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Darya Dontsova's 'Sleuthettes': A Case of the Regendering of the Post-Soviet Russian *Detektiv*?

It is widely acknowledged that the detective story/mystery novel has been the success story of the past century and a half. From its humble beginnings, traditionally assumed to coincide with the publication of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter',¹ the genre has grown almost exponentially. In his recent survey of the genre, Stephen Knight quotes some impressive figures: over a billion copies of Agatha Christie's novels sold by 2000 and an increase in the number of feminist detectives in American crime fiction from 40 to 400 between 1980 and 2000. Knight further notes that 'a third of the fiction published in English belongs to the genre'.² In the Russian context, equally remarkable is the claim by Stephen Lovell that there were 30 million pirated copies of Agatha Christie's works published in Russian between 1986 and 1993.³

Not surprisingly, given the ideological tergiversations of 1917 and 1991, the fortunes of the detective story, termed in Russian a *detektiv*⁴, fluctuated wildly throughout the twentieth century in the geographical space now referred to as the Russian Federation. The form enjoyed great popularity in the immediate pre-Revolutionary period, only to suffer virtual proscription at the hands of the Bolsheviks. With the *de jure* abolition of censorship in 1990 and

¹ Michael Holquist, 'Whodunit and Other Questions: Metaphysical Detective Stories in Postwar Fiction' in Glenn Most, William Stowe, (eds), *The Poetics of Murder: Detective Fiction and Literary Theory* (San Diego, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983), 156.

² Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800-2000: Detection, Death, Diversity* (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 2004). x.

³ Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution: Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras* (Houndmills, Macmillan, 2000). 131.

⁴ For the purposes of this article I use *detektiv* as the overarching term to refer to Soviet Russian crime fiction, however its referential framework differs significantly from that of the Western tradition and the term is much broader in application. For a discussion of the implications of nomenclature, see Jeremy Dwyer, *From Mess-Mend to the Mafia: A History of Russian Detektiv* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Monash University, 2005), 147-197.

the introduction of a market economy at the beginning of 1992 the genre again experienced a considerable resurgence in demand and popularity. Deprived of state subsidies in the early 1990s, Russian publishing houses turned to popular literature in order to remain viable. At the moment of writing sales throughout the Russian Federation are high, with the *detektiv* constituting a staple of the book-publishing industry.

In an echo of the situation obtaining in some Western societies (notably the United Kingdom and the United States), Russian female writers have attained prominence in the genre over the past decade and consistently occupy leading positions in terms of sales figures, consumer demand and, more rarely, critical recognition. This trend has been accompanied by the appearance of a hitherto unknown literary personage, the autochthonous female investigator. The emergence of a popular literature written by women and read by both sexes raises numerous questions about the inscribing of gender issues during a time of economic and social reorientation. To what degree has this development led to a modification of the traditional gendering of crime fiction, characteristic of the Soviet era? Has the appearance of female authors and female protagonists meant that the post-Soviet Russian *detektiv* heroine has attained the prominence and agency of her male counterpart? Has she manifested herself *à l'anglaise* as a seemingly harmless middle-aged or elderly lady whose knowledge of human nature gives her insights into the darker sides of life (Miss Marple, Mrs Mallory) or has she *à l'américaine* metamorphosed into a hard-boiled detective (V.I. Warshawski, Kinsey Millhone) or an amateur housewife sleuthette (Jane Jeffry)? Has there appeared a Russian heroine un beholden to other literary traditions based on national paradigms? Most importantly, whatever her outward guise, has this new heroine been able to carve out her own area of expertise and efficacy or have the patterns of the past continued to dictate the delineation of the female protagonists in the genre? In this article I propose to examine the contribution to this debate of the depiction of the main female protagonists of Darya Dontsova, one of the most commercially successful writers of the past decade.

Soviet cultural authorities were not blind to the blandishments of the detective story as entertainment. In the nineteen twenties there were repeated

calls to produce a 'red detective story' or a 'red Pinkerton story',⁵ but the ascendancy of RAPP with its anti-bourgeois, anti-formalist dogma effectively put an end to this trend. By the 1960s crime fiction genre called *detektiv* had emerged but this new tradition often had little to do with the Western detective tradition. Private detectives were unavailable as a rhetorical option and crimes frequently lacked mystery because the very concept of Soviet crime was framed within a specific Marxist-Leninist criminological lens that limited how it could be dealt with. Prominent exponents of the genre included Arkady and Grigory Vainer, Leonid Slovin, Arkadii Adamov and Yulian Semenov. The works of these writers belonged to the police procedural style of presentation featuring a conscientious militiaman engaged in a struggle against those forces which would threaten the stability and continued well-being of the state. The genre was essentially mono-gendered:⁶ police investigation was seen as responsible and difficult work unsuited to the abilities of women except in subsidiary roles. They were equally under-represented as perpetrators of crime. As well as the fictional accounts, there appeared in print a steady stream of reminiscences (heavily sanitized) of members of the security organs, army and the militia, which dealt with the weighty issues of law and order, crime and punishment. These were invariably didactic and almost always suspenseless⁷. In spite of such apparent drawbacks, demand for such literature far exceeded supply as Catherine Nepomnyashchy indicates:

In sum, whatever illusions Western scholars may have entertained about the reading habits of Soviet Russians – illusions most likely fed by a lack of credible statistics for patterns of reading and wishful thinking on the part of the intelligentsia who monopolized the national literary press – well before

⁵ Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992). 43-4.

⁶ Anthony Olcott, *Russian Pulp: The 'Detectiv' and the Way of Russian Crime* (Lanham, Rowan and Littlefield, 2001), 57.

⁷ Typical of this is the collection of short stories *Po sledam prestuplenii* (Moscow, Yuridicheskaya literatura, 1965) written by militia officers devoted almost exclusively to the embezzlement of state property.

glasnost Russians were reading a great deal of detective fiction and were clamoring for more.⁸

Anthony Olcott has provided an overview of the Russian *detektiv* in his recent book on the genre *Russian Pulp: The 'Detekti'v and the Way of Russian Crime*. The five main features he isolates reveal the degree to which the Soviet *detektiv* diverged from the crime novel as it was evolving in the English-speaking world: the *detektiv* was not necessarily concerned with the deprivation of life; the *detektiv* was not necessarily a mystery as the identity of the villain or perpetrator was rarely kept a secret, and equally rarely were there several, let alone numerous, suspects; the hero of the *detektiv* was limited to one of four professions: *uchastkovyy* (simple policeman), *syshchik* (detective), *sledovatel'* (investigator) or KGB agent; there were no private investigators; the point of the Soviet-era *detektiv* was to illustrate the general purpose that crime harmed the state; and rarely did the *detektiv* end with the actual arrest of the villain although justice was seen to triumph.⁹

It is noteworthy that glasnost, which was introduced to revitalize political debate and introduce an element of accountability into political decision-making, made its greatest mark on cultural production. The glasnost years saw the rediscovery of the alternative Soviet canon, consisting of those works which had been banned since the 1920s, the overseas canon of writers who had continued to publish in Russian abroad, and, concomitantly, western popular culture. In the Gorbachev years, the last element was exemplified by Mexican soap operas, western pop-music and light escapist fiction. The effect of this triple exposure is difficult to overestimate. It constituted a powerful alliance which, taken together with the abolition of censorship and the abandonment of the administrative-command system, completely rewrote the cultural landscape of the Russian state. The changes were not universally welcomed and numerous observers at the time bewailed the death of the Russian novel, the absence of big names in literature, and the corruption of the Russian

⁸ Catharine Theimer Nepomnyashchy, 'Markets, Mirrors, and Mayhem: Aleksandr Marinina and the Rise of the new Russian Detektiv' in Adele Marie Barker (ed) *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex and Society since Gorbachev* (Durham, Duke University Press, 1999), 165.

⁹ Olcott, 38-41.

language.¹⁰ Critics of post-Soviet Russian cultural production remain vociferous even a decade later. Illustrative of the paradoxical nature of much criticism in this vein is a reader's evaluation of Dontsova's novels published in the newspaper *Argumenty i fakty* which *inter alia* stated 'I have read twenty five of your novels and they are all crap'.¹¹

In the new reality where consumer demand was acknowledged as an index of desirability and even notability, the *detektiv* began its dramatic rise to prominence and in the process underwent a considerable metamorphosis. The process of cultural importation, a feature of Russian cultural life for centuries, manifested itself in a new commercial guise. The tripartite process of translation of external models, manipulation of Western models and assimilation of both characterized the resurgence and recasting of the *detektiv* and was largely completed within a decade. Among the most popular English-language authors to be translated (apart from the classics, such as Agatha Christie and Conan Doyle) were Ed McBain, Dick Francis, Ngaio Marsh, James Hadley Chase, Rex Stout and Raymond Chandler.

The move towards the western model was swift and irreversible. Each of the above features cited by Olcott gave way to the corresponding aspect of the Western exemplar. Bodies, formerly in short supply, littered the pages, the identity of the villain only became known in the final dramatic climax, twists and red herrings became *de rigueur*, the personality of the investigating officer became less two-dimensional, and the range of stylistic techniques widened considerably. The parallels between the immediate pre-Soviet years and the post-Soviet decade are striking, not the least of these being the actual appearance of the *detektiv*. Writing of the first decades of the twentieth century, Jeffrey Brooks could equally be describing the last decade:

The content of bookstore windows changed from a bland row of titles in plain covers that had been agreeable and familiar to the regular customer to a

¹⁰ A more sanguine approach is adopted by Deming Brown in his chapter 'New faces' where he lists a number of young writers who in his view show literary promise. *The Last Years of Soviet Russian Literature* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1993), 171-186.

¹¹ *Аргументы и факты*, №. 36, 2003.

colorful display of eye-catching bindings and covers designed to attract the casual passerby.¹²

Since 1990 the term *detektiv* (not unlike the collocation ‘crime fiction’ in the West) has served as the umbrella descriptor for a number of sub-genres. At one end of the spectrum is the *boevik*, a fast-paced, tightly plotted adventure story in which a warrior-like figure seeks to foil the plot of a master-criminal and avert large-scale tragedy. Often a veteran of the war in Afghanistan or a member of the former special forces, the hero is portrayed as a lone individual, motivated by a fierce and pure patriotism, fighting corrupt elements in society. The *boevik* came to prominence in the early 1990s and continues to enjoy steady popularity, predominantly among male readers. Leading exponents of the sub-genre in contemporary Russia include Daniil Koretskii and Viktor Dotsenko.¹³ Its treatment of gender issues owes much to the Soviet era: female characters play secondary roles, with the added function of indicators of the hero’s virility.

A slightly later development was the *zhenskii detektiv* (female detective fiction), a mystery story written by a woman and featuring a female protagonist. In contradistinction to the *boevik*, the *zhenskii detektiv* focuses on relationships, eschews descriptions of extreme violence and often blends the classical detective paradigm with other paradigms such as adventure and romance.¹⁴ The forerunner in this field in the 1990s was Aleksandra Marinina (*nom de plume* of Marina Alekseeva) who in 1995 published her first novel in book form about a police officer, Anastasia Kamenskaya, an analyst in the central police headquarters at 38 Petrovka. The novelty of the series lay in the

¹² Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia Learned to Read: Literacy and Popular Culture 1861-1917* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1985), 110.

¹³ For a detailed study of Dotsenko’s superboeviki featuring the ‘Russian Rambo’ Savelii Gorokov, also known as Beshenyi (The Wild One) see Jeremy Dwyer, ‘Telling the “Real” Story: Interpretation of Contemporary Events in Viktor Dotsenko’s Superboeviki’ *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review*, 29, No. 3 (2000), 221-40.

¹⁴ Not all critics have welcomed this development. Z. Podkolodnaya in her influential polemical article «У детектива не женское лицо?» comes to the extreme conclusion: «В общем, приходится признать, что у детектива – не женское лицо. А если женское – значит, это не детектив.» *Книжное обозрение*, № 51 (1997), 6.

central importance of Kamenskaya to the work of a larger male collective and her unusual private life. Catharine Nepomnyashchii encapsulates her role thus:

Kamenskaia's character is based on the premise that she remain in her Petrovka office, drinking cup after cup of coffee and chain smoking, while her male colleagues do all the legwork of gathering evidence and interviewing suspects. She then solves what are generally devilishly complex crimes by subjecting the material the men gather to cold, machinelike logic combined with an extraordinary imagination, which allows her to (re)construct multiple narratives based on the evidence and ultimately arrive at the "correct" story.¹⁵

Kamenskaya combines both the traditionally masculine and feminine interpretative approaches in her work. She is very rational in her ordering of facts but at the same time is able to making the creative leap required to fuse disparate elements in order to recreate the crime.

In an interview given in 1997 Marinina stated that the *detektiv* 'gives us the opportunity to understand that there is no absolute black and white in the world. I have no absolutely bad criminals or completely good heroes [in my novels]'.¹⁶ By moving away from the moral absolutes of the Soviet era and making her law enforcer a woman passionate about her work, she revitalized the standard Soviet procedural formula. Her phenomenal success attests to the durability of the *detektiv* cast in the traditional guise of a struggle by representatives of the state against elements seeking to subvert it. Equally significantly, according to Anatoly Vishevsky, Marinina 'lift(ed) the stigma from household activities which are usually regarded with condescension in traditional Russian culture, and thus legitimize(d) everyday routine (*byt*)'.¹⁷ He encapsulates her function as a writer thus: '(s)he aims to educate while

¹⁵ Nepomnyashchy, p. 169. See also: Святослав Бирюлин, «Из чего сделана Каменская?» Литературная газета, №51-52 (1999), 11.

¹⁶ Александра Маринина, «Преступников я описываю особенно любовно» *Огонек*, № 19 (1997) 49.

¹⁷ Anatoly Vishevsky, 'Answers to Eternal Questions in Soft Covers: Post-Soviet Detective Stories' *Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol 45, No 4 (2001), 735.

entertaining: the author treats her reader just as a good and kind teacher would treat her students who need support, advice, and guidance¹⁸. In Marinina's wake the number of female writers of detective fiction rose dramatically. Among those who proved to be popular with readers were Marina Serova, Tat'iana Poliakova, Polina Dashkova and Anna Malysheva.

In his doctoral thesis on the Russian *detektiv*, Jeremy Dwyer charted the best-seller lists in the weekly *Book Review* (*Knizhnoe obozrenie*). His findings

show that Russian-authored *detektiv* literature was not a major presence in the bestseller lists for 1994 but that it gained much ground in 1995, and from 1996 to 1998 it overwhelmingly dominated the lists. ...Two more specific phenomena that were observed ... were the ascendancy of the Russian female *detektiv* authors over their male counterparts in the years 1996 and 1997, and the overall popularity of Russian *detektiv* series rather than discrete works.¹⁹

Dwyer's analysis stops at 1998, however the trend which he describes has only continued to grow. However, it is the move away from the 'police procedural' towards the 'amateur detective' tale that has proved to be most productive development in the past decade. Though obviously taking their inspiration from external models of the amateur detective, Russian female authors locate their heroines in the familiar but confusing world of post-Soviet Russia. Russian critics have been slow to recognize this new development. Olcott quotes an unidentified Russian critic writing as late as 1998:

There is no *detektiv* in which the main hero is an amateur private investigator; apparently there is no eccentric or stranger (aristocrat, foreigner, or well-intentioned old lady) in modern Russia who is suitable for this role.²⁰

Although, as Olcott points out, there were isolated *detektiv* novels with a private individual as investigator, it was Darya Dontsova who was the first to write a series based on an investigator without institutional affiliations. Her first novel (which was submitted to the publishing house Eksmo in 1995 with

¹⁸ Vishevsky, 734.

¹⁹ Dwyer, 355.

²⁰ *Itoqi*, 6 October 1998, 56 quoted in Olcott, 24.

the bland title *A Trip to Paris* and published about a year later as *The Feisty Heirs*) has references to only three literary personages, Madame Bovary, Miss Marple, and Hercule Poirot. Dontsova, from the very beginning, flies her colours as an adherent to the tradition of the independent non-official detective.

Darya Dontsova (born in 1952 as Agrippina Arkadievna Vasilieva) has assumed the mantle of the most popular writer of best sellers since 2001. The daughter of an official Soviet writer, she worked for many years as a journalist, then following her second marriage, as a teacher of French and German. In her autobiography, subversively entitled *Notes of a Crazy Optimist*, she relates how her cherished literary dreams were dashed during the seventies when her first novel was rejected by the publishing house Youth (Yunost') with the comment 'dames don't write detective stories'.²¹ In each of the three years 2001-3, she was voted Writer of the Year (in the best-seller category) by the internet company Rambler and, in a list of the ten best sellers written by women writers drawn up at the beginning of 2004 by the Ozon site (Russia's answer to the Amazon site), her novels occupied three of the top five places.²² This is a far cry from the writer's second attempt in the Soviet era to conform to traditional mores and write a production novel. It too was rejected on the grounds that the untimely deaths of the director of the factory and his wife early in the narrative were elements alien to the genre.

At the time of writing Darya Dontsova has some forty-nine novels to her name. These have all appeared in print since 1995, their number being supplemented at regular and frequent intervals. They belong to four series, each of which is built around a main character and written as a first-person narrative.²³ The main story lines are instructive as to Dontsova's preoccupations and deserve elaboration here.

²¹ Дарья Донцова, *Записки безумной оптимистки* (Москва, Эксмо, 2003), 212.

²² www.ozon.ru/context/detail/name/book/id/1610841 accessed 21/2/04.

²³ Only the first three series will be discussed here as the fourth series features a male detective in a reprise of Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe series. The first two series have also been televised, thus reaching an even greater audience. Юрий Богомолов, 'Мур, мой амур' *Огонек*, № 21 (2004), 54. Over the same time period Aleksandra Marinina has written some twenty novels. Numerous best-selling authors produce book after book in quick succession probably under pressure from their publishers. Two to three months

The first series relates the adventures of Darya Vasilieva, a teacher of French in Moscow, who shared a flat with her friend Natasha until the latter married a Frenchman and went to live in Paris. Natasha divorces her French husband and subsequently marries a rich Scotsman Baron Macmair. Having thus become incredibly wealthy, Natasha invites her friend Darya to Paris for a visit, passing her off to her in-laws as her sister. Natasha is shortly afterwards left a widow in mysterious circumstances and her life is threatened. Darya, an avid fan of detective fiction, decides to imitate her heroines and try her hand at a private investigation. Several more deaths follow as the various heirs fight over the inheritance. In the concluding chapters, the villains flee France for Australia and Commissar Georges Perrier, the investigating officer, reproaches Darya for her interfering ways, which have prevented him from making an arrest. In his unofficial summing up of the case which takes place in a small restaurant, he favours them with his evaluation:

Жорж закивал головой:

-А теперь я, как частное лицо, подчеркиваю, как частное лицо, как ваш добрый хороший друг, изложу свои соображения. Во-первых, замечу сразу: мне ужасно мешала Даша. Вместо того чтобы спокойно подождать развития событий, она то и дело засовывала палку в осиное гнездо... Результат вы уже знаете – куча подозреваемых и ни одного обвиняемого.²⁴

In spite of this harsh evaluation of Darya's activities, the exculpated Baroness is so grateful to her friend that she settles a goodly proportion of her wealth on her two children, thus ensuring a life of ease and comfort for both women. The narrative reads as a meld of escapist fantasy, murder mystery and domestic chronicle. Dontsova sets the tone in the first paragraph when she ironizes the standard accomplishments of an educated middle-class woman:

Я много раз выходила замуж. И каждый раз неудачно. Но, очевидно, раз начав, трудно остановиться. Мой первый муж был художник. После развода он получил однокомнатную квартиру, а мне оставил своего

appears to be the accepted time frame for the writing of a pulp novel. There are persistent claims that certain 'authors' are not single persons but collectives of writers.

²⁴ Дарья Донцова, *Крутые наследники* (Москва, Эксмо, 2002) 274.

сына от первого брака Аркадия. Мой второй супруг оказался дипломатом. Ему после развода досталась машина, а мне маленькая собачка дворянских кровей по кличке Снапик. К третьему мужу отошла дача, я же приобрела кошку Клеопатру с тремя котятами. Четвертое замужество принесло мне девочку Машу. Четырнадцатилетний Аркадий был страшно недоволен:
 – Ну ладно бы хоть приличную собаку подсунули, а то годовалого младенца, да еще девочку.²⁵

Exactly where Masha originated and how she is so easily foisted on Darya is not defined in the novel and, like Arkadii, she regards Darya as her mother. Such lapses in the plotting are numerous and probably reflect a less demanding editorial procedure. One could analyze this opening at some length but suffice to say at this stage that the basic characteristics of the heroine are already delineated. She is rash, fallible, unmaterialistic, loves children and pets and her private life is of paramount importance to her. This is a far cry from Miss Marple or Sheila Mallory, let alone Stephanie Plum or even Jane Jeffry, the literary character with whom she has most in common.²⁶

In subsequent novels Darya discovers that she has a talent for getting into scrapes and 'detecting' her way out of them. From the third volume onwards, the action shifts to Moscow with Paris receding in importance in the narrative. At the same time, however, its role remains vital. In the sixth volume of the series, Darya describes her situation with a certain degree of complacency in a passage implicating Russia as the dangerous 'other':

Мы поселились в столице моды. Но ностальгия – смертельная болезнь, и члены семьи принялись ломать головы, как бы так устроиться, чтобы жить и во Франции, и в России...

Но тут грянули перемены. Разрешили двойное гражданство. Теперь мы не боимся ничего, потому каждый имеет на руках два паспорта – красный, российский, и синий, французский. Не страшны и

²⁵ *Крутые наследники*, 5.

²⁶ Jane Jeffry is the main character in a series of crime novels by Jill Churchill (nom de plume of Janice Young Brooks). A widow with three children, she uses her knowledge of the particularities of life in suburbia to help her friend and love interest. Detective Mel VanDyne to investigate a series of crimes. The playfully humorous tenor of the novels is signalled by the punning titles, *Grime and Punishment*, *War and Peas*, *From Here to Paternity*, *A Quiche before Dying*.

экономические кризисы – капиталы размещены во Французской Республике, в России только счет, через который переводим средства. Вот так и живем – полгода тут, полгода там, на два дома, на две страны.²⁷

The description given of her new life in Moscow (so different from her earlier existence as an impoverished language teacher) replicates her Parisian situation and resembles a contemporary urban version of the country estate. The wish-fulfilment motif is especially strong in the following passage.²⁸

А дом у нас теперь большой. Двухэтажный кирпичный особняк в поселке Ложкино. В здании комнат двадцать, но это не так много, если учесть, сколько человек там проживает.

Значит, так. Старший сын Аркадий, его жена Оля и двое близнецов – Анька и Ванька, Потом тринадцатилетняя Маруся, следом я и Наташка. На первом этаже разместились домработница Ирка, кухарка Катя и няня близнецов Серафима Ивановна. По бесконечным коридорам носится тьма животных: питбуль Банди, ротвейлер Снап, пуделиха Черри, английский мопс Хуч, кошки Клеопатра и Фифина, йоркширская терьерка Жюли. Иногда к ним присоединяются удравшие из клеток попугай Коко и морские свинки Морис, Жюстина и Патрик. Частенько к нам приезжают в гости родственники со всех концов России. Так что, если рассудить, двадцать комнат – это еще мало..²⁹

In both cities she has a friend who works in the police force and who is disparaging of her efforts to conduct investigations and solve crimes.³⁰ In Moscow this function is fulfilled by MVD Colonel Aleksandr Mikhailovich Degtiarev. Once the basic locus of the action shifts to Moscow in the third book in the series, the foreign element is expressed by a form of rampant

²⁷ Дарья Донцова, *Жена моего мужа* (Москва, Эксмо, 2002), 9.

²⁸ In this the Darya Vasilieva series displays significant parallels with the Phryne Fisher series of novels written by Kerry Greenwood and set in Melbourne in the 1920s. Phryne, a young single woman, who has come into money after an indigent childhood, also establishes a household consisting of assorted (adopted) children, servants, and a lover. Thus she is able to enjoy all the comforts of ‘family’ life without surrendering any of her independence.

²⁹ *Жена моего мужа*, 9

³⁰ *Жена моего мужа*, 9

product placement. Allusions to Napoleon brandy, Volvo cars, Longines watches, Ericsson mobile phones and Valentino clothing serve as markers of a rarified world to which certain of the characters have access (and the reader probably does not). In the sixth volume Darya is assisted by a mafia boss who, like the officials of the law, tries to discourage her from her sleuthing. Her first sighting of him is rendered exclusively in terms of externals.

Я оглядела его с головы до ног – джинсы и рубашка от «Лагерфельд», ботинки фирмы «Пазолини», черные очки от «Диора», а вот часики – самые обычные «Сейко», не заработал еще на приличные.³¹

In her autobiography Darya Dontsova writes that she fully expected her literary success to be as limited as twenty years earlier, however she was encouraged by the reaction of her first unofficial readers (fellow hospital patients) to submit her works to a publishing house.

Так вот, моя «Поездка в Париж» поставила «ЭКМО» в тупик. С одной стороны – детектив, с другой – семейная история. До меня все российские криминальные книги были очень серьезными, настоящими. Авторы успешно продолжали традиции Адамова, Леонова, братьев Вайнеров. А тут не пойми что: хихоньки, хахоньки, собаки, кошки, глуповатая Дарья Васильева, гора трупов и не страшно.³²

Although the Eksmo publishing house bought Dontsova's first six manuscripts, it was not until a year later that they were published as a distinctive variant of *zhenskii detektiv* under the imprint of the *ironicheskii detektiv*.³³ This new formula proved to be commercially successful and so led to a second and third series. Because of the unusual conventions of Russian copyright practices it is virtually impossible to retrospectively date the order of appearance of Dontsova's works. It would appear that, as in the case of her

³¹ *Жена моего мужа*, 96.

³² *Записки безумной оптимистки*, 248.

³³ See P. Огинский «Ироничные дамы против квадратных зубодробителей» *Книжное обозрение*, № 29 (1996), 6 for the aetiology of the genre. Promotional material on the cover of *Урожай ядовитых ягодок* characterizes the series thus: Невероятные препятствия и недоразумения. Легкий «юморный» стиль и динамичное повествование. Сочетание комичности и серьезности ситуаций. Немногие смешные и взбалмошные героини – вот что такое «Иронический детектив»!

predecessor, Aleksandra Marinina, she is paid honoraria for her manuscripts which then become the property of the publisher. Subsequent reprintings are copyrighted in the new year of publication.³⁴

The second series (thirteen titles published under the rubric 'A Dilettante Investigates') locates the action firmly in the impoverished intelligentsia milieu, which was Dontsova's own situation before she became a successful author. The heroine (this time with the improbable and faintly comical name of Yefrosinya Romanova) leaves her unhappy marriage with a successful 'new Russian' and is rescued from a suicide bid by a surgeon, Katya Romanova (who shares her surname but is not related). Katya is in need of a housekeeper for her extended family of two sons, not her biological offspring, but the 'booty' of four unsuccessful marriages. When Yefrosinya is asked to introduce herself, she decides to make a definite break with the past and renames herself Yevlampiya, prophetically providing herself with a name redolent in diminutives suggesting a source of light (Lampa, Lampochka). Katya is subsequently kidnapped and a large sum of money demanded for her release. Yevlampiya is compelled by circumstances to rebuild her life under the conditions of the new Russia far different from those she enjoyed as the wife of a successful businessman. She tries to rescue her employer, but only manages to get herself kidnapped. The two Romanova women are subsequently liberated by their neighbour, a militia major, Volodya Kostin, who has been assigned to their case, and whose attempts to solve the crime have been hampered by Yevlampiya's amateur efforts. He agrees to reveal the identity and motives of the perpetrator in exchange for a home-cooked meal.

³⁴ It is very difficult to obtain reliable information on the nature of arrangements between writers and publishing houses. Dontsova writes in her autobiography that she sells her manuscripts to Eksmo and this is borne out by the copyright on all editions being in the name of the publishing house. However an article in *Argumenty i fakty* indicated that Dontsova received royalties. A comparison of the copyright arrangements for less commercially but more critically successful writers indicates that Boris Akunin and Polina Dashkova retain the copyright on their works which coexists with the copyright held by the publishing company. None of the following female writers published by Eksmo Press retained her copyright over the manuscript (Marina Belova, Marina Serova, Anna Mikhaleva, Aleksandra Marinina). The catalogue of the National Library of Russia is the most reliable guide to the printing history of Dontsova's works.

This debacle does not deter Yevlampiya who, like a modern-day Don Quixote, continues to come to the aid of those in need in subsequent novels: an unknown woman who rings Yevlampiya's number by mistake and asks for assistance as she senses that she has been poisoned (*Poker with a Shark*); a hospital patient who entreats her to find her long-lost brother (*Beautiful Bastard*), the family of her temporary employer, a crime novelist, following his murder (*Lunch with a Cannibal*). Since she has no institutional standing and is not able to smooth her way financially, she resorts to the stratagem of acquiring false police and FSB agent identity papers. These she employs when unable through gossipy curiosity to obtain information. She comes into contact with a wide circle of people including an *oligarkh*³⁵ who is briefly enamoured of her and assists her in an investigation. In the eleventh volume, Kostin becomes a suspect in a murder investigation and is forced to resign from the militia. Yevlampiya encourages him to set up his own private investigation agency, calculating that she might be offered a position in it.³⁶ However, in the subsequent volume he has returned to his former position and is in place to continue to be of assistance when required. Like Darya, she and Katya belong to an extended household of unrelated children and pets. The two children Seryozha and Kirill have come from Katya's husbands and are supplemented by Seryozha's wife Yuliya, the pugs Mulya and Ada, the toad Gertrude and some hamsters.

The third series of nine titles ('In the World of Criminal Passions') centres on the adventures of Viola Tarakanova, a relatively uneducated woman, who grew up in straitened circumstances, and who shares a flat with her friend Tamara. At the outset of the series, neither Viola nor Tamara is married but they have an extensive network of friends and acquaintances. In the first volume, *The Devil from the Snuffbox*, when Viola finds a young woman wandering on the street late at night, she recoils at the thought of handing her over to the authorities, whose casual indifference to those in trouble is well known, and takes her home. The young woman is suffering from amnesia and so is unable to assist Viola in her campaign to find her kith and kin. During her investigations, Viola stumbles upon a flat where three young men have been

³⁵ Дарья Донцова, *Созвездие жадных псов* (Москва, Эксмо, 2002).

³⁶ Дарья Донцова, *Камасутра для Микимауса* (Москва, Эксмо, 2003).

murdered. Another young woman is declared missing and her mother entreats Viola to track her down. In the denouement Viola considers that she has discovered the identity of the murderer, only to learn from her good friend police detective Oleg Kuprin that she has misinterpreted the information she has gleaned from her investigations and that the instigator of the whole affair was a minor player hitherto unnoticed by her.³⁷

She marries Kuprin and keeps the detecting in the family, so to speak. The tenor of their relationship is set at the beginning of the second book where Viola speculates on the qualities of the ideal husband and reiterates the clichéd image of ‘a blind, deaf and dumb sea captain’. Subsequent adventures involve long-lost members of her extended family (including a father who has served a prison sentence) and feature a number of ‘exotic’ locations, such as a fitness centre and a modelling agency. Later in the series, Viola is hired as a part-time journalist for the paper ‘Criminal News’ and in the fifth book writes her own mystery novel. Throughout the series her husband and his colleagues repeatedly come to her assistance, except in *A Fillet of Golden Cockerel* where her literary agent, Fyodor, saves her life and resolves the mystery.

Even from such a cursory overview one can see that there are numerous commonalities in the stories. Each first volume reads as a *Bildungsroman* in which the potential of the detective is revealed, since, as Cathy Cole notes, ‘[e]ven amateur detectives, characters driven by their personal sense of justice, require something that makes them stand apart from their fellow citizens.’³⁸ The challenges vary considerably, but in each case the leading protagonist is faced with a set of exceptional circumstances which reveal her deeper resources. In the first series, it is Darya’s capacity to tackle a difficult situation in a foreign land; in the second, it is Yevlampiya’s ability to fit into an extended Russian family after the pampered life as the wife of a new Russian; while in the third, it is surviving in the new Russia as woman without marketable skills. In this they differ greatly from Marinina’s heroine, Anastasia Kamenskaya, who not only is employed to investigate but also knows several languages and supplements her income by doing translations into Russian. Each book

³⁷ Дарья Донцова, *Черт из табакерки* (Москва, Эксмо, 2003), 337.

³⁸ Cathy Cole, *Private Dicks and Feisty Chicks: An Interrogation of Crime Fiction* (Fremantle, Curtin University Books, 2004), 126.

essentially constitutes a variation of a meta-plot in which the kind-hearted well-intentioned heroine attempts to come to the assistance of a person in trouble, makes vigorous and repeated enquiries which serve as a catalyst for further events. These in turn lead to a denouement in which the 'sleuthette' either has to be rescued by the official upholders of the law or requires that the mystery of who and why be explained to her. The root cause of most of the crimes is money, which looms large in the action. In a curious demarcation, small sums are rendered in rubles while larger ones are in dollars. The upper level of the ruble is around a hundred, while the dollar sums start at ten and appear not to have an upper limit. Half a million dollars is the sum demanded by a blackmailer in one of the later novels of the third series.

All this could be seen as taking the formulaic nature of the genre a step too far,³⁹ but the predictability of the plot is compensated for by the liveliness of the personal vision of the author as conveyed through the first person narrator. Dontsova plunges the reader into a brash, bright, improved version of modern Russian life. She infuses the predictable story-line with 'exotic' adventures, unusual encounters, humorous observations, the vagaries of contemporary daily life and a cavalcade of recognizable stereotypical figures, all of which are foregrounded on matters domestic. There is an extremely playful element in the novels. From the outrageous titles⁴⁰ to the lively and modern style there is a strong accent on entertainment. Dontsova has a keen eye for the ridiculous and achieves an undercutting of tension by a variety of techniques. She is particularly attuned to the inanities of the contemporary language. In *Harvest of Poison Berries*, Viola mentally castigates a policeman who asks 'are you acquainted with the corpse?' and derides a television

³⁹ John Cawelti argues that '[e]ach formula has its own set of limits that determine what kind of new and unique elements are possible without straining the formula to breaking point'. One must therefore assume that the extremely stereotypical plot is more than compensated for by the variety of the particularities used to express it. *Adventure, Mystery, and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago and London, University of Chicago Press, 1976), 10.

⁴⁰ These are satirized in the later books of the third series where the heroine becomes a writer of crime fiction and entitles (under pressure from her publisher) her first work *Гнездо гиппопотама*. Дарья Донцова, *Чудеса в кастрюльке* (Москва, Эксмо, 2003), 159.

advertisement asking ‘what could be tastier than a box of chocolates?’ As she reasons, you cannot be acquainted with a corpse and of course the chocolates themselves are tastier than the box.⁴¹ There is very little overt political or ideological commentary but there is much social observation. The narrative is built on the overlapping binary contrasts of Russian/Soviet, Russian/Western, real/unreal, truth/falsehood which provide a dynamic and ever changing backdrop for the action.

Does it necessarily follow, however, that the presence of a thriving popular women’s fiction is a challenge to the dominant gender premises of the Soviet past? Certainly the successful careers of female authors indicate that the notion of a woman telling her own story and not necessarily having it mediated through a male story teller, be it narrator, author or both, is one which has been accepted, at least as far as popular literature is concerned. But a female author and a female protagonist do not necessarily translate into an endorsement of female agency. In western countries the rise of the feminist detective owed much to the success of the feminist movement. In appropriating the detective formula, female writers also appropriated its successful outcomes and tradition of closure. Although female writers based their plots on a different set of investigating premises (psychological analysis, attention to the details of distaff life, intuitive reasoning and the ability to synthesize various strands of information), the narrative still led to the same final resolution and served as an active validation of a female epistemology.

In the absence of widespread social acceptance of more liberalized gender roles, Russian women since 1991 have continued to operate largely under the same expectations and according to the same basic scripts as in earlier decades. Although, as one of Dontsova’s heroines notes, life has become more interesting since the demise of the Soviet state, the relative power balance between the genders has not altered significantly and women have remained under-represented at all levels of the decision-making process. If anything, the situation has deteriorated for most women. According to Barbara Alpern Engel,

Although the lived experience of women varied enormously, according to age, family status, geography, and nationality, everywhere in the former

⁴¹ Дарья Донцова, *Урожай ядовитых ягодок* (Москва, Эксмо, 2002), 70, 5

Soviet Union, women encountered a gender backlash that intensified following the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴²

Behind the ironic narrative, the kaleidoscope of daily life, the details of domestic minutiae, the role of the woman in Dontsova's novels is effectively circumscribed by those very qualities, which are in the narrative her greatest strength, her kindness and her spontaneity. In the diegetic resolution the natural order of traditional values is incontrovertibly re-established. An egregious example of the attitude to the investigations undertaken by Dontsova's heroines is provided by the epilogue of the sixth volume of the first series, *Dentists also cry*. The denouement takes place in Darya's living room in the presence of the main villain, the investigating official and various household and family members and follows hard on the heels of the last of several attempts on Darya's life. Darya finds herself set upon from both sides, by the murderer and the investigating officer. The police officer refers to her sarcastically as «Эркюль Пуаро незадачливый!» and proceeds to impugn her intelligence and her interpretation of events in the following terms: «Кошмарный случай, как она нам мешала, сколько глупостей она наделала!» and later «Вообще наша дорогая Даша уверенно идет по следу и, делая глупость за глупостью, ...».⁴³ He ridicules her amateurish attempts to cover her tracks by giving a false description of her attacker and her practice of removing evidence from the scene. His parting shot is «Я же говорю, глупая курица... Ну теперь тебе все ясно?» All this occurs in the presence of the apprehended murderer who directs equally venomous evaluations of her meddling ways («сволочь любопытная», «гадина», «сука»)⁴⁴ The heroine is hurt by this but does not defend herself thus allowing the official side of the story to dominate.

The world of Dontsova's heroines can best be understood as a response to a largely unexpressed but ever-present other reality. The investigations of the various heroines are described in great detail but signify very little, as they run parallel to an official investigation which is never inscribed in the confines of

⁴² Barbara Alpern Engel, *Women in Russia 1700-2000* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2004), 258.

⁴³ Дарья Донцова, *Дантисты тоже плачут* (Москва, Эксмо, 2002), 302-312.

⁴⁴ *Дантисты тоже плачут*, 310-14.

the tale. The impetuosity, kindness and foolishness of the heroine is foregrounded on the implied professionalism of the militia. The fact that Dontsova only needs to tap into this unseen world during the denouement to return everything to its traditional place shows the power of an accepted natural order in which most of the actions described in the book are irrelevant. The readers' expectations of this other world are occasionally confounded by the diegetic distortion of mythic elements, and many male characters are found wanting, but at the end they carry the day. Dontsova can give rein to her fantasy and provide her heroines with exciting adventures, she can satirize some of the holy cows of the underlying mythic structure, but at the end she returns to the traditional notions of a paternalistic structure. In a sustained metaphor the unproductive world which Dontsova creates is conveyed by the barrenness of her heroines. They live with other women or workaholic men, with other people's children and they engage in frivolous games, the wayward results of which require rectification by official representatives of the state. As in a former era, the private dimension is comprehensively subordinated to the demands of the largest official entity, the state (through its representatives).

Darya Dontsova's *detektiv* novels break new ground and constitute a noteworthy hybrid form. She does what Russian creative artists have done for several centuries; she takes a western model and infuses it with Russian content. Just as Russian authors took the detective story at the beginning of the twentieth century and turned it into Pinkerton, so Dontsova takes the Western tradition of the female private investigator and relocates it to the chaotic, dangerous, but vibrant world of the post-Soviet Russian state. She takes a concept, not organic to Russian society, and reworks it within the Russian context. If we regard the detective story as an area where female agency can be given a certain amount of scope, whether this manifests itself as detecting intuitively or by imitating the sort of agency enjoyed by male characters, then Dontsova's characters, for all their optimistic protestations, have virtually no agency at all. They serve as catalysts, it must be granted, but this in the novels is their essential function. For all the prominence of the female narrative and the novelty of the distaff view of societal workings, the effectiveness of the heroine remains in the grander scheme of things virtually approximated to that of the Soviet era. She plays a minor, albeit noisy, role in the grand dramas of the evolving state but her vision is not validated through tangible results or authorial sanction.

Darya Dontsova is not alone in cleaving to the established tradition. Catharine Nepomniashchy decides that 'it would be problematical to identify Marinina as a 'feminist' writer in any recognizably Western sense of that word'⁴⁵ while Knutte's analysis of the *detektiv* novels of Marina Serova inclines her to include mention of the rumour that the novels are actually written by a male collective.⁴⁶ Marina Belova's recent novel *A Foreign Prince into the Bargain* pits a Russian heroine in search of a foreign husband against her loyal Russian admirer. Her Portuguese suitor turns out to be a serial sexual exploiter of desperate women, but even when he is completely discredited, she does not recognize the sterling worth of the former.⁴⁷ And yet the cause of the amateur female detective has found an unexpected champion in an unlikely source. The best-selling author Boris Akunin, who originally came to prominence as the creator of the popular Erast Fandorin series, has also penned three novels in his Provincial Detective Story series⁴⁸. These relate the adventures of a nun, Sister Pelagiya, in nineteenth-century rural Russia. In each of the books Pelagiya is instrumental in solving the mystery and in her investigation of the Black Monk succeeds where three previous male envoys have been unsuccessful. Immediately prior to her setting off to investigate this case, she makes a claim for her abilities to be recognized in an exchange with her bishop.

Нет сильного пола и нет слабого. Каждая из половин человечества в чем-то сильна, в чем-то слаба.⁴⁹

Regrettably, this is not a position endorsed by Dontsova's characters and, one suspects, the large audience of readers her books attract. Parallels can be drawn between Dontsova and certain American writers, in particular, Jill Churchill (*War and Peas* and *From Here to Paternity*) and Janet Evanovich

⁴⁵ Nepomnyashchy, 171

⁴⁶ Хармуте Треппер, «Филипп Марлоу в шелковых чулках, или женоненавистничество в русском женском детективе» *Новое литературное обозрение*, № 40 (1999), 420.

⁴⁷ Марина Белова, *Заморский принц в нагрузку* (Москва, Эксмо, 2004).

⁴⁸ These are *Пелагия и черный монах*, *Пелагия и белый бульдог*, *Пелагия и красный петух*.

⁴⁹ Борис Акунин, *Пелагия и черный монах* (Москва, АСТ, 2004), 200.

(*One for the Money, Two for the Dough*). Common elements include a female amateur private investigator, an emphasis on the family and the domestic side of life, constant reverses in the conducting of investigations. However there is one important difference. Although the American heroines also require a male confederate to enable them to translate their insights into action, they are the ones who actually solve the crime and so validate their activities. Darya Vasilieva, Yevlampiya Romanova and Viola Tarakanova by contrast succeed only in muddying the waters. In the novels of Darya Dontsova the heroine is condemned to be a seeker of truth, but never a finder of truth.