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Reading as a Value Among Young Russian Intellectuals

Liubov' Borusiak

On Reading and Not Reading Today

Boris Dubin

The Internet and Political Involvement in Russia

Denis Volkov

M.E. Sharpe

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LIUBOV' BORUSIAK

Reading as a Value Among Young Russian Intellectuals

Research on the reading habits of the more intellectually inclined young people of Russia shows that their allegiance is to the more serious classics of literature rather than to contemporary popular fiction. Thus, the literary tastes of the older generation of Russian intellectuals are being preserved by the younger generation.

It is acknowledged that the value of reading has gone down in today's Russian society, and this is rated as unequivocally negative. Instead of "the most well-read country in the world," Russia is now called a "society of TV viewers" by the some observers; it is not a nation of independent thinkers but passive objects of the influence of the state and mass media, subservient to the state. The abdication of the intelligentsia as an authoritative social entity that sets cultural norms, the decline of active social involvement in all social spheres, the change in social and politi-

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Translated by Kim Bralithwaite.

cal processes over time and the simplification and atomization of social structure have all led to a drastic decline in the role of books and reading.¹

The data from nationwide surveys by the Levada Center indicate a drastic decline in magazine circulation numbers and the size of home libraries, and reading is increasingly a marginal activity. In nineteen years, from 1990 through 2009, the number of adult inhabitants of Russia who read books at least two or three times a week went down from 29 percent to 22 percent, and the number of those who never read books rose from 19 percent to 36 percent, a twofold increase.² In just nine years, from 2000 to 2009, the percentage of people who never buy books doubled from 30 percent to 60 percent, and the number of those who do purchase books regularly went from 12 percent to 4 percent.³ Moreover, 90 percent of the population never or almost never go to libraries; more than 60 percent do not borrow books from friends and acquaintances, and 90 percent do not download books from the Internet.⁴

Increasingly, books in the home no longer have a sacred value as an indicator of the family's culture; they are turning into an ordinary commodity. This is why one-third of those who buy books (34 percent) discard them after reading or give them to friends or relatives to read and discard. Such an attitude is a new phenomenon in our culture. As a result, the percentage of people who do not have any books in their home or have a random selection of fewer than 100 books has risen from 58 percent to 70 percent in the past fifteen years.⁵

However, processes by which a transition is made from one system of values to another one, the decay of old cultural codes, tends to occur gradually and do not affect all groups at the same time and to the same degree. The present article offers an analysis of attitudes toward books and reading in a transitional group, members of the middle class in the capital city, and in a group that evidently preserves the intellectual values to the greatest extent, the young intellectual elite of the capital city.

Books and the middle class: an examination of young parents' attitudes toward their children's reading

To gain a general understanding of what value literature and reading have for today's middle class (or, more accurately, its female members) let us turn to forums of a popular Internet portal, whose participants are highly educated, well-off middle-class women between the ages of thirty and forty, living primarily in Moscow. I tracked all entries relating to this topic in 2009–10. In that period of time, there were over 5,000 postings, but as a rule the topic of books and reading did not come up, which means that reading is not an essential part of the lives of female representatives of the middle class. Only occasionally are there requests for advice about something to read, something "light, pleasant, and relaxing." One gets the impression that reading is not of special interest, it is hardly an issue at all; it only represents a pleasant relaxation away from professional duties and concerns.

These female discussion participants assign huge importance to the upbringing of their children. In the many forums relating to parents and children, we find dozens of daily entries on literally all aspects of life, including: the choice of a school or college; the state of the children's health; all kinds of activities and lessons outside of school (music, drawing, and sports); issues linked to learning in school and in college; psychological problems of interaction between parents and children; discussions of the topic of "the child and the computer (the TV)"; purchases of clothing and textbooks; conflicts between teachers and children, between older and adult children in the family, and with classmates; the organization of a party for a child (or a class).

The variety of problems is boundless, although certain ones have greater priority. These include, first, the correct choice of a school, since for this group it is obvious that going to a good school gives the child excellent opportunities in his future life and career, while the mass schools, disdainfully dubbed "low-rent schools," are hardly discussed as an option. Since for this group of

parents the development of their children and future is top priority, I decided to determine the extent to which children's reading is seen as an issue. In other words, do female members of the middle class think that the choice of books for children's reading and the problem that children have no interest in reading are important issues? I analyzed several thousand postings and comments in the same period, 2009–10, to determine whether this problem is actively discussed. I assumed that the choice of a good school as a guarantee of a successful future might go together with the idea that for a child to be successful he should read a great deal, and read "the right things," the kinds of books that are approved by the community.

In the first entry related to children's reading, the writer complained that the school program has become too complicated, beyond children's understanding. Second-graders are supposed to memorize poems in which half the words are beyond the understanding of eight-year-olds, and this is ridiculous, since the burden of explaining these words falls not on teachers but on parents. In general, the entry concludes that such works should not be used but, instead, works that are more modern, simpler, and easier to understand. The text in question was an excerpt from *Evgenii Onegin*: "Winter! . . . The peasant, rejoicing. . . ." The posting puts in bold the words that, in her opinion, were unknown and not necessary to today's child: "rejoicing," "wood sledge," "sensing," "trudges along," "at a trot," "reins," "exploding," "covered sledge," "daring," "mongrel house dog," and others—exactly half the words in the excerpt, not counting prepositions and conjunctions.

That opinion might be considered amusing, but it reflects a change in the situation that is quite serious: Russian classical literature, which used to be considered a sacred reflection of the nation's culture, has become desacralized. To well-educated young women, and not just to their children, these works are now simply a set of texts that do not carry any special value, but are more or less successful. In the case described, the text was perceived as unsuccessful, since it could not be understood. Even the Pushkin text—Pushkin is still perceived as a major symbol of Russian

culture—no longer carries any particular value, obvious evidence of change with the vanishing of the old system of values.

An analysis of all the entries on forums relating to parents and children showed that very few have to do with reading, which is clearly retreating from the forefront of problematization and reflection. Under what circumstances is this taking place? An analysis of Internet discussions permits us to conclude that mothers of school students and adolescents, who are educated members of the middle class, are in a twofold situation. The first group consists of those who retain the old intellectual system of values and have an interest in their own reading and their children's reading; the second group consists of women of the new formation for whom reading no longer represents a supreme value or, at times, any value at all. From time to time members of the first group turn to forum participants with anxious questions: "My child does not read! What am I to do? Does this mean that he is going to grow up and be a blockhead?" It is instructive to note how precisely the groups of answers are distinguished. None of the first group, of course, agree that without reading a child will grow up to be "a low-culture blockhead"—possibly out of considerations of politeness and courtesy. But they suggest that parents should try to get their child to read. The most frequent option, which is fairly neutral, is: "There is nothing to worry about, it is just that he has not yet found the right book; as soon as he does, he will start to read." Of course, the reasonable question "How is the child ever going to come across the right book if he does not read *at all*?" does not get an answer; the questioner is just advised to wait a while and be confident that something will happen. Some posts cite examples from their own lives: "My child was not reading either, but then he got interested in comic books, and now I can hardly buy enough of them." It seems fundamentally important that it hardly makes any difference just what the child is going to read, as long as he does read, which is a value in and of itself.

Similar answers include the suggestion to retell a book's story, and then the child may hear something that sticks in his memory and may want to read on his own; or the mother could start to read a story and stop at the most interesting place so that the child will

become intrigued, cannot wait, and will continue on his own. It is a suggestion similar to the technique of television series, when the episode stops at the most interesting place. We recall that this is what Scheherazade did.

However, a larger number of comments often have completely different advice. The writer is urged not to be worried or upset: reading is not essential in order to become well educated and cultured. That desired outcome can be achieved through different means: talk about things with the child a little more, take him to exhibits, to the theater, and so on. This is one variant of the diversity of culture, but it still relates to the old system of values of the intelligentsia: all elements of "high" culture are equally important but interchangeable. A more pragmatic and "modern" option is to suggest the use of audio and video versions: "Just buy her an audio book, what is the difference?"; "Let him watch films or cartoons, they are just as good"; "In the long run, if you really want to go ahead and buy books there are plenty available that provide a brief synopsis, that is not a bad way to give the child some idea."

But in a large number of responses we perceive the opposite view that books do not make any special contribution to overall culture: "What is so bad about not reading?"; "All right, if he doesn't read he doesn't need to"; "My husband and I do read, but if our child does not there is nothing terrible about that, he may have some other hobby"; "Don't sweat it; on V Kontakte [akin to Facebook] half the participants answered 'I hate to read!!!' when asked about their favorite books"; "You might as well back off, I also used to nag my child, and he would say: 'Get off my case, I couldn't care less about reading that dusty crap, with all the stuff that is going on in my life right now.' What can I say? He's right." Moreover, as examples of a positive result of active avoidance of reading, writers of these posts refer to husbands, friends, and relatives who do not read but are still exceptionally interesting and very well-off individuals with a rich inner life and good company: "And there are some (my former husband, in particular) who do not read fiction at all, and this does not prevent them from being encyclopedically educated individuals and very interesting conversationalists"; "My

husband does not like to read, and he never has. So what? He is a very successful and intelligent man and he has two college degrees." But while positive examples of highly cultured nonreading people are often cited, examples from their own lives are rare. The older norms have not completely disintegrated: "The last serious book I read was at the institute, as part of the curriculum. About the only things I read are thick magazines like *Karavan*, and not very often."

When they describe successful examples of the formation of a cultured individual "without books," we sense a kind of justification, the feeling that this is a deviation, that it should not be the norm. There are a great many such examples, indicating the ambivalence of the situation. It is not by chance there are practically always projective variants, in which positive outcomes are demonstrated using the examples of other respected people (always men), but not the authors' own examples. So far there are still many educated people who find it hard to admit that they do not read.

But there is a third group as well, consisting of people who honestly and openly acknowledge that the book culture no longer has value. In particular, one posting admonished: "Can't you see that is your Soviet upbringing that is speaking?" This is a direct reference to an outmoded system of values that is no longer relevant in today's Russia. Closely allied are those who assert that reading is harmful to your health: "When we were going to school, everyone read. Now 80 percent have to wear glasses. Be glad that your child is not reading, he will be more healthy." Similar statements prompt vigorous debates, but not about the usefulness of reading—instead, about whether reading really is harmful to children's (and adults') delicate vision. In other words, it is no longer a debate about culture but, instead, a matter of medicine, with no relevance to value. This also provides strong evidence of the desacralization of reading as an inseparable attribute of Russian culture.

In addition to reading in the home, there is also reading that is mandatory, in school. Practically all the female middle-class participants in Internet forums are unanimous that school does not instill an interest in reading but instead, a strong dislike. They are not happy with canonical texts that constitute the Russian classics;

they rate these as outmoded, uninteresting, and incomprehensible to today's children and adolescents. From time to time this topic comes up: Should children be forced to read the books in the school program? Opinions are divided, but female respondents in different groups are unanimous about one thing: books are essential in schooling, but do not prompt interest and emotional reactions. They view books as a bitter medicine; it is hard to take but you have to be treated—that is, to learn. Thus, some mothers force their children and adolescents to read the literature of the school program, imposing punishments that are sometimes quite severe (such as banning television or the computer), they test their children's knowledge of the text, and so on. Just as many, however, draw on their memories from school and tell their children what some book is about; they read brief passages aloud, buy film versions and collections of synopses. The use of such surrogates of great Russian classics has become the norm and does not provoke moral objections. People even make jokes (without condemnation) about the subject, telling about blunders children make in their essays: "He wrote Donkii khod [Don Quixote], just like that. But in fact it really is hard to read"; "He had Lenskii kill somebody in a duel. How about that!"

Another proof of the decline in the value of reading are jokes, primarily sexual, which confirm and legitimize this phenomenon. Basically the jokes involve the idea that reading consists necessarily of fiction, which causes the child to be bored: "Give her a book about sex, and she will read it like a good little girl! Until it practically falls apart"; "Oh, how I loved to read a reprinted medical work on how to treat married couples' sexual problems! I was eleven years old, by the way"; "But *The Decameron* disappointed me, I did not like it as much"; "In those years I read Casanova's *Memoirs*, and I only remember one scene—but in every last detail"; "Well, how shall I put this, I enjoyed it immensely. Red hot!"

In other words, there is literature that you read for pleasure, and then there is school literature, the classics, which are boring, hard to understand, and disliked. In the mass consciousness, serious fiction is becoming an unnecessary part of culture. The female

representatives of the middle class often position themselves as readers but no longer discuss books, they do not ask for advice about what to read, with the exception of something light and relaxing. To them it is also a "female norm" rather than a male norm: using their husbands as examples they argue that today's man can develop successfully without any book culture. The ambivalence of the situation is characterized by the women's attitude toward their children's reading, in other words, the relaying of that value from one generation to the next. On this point opinions were divided, but the neutral position is more pronounced (reading is not essential, but it is still better to read), and, at times, even defiantly negative: the perception of reading as a value is the legacy of Soviet upbringing and the (outmoded) Soviet system of values.

While the middle class exhibits the decline in the old system of values that was marked by the need to belong to the book culture, it is obvious that this applies even more to the strata of society ranking "further down": less educated, less well off, less capital-city urban, and so on.

In what strata or groups, if any, is it still possible to find a sense that books and reading are a high value? I assumed that reading should represent the highest value in the minds of intellectual youth community. This contingent is quite exclusive and strives to stand apart, with a desire to emphasize its own elite status. Its members are the most advanced from various points of view, such as level of education and up-to-date information technologies. I assumed the humanities component should be manifested as a value, and since other groups are no longer interested in books, this group, in contrast, ought to retain it.

For this reason it was decided to clarify two circumstances. First, do books and reading actually represent a high value to them? And second, what are the reading preferences of this group, or, more accurately, what ideas and values are characteristic of its range of reading? I wanted primarily to test my hypothesis as to how innovative these preferences are, whether they provide evidence that the intellectual youth community is, via literature, coming up with new ideas that are not characteristic of older generations.

**Books and reading among young Moscow intellectuals:
The basic characteristics of the study participants**

To accomplish these tasks I turned to the popular social network V Kontakte,⁶ which young people are actively involved in. Each network participant has to fill out (completely or in part) his "calling card," including, in addition to age, education, place of work or school, religious and political views, and marital status, some personal data on tastes and preferences. This information can then be analyzed from the standpoint of their system of values. In general, the participant can post photos and videos of himself, favorite works of music, information categorized as "interests": things that are important to the person in his life, things and people he likes.⁷ Questions are included about favorite activities, movies, TV programs, and so on. Naturally, there is also a section for "favorite books." Specifically because V Kontakte provides a maximum of detailed information about individuals, it was decided to analyze the data on network participants. It is extremely popular among young people: a majority of active Internet users take part in it.

To select the Internet questionnaires of people who belong to the circle of interest to me, I decided to analyze the questionnaires of all the "friends"⁸ of one twenty-one-year-old participant in the social network, who graduated with a degree in mathematics from a Moscow university and is now a graduate student and an instructor at the University of Finance under the government of the Russian Federation (formerly the Academy of Finance), and is also a master's degree student at the Russian School of Economics. As he simultaneously belongs to a large circle of communities that intersect only partially, the number of his "friends" is considerable, 694. That number proved sufficient to carry out a statistical calculation, since about half the questionnaires were not filled out fully, and another portion was not accessible.

What is this group of respondents like? They are between eighteen and twenty-eight (most are twenty to twenty-four); 53 percent are men and 47 percent women. All either have a higher education or are attending college; over one-third are continuing their education, in a graduate program or acquiring a second higher

education. Just about all are students or graduates of prestigious colleges and universities in Moscow (a small number are in St. Petersburg): Moscow State University, the University of Finance, the Moscow State Institute of International Relations, the Higher School of Economics State University, and the Leningrad Institute of Electrical Engineering. Under 10 percent obtained or are obtaining an education in the humanities (history, philology, philosophy), while the rest are majoring in economics, physics and mathematics, psychology, and languages.⁹ Many are not acquainted with each other, but all are among the most advanced intellectuals who do not belong to the young humanities elite. This is important to me, since it is most likely that philology majors, at least, would have a specific structure of reading preferences.

The absolute majority of these young people grew up in families of the class that used to be called the Soviet intelligentsia, and all their parents have a higher education. The participants are certain that they will have the opportunity to obtain a good-quality education, find a job that interests them, quite often in business or science, and make a decent salary. They do not need any social lifts, and have no doubt that the future is in their hands and does not depend directly on the social and political situation in Russia. A number of them would like to continue their education in another country, in good universities of the United States or Europe, and have the chance to obtain a stipend for that purpose. A keen urge to emigrate is not typical: everything will depend on circumstances, on where it is more comfortable and interesting to work.

What characteristics turned out to be common to this entire group? First and foremost, serious motivation in regard to their work or schooling. Almost all of them, when filling out the questionnaire on their personal page on V Kontakte, mentioned among their interests the profession they have already acquired or their future profession, while the students mentioned their academic interests. Naturally, such a high professional or academic level of motive and interest are not characteristic of less-advanced groups of young people.

When it comes to other characteristics of this group, most of these young people do not have any interest in politics. A third did

Table 1

Distribution of Answers to a Question on Political Views

Self-determinations	% of the total
Liberal	19.5
Indifferent	17.5
Moderate	13.0
Monarchist	8.0
Ultraconservative, conservative	5.0
Communist, socialist	4.0
Did not answer	34.0

not give information as to their political views (we can assume that there is nothing to say about it), and another third (see Table 1) defined their views as indifferent or moderate, almost synonymous terms in this context. Almost one-fifth mentioned their liberal views, and the same number mentioned monarchic, conservative, or communist views; in other words, "left-wingers" and "right-wingers" are represented by an almost equal number of young intellectuals. Our attention is drawn to the large number of "monarchists," 8 percent. It is not likely that many really advocate Russia's conversion to the monarchic system; this is probably a way for them to express their protest against the present political structure.

The extremely low level of these people's committed involvement in political life seems substantial. Among the most varied "interests" mentioned, politics is noted in under 10 percent of the questionnaires. For many of them, the political circumstances of Russia's life do not intersect with their personal lives and careers, although a number did mention their love for Russia, their patriotism. It seems evident that these are hardly associated with politics.

In mass surveys, most inhabitants of Russia reported their religious affiliation. In 2009, 73 percent of adult Russians called themselves members of the Orthodox faith, another 7 percent reported their affiliation with other religions, and only 6 percent said they were atheists.¹⁰ Among the highly intellectual community of young people, an interest in religion, a "fashionable" involvement

Table 2

Distribution of Answers to a Question on Religious Affiliation

Self-determinations	% of the total
Orthodoxy	17.0
Atheism	15.5
Indifferent	11.0
Agnosticism	4.5
I believe in myself	3.5
Other religions	2.5
Secular humanism	2.5
I believe in principle	1.0
Did not answer	42.5

in religion, is expressed much less strongly (see Table 2). More than 40 percent simply omitted an answer to this question on their Internet questionnaire, considering it irrelevant. Only 17 percent called themselves Orthodox believers and 2.5 percent said they belonged to other religions, whereas 20 percent said they were atheists or agnostics. In this community, being religious or not religious is not an issue from the standpoint of status or prestige; it does not add or detract anything. As in other strata, the percentage of Orthodox believers among young women is a bit higher, and the same is true among those who say they are monarchists.

By filling out a questionnaire on the social network, the participant is introducing himself to the community. A "calling card" always constitutes one's positioning in regard to others. In such a case, naturally, the participants are not only oriented toward their own ideas about what kind of person one is but also what kind of person one ought to be, the opinion of generalized significant others. Thus, via the personal information he provides, he is included in a reference group of the kind he imagines. Some characteristics, such as religious affiliation, do not have normative value nuances, but other characteristics are explicitly marked as prestigious or not prestigious. Being a member of the TV viewing community is considered not prestigious. The absolute majority of young intellectuals would not think of reporting that they watch television actively.

Let me note that younger age groups really do watch TV programs a great deal less than older people. Evidence is provided by data of the TNS Gallup Media, a TV monitoring company. Young people spend a lot more time in leisure activity outside the home, and also on the Internet on social networks. These circumstances are also characteristic of young intellectuals, but the nonprestigious character of this activity remains in first place. Such people position themselves as being advanced and active, and from their point of view, the ordinary TV viewer, a passive and low-intellect person, is their complete opposite. In this sense the position held by the young intellectuals fits in completely with that of adult intellectual elites.

Only a very small percentage of young intellectuals include an item line about a favorite TV program; on most questionnaires it is omitted, symbolic evidence of the absence of any interest in such activity. Some include this item, while emphasizing that they do not watch television: "I got rid of my television"; "It has been a year and a half since I watched anything on TV"; "I don't even know the titles of the programs, I do not watch the boob tube"; "I don't even know what to say. . . . Sometimes I watch when I'm bored, but I do not have any favorite." Among my respondents a fairly large percentage compete in intellectual games that are popular in that community. They note that they watch "What? Where? When?" and "Our Game." Relatively popular are recent "new-generation" humor programs, in particular "Prozhektorperiskhilton."* Some like KVN [Fun and Quick-Witted Club], already over fifty years old, and a few other programs. But on the whole, the young intellectuals strive to emphasize their elite status by keeping their distance from the "boob tube."

What do they consider important about themselves? In just about all the complete Internet questionnaires there is information about engaging in sports; many mention being a sports fan, which is prestigious. A love of music is practically universal. Naturally, not the "pops," which this group disdains, but the classics, jazz,

*A First Channel show, often with celebrity guests who gossip and comment humorously on the news etc.; Paris Hilton's agents tried to sue.—Trans.

performers' original songs, Russian rock, foreign groups, and so on. A considerable percentage took music lessons in their childhood, and now they play a musical instrument, especially the guitar, and sing. They indicate interest in dancing, a fashionable pursuit of everyone these days. Note that this is an activity, not just a habit of going to clubs, which they do not indicate often. Another mass interest is travel and photography. Many are enthusiastic about hikes, urban orienteering, and local orienteering. The popularity of these activities stems from the fact that many survey participants graduated from well-known schools of mathematics. Starting in the 1960s, mathematics schools started the tradition of involving students in hiking and outdoor activities, and they still have a fondness for it. The young people in this group regularly go to movies, download films from the Internet, and include long lists of their favorite films, on which the latest movie generally has something in common with the intellectual cinema of former and contemporary art houses. These young people's questionnaires also include, although on a less massive scale, information about theaters and exhibits, a love for architecture and so on.

Books and reading as a value in the minds of young intellectuals

An analysis of the young intellectuals' questionnaires shows that one of their most important and prestigious activities is reading. Books and reading show up in the section on "interests," as a value; over half the study participants list books and reading among favorite activities. Quite often, reading is singled out as particularly important. In contrast, in just one questionnaire we find "I could care less about that junk" (a student at the Academy of Finance, age twenty-one), and this is probably a manifestation of non-conformism, as if the writer is purposefully positioned opposite the reference group. In response to a question about favorite books, we find: "This is a stupid line. How could anyone say who is better, mommy or daddy? Anyway, I love books in general, especially the kinds that transform my vague and disorderly notions into something orderly and well defined"; "I just love to read, as much as I

can"; "I like books that convey an idea or a conception that compels me to think and change, to become different. Or just histories that are interesting to read, let my imagination roam, and fill it with images. I would rather toss stupid garbage into the trashcan or put it on a far back shelf . . . , and not on my shelf either"; "Books are my most intimate companions"; "What I need books for is to think about things, to fantasize, to learn things, to rise higher"; "I adore life, books, and everything connected with them."

Thus books have a serious value component in the minds of young intellectuals. It is not even important whether they are active readers or if they are trying to make a favorable impression on the reference group. Evidently, the individual aspect and the group aspect are tightly interconnected. In contrast to the middle class, for which the old values are retreating and are either already a thing of the past or are becoming so dramatically, in this group such a breakdown in the value system has not yet occurred. In this group it is the practice to talk about books and ask what to read. Participants' information about their favorite authors is sought by others as a guide for their own reading, in the same way that we look for works of music recommended on the web pages of network participants.

The graduates of Moscow State University, the Moscow Institute of Physics Engineering, and the Higher School of Economics State University usually enroll in the Russian School of Economics to pursue a master's degree. Not long after a new class was recruited, the following query showed up on the class web page of V Kontakte: "Can someone please advise me on what is good to read?" A lot of recommendations showed up right away: "You ought to read Albert Camus. Read *The Stranger* or *The Plague*. But the best thing to read first is *The Outsider*. Read Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*"; "Yes, do read Ionesco! And also Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* and *Foucault's Pendulum* . . . really clever entertainment. Read Proust, but he takes a lot of time to read, and Joyce, and he does too"; "*The Bead Game*, which is quite something"; "I give a score of 100¹¹ to *Moskva—Petushki* [Moscow to Petushki], and by Hesse, besides *The Bead Game*, I really liked *Steppenwolf*"; and others. These people have

just begun to get acquainted, and what is more important to them is not so much to give advice about what to read as it is to show where their own place is in the new intellectual continuum. They do this, among other ways, by means of books, a practice typical of the Soviet intelligentsia. In this regard Hesse, Ionesco, Beckett, Proust, and Joyce are not so much the authors of literary works as they are a reflection of the young people's attempt to give a characterization of themselves that is easy to grasp via cultural codes. This is the reason for the lofty complexity of the literary samples.

Now let us attempt to analyze the range of authors whom the young intellectuals mention most often. To what extent have these readers found their way into the cultural space, how new are the ideas that they have internalized? Which social groups are they oriented toward as reference groups?

The authors [of favorite works] as the leaders of the young intellectuals' reading

We selected all the questionnaires that included a list of favorite books—titles of specific works or more often favorite authors. If a number of works by the same authors were listed in one questionnaire, that was considered one mention. A total of 1,683 mentions of 385 authors were analyzed (see Table 3).

If we compare the structure of these reading preferences with those of Russians as a whole, we find fundamental differences. According to the data of the Levada Center's long-range monitoring survey, among the preferred genres in 2008 the leading one was the "female crime novel," with 28 percent; this was followed by Russian thrillers with 24 percent, historical adventure classics with 23 percent, romance novels with 19 percent, and Russian Soviet classics with 15 percent, as well as current historical prose, classic foreign crime novels, and Russian prerevolutionary classics, with 14 percent each.

All the "low" genres, such as romance novels, crime novels, and thrillers, are sparse to virtually missing from the Internet questionnaires of the young intellectuals, as are modern historical prose or books about the Great War for the Fatherland [World War

Table 3

Distribution of Answers by Groups of Literature

Answer choice	Number of authors	Number of mentions	Average number of mentions per author
Russian prerevolutionary classics	16	157	9.8
Russian prose of the twentieth century	51	205	4.0
Current Russian prose	23	93	4.0
Foreign classics	44	147	3.3
Translated prose of the twentieth century	119	637	5.4
Poetry	52	137	2.6
Science fiction and fantasy	50	228	4.6
Crime novels	4	15	—
Children's literature	26	64	—
Total	385	1,683	4.4

II]. Even the popular crime novel genre got only fifteen mentions, and eleven of those are classified among the classics of the genre, Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie.

Is it really possible that the reading structure of the young people whose Internet questionnaires this study analyzes has no points of contact with the rest of the reading audience? It is true that they represent a narrow group whose members are not only set apart in terms of most indicators but also strive to distance themselves. Nonetheless, the differences are quite radical. I do not doubt that these young people read a wide variety of literature, but (and this makes them different from other groups) for them, books, authors, and genres retain dichotomies of "high"—that is, worthy, and "low"—that is, unworthy. In this regard they are much like the ideas of nineteenth-century intellectuals who would bring home *Belinskii and Gogol* [Belinskii i Gogol'] from the book bazaar, a practice continued by the Soviet intelligentsia. Naturally, young people do not include everything they read in their questionnaires; they include only works and authors that will be perceived positively and, they hope, recognized and given a high rating by the reference group.

Table 4

Number of Authors and Mentions by Particular Groups of Literature (%)

Answer choice	Number of authors	Number of mentions
Russian classics	4.2	9.3
Russian prose of the twentieth century	13.2	12.2
Current Russian prose	6.0	5.5
Russian prose, total	23.4	27.0
Foreign classics	11.4	8.7
Translated prose of the twentieth century	30.9	37.9
Foreign prose, total	42.3	46.6
Poetry	13.5	8.1
Science fiction and fantasy	13.0	13.6
Crime novels	1.0	0.9
Children's literature	6.8	3.8
Total	100	100

In other words, the authors and works mentioned as favorites probably really have been read and enjoyed, while anything perceived to be trash, unworthy, or random has been left out. Reading that kind of literature may even cause one to experience an inner conflict between what ought to be read (Joyce and Kafka) and what ought not to. The way this conflict is resolved is the idea that there is genuine literature and then there is trash reading just for relaxation, but it has nothing to do with Literature with a big L, so it is not a good idea to list such "trash reading" on one's questionnaire. Nonetheless, this system of values assumes it is necessary to read serious literature for a person to be considered cultured.

Mentions of authors of Russian classics comprise only 4.2 percent, but the number of mentions of these classics stands at 9.3 percent (see Table 4). Only two Russian writers, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, were mentioned often, followed further down by Chekhov and Bunin (12 mentions each). All other Russian classics are generally forgotten after graduation from school. With such a high concentration of answers relating to two to four names, there is a

very large number of mentions (an average of 10) of each single author, compared to 4.4 mentions for the entire file as a whole. Pushkin is rarely mentioned among either prose writers or poets. This confirms the reliability of the information in the questionnaires. When I played the game of "Three books you would take with you to a desert island" with this group, Pushkin showed up immediately.

A much higher diversity of names is represented by Russian literature of the twentieth century: fifty-one names are listed, yet the number of mentions is not large, just 205, which can be compared with the Russian classics, with 3.5 times more names. This means that twentieth-century Russian literature received a very small number of significant, labeling names; for this circle there are very few writers that "a person simply has to read" to maintain group identity. In fact there are only three: Mikhail Bulgakov with 16 mentions, Vladimir Nabokov with 18, and Sergei Dovlatov, with 14. These are followed by authors listed by fewer than ten people, which means these names do not represent any mass interest. Just about the entire array of Soviet literature has vanished from the discourse of young intellectuals (and, very likely, young nonintellectuals even more so)—from Zoshchenko to Trifonov, whose names were not mentioned by a single one of three hundred respondents. They do not read, do not know, and do not want to know either any urban prose or the prose of the 1960s (with the possible exception of Vasilii Aksenov), or village prose, or military prose, works whose authors, affiliated with "socialist realism," never come up.

One gets the impression that all these writers are not important to young intellectuals, since they reflect the values of an era that is no longer of interest.

Today's Russian prose is represented by twenty-three names, 6 percent of the authors, and the mentions are even fewer, with 5.5 percent. We often hear about certain "cult names" of current Russian writers, and all kinds are mentioned. Our analysis of the Internet questionnaires of young intellectuals shows that only Victor Pelevin enjoys mass popularity, with twenty-one mentions; a lot of his works are listed, which means they are well known and read. In second place was Boris Akunin, with eleven mentions;

moreover, this group (in contrast to other groups) rates his works not so much as crime novels but as a kind of interesting literary game. Next are books by E. Grishkovets, with just eight mentions, but I did not find even five admirers of other current Russian writers. It is curious to note that V. Sorokin, such a powerful presence in critical discourse, was not mentioned a single time.

Today's current literature is ignored by young intellectuals who are not members of the sphere of humanities. It is hard to say what this is due to: can it be that these works do not contain ideas that representatives of this group can respond to, their inadequate normativeness and "markedness" in terms of value? Can it be that these young people lack a sense of the value of new things in the spiritual sphere, that there is no exchange of information between the circles of young people in the humanities and those who are not? I am certain only that it is not due to any excessive complexity of the works of present-day writers or that they are beyond the understanding of young intellectuals.

On the whole, only 23 percent of writers' names, and 27 percent of mentions, have to do with Russian literature; the members of this group are much more active in their reading of foreign literature: 42 percent of names and 47 percent of mentions. At the same time, foreign classics are not very attractive to young intellectuals: here again, only a few names were mentioned, a total of forty-four or 11.4 percent, and, especially mentions, with 147, practically the same number as the number of mentions of the Russian classics, with a much smaller number of their names. The young people whose tastes I studied do not have any special interest in the "older" foreign literature; it is a treasure that they are barely acquainted with. For example, the literature of the eighteenth century, not to mention earlier eras, they have not studied at all, and the literature of the nineteenth century is also of little interest. The depth of their exploration of the strata of culture is astonishingly shallow, and in fact they do not show any interest either in standard samples of past culture. Among foreign writers of the nineteenth century, with eighteen mentions, the leader is Alexandre Dumas, and he is reflected only in their childhood fascination with *The Three Musketeers* and *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

The situation is entirely different in the case of twentieth-century foreign literature, which is the most attractive to young intellectuals, who have read it the most and/or want to read it, expanding their understanding and ideas through new names and works. Such literature accounts for more than 40 percent of the names of writers and almost half the mentions. In this regard there is no precise, normatively defined circle of names and works, although some are in the lead. Foreign literature of the West, diluted only slightly with the names of Latin American writers, is perceived as an unbounded continuum by young readers: it is what they want to get to know better and are willing to go into more deeply. I venture to suggest that this literature is much more understandable and more to the liking of this group than Soviet literature, which seems alien and too tied to the reality of the past. The translated literature of the twentieth century does not carry such a burden. Quite the contrary: they associate the most positive connotations specifically with the translated literature. Thus it is reasonable to say that young intellectuals have much more of a sense of themselves as "Western" people than as the inheritors of the Soviet era.

To a major portion of the young intellectuals today the word "book" is associated with prose, not poetry. There are as many mentions of poets as of twentieth-century Russian prose writers (fifty-two)—still, not very many. Thus, while poets comprise 13.5 percent of authors, but only 8 percent of mentions. As a rule, young people list only Russian poets, having no interest in translated poetry. And almost all the poetry cited is from the Silver Age [1900–20]. Most popular are S. Esenin with thirteen mentions, V. Mayakovsky with eleven, and A. Akamatova and M. Tsvetaeva with nine each. Not a single contemporary poet is mentioned. For intellectuals who are not philology majors, there is simply no interest in contemporary poetry, and the same is true of almost all poetry of the nineteenth century and the Soviet era. To love poetry, to read any poets, is a personal choice; it is not possible to speak of any norms here. I merely note that poetry is perceived as a female interest, an area of intensive feelings. Poetry these days is not a marker of what is masculine: it is the women who talk about poets. Only Esenin and

Mayakovsky are relatively more popular [as] men also included them in their questionnaires.

While the crime novel is marked as a low genre, science fiction and fantasy are perceived as an acceptable or positive choice of literature, marked by modernity, dynamism, freshness, and so on. To some extent, translated foreign intellectual literature and fantasy represent two complementary poles of the norm in the value structure of the group in question.

A relatively small number of respondents (primarily young women) included children's and adolescent literature among favorite books on their Internet web page. The leader in this regard, of course, is *Harry Potter* by J.K. Rowling. In their listing of "intelligent" adult books, they also added *Harry Potter*, adding with some embarrassment "I couldn't stand not to have it," along with *Alice in Wonderland*, and others.

The analysis of the Internet questionnaires of young intellectuals showed that books and reading are important and valuable to them; the fact that their web pages have a list of book titles and authors confirms that they are members of this elite group. A majority feel that they are a young elite and back this up in every way, including references to their membership in the book culture. However, there are a number of obvious gaps on their literature lists on the Facebook social network site. There is hardly any contemporary literature and poetry, or literature prior to the twentieth century. They indicate a rather narrow historical horizon.

In determining which authors and books this group lists most frequently it is possible to determine where young intellectuals get the books they express later in life. It is obvious that a "cross fertilization" is taking place: advice is being given within the group about what is worthwhile to read.

Authors and books that are the leaders of the range of reading of young intellectuals

In analyzing the lists in the questionnaires I determined the authors and books that were most popular. While quite a large number were listed

(385), only a few are named in a large or relatively large number of questionnaires. In other words, the factor of individual preferences is very large, but the few names that are especially important reflect a pronounced preference and, thus, a positive nuance of value within the group. Twenty-two authors account for 34 percent of mentions, that is, only 3.8 percent of the total number of authors. These writers were listed about ten times more often than the average for the entire data file. Let us note that the list of leaders did not include a single poet, while prose writer V. Pelevin was in tenth place in terms of number of mentions. Pelevin is the only figure singled out by young people in the current literary process. To some extent, he represents a symbol of today's Russian literature, and has no competitors.

Among the twenty-two leaders, only seven are Russian writers, while fifteen are foreign writers. On the other hand three Russians (the Strugatskii brothers count as a single author) are at the top of the list. It is astonishing that only two writers on this list, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy, belong to the nineteenth century; no other Russian and foreign classics are marked in terms of value. In an interview one participant characterized Dostoyevsky this way: "What do you mean nineteenth century? He's twentieth century of course." This was clearly meant as praise for the writer as one who has "made the transition" into modern times from the nineteenth century, which is already too distant. Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, mentioned exclusively by young women, represents the women's romance novels that are "unworthy" of this group.

Two writers, M. Bulgakov and E.M. Remarque, accounted for an equal (and very large) number of mentions. Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* accounts for the absolute majority of mentions, while the rest of his works were cited just a handful of times (e.g., *A Dog's Heart* was mentioned three times). In the case of Remarque, the young people read several novels and have mentioned almost all of them; it is not possible to single out one that is most popular. If I had not taken the listing of three to five novels by Remarque on one questionnaire to represent just one mention, the number of his mentions would exceed eighty. Remarque was a cult figure in the

1950s and 1960s. Subsequently, interest in him diminished, but in the past few years has risen dramatically among young people. People buy his books and take him to heart. His prose, which used to be perceived as too sentimental, is in high demand by today's young intellectuals, including pragmatic and rational economics majors and people who have already completed their economics education and are oriented toward the business world. Evidently, reading works of this kind moderates one's toughness and rationality and enables one to position oneself as subtle and sensitive.

While the works of Remarque enjoyed a boom in readership in the 1950s, *Master and Margarita* became a phenomenon in the next decade, the 1960s. It is well known that a dramatic rise in interest toward books these days is generally linked to some popular series on TV. In this case, that mechanism did not have particular significance. Of the novels mentioned, most young people fell in love with *Master and Margarita* while they were in school, before the popular TV series. In contrast, interest in *Pride and Prejudice* is very likely linked to its numerous screen versions.

Dostoyevsky ended up in third place, with fifty-two mentions, while Tolstoy was in sixth place. Reading Dostoyevsky or saying that one reads and likes his works is considered very "cool" in this community, evidence of high intelligence and membership in the elite. In addition, to young intellectuals who are more oriented toward the West and its literature, Dostoyevsky's success in other countries is very important (see Table 5).

Among authors who write in the science fiction and fantasy genre, the Strugatskii brothers are far in the lead. In the number of mentions they have far surpassed even the author of *Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*, although among young people, especially a few years ago, the Tolkienist movement became very popular. In the case of the Strugatskii brothers, many works are noted, especially *It Is Hard to Be a God* [Trudno byt' bogom] and *Monday Begins on Saturday* [Ponedel'nik nachinaetsia v subbotu] (which enjoyed great popularity among the technical intelligentsia in the 1960s). Also notable is the popularity of works by Garcia Marquez, Salinger, Hemingway, Saint-Exupéry, Richard Bach (especially *Jonathan*

Table 5

Leading Authors by the Number of Mentions

Author	Number of mentions
1–2. M.A. Bulgakov	62
1–2. E.M. Remarque	62
3. F.M. Dostoyevsky	52
4. A. and B. Strugatskii	43
5. J.R.R. Tolkien	33
6. L.N. Tolstoy	28
7. G. Garcia Marquez	26
8. A. Saint-Exupery	25
9–10. E. Hemingway	21
9–10. V. Pelevin	21
11. U. Eco	20
12–14. V. Nabokov	18
12–14. Richard Bach (1974)	18
12–14. O. Wilde	18
15–16. A. Dumas	17
15–16. R. Bradbury	17
17–18. G. Orwell	16
17–18. P. Süskind	16
19. J. Salinger	15
20–21. H. Hesse	14
20–21. J. Austen	14
20–22. S. Dovlatov	14
Percentage in the number of mentions	570 (33.9%)

Livingston Seagull), and Hesse (in particular, *The Bead Game*). All of them enjoyed huge success among Soviet readers, chiefly among the technical intelligentsia of the 1950s through the 1970s.

During perestroika and the early post-Soviet period, of the works of the twenty-two leading authors the only ones that were published in Russia during that period were George Orwell's *1984*, P. Süskind's *Perfume*, and works by Umberto Eco. Orwell's novel, written more than sixty years ago, is considered almost mandatory on the list of young liberals' favorite books, while Eco is marked as a symbol of today's intellectual literature,

On the whole, the list of leading authors shows that from the standpoint of literary preferences young intellectuals are not looking for new ideas, while books written earlier than the twentieth century are of practically no interest. In this sense, their intellectual horizon is fairly narrow. What is more important is that the literary preferences of this group are of the same "flesh and blood" of their parents and grandparents, the Soviet intelligentsia. This means that these young people have accepted the ideas of that era, which are consonant with their ideas of what "real literature" is. If the values of the intelligentsia have been preserved, it is among these young intellectuals who are working in economics, business, and information technology. They retain a sense of the undoubted value of literature, and moreover it is the same literature and value that enjoyed popularity among the Soviet intelligentsia of the 1950s through the 1960s–70s. It has lost its influence in society, but its values persist among the young elite, who are not looking for new guidelines of meaning.

Notes

1. These processes are examined in detail in B.V. Dubin's and L.D. Gudkov's book *Intelligentsia: Zametki o literaturno-politicheskikh illuziakh*, revised and expanded 2d ed. (St. Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Ivana limbakha, 2009), and in numerous works by B.V. Dubin and N.A. Zorkaia. See B.V. Dubin and N.A. Zorkaia, *Chtenie i 2008: tendentsii i problemy* (Moscow: Mezhhregional'nyi tsentr bibliotchnogo sotrudnichestva, 2008).

2. *Obshchestvennoe mnenie—2009. Ezhegodnik* (Moscow: Levada-Tsentr, 2009), p. 134.

3. *Ibid.*

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 134–35.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

6. Above I cited an Internet discussion noting that half the adolescents in this network wrote "I hate to read!"

7. Typical "interests" include not only certain activities but also living creatures, for example "my girlfriend Iul'ka," "my husband Serega," "my cat Dashka," and "my deceased pet rat."

8. The meaning of "friends" on social networks differs a great deal from the ordinary meaning. A person becomes "a friend" on V Kontakte this way: any participant in the network gets in touch with another participant and asks him or her to become one of his "friends"; that person may accept the offer or turn it down. Only after that can the person look at the personal information of the participant. Naturally, as a rule these are people who are acquainted with