

TASTING LATVIAN CONTEMPORARY BESTSELLER WRITING: TEXT AND LIFE REALITY

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Abstract

*This study is revisiting the possibilities of defining a bestseller as an analytical category in literary research, and tracing global trends and those in the development of national literatures, the Latvian literary process in particular, in communication with the local community. The study focuses on a novel by Karīna Račko, "Ripped Lace" (*Saplēstās mežģīnes*) – a literary debut written and published in Latvian in 2017, which has been presented in public space as a sensation in the Latvian literature and as such has been staying on the Top 10 list of books published in Latvia for more than a year. The novel has been reprinted several times and termed a national bestseller. The origin, content, authorship and marketing strategy of the Latvian bestseller have been considered in relation to the phenomenon of E L James' novel, "Fifty Shades of Grey" (2011), highlighting the importance of the factor of interaction between the contents of the Latvian text and the reader, as well as trends in the serious literature and current political discourse concerning the issue of sexual liberation. The text produced by Račko strongly resonates with both the mainstream of serious Latvian literature and the fresh focus on human sexuality in the socio-political discourse; however, it resonates on the principle of contrast. The study has used the approaches of 'close reading', 'distant reading' (Moretti), and 'reading after theory' (Cunningham) approaches.*

Keywords: fiction, reading, sexuality, adolescence, opposite gender, pleasure

The term 'bestseller' is traditionally used to denote a book which is extremely popular and has sold in very large numbers; bestsellers are books that are read by millions in the original or via translations. For a literary researcher, any book is first of all a text, with its content and meaning, namely, it is an aesthetic not a commercial category, as in the case of the bestseller definition. Consequently, a bestseller is not a literary genre defined in its traditional understanding in terms of the specific features of its theme and poetics and, although bestseller lists contain Harriet Beecher Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin", Leo Tolstoy's "Anna Karenina", Margaret Mitchell's "Gone with the Wind" and other world-famous novels, the concept of 'bestseller' is primarily linked to entertainment culture and the so-called popular literature, from which high literary and artistic qualities are not expected. For all that, whatever category a bestseller fits into in terms of its content and quality, it has a major role and significance in literary communication with the public.

According to global statistics, it is fiction of all types that forms the assortment of best-selling and popular books: *fantasy, mystery, romance, horror, historical fiction, science fiction, young adult fiction, classical literary fiction* (up to 1950), *modern literary fiction* (after 1950), and others. <<https://ebookfriendly.com/most-popular-book-genres-infographic/>> Statistics reveal that modern literary fiction ranks first in that contention among chart-topping genres of adult literature, and Karīna Račko's novel titled "Ripped Lace" (*Saplēstās mežģīnes*), written and published in the Latvian language, also fits the category. As put by the publisher, the book *turns a totally new, unprecedented page in the Latvian literary history*. <http://www.zvaigzne.lv/lv/gramatas/apraksts/157975-saplestas_mezgines.html> It might as well be called a new, unprecedented page in the Latvian literary marketing, since a remarkably massive campaign is being staged to promote the book and its author, both through advertising and anti-advertising. On the one hand, the text is being presented as a new super-product, as a national bestseller that anyone should get a taste of, and, on the other hand, as a *national shame* <<https://vilkamidzenis.wordpress.com/2017/12/06/karina-racko-saplestas-mezgines/>>

Literature written in Latvian belongs to Europe's minor literatures, and in this case it is not the question of millions, but of tens and hundreds of thousands of readers and a text targeting the domestic market

of Latvia. According to the publishing industry statistics for 2016 compiled by the National Library of Latvia, the total number of titles issued by Latvian publishers in Latvian was 1873 (the average print run being 1344 copies per title). The largest part of titles published in Latvian is Latvian original publications (1152), with translations from foreign languages into Latvian (798) being not far behind. Besides Latvian, two main foreign languages in which books are published in the present-day Latvia are English and Russian; this, however, constitutes a comparatively small share of all publications: the total number of titles in Russian being 110, and the total number of titles in English – 97. In the category that Karīna Račko's "Ripped Lace" falls into – first publications of literary fiction in Latvian – more than a half of titles are translations from foreign languages (838), with Latvian first fiction publications numbering 416, excluding juvenile and children's literature.¹

This is also the matter of a national literary tradition and the global literary context, an obvious fashion trend, when a bestseller is published in one of the global literary 'great powers', usually the USA, Britain or France, and soon other national literatures yield equivalents of similar style and content. The phenomenon of bestseller also has an inherent paradox: on the one hand, it is mainstream literature, on the other, it is (or at least is presented) as something new, unparalleled, unexperienced, unread, a sensation of sorts, often related to exploring a new theme and expanding the horizons of the reader's awareness. Ergo, this is not the matter of the text only, but to a large extent, of the reader, of the way that literature and its marketing shape its reader. The question that emerges in this respect is what the Latvian reader could possibly thirst for so strongly. What has been borrowed from the *treasures* of the global literary market, and, for all that, what are the locally specific features that the readers could identify themselves with to at least some extent and find a certain satisfaction in, if not catharsis, speaking in terms of high-style literature?

One of the main global-scale sources of inspiration for "Ripped Lace" comes across quite clearly. It is E L James' novel "Fifty Shades of Grey" (2011): the author of the Latvian bestseller herself points to that indirectly by mentioning the title of James' work in her novel and addressing "the Fifty Shades of Grey phenomenon" (Račko 438) and its corruptive influence on the contemporary society. Consequently, the subject here is the one of sexual liberation, *female initiation*, presented in an entertaining genre through erotic content. The text produced by Račko strongly resonates with both the mainstream of serious Latvian literature and the fresh focus on human sexuality in the socio-political discourse; however, it resonates on the principle of contrast. Namely, the presence of *positive characters* with untraditional sexual orientation has become rather a matter of course in the mainstream Latvian literature, and academic criticism also deals with the interpretation of texts of that nature (Vērdiņš 2018). In addition, legalisation of non-normative sexuality is high on the political agenda in the present-day Latvia.

The principal character in Račko's novel, Ketlina, the only offspring of a popular dynasty of doctors, discovers her true sexuality and explores wild sexual experiences with a well-to-do representative of the opposite sex, a man older than herself – the most eligible bachelor in Riga, Jonathan. The *opposite sex* is a recurrent idea in the novel, and sex, love and living together with a member of the *opposite sex* lies at the basis of their formula for a happy life. When, in the conclusion of the novel, Jonathan asks for Ketlina's hand in marriage, she *swallows back the lump of happiness in her throat* (Račko 555), Jonathan says that she has made him *the happiest man on the Earth* (Račko 554) and he feels again like *a small, blissful child who sincerely believes in Santa Claus* (Račko 555) and fairy-tales with a happy end. The author of the Latvian bestseller is even more radical than E L James in some respect: if the young lady in James' book is a college graduate, then the main character of Račko's novel is just out of high school. Still, that does not prevent Jonathan from *doing what we both want – that is, screw you so hard that you can hardly walk tomorrow* (Račko, 398). And the *ripped lace* refers to Ketlina's clothing ripped more than once during a wild sex.

However, Ketlina is not portrayed for a single moment as a gender stereotype of a *femme fatale* or a *fallen woman*, sooner a *super girl*: she is smart, pretty and strong physically and mentally, hardworking,

¹Statistics for the Latvian publishing industry in 2017 have not been compiled yet, but there is no reason to think that the figures could be considerably different from those for 2016.

polite, determined, *having inherited a sharp mind from her parents and honed her intelligence* (Račko 9) and, apart from the extremes of sexual behaviour in her relationship with Jonathan, any other way she is *as exemplary and perfect as she possibly could* (Račko 9). It is sooner Jonathan who plays the part of the *homme fatal* and saves Ketlina from repeating, in her own life, the negative experience of her parents' relationship. Ever since she can remember herself, Ketlina *had always got everything that money could buy* (Račko 9), whilst feeling emotionally empty and estranged in her relations with her parents. Ketlina's mother, a brilliant paediatrician, *had returned to work just a couple of weeks after giving birth and [...] she spent her days taking care of other people's children, while never being able to find time and devote some attention and tenderness to her own daughter* (Račko, 8). Jonathan has also experienced similar troubles as a child: his mother belongs to the type of women *who should never become mothers* (Račko 257), and, as the thematic pattern of "Ripped Lace" suggests, all that is the fault of women and flaws in their motherhood.

In recent years, the attention of serious Latvian literature and literary criticism has been focused on a series of historical novels "We. Latvia. The 20th Century"², aimed at revealing and reflecting on facts, events and experiences suppressed by the Soviet historiography, that is, the nation's collective historical experience and lessons learned. The characters of "Ripped Lace", on the contrary, are acting here and now, right in front of our very eyes, and the reader is being reminded of that in rather a graphic manner. For instance, in the concluding part of the novel, Ketlina is drinking latte bought at the *Circle K* petrol station (Račko 477), but the name of *Circle K* came into use in Latvia only in 2017 after it replaced the popular Statoil brand. In addition, through the main character of "Ripped Lace", this is being presented as an individual and deeply personal experience, as adolescence caring nothing at all for socio-political processes and related systems of reference.

The novel's action spans approximately a year; it is a story of Ketlina's rebellion against her parents and breaking away from their authority. That battlefield, however, does not extend much beyond the borders of the circle of her parents and their friends, a circle ruled by the principles of seemingly *exemplary* but questionable sexual morality. With Ketlina being in fact isolated from a different social environment and people who do not drive a *Bentley Bentayga* or a *Mercedes*, do not feed on delicatessen and do not wear expensive brand clothing, the novel could hardly be called a *national scale* bestseller. In that context, the motif of contesting parental authority is traced rather vividly, Ketlina reflecting "*free sex*" and "*sexual revolution*" that created the truly philistine popular culture of the present day (Kobrin, 124). The plot begins in Riga and unfolds also to other locations across Latvia, but for its happy end the reader is swiftly carried over to Manhattan in New York City, the USA, where Ketlina, defying her parents wish, has won a place on a fashion design course at one of New York's most prestigious elite schools and is launching a brilliant career in the global fashion industry.

Ketlina has splendidly demonstrated her sexuality, which has become a subject of society gossip and the yellow press coverage; *the entire Latvia is rather well informed* (Račko 518) about the relationship between Ketlina and Jonathan, and also New York applauds her achievements: *When Ketlina appeared on the catwalk, where her collection was shown just a minute ago [...] the room was filled with generous applause and loud ovation* (Račko 543). Speaking in the categories of Guy Debord's sociocritical perspective of the contemporary world, Ketlina in her flesh and spirit is a typical product of *the society of the spectacle*.³

As we are watching the evolution of the character, her success story and values that Ketlina professes in her life, the author's position remains unclear, although, in accordance with the literary convention of a bestseller, she is sooner an arbiter of her character's aspirations, rather than the one who would question them or pass any judgements. The novel abounds in sticky quotes referring to the ideology of beauty and happiness, and at least at the present stage Ketlina's life is a utopia come true. For instance, *Happiness is not a utopia. Everyone deserves it, and Ketlina was prepared to fight for it* (Račko 514);

²Published with support from the Cultural Capital Foundation and on recommendations by literary experts. The first novel of the series, issued in 2014, deals with the events of the 1905 Revolution in Latvia.

³It is noteworthy that the Latvian translation of Guy Debord's "*La Société du Spectacle*" was published in 2017, almost simultaneously with Karīna's Račko "Ripped Lace", which shows the diversity of cultural channels and the varied mutually contradictory cultural information entering the present-day Latvia through those channels.

Regrettably, there is no way to perform plastic surgery on a soul (Račko 25); People are striving for light, but there are no morals in light (Račko 556), and so on. The two model characters in the novel are avidly enjoying bodily pleasures; they are both working in the beauty industry – Jonathan runs private practice in plastic surgery, and Ketlina works in the global fashion business – but in words they advocate not the outer but inner beauty, which is invoked and lauded on many a page throughout the novel.

This lack of consistency, the glaring contradiction does not interfere with the promotion of the ideology of beauty, quite on the contrary. From the actual perspective of the genre parameters for literary fiction, such type of narrative comes dangerously close to strategies employed by the yellow press and the so-called men's and women's magazine in their communication with society. This could be both an unconscious quality of a young author's handwriting, not yet fully formed,⁴ following automatically the manner popular magazines communicate with their readers, or a clever, consciously chosen technology of addressing the audience. Referring to Louis Althusser's theory of ideology as a form of "hailing", John Fiske underlines that:

In communicating with people, our first job is to "hail" them, almost as if hailing a cab. [...] We will hail children differently from an adult, a male differently from a female, someone whose status is lower than ours differently from in a higher social position. [...] Hailing is obviously crucial at the start of a "conversation", though its ideological work continues throughout. (Fiske 1270)

As self-evident as this could be from the perspective of the bestseller advertising strategy, it should nevertheless be noted that "Ripped Lace" is not a *totally new page* in the context of modern Latvian literary fiction, not even in terms of recording the theme of sexuality into the annals of traditional Latvian culture. The protagonist of Dace Rukšāne's novel "Beatrice's Bedtime Stories" (*Beatrices gutas stāsti*) can be regarded as Ketlina's predecessor and a kindred spirit in her aspirations of sexual liberation and adoration of the opposite sex in the 21st century Latvian literature. By putting the spotlight on a female human being who cannot exist without a male, like a child without a mother, and accentuating a woman's dependence on her sexuality, Rukšāne's work has won an unprecedented popularity in Latvian literature.

Reflection on the themes offered by Račko's "Ripped Lace" is bound to raise a question of whether and to what extent the history of the Latvian people's sexuality could be found reflected in her novel. Ample food for thought on this matter is offered by Latvian folklore and mythology passed on through generations, still kept alive by the word of mouth, and recorded in the publications of outputs yielded by academic research in the first half of the 20th century. For instance, Ketlina saves Jonathan from the "old bachelor's curse", and social attitudes towards old maids have also been discussed in the novel, while "Latvian Popular Beliefs" (*Latviešu tautas ticējumi*) relate of old bachelors and old maids finding it difficult to enter the heavenly kingdom, and a spicy depiction is offered of their after-death fate in the sexuality context:

Old maids are not allowed into heaven before they have not brought along 99 male genitals, carrying those in a bag with holes in it. But it is said to be a very difficult thing to do, since they keep slipping out of the bag. (Latviešu tautas ticējumi 1938); Old bachelors are not allowed into heaven before they have not brought along 99 female genitals, drawn onto a sleigh shaft. But it is said to be a very difficult thing to do, since they keep slipping off the shaft. (Latviešu tautas ticējumi 1938)

The unconscious aspect comes strongly to the fore in the case of those popular beliefs; albeit ethnically primitive and naturalistic, this is a human life perspective put in cosmic dimensions, in contrast to the systems of reference in the structure of Račko's novel; in both cases, however, this is the matter of sustaining the idea of normative sexuality in social conscience.

Poetic folklore, Latvian folk songs or *dainas* have a special place in the Latvian intangible cultural heritage, and it also underpins the Song Festival tradition, which is being kept alive today. In 1939, Riga saw the publication of Volume IX of "The Latvian People's Dainas. An illustrated edition with variants

⁴Račko is a dentist by profession, and the media promoting her bestsellers refer to her as "a dentist and author", not just "an author".

and academic comments" (*Latvju tautas daiņas. Ilustrēts izdevums ar variantiem un zinātniskiem apcerējumiem*), its title page bearing a note "This volume is not for sale in the open market".

What is more, there was a warning that:

*"This volume has been printed for research purposes only and is not for sale in the open market. It is forbidden to the persons who have obtained this volume to sell it, to give it to read, or relate its content to another person. Those guilty of violating these rules are facing a punishment."*⁵

This concerns the so-called "Naughty Dainas", a special volume separated off from the rest of the *dainas* corps because of the poetry containing direct and metaphorical references to various ways of sexual intercourse and related imaginary scenes. Real life and life in the text, the literary interpretation of life are completely different things, although the so-called realistic narrative creates an illusion that no borders exist or there are almost none. The question of whether the entire experience of our human existence, including the realm of thought, awareness and life related to sexual desires and instincts, should be literarised is not of a minor importance, and should be given consideration.

Still, ideological censorship concerning the circulation of texts recorded in folklore collections contains a paradox. Those are stories of experience and imagination created by people, heard from people. What had been done or had happened since the time when they were written down that made them unfit for being returned to people? And where does the biggest "blame" lie – on the nation's experience recorded in the form of folklore texts, or their scientific and academic readings and interpretations? Those are reflections on human sexuality as a commodity in the global book market and its marketing, on some points of intersection between the global and the national in that process.

What Alan T. Sorensen has said about a bestseller as a product and its commercial aspect in the context of the New York Times bestseller list (bestseller lists and product variety - ssc.wisc.edu) is also true, on a smaller scale but fully, about the above-discussed Latvian bestseller product. Bestseller lists, or in Latvia's case, the "Top 10" ranking, directly affect sales. A bestseller that is a debut book of a young unknown author has higher prospects, as was the case with Karīna Račko. Another conspicuous analogy concerns two other determinant qualities of global bestsellers, namely, speed and quantity. Those usually are large works, on 500 pages or more, and the customer is surrounded by constant care and attention: while the reader is still under the spell of the earlier text, a new one must be provided. Within a year, Račko has also produced a sequel to her "Ripped Lace" under the title of "Skies in Ashes" (*Debesis pelnos*) and, according to the media, the third book is already on its way to the reader.

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⁵During the Soviet era, those publication were kept in special storages with restricted access. Latvia having regained its independence, "The Latvian Popular Beliefs" and also the "Naughty Dainas" are on the book market and freely available in libraries.

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