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Rediscovering Soviet Children's Literature

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Illinois Wesleyan University's Marina Balina is forging the way to a rediscovery of children's literature written in Soviet Russia.

For years, scholars ignored children's literature written during the Soviet regime as merely a tool of propaganda. "Seventy-five years of Soviet children's literature should not be dismissed that easily. It's a shame," said Balina, the Isaac Funk Professor of Russian Studies at Illinois Wesleyan, who recently co-edited *Russian Children's Literature and Culture* (Routledge, 2007). Almost no books have been written about Soviet children's literature, and the few that were looked at single authors rather than trying to analyze the complex body of texts written during this time.

With her co-author Larissa Rudova, a professor of Russian at Pomona College in California, Balina is breaking new ground with the book, which is a collection of critical articles about children's literature in Russia both during and after Soviet rule.

Balina is familiar with the children's literature both as scholar and from her days growing up in Soviet Russia before immigrating to the United States with her family in 1988. "Soviet Russia was not the best place to have free ideas, in fact it was a challenge to remain a free thinker in that country. But Soviet children's literature played a unique role in creating free minds, and this fact should not be ignored," said Balina, who noted that the entertainment value placed on children's literature gave authors more leeway in their choice of creative expression. "It was a much freer space for Russian writers to use alternative artistic devices, such as playful poetry similar to Dr. Seuss, but their work would still be publishable and considered politically correct."

While many writers of adult Soviet literature were severely criticized if they would not follow the prescribed pattern of socialist realism, children's literature often escaped that dictate, said Balina. "Despite all ideological pressures put on creativity, it was understood that children needed not just to be educated, but entertained as well."

According to Balina, didacticism is in the very nature of children's literature. "Since

Soviet literature was supposed to create a ‘textbook for life,’ educating the young was a natural assignment for a writer,” she said. “So many writers felt that their creative freedom was less violated while writing for children’s audience.”

Balina’s interest in children’s Soviet literature emerged five years ago, as she was working on her last book, *Politisizing Magic: Russian and Soviet Fairy Tales*, which was published in 2005. She began presenting on this subject on national and international scholarly gatherings, and in 2005, together with Rudova, she was invited to organize a special forum for the *Slavic and East European Journal* dedicated to Russian children’s literature. This special issue, entitled *Russian Children Literature: Changing Paradigms*, was the first organized attempt to introduce this topic to the audience of Slavic scholars in the West. “That issue drew a lot of attention and was a signal to us that we could continue,” said Balina, who now has lectured on the subject around the globe in places such as Germany, Sweden and France. She will continue this spring in Venice and Bologna, and is the keynote speaker for a seminar at Pedagogical University in Perm, Russia, that will be dedicated to children’s literature of the past and the future.

Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Balina has seen many changes in children’s literature in Russia. “During the 1990s, the field was completely dominated by foreign translations that were not available before,” she said. “Of course, many were done with such speed to get them into people’s hands that the translations suffered because of a poor quality.” More beneficial to Russian literature was the reintroduction of banned native children’s writers. “In post-Soviet Russia, it was a remarkable return of many pre-Revolutionary authors who had been dismissed for decades for political reasons,” said Balina.

These days, children’s literature can be found moving in a new direction, said Balina. “New writings have started to appear on tolerance – religious tolerance, ethnic tolerance, national tolerance. Because Russia is such a contradicting place at this point with ethnic and religious conflicts, these themes are extremely important for the whole body of children’s texts produced today.”

In her studies, Balina hopes people will gain an appreciation of the contributions of Soviet writers. “Anatoly Rybakov created some wonderful adventure and detective stories. Konstantin Paustovsky was a writer for adults, but created some absolutely amazing stories about nature and animals that were suitable for children. His works were so extremely poetic you could see the beginnings of environmental prose there. Lev Kassil, who by every standard was a very Soviet writer, served as an important contributor to children’s moral education.”

People are surprised by the ways children's literature can represent changing culture said Balina. She recently finished an article for the *Theory of Fashion*, a magazine published in both England and Russia, on school uniforms in Russia that is based on autobiographical narratives and fiction written for children.

Balina received a National Endowment for the Humanities grant to continue her work, which will take her to Russia for the next several months to gather information for her next book, also focusing on Soviet children's literature. "I'm fascinated with historical novels written for the young audience in Russia. I would like to investigate the development of this particular genre from its Soviet past to its post-Soviet present."

A native of Russia who earned her doctorate at Leningrad State University (now St. Petersburg), Balina joined Illinois Wesleyan's faculty in 1989 and is a member of the University's Department of Modern and Classical Languages and Literatures. A former chair for her department at Illinois Wesleyan, Balina teaches the Russian language and has helped shape the department's curriculum. A prolific author, Balina has published more than 30 articles and five books in three languages—Russian, German and English, and her work had been translated in French and Italian.

Balina has been the recipient of grants from the U.S. Department of Education, the Austrian Ministry of Culture, the American Association of Learned Societies, the National Endowment of Humanities and the Kennan Institute for Advanced Russian Studies of the Woodrow Wilson Center for International Scholars. She has a long history of dedication to her students, and was recently named the recipient of the 2008 Pantagraph Award for Teaching Excellence at Illinois Wesleyan.

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