

РЕЦЕНЗИИ

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BOOK REVIEW OF «GROWING OUT OF COMMUNISM. RUSSIAN LITERATURE FOR CHILDREN AND TEENS, 1991–2017».

A. LANOUX, K. HEROLD AND O. BUKHINA.
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The review of “Growing Out of Communism” highlights the main steps in the development of Russian children’s literature after the emergence of the market-driven publishing industry in 1991 and the creation of new small publishing houses in the 2000s. By offering a comprehensive analysis of the factors which led to the rise of a new literary production, of the struggles to find its own place and recognition within the Russian society, but also of the link with the Soviet and Russian literary tradition, the book provides a significant contribution to the study of contemporary Russian children’s literature.

Keywords: Russian children’s literature, mass-market books, boutique publishing houses, young adults and children’s fiction, Soviet canon

“Growing Out of Communism” examines the development of Russian children’s literature after the emergence of the market-driven publishing industry in 1991 and the consequent creation of new small publishing houses in the 2000s. By providing evidence collected through trips to Russia and interviews with the main actors involved in this process of (re)birth, the authors of the book provide a portrait of contemporary Russian literature for children and teens, showing that what

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has appeared after the fall of the Soviet Union is in effect a new literature, with new writers, new characters and new content.

The monograph analyses how children's literature managed to re-emerge after the fall of the Soviet Union, how it gradually detached itself from the Soviet canon (although it still persists in some institutions) and how it created its own Russian version of those Western translations that appeared in the country with the emergence of the private market. The authors demonstrate how this renaissance brought about a shift in the perception of the child reader, who became not only an active subject of the same process of reading, but also a consumer with his/her own requests and interests. This transformation led also to a change in the representation of child characters in the narration while offering a place to investigate the surrounding world.

After having recalled the most important stages in the development of Soviet children's literature and in the formation of the Soviet children's canon, the authors analyse the evolution of children's literature in the Post-Soviet period, showing how the latter has been deeply influenced by the former. Three main causes are here identified to explain the persistence of the Soviet canon in contemporary children's literature. Notwithstanding the fall of the Soviet Union and the disappearance of the state-run apparatus and of its institutions, people were not ready to adapt quickly to this change. Secondly, for the generation who had grown up during the Soviet Union to read those books which forged their own childhood to their children and grandchildren was a way of reducing the generational gap that the fall of the Soviet Union exacerbated. Thirdly, and probably the most interesting point, the socialist vision narrated to children through children's books during the Soviet Union was not substituted by a similarly fascinating vision (pp. 37–38).

As we read in chapter two, the appearance of a new Russian children's book industry and the emergence in the 2000s of boutique publishing houses led to an increase in the quality and quantity of books available to children and teens. Similarly, the rise in new book prizes after the year 2000 contributed to forming a new Russian literature by discovering new writers and drawing attention to their productions. The case of two journals born out of the ashes of the state-led journal "Children's Literature", the "Bulletin of Children's Literature" and the "Children's Readings", is then analysed, showing how they are contributing to promoting, debating, and evaluating contemporary Russian children's literature (pp. 75–76).

Chapter three, "Mass-Market Publications for Children and Teens", analyses the transformation of the Soviet publishing industry in the

1990s with the emergence of mass-market books and of new genres. Although these new genres introduced into the Russian market by Western translations were immediately labelled by elites as a sign of the decline of Russian civilization, they nevertheless gained the favour of many readers. This pushed publishing houses to produce their own quality versions of these genres, giving the lead to the emergence of new and original works for children and teens under the headings “Russkaia” and “narodnaia” (Russian and homegrown) (p. 113).

From the rubble of the Soviet children’s literature a new generation of children’s writers emerged. Deeply influenced by Soviet classics (e.g. *The Republic of ShKID* by Grigorii Belykh and Leonid Pantelev (1927), *The Two Captains* by Veniamin Kaverin (1938–40), *Timur and His Team* by Arkadii Gaidar (1940), the school novels, etc.), but also by topics coming from translated literature (e.g. individuality, tolerance, and identity) this new generation of writers, including Ekaterina Murashova, Dina Sabitova, Miriam Petrosyan, and Narine Abgaryan, represent the contemporary social reality of their readers through the eyes of marginalised children, often orphans (a recurring Soviet trope), using magical realism and fantasy elements “to offer their protagonists a way out of their sordid realities” (p. 160). This new world, although imaginary, grants the characters a new role in the narration, as they do not accept the reality they live in and try to change it, thus contributing to creating a new image of childhood and adolescence in rupture with the Soviet literature.

2013 is identified by the authors as the turning point in the creation of a new literature for children and adolescents, when a new wave of authors of young adults and children’s fiction appears, moving away from their predecessors’ gloomy themes — but not from sensitive topics — to focus more on ordinary children and their daily lives and experiences. The characters in the stories now try actively to influence the world they live in, take their own decisions and struggle to find their own place in the society (pp. 193–194).

One major strength of this comprehensive study on contemporary Russian literature for children and teens is the focus on the young reading public and its role in the formation of a new cultural production. Children have changed their social position by becoming consumers and by requesting writers and publishing houses to listen to their needs and desires. By means also of online tools which have created a new reading space unknown in the Soviet Union, young readers can now express their positive or negative views on the books they read, in this way taking an active role in shaping a new literature (p. 224).

Contemporary Russian children's literature is however facing many challenges which can in some way prevent it from developing further. First of all, for publishing houses it is extremely difficult to distribute books outside Moscow and Saint Petersburg. Secondly, the cost of the books is high and prevents many families from buying good-quality books, in this way exacerbating the division between those families who can afford them and those who cannot. Another obstacle to mass scale distribution is represented by schools, which do not grant publishing houses and new writers direct access to teachers and students, as they have to follow the state school curriculum and do not have enough room to explore new books. Finally, the interest shown by the Russian government and the Russian Orthodox Church in the last few years in the production of the independent publishing houses can put some limits on publishing houses activity (pp. 228–229).

“*Growing out of Communism*” is innovative in the sense that it focuses on a field of study, children's literature, which still “suffers from discriminatory and outdated assumptions” (p. XX), in a country, Russia, where until 1991 children's literature was under the direct control of the state-run apparatus. Although in recent years many studies on Soviet children's literature have been published, contemporary Russian literature still remains an underexplored field of study and the present book contributes to investigating it.

The book represents a significant contribution to the study of contemporary Russian children's literature, as it provides a comprehensive analysis of the factors which led to the emergence and development of a new literary production, of the struggles to find its own place and recognition within the Russian society, but also of the link with the Soviet and Russian literary tradition. It also contributes to the study of children's literature as a whole field of study, which includes different disciplines such as gender, nationhood and globalisation, by highlighting the importance of children's books in the socialisation of young people and in the process of cultural transmission.

Bibliography

Sources

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РЕЦЕНЗИЯ НА КНИГУ «ВЫРАСТАЯ ИЗ КОММУНИЗМА.
РУССКАЯ ЛИТЕРАТУРА ДЛЯ ДЕТЕЙ И ПОДРОСТКОВ,
1991–2017 ГГ.» А. ЛАНУ, К. ГЕРОЛЬД И О. БУХИНА.
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В рецензии на коллективную монографию «Вырастая из коммунизма», написанную Андрией Лану, Келли Херолд и Ольгой Бухиной, характеризуется основное содержание книги, ее предмет (постсоветская детская литература), хронологические рамки (2000–2013 гг.), методы исследования (интервью, беседы), основные выводы, к которым пришли авторы. Рецензент отмечает, что в монографии освещаются основные этапы развития русской детской литературы, сформировавшейся после появления в 1991 г. рыночной экономики, книжного рынка и начала деятельности частных издательств. По мнению рецензента, авторы исследования предлагают всесторонний анализ факторов, повлиявших на становление и развитие постсоветской детской литературы. В монографии затрагиваются вопросы литературной и издательской конкуренции, освещается творчество отдельных авторов (например, Екатерины Мурашовой, Мариам Петросян, Наринэ Абгарян, Дины Сабитовой), рассматривается связь детской литературы 1990-х — 2000-х гг. с каноном советской детской литературы, освещается трансформация взгляда на читателя-ребенка, которого начинают воспринимать не только в качестве активного субъекта процесса чтения, но и как потребителя со своими запросами и интересами. В рецензии подчеркивается, что это исследование вносит значительный вклад в изучение современной русской детской литературы.

Ключевые слова: история детской литературы, постсоветская детская литература, массовая детская литература, детские издательства, литературный канон