2016, position 11 in 1050 ratings; Top-50 in 2014-2015, position 4 in 8978 ratings
4	Vladimir Sorokin	<i>Telluria</i>	Bolshaya Kniga 2013;	Top-50 in 2013-2014, position 24 in 3714 ratings;
5	Guzel Yakhina	<i>Zulekha otkryvayet glaza</i>	Bolshaya Kniga 2014; Yasnaya Polyana 2015; Kniga Goda 2015	Top-50 in 2018-2019, position 2 in 1618 ratings; Top-50 in 2017-2018, position 3 in 2087 ratings; Top-50 in 2016-2017, position 4 in 1712 ratings; Top-50 in 2017-2018 (ebooks), position 19 in 56 ratings;
6	Evgeny Vodolazkin	<i>Aviator</i>	Bolshaya Kniga 2015;	Top-50 in 2016-2017, position 21 in 602 ratings;
7	Ludmila Ulitskaya	<i>Lestnitsa Yakova</i>	Bolshaya Kniga 2015;	Top-50 in 2016-2017, position 6 in 1405 ratings; Top-50 in 2015-2016, position 39 in 358 ratings;
8	Olesya Nikolayeva	Nebesny ogon i drugiye rasskazy	Patriarshaya literary premiya (2012)	Top-50 in 2012-2013, position 33 in 3434 ratings;
9	Narine Abgaryan	<i>S neba upali tri yabloka</i>	Yasnaya Polyana 2016;	Top-50 in 2015-2016, position 46 in 304 ratings;
10	Arkhimandrit Tikhon (Shevkunov)	<i>Nebesnyie svyatye i drugiye rasskazy</i>	Kniga Goda 2012	Top-50 in 2018-2019, position 40 in 146 ratings; Top-50 in 2017-2018, position 12 in 828 ratings; Top-50 in 2016-2017, position 44 in 351; Top-50 in 2015-2016, position 37 in 367 ratings; Top-50 in 2014-2015, position 15 in 4034 ratings; Top-50 in 2013-2014, position 45 in 2234 ratings; Top-50 in 2012-2013, position 1 in 19941 ratings; Top-50 in 2012-2013 (ebooks), position 14 in 163 ratings;
11	Dmitry Bykov	<i>Iyun</i>	Bolshaya Kniga 2018;	Top-50 in 2018-2019, position 15 in 359 ratings;

pulp fiction. As a result, serious literature in Russia has a potential for commercialization which implies that it has a perspective for development.

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