

Chemistry of Creativity, Chemistry of Russian Character



Daria ALYUKOVA

Zakhar Prilepin is a writer, publicist, political activist. Having completed his philology studies, he worked initially as a packer, a security guard and a journalist before joining a special military unit that took part in anti-terror deployments in Chechnya. In 2008 he won the Russian National Bestseller Award for his book "Sin". He is a laureate of numerous prizes and awards, and his books are required reading in 5 Russian universities. Prilepin could be a novel character himself. He currently lives in Nizhny Novgorod – a city that was known as Gorky between 1932-1980 after the writer Maxim Gorky who was born there. Ironically, thanks to one of the critics' good graces Prilepin is sometimes referred to as "the new Gorky"..

RM Do you have taboo topics in interviews, or perhaps least favourite questions?

ZP: Not really, but I often have to answer one and the same question again and again. It's quite boring, so I have to invent a new answer every time. I'm not fond of discussing my military service in Chechnya – for the sheer reason that I don't want this image of me as a 'war veteran' mythologized.

Actually, many writers seek to become in-demand for interviews, but get disappointed when they finally get popular with the press – at very least by the fact that their words get misinterpreted and misrepresented.

RM Joseph Addison once said in response to a lady, who complained of his having talked little in company, that he has but nine-pence in ready money, but can draw for a thousand pounds. Is it true that writers, although expected to be as eloquent in speech as they are in writing, sometimes turn out incommunicative?

ZP: Absolutely so – some are merely incommunicative, some are even inarticulate. In some cases the personality exactly matches the media image, sometimes it's not in line with public vision at all. Actually, TV presence is indicative: if a writer is often invited, he is also a good speaker – like Tatiana Tolstaya, Alexander Prokhanov, to name just a few.

RM What is the process when writing a book?

ZP: It has a complex chemical composition. You unwittingly collect impressions, thoughts, gestures. But involuntariness is a key element; otherwise the result is artificial, fake. Once an actor told me a story about coming to a restaurant and catching an expressive gesture of a waiter; the actor realized it was exactly what he was lacking for his part, and

the waiter "made him a gift of a hand". In my case this does not work. Impressions and feelings get collected all by themselves, and at a certain point, totally unpredictably, they interfuse and transform into something new. This is the case when the outcome is much bigger than just the sum of its elements.

RM Do you engineer a plot or a main idea in advance?

ZP: Hmm, I cannot imagine myself thinking: "Today I will start a book about fishermen, and it will have a murder in the end". Above all – a plot is unimportant. Emotions and subtle psychological movements – this is what carries a reader away.

RM How often do the critics' renditions surprise you? Do they see ideas that you did not mean to put into your book?

ZP: Actually, it happens thickly. But reading this is quite intriguing. Writers and critics compliment each other, as a writer hardly ever thinks about context and allusions, except for personal ones. The more mathematics in the writing process – the worse the result. I started "The Pathologies" as a novel about love, then I decided to add a bit about war. Then the structure was often complimented, as love and war chapters alternated throughout the book, but designing a particular structure was never my purpose. So, even if you take a text to pieces and then recompose it, something essential steals away.

RM Do you think your books can be translated? Translation is, in fact, a deconstruction and further reconstruction of a text.

ZP: I would say yes, however, certain socio-existential phenomena cannot. There are cases when even a synonym would kill the meaning, let alone the translation. For instance, the story involved Russian soldiers riding through Grozny on a UAZ



(colloquially called Kozelok – "a goaty"), eating kilka. In French it turned into soldiers riding a jeep and eating sardines. Literally it means the same, but loses all the references. Dirty words lose all the energy as well when translated; "we set up trip wire and ***ed away" – in Polish it turned into "we put trip wire and left", and the phrase sagged. However, I believe the energy of a text can win through despite a poor translation.

RM One of Sergey Dovlatov's sketches rallies that the original texts by Kurt Vonnegut heavily lose out to the Russian translation. Speaking of Dovlatov and other emigrants, do you consider it possible to write about Russia if you are abroad?

ZP: To me it is absurd, especially in the long term. Russian language "does not sing in captivity". Mass emigration in the 20th century did an ill service to Russian literature. As for myself, I quickly get tired of a journey and start feeling homesick.

RM Do you have a personal definition of Russian Mind? Boris Akunin once told a story about Francis Greene – English

physicist, Graham Greene's son, who has spent a long time in Russia and likes the people, and in reply to a similar question once said that being Russian means to be able and fond of discourse upon abstract matters – Big things like the meaning of life, soul, or the course of history.

ZP: This is quite witty. First thing that comes to mind is a saying that flatters Russian vanity: if you want an insuperable thing done, ask a Chinese; if you want an impossible thing done, ask a Russian. There is a grain of truth here, as Russians have a colossal ability for mobilization in emergencies – but in standard situations you can see tired Tim.

Jokes aside, I find defiance of everyday comfort, of living conditions a defining characteristic; at the same time, petite bourgeoisie attitude is the other extreme. Obsession with things is even worse than being detached from everyday life.

Another feature is bravado which also cuts both ways. It means brashness, scorching, devil-may-careness; however, it also means audacity, bold spirit, large heart. I've seen these people at war when

these features exert most clearly: young men – yesterday's boys, are fearless, resilient, high-spirited.

RM What do you think about national cultural brands? Those of the USSR are still very powerful in popular culture, while those of contemporary Russia still fail to match them in energy and integrity. What can be done to invigorate cultural identity?

ZP: That's quite true, for example, the songs of 1920-30s are incredibly powerful and passionate. To invent something new, a society needs certain latitude, fresh air. Otherwise the result is bloodless. A simulacrum. There's one demonstrative fact: the Soviet era presented a separate genre of books and movies dedicated to proletarians – steelmakers, combine drivers. Nothing inspiring, or merely plausible, has been written about today's heroes – mid-level managers. For some reason the praised contemporary values do not catalyze good texts. Maybe this is indicative of the necessity to rethink the promulgated values. I think that Russia desperately needs a national idea that is not stiff and phony. The risk is huge – history has seen plenty of empires that disappeared, dissolved. Also, despite the seemingly weak civil society, there is the possibility of public disturbances. As recent events in other countries show, crowds do not need to count dozens of millions in order to bring about changes, 2% of a population is more than enough. It's like electrical wiring in your house: works for years, and then in one moment – bang! – the house burns.

RM What social phenomena would you consider alerting?

ZP: Involuntary social marginalization. And, again, this feeling of artificiality, of surreal life. As if there was a common unspoken agreement, a role play of building a quasi-career in a quasi-superpower. Russia is a country of phantasmagoria.

"Sankya" that came out in 2006 is a novel with a group of political extremist's in focus. It takes place in the 'alternative reality' of recent years. I thought the book was strongly tied to the time segment it depicts; surprisingly, it remains topical. Kirill Serebrennikov, a famous director, staged a show called "Hell-raisers" which was based on "Sankya". The axis of the novel is the feelings of a person who is shut off from society to political fringe, and who struggles to learn the fundamental mechanisms of society.