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# Russian Writers Since 1980

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Aleksandra Marinina  
(Marina Anatol'evna Alekseeva)

(16 July 1957 - )

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BOOKS: *Shestikrylyi Serafim* (Moscow: Militsiia, 1992);  
*Stechenie obstoiatel'sto* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1993);  
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*Smert' i nemnogo liubvi* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1995);  
*Chernyi spisok* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1995);  
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*Za vse nado platiť* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1995);  
*Chuzhaia maska* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1996);  
*Ne meshaite palachu* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1996);  
*Stilist* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1996);  
*Illüziia grekha* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1996);  
*Svetlyi lik smerti* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1996);  
*Imia poterpevshego—nikto* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1996);  
*Muzhskie igry* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1997);  
*Ia umer uchera* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1997);  
*Rekviem* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1998);  
*Prizrak muzyki* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1998);  
*Sed'maia zhertva* (Moscow: EKSMO, 1999);  
*Kogda bogi smeütsia* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2000);  
*Tot, kto znaet* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2001);  
*Komedii* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2001);  
*Nezapertaia dver'* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2001);  
*Fantom pamiatii* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2002);  
*Zakan trekh otritsanii* (Moscow: EKSMO, 2003).

RECORDINGS: *Ne meshaite palachu*, read by Marinina,  
Moscow, TWIK-Lyrec, 2001;  
*Stilist*, read by Marinina, Moscow, TWIK-Lyrec, 2002.

OTHER: *Priamye proizvodstvennye i nauchno-tekhnicheskie sviazi s zarubezhnymi partnerami v usloviakh destviia zakona SSR "O gosudarstvennom predpriiatii (ob edinenii),"* edited by Alekseeva (Moscow: Upr. inform. TPP SSR, 1989);



Aleksandra Marinina (Marina Anatol'evna Alekseeva)

*Voprosy sovershenstvovaniia pravookhranitel'noi deiatel'nosti organov vnutrennykh del*, edited by Alekseeva (Moscow: MIUI, 1996);  
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In a post-Soviet publishing industry flooded with action novels, mysteries, sword-and-sorcery epic fantasies,

and translations of the latest Western thrillers, Aleksandra Marinina was the undisputed champion of the Russian best-seller lists throughout the second half of the 1990s. Her mystery novels, most of which follow the exploits of the decidedly unadventurous Moscow police detective Anastasiia Pavlovna (Nastia) Kamenskaia, have a broad appeal among the Russian reading audience, largely transcending the categories of class, gender, and education. On its own, her popularity among the Russian reading public throughout the former Soviet Union would make Marinina's work significant for contemporary Russian literary culture, but the importance of her novels lies as much in their themes and preoccupations as in their marketplace success. Marinina's mysteries are often self-conscious reflections on the contemporary Russian literary market and the importance of professionalism and systematization, while the twists and turns of her plots betray a strong concern with the dangers of unchecked scientific progress and experimentation, the plight of the post-Soviet family, and the lives and careers of unconventional women.

Marinina's success in the Russian marketplace is a result of the features that make her stand out from her competitors: complex interwoven plot lines that, though often straining credibility, usually come together into a coherent narrative organized around a single, overarching idea; a set of easily recognizable and engaging protagonists; consistent attention to the psychology and motivations of her characters; a keen understanding of the nature, appeal, and limitations of serial narrative; frequent references to literary classics and high culture in general; and a readable individual prose style that, although subject to easy caricature, is far superior to that of the average Russian mystery or potboiler. Marinina no longer dominated the best-seller lists after 1999 to the same extent that she did in the 1990s, in part because the competition has become more fierce, and in part because she has not sustained the same break-neck writing pace that characterized her output in that decade (she now averages one book per year, as opposed to the eight new novels she published in 1995, the peak of her production). But the adaptation of her work into television movies (all of her novels either have been made into movies or are slated for production) ensures an ever-broadening audience for Marinina's stories.

Aleksandra Marinina is the pseudonym of Marina Anatol'evna Alekseeva, who was born in Leningrad on 16 July 1957, where she lived until moving to Moscow in 1971. Her father, Anatolii Alekseev, was a detective in the Leningrad militia, while her mother, Lidiia Alekseeva, is a professor of law and the first vice president of the Law Academy at the Russian Ministry of Justice. After a secondary education in special English and music schools, Alekseeva enrolled in the Department of Law at the prestigious Moscow State University. She graduated in 1979, whereupon she began her career in the Moscow Police

(*militsiia*). From the beginning, her police work was analytical rather than investigative. As a researcher with the rank of lieutenant, she specialized in profiling violent and mentally ill criminals. In 1986 Alekseeva defended her doctoral (*kandidatskaia*) dissertation, titled "Lichnost' ~~preduprezhdenii~~ *spestsiial'nogo retsidiva*" (The Personality of the Convicted Violent Criminal and the Prevention of Special Recidivism). From 1987 to 1994 she continued her analytical work and was the author of more than thirty publications on crime prevention and forecasting; unfortunately, most of these articles cannot be identified.

Alekseeva began her literary career in 1991, when she and a colleague, Aleksandr Gorkin, drafted a short mystery novel called *Shestikrylyi Serafim* (Six-Winged Serafim), first published in the journal *Militsiia* in 1992. Though the product of a collaborative effort, this novel appeared under the sole name of Aleksandra Marinina, a pseudonym composed of the co-authors' first and last names, which they had previously used for occasional articles and humorous sketches in various professional and popular magazines. A story about the drug mafia's ties to law enforcement, *Shestikrylyi Serafim* is not part of Marinina's subsequent fictional world and is the only Marinina novel that had a co-author. Marinina has vowed that the book will never be reprinted.

From 1992 through 1998 Marinina combined her rapidly growing literary career with her police work. She wrote eighteen novels while still holding a full-time position at the Moscow Law Institute of the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs. She finally retired with the rank of colonel in February 1998, in part because her fame was becoming an increasing distraction at work; readers who wanted legal and police advice from their favorite author were tying up the switchboard lines at the institute. She now devotes herself to her writing full-time. Marinina is married to Sergei Zatochnyi, a police detective who now teaches at the Academy of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

All of Marinina's novels but one—*Chernyi spisok* (The Blacklist, 1995)—center on Nastia Kamenskaia, who is typically introduced to the reader as an exhausted, lazy woman in her thirties struggling to get out of bed. Kamenskaia's unwillingness to wake up in the morning, her daily rituals of conjugating foreign verbs while standing under a shower (of now hot, now cold water)—followed by the first of many cups of coffee that she will drink—become, in the course of the series, a touchstone that helps define and redefine the character and welcome the reader back into the detective's world. Unlike most of her colleagues in the Moscow Police Violent Crime Unit, Kamenskaia has a university education, relatively refined tastes, and a familiarity with five foreign languages (English, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish). Her skills as a polyglot are of little help to her at work, but they do enable her to translate



Front cover for Marinina's *Smert' radi smerti* (*Death for the Sake of Death*, 1995), in which a woman detective, Nastia Kamenskaia, finds out that a scientific experiment is causing people in a Moscow neighborhood to commit violent crimes (Skillman Library, Lafayette College)

foreign mystery novels, thus supplementing her small police salary. Although journalists typically compare Marinina with Agatha Christie, a more accurate comparison would be between Kamenskaia and Nero Wolfe. Kamenskaia never carries a gun, wears a uniform only under duress, and does her best to avoid leaving her office. She prefers processing numbers and statistics and generating analytical reports for her supervisors to actual crime-solving. But she works for the maverick colonel Gordeev, and over the years he has painstakingly assembled a handpicked team of independent, professional police who are largely immune to the pressures of bribery and corruption that run rampant throughout the Interior Ministry. Besides Gordeev, the regular supporting cast includes Kamenskaia's fellow detectives; her husband, Alesha Chistiakov, a world-renowned professor of mathematics; Stasov, a former policeman who now provides private security; and Stasov's wife, Tat'iana Obraztsova, a police detective who writes murder mysteries under the pseudonym Tat'iana Tomilina.

Marinina distributes among her cast of characters a set of complementary talents and virtues that, while perhaps verging on caricature, are also evocative of the author's own preoccupation with professionalism and a systematic approach to one's life and work. Kamenskaia is, as the reader is told repeatedly, a walking computer, whose arcane system of graphs, charts, and databases allows her to solve the most convoluted mysteries. Her colleague Misha Dotsenko is unsurpassed at working with witnesses and getting them to recall details they thought long forgotten. Indeed, even the most minor characters in Marinina's novels—those with little or no connection to the business of solving crimes—display a thoroughness and concern for detail that at times seems incommensurate with the task at hand. Kamenskaia's sister-in-law Dasha indulges in lengthy monologues about the niceties of fine clothing and makeup (for which Kamenskaia herself has little patience). Irina, the young woman who runs the household for Obraztsova and Stasov, has a logical, systematic, and, above all, professional approach to shopping and cooking. One may argue that, given Kamenskaia's lack of interest in both traditional feminine pursuits and political feminism, characters such as Dasha and Irina are redeemed only through the professionalization of feminine virtues.

Marinina's concern with professionalism is so pervasive that it even characterizes her villains. In *Igra na chuzhom pole* (*The Away Game*, 1993) the plot hinges on the fact that even snuff films need classically trained, conscientious composers to write the movies' scores, and that a drug-addicted dwarf with a solid musical education can analyze the music and conclude that the film culminates in murder. On a metatextual level, Marinina's enthusiasm is understandable: not only is professionalism a quality that is arguably all too scarce throughout Russia today but it is also a sore point for both of the author's own chosen careers in law enforcement and popular entertainment. In her novels Marinina's narrator reserves particular warmth for those who exemplify professionalism in either endeavour, while violations of the codes and norms of professional behavior are often at the heart of her mysteries. That both Kamenskaia and Obraztsova—like their creator—combine police work with literary craft allows Marinina to create mysteries in which the ins and outs of each profession are explored in meticulous detail.

In *Ukradennyi son* (*Stolen Dream*, 1994) Kamenskaia's reading of works by a popular Russian émigré mystery writer solves the main dilemma. She discovers along the way that the author is not who he seems: he is a fictional construct used to group together the works of underpaid, unpublished Russian *graphomaniacs*. In *Stilist* (*The Stylist*, 1996) Kamenskaia's old lover and linguistic mentor, presented as the translator of wildly popular Japanese mystery novels, is tangentially connected to the main murder plot, but his presence allows the author to give a

scathing insider's view of the world of contemporary publishing. Moreover, the murder mystery leads Kamenskaia to resolve a literary mystery: her former lover turns out to be the author, rather than translator, of these "Japanese" books. The plot of *Chuzhaia maska* (Someone Else's Mask, 1996) pivots on the murder of a male writer of best-selling romance novels. After his funeral his widow continues to peddle his last unpublished manuscripts, leading to speculation that she herself was the author or that her husband is not dead after all. Given the frequent (and evidently groundless) accusations that Marinina herself is nothing more than a name hiding several different ghost writers, the author's frequent investigations of the intricacies of authorship is understandable.

Marinina's concern with the business and politics of literature corresponds to a larger sociopolitical arena, that of the intelligentsia in post-Soviet society. Her own works are routinely reviled by highbrow critics as exemplifying the worst trends of a literary market that caters to the lowest common denominator, but her novels reveal a complex attitude toward the artistic and technical intelligentsia. In addition, Marinina's detective stories are a guilty pleasure, and many intellectuals who might otherwise think they are above crime fiction indulge in them. Part of Marinina's crossover appeal lies in her understanding of the cultural code: she herself is a product of the same cultural milieu that produced the intelligentsia in Russia. Though most of Marinina's characters are by no means intellectuals, the university-educated Kamenskaia and her immediate family have a perfect intelligentsia pedigree. Kamenskaia's familiarity with classical music, her taste in art, and her background in languages are a reassuring feature for educated readers, reminding them at regular intervals that they are in worthy company.

Despite the recurring references to the literary and artistic canon, the intelligentsia and high culture are not put on a pedestal. In *Igra na chuzhom pole* Kamenskaia engages in a spirited defense of Ed McBain's mysteries, which her new acquaintance, an elderly music teacher, considers devoid of artistic and intellectual value. To complicate matters even further, this same music teacher turns out to be a far less benign figure than she at first appears. Indeed, if Marinina's plots are at all predictable, her tendency to reveal unexpected motives and criminal actions on the part of cultured, intellectual, and highly pleasant people is the reason. In Marinina's world, the trail of corpses often leads to an overeducated, refined old lady who has every reason to turn to murder.

If the violent impulses of the artistic intelligentsia initially come as a surprise, they are no match for the cynicism and casual disregard for human life that Marinina so often attributes to members of the technical intelligentsia. By no means is the author making a blanket condemnation of an entire group. Just as Kamenskaia has one foot in

the world of humanities, her husband, Alyosha Chistiaikov, is a world-renowned mathematician of impeccable virtue and good humor. More often than not, however, Marinina's doctors, technicians, and researchers turn out to be devoted more to blind ambition than to the alleviation of human suffering. *Smert' radi smerti* (Death for Death's Sake, 1995) establishes a mystery involving unusually high rates of violent crime in one particular Moscow neighborhood; Kamenskaia discovers that the rise in crime is the result of an antenna on a research institute that uses radio waves to experiment on the population. The bizarre murders that occur in *Chuzhaia maska* can be explained only by the revelation that a provincial doctor once ran a black-market baby ring, in which he used to deliver twins by cesarean section and tell the unwitting mothers that they were carrying singletons. Scientists and artist themselves become the victims of a cruel medical experiment in *Za vse nado plati'* (No Such Thing as a Free Lunch, 1995) when they voluntarily take a chemical compound meant to increase their intellectual and creative abilities; they have not been told that the treatment inevitably leads to death. The plot of *Illuziia grekha* (The Illusion of Sin, 1996) centers on an obstetrician's attempts during the course of many years to create a new breed of superhumans by irradiating unsuspecting women whom he himself has impregnated. No doubt Marinina's mad science is convenient to the plot, allowing her to construct intricate stories that would otherwise be plausible only through recourse to the supernatural. Yet, by the same token, her manifest distrust of science gone wild reflects a marked trend in post-Soviet culture, recapitulating the relationship between the population of the former Soviet Union and the authorities: again and again, powerful people in Marinina's novels treat human lives as simply the raw materials on which they can perform both social and biological experiments.

Marinina's characteristically post-Soviet distrust for social experimentalism provides at least a partial explanation for her approach to gender in these novels. Her protagonist Kamenskaia is strong, brilliant, engaging, yet still deeply flawed; more important, she is virtually the only developed female character in contemporary Russian popular entertainment whose adventures and appeal do not lie in her sexual prowess. The world of action novels such as Mikhail Dotsenko's popular *Beshenyi* (Mad Dog) series is populated by attractive young women whose sole narrative purpose is to have sex with at least one of the men in the novel, while the female stars of other series, such as in Elena Kornilova's *Pantera* (The Panther, 1997) or Dmitrii Shcherbakov's *Nimfomanka* (The Nymphomaniac, 1998), tend to be aggressive, sex-crazed vixens. Kamenskaia has nothing in common with these heroines. Instead, the narrator repeatedly reminds her readers that Kamenskaia has only a passing interest in her appearance, but that when



Front cover for the 1998 edition of Marinina's novel *Stylist* (*The Stylist*), in which the detective Kamenskaia investigates a murder that brings her in close touch with a former lover and mentor (University of Kansas Libraries)

duty (or the occasional whim) demands, she can transform herself with the help of judiciously applied cosmetics and the designer clothes that her mother periodically brings back from Europe. This chameleon-like capacity, too, is presumably part of Kamenskaia's appeal: in Marinina's first few novels, Kamenskaia, like a superhero with a secret identity, frequently undergoes just such a transformation, from shy bookworm to femme fatale.

Throughout most of Marinina's books, Kamenskaia is quite satisfied with being the lone woman in a male-dominated profession, showing little interest in feminist politics or the question of equal rights. Only in the third novel, *Igra na chuzhom pole*, is Kamenskaia so offended by a police officer's refusal to take her seriously that she engages in an extended monologue about the outrages of sexual discrimination. Usually, any reflections on gender on the part of the narrator or Kamenskaia herself reinforce traditional assumptions of masculinity and femininity: over and over, Kamenskaia is shown to be the exception that proves the rule. While such a stance might not satisfy some of Marinina's Western readers, it does allow her Russian female audience to savor the adventures of an independent, powerful woman without having their worldview challenged.

Kamenskaia's appeal is intimately connected with the nature of open-ended serial fiction, itself a relatively rare phenomenon in Russian entertainment before the 1990s. Her legendary quirks give the returning reader a sense of familiarity, while the speed and frequency of Marinina's publication schedule allows the author to develop her character from book to book. Marinina has allowed Kamenskaia to age in real time. Readers watch her come to terms with the idea of marrying her longtime lover, Alesha, and their wedding provides the opportunity for yet another murder mystery (in *Smert' i nemnogo ljubvi* [Death and a Little Love], 1995). She and Alesha drift apart over the years as Kamenskaia watches herself grow colder and less "human" with a vaguely dissatisfied detachment. Only when her own problems come to a head does she regain her enthusiasm for life and patch up her relationship with her husband (*Ia umer vchera* [Yesterday, I Died], 1997). Marinina rewards her longtime audience with plausible development of her leading characters.

This combination of stand-alone mysteries with up-to-the-minute serial fiction may ensure Aleksandra Marinina's historical significance, in that her novels are a fictionalized account of the daily life of post-Soviet Moscow. When pyramid schemes collapse, banks fail, or terrorists' bombs explode, such events are inevitably incorporated into the background of the novels. After the banking crisis of 1998, Kamenskaia and her husband lose all of their savings but still owe money for taxes (their insistence on paying every kopeck that the government demands of them is perhaps the greatest strain on the credibility of the novels). For the next several books, the couple count every ruble, living in an apartment that is halfway through a remodeling process that will probably never be completed. By developing her ingenious, impossible plots against the backdrop of an immediately recognizable post-Soviet urban life, Marinina has created a compromise between the fantastic and the mundane that holds a strong appeal for a weary Russian audience, hungry for magical entertainment that resonates with their everyday lives.

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