

Similarly Karen Antashyan, a winner of the Inkhnagir jury special prize, writes about a taxi driver who wanted to immolate himself, his wife and his apartment at midnight but could not find any matches. He ran away with a little fish in his pocket (the fish had died in the aquarium), in order to bury it, and came upon a street dog attacking a prostitute. He threw the fish at the dog and the dog, surprised, ran away. The prostitute has his mother's name. He, just like Susanna's heroine, does not know how to comprehend all these events.

When people produce readable prose from the things they do not know what to do with, it provides promising

ground for a serious reevaluation of life, which is the heart of good prose. Perhaps imaginative literature will once again govern thoughts in Armenia, despite years of war and poverty. Certainly when it achieved independence, Armenia did not dream of becoming nothing more than a community mired in outdated cheap consumerism, much less a remote province of the world, ruled by oligarchs, where lack of achievement is habitually justified by an inability to overcome the postmodern condition.

#### *About the Author*

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## The Business of Literature in Azerbaijan

By Nigar Kocharli, Baku

### Abstract

Book publishing in Azerbaijan currently faces a number of challenges, ranging from the small market inside the country to the changes in the alphabet in recent years. Despite the dramatic decline in bookstores since Soviet times, books by young authors who address a wide range of topics are now growing increasingly popular. Additionally, a new book contest is helping to revive interest in literature among the general public.

### Local Publishers Don't Serve the Market

In Soviet times there were about 200 bookstores in Azerbaijan, with more than 100 just in the capital city of Baku. Now there are only 10 bookstores in downtown Baku and virtually no bookstores outside the capital at all. Ironically, 85–90 percent of books sold in Azerbaijan's bookstores are in Russian and are imported from Russia. Only 7–8 percent are in Azerbaijani, while the rest are in Turkish or English.

According to a March 2010 survey conducted among 783 customers of the Ali and Nino Bookstore, 73 percent of customers are women, and only 27 percent are men. The most frequent book buyers are young people between 26 and 35 years old. Unfortunately, local publishers are not aware of these statistics and the trends that they reflect. As a result, the supply of local books in the market does not meet the demands of this particular age group and gender category. Local publishers only meet the needs of 7–8

percent of the market, leaving most readers to rely on Russian imports.

Why is it that in a country with a population of 9 million (including 3 million in Baku) the number of bookstores is so small and the majority of books purchased are not in the local language?

Every year 40–50 publishers produce about 2,000 books in Azerbaijan. The number of registered publishers is about 90, though half of them are not active. The majority of these books are issued in tiny print runs – about 500 copies as opposed to the 30,000–40,000 copy print runs typical during Soviet times.

In other countries, the publishing industry usually consists of writers, literary agents, publishers and bookshops. The author writes a manuscript, literary agents sell the work to a publisher, who in turn prints a book and distributes it to booksellers. Often publishers help to promote the book. But in Azerbaijan many parts of this chain are missing – authors print books at their

own expense and then distribute them directly to the bookshops. The absence of effective agents and publishers causes many problems. In particular, it is hard for bookstores to attract attention to new books and the up-and-coming authors who write them.

Recent changes in the alphabet have divided the readership into distinct groups. During the last century, Azerbaijan's alphabet changed three times: from Arabic to Latin in 1929, to Cyrillic in 1939, and then back to Latin in 1992. There are now three groups of readers in Azerbaijan – those who can read both the Cyrillic and Latin alphabets, and those who read only one or the other. In 2001 the president issued a decree requiring that all publications be printed using the Latin alphabet.

Copyright is another problem. Very few authors try to obtain copyrights for their works, and almost none of them receive royalties for their publications. Numerous legal problems remain: there are gaps in the current legislation and most of the existing laws are not implemented fully.

### What Azerbaijanis Are Reading

Seventy years of Soviet rule put certain restrictions on the availability of literature in the Azerbaijani language and those who cannot read in Russian had to turn to books published in Turkish. Thus, Russia and Turkey influence the market not only in terms of exporting books to Azerbaijan but also in the way writers practice their craft. The peculiarity of this part of the world is that authors produce work either in Russian or Azerbaijani. Both groups are producing good books but these two groups coexist independently from each other. Tensions arise among the groups from time to time when there is a debate in the society in general over the importance of using the native language versus Russian, which some argue is a language “imposed” on independent states by the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union.

Only a small number of books have been translated into Azerbaijani. About a year ago the government launched a project of translating and publishing 150 of the world's most important books. Among the 26 books that have already been translated and published are Nobel prize winners, classics and the works of contemporary writers that have attained worldwide fame. They range from Swedish author Par Lagerkvist to the American J. D. Salinger.

Only a few contemporary foreign authors have been translated, and almost all of these translations are illegal. Biographies of globally- and regionally-recognized political leaders, as well as famous authors such as Orhan

Pamuk and Paulo Coelho, are among those that were translated during recent years.

What kind of books are being published in Azerbaijan today? Azerbaijan is a country with poetic traditions and that legacy has a strong impact on the local literature today. The country is known as a cradle of oriental poetry, with such prominent poets as Nizami and Nasimi, who laid the foundation of the poetic traditions in this part of the world. Romantic poetry comprises the largest part of contemporary literature today. Some books also touch on politics and analyses of the current political situation can be found between the lines in many others.

A recent bestseller is the novel entitled *A* by the young rapper Qaraqan. It is about the fight against corruption and prostitution and many people are discussing it in on-line social networks. Fatima, a 22-year-old woman active in such communities, described reading this book as “rewarding and the first book I have read in several years that made me think.” Rashad Majid, the secretary of the Writers Union of the Azerbaijani Republic and editor-in-chief of the newspaper *525* agreed, describing *A* as “an amazing book.” “Above all, it is a book discussing the social problems of young people facing challenges in society. Additionally, it demonstrates that young people can use PR tools better than authors from other generations since Qaraqan's fans attentively follow his actions.”

Another bestselling book is *Baku and its Suburbs* – an almanac of 13 young authors writing in different genres ranging from fantasy to love stories. The book was published in a rather large edition and completely sold out in seven months, beating the records of the classic 1937 novel *Ali and Nino*, which was the top seller for many years. Readers avidly discussed *Baku and its Suburbs* in a variety of forums, social networks and media. The authors used all the new media tools to promote the book and it will eventually be published in Russia as it raised a lot of interest outside of Azerbaijan. Only a couple of authors included in the book were already famous and the rest are young new-comers who have never been published before but were well known as bloggers. Oscar-winning author Rustam Ibrahimbeyov highly praised this book as the first publication to bring together exclusively young authors.

There is a huge demand for children's literature in the market, but only weak supply. Books for kids typically suffer from low quality content and printing. Again, though, the size of the market is rather small. Normally, if a book with a print run of 500–1000 copies sells within one year, it is considered a good result.

## Book Prizes

There are several book prizes in Azerbaijan, founded both by the government and individuals. The most successful competition in terms of public awareness was the National Book Award (NBA) founded last year by the Ali and Nino Publishing House. The organizing committee of the NBA visited six regions of Azerbaijan and all the main universities to promote this contest among the population. As a result, 265 works were collected from across the country. Overall, 69 percent of the writers competing for the NBA were male and only 31 percent female. The launch of the project and the announcement of the long list and short list provoked a lot of discussions and debates in society. The first reaction was not positive, but gradually the project gained considerable support and interest among the general public. Moreover, it has served as a bridge between the Russian-speak-

ing and Azerbaijani-speaking groups, the regions and the capital, and young authors and prominent writers who have been famous for many years. It was also the first public-private partnership project devoted to literature, with several businesses funding the book prize competition.

Authors who ended up on the long list came from different backgrounds: a young man who is serving in the Army, an obscure public school teacher living in a village, and famous writers well known to public. Even though the project is on-going and the results will not be announced until May 1<sup>st</sup>, it has already gained a reputation as the first independent and fair book prize competition initiated in modern Azerbaijan. As expected, this project has aroused interest for literature among the larger public and provoked a lot more discussions about books than ever before.

### *About the Author*

Nigar Kocharli is the owner of the Ali and Nino chain of bookstores and cafes. She was inspired by the book of the same name written by the Azerbaijani author Kurban Said, which describes events when Azerbaijan was an independent country just after World War I. Even today the story presented in this book is relevant and people still relate to it even though nearly a century has passed. This book has remained a best-selling novel for over 7 years since it became available in Azerbaijan and is still in great demand by local and foreign customers.

### *Recommended Reading:*

Kurban Said, *Ali and Nino*, Anchor reprint in English, 2000. The book is now available in 33 languages.

## Conformism and Resistance: The Birth of the Modern Georgian Literature

By Malkhaz Kharbedia, Tbilisi

### Abstract

This article investigates the state of the Georgian literature as it developed since the late 1980s. It argues that Georgia did not begin on a new path even with the collapse of the Soviet Union and that the country needs to conduct an evaluation of its history. There is little interest in contemporary poetry in Georgia, including even the “civic lyric” from street protests. Georgian literature today is infantile in the sense that it distracts one’s attention so that people will accept something against their will. Among Georgia’s recent literature you will hardly find powerful, rebellious, insightful, witty, or sarcastic texts. Another problem is the lack of effective criticism. Additionally, media discussions of literature are boring and do not attract attention to it.

### Pseudo-Crossroads

There is an interesting book by Jean Starobinski called *1789: The Emblems of Reason*. The book is about shifts in artistic vision during the French revolution. It addresses the questions of whether the revolution prompted the changes, what the intersecting points

of the revolution and aesthetics were, and if the revolution was a watershed event in the history or art as well as in European political history. The book perfectly reflects the cultural dynamics of those times and the roots of the modern culture that evolved out of them.