

The phenomenon of the “Professorenroman” in Bulgarian literature

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Bulgarian literature. *Professorenroman*. Postmodernism. Academic fiction. Campus novel.

This article, based on the author’s previous research in Bulgarian, presents a phenomenon that until now has not been the subject of systematic study: the Bulgarian *Professorenroman* (literally “professor’s novel”). Tracing the development of Bulgarian academic fiction over the last three decades, it brings out the presence of a relatively homogeneous group of works that share common literary characteristics and ways of communicating with readers. The present analysis defines several common features shared by approximately a dozen novels by contemporary Bulgarian writers, all of them university professors. The phenomenon of the *Professorenroman* is examined briefly in the historical context of its emergence in the 19th century, and in more detail as an effect and consequence of the development of postmodernism in Bulgaria since the late 20th century. It is complemented by a more detailed reading of four recent novels.

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The *Professorenroman* (literally “professor’s novel”) emerged as a new phenomenon in Bulgarian literature in the late 20th century and continues to develop. Bulgarian critics use the term *Professorenroman* as a self-explanatory concept, but there is no official definition of it in Bulgarian literary studies, and the phrase has no translation in major languages such as English and French. The following brief historical excursion will help us view the phenomenon in its Bulgarian and contemporary context.

The term *Professorenroman* appeared in Germany in connection with a new type of the historical novel that gained great popularity in the second half of the 19th century. These works were written by professional historians (university professors) in ancient world history, especially the history of Egypt and Old Germany (they were also called *archaeological novels*). These novels had a literary, usually adventurous, plot with fictional characters, but the action was situated in settings described with utmost historical accuracy and in meticulous detail (the Indiana Jones film series can be considered their distant descendant in popular culture). This approach obviously appealed to an audience that was already predisposed by the rapid development of the scientific knowledge of history, the welfare state and nationalism in that era. The combination of fiction and “reliable” knowledge would become the *Professorenroman*’s most persistent characteristics, something of a trademark that would survive all vicissitudes.

In English literary studies of the late 19th century, this new subgenre took on pejorative overtones.¹ The pallid characters and contrived circumstances, the supremacy of knowledge over imagination, and the lack of individuality in the novelistic style seemed too “German”. Yet it was British literature that revived and updated this already dusty genre in the mid-20th century. Its renaissance began with the Oxford professor Iris Murdoch and such works as *Under the Net* (1954) and *The Black Prince* (1973). The genre’s Enlightenment past seemed to be completely forgotten when the remarkable novels of J. R. R. Tolkien (a leading British linguist and folklorist), William Golding (an English language professor), and John Fowles (a professor of philosophy) appeared one after another. Fowles entered the field of postmodernism (using numerous allusions to Gothic and Victorian novels, playful irony, etc.) with works such as *The Collector* (1963) and *The French Lieutenant’s Woman* (1969) in the late 1960s.

Against this background, we should distinguish three directions of “professorial” presence in Bulgarian literature. The first is an unprecedented and unimagined growth of writing ambitions among Bulgarian academics. It is impossible to make a list of all the novels published by academics over the last twenty years, so here is an indicative (and possibly incomplete) sample of those who have published novels in 2022 alone: Ivan Stankov, Lyubomir Halachev, Ivan Dobchev, Todor P. Todorov, Emilia Dvoryanova, Daniel Valchev, Albena Stambolova, Kristin Dimitrova, and Justine Toms, not to mention Ivan Mladenov’s novel from late 2021. Not all of these authors write novels that can be called *Professorenroman*. But there are plenty of others who have mastered this approach without professional training, just patience and motivation.

The second includes books with professors or academics as protagonists (so-called *campus novels*). True campus novels are still lacking in Bulgarian literature, perhaps because American-type campuses are also lacking, yet there are literary characters marked by an academic presence. In reference to the abovementioned examples from 2022, the novel production of that year is exceptional for Bulgarian literature. The number of new novels published by Bulgarian authors is rather impressive; I have read about 40 of them, but the total seems to be at least 60, and perhaps 70.² On the one hand, this shows the trajectory that 21st-century literature has already undertaken; on the other hand, it is indicative of the emergence of new trends that will probably continue to develop in the time ahead.

The third group is made up of the true Professorenroman produced in Bulgarian literature since the 1990s. It includes often well-written works such as Svetlozar Igov's *Elenite* (The stags, 1998), Ancho Kaloyanov's *Deveti* (The ninth, 2003), Nikolai Gotchev's *Pisma do Egina* (Letters to Aegina, 2006), Valeri Stefanov's *Izgu-benite magareta* (The lost asses, 2006), *Slepiyat gradinar* (The blind gardener, 2011), *Zhenite sa spomen ot mraka* (Women are a memory of darkness, 2014), and *Lyubovni istorii ot Vavilonskata biblioteka* (Love stories from the Babylonian library, 2016), Simeon Yanev's *Biografii na otrepki* (Biographies of geeks, 2013), Boris Minkov's *Prezapis ili drugiyat kufar v Berlin* (Remake, or the other suitcase in Berlin, 2013), and Ivan Mladenov's *Raz/sdvoenie* (Re/paired, 2021). Four recent novels – Albena Stambolova's *Dnevnik na artista* (An artist's diary, 2022), Daniel Valchev's *Nedel-niyat prodavach na knigi* (The Sunday bookseller, 2022), Krassi Zourkova's *Wild-alone* (2015, Bulgarian trans. *Samodiva*, 2016), and Vladimir Karadzhev's *Etiopska prikazka* (An Ethiopian tale, 2017), will be presented to illustrate the specific features of the genre.

ORIGINS OF THE PROFESSORENROMAN IN BULGARIAN LITERATURE

The aftermath of World War I gave birth to Bulgarian fiction that expressed the state of the psyche in extreme situations of human existence: between reality and hallucination, life and death. A kind of psychological reflection appeared in Bulgarian literature, which rejected the traditions of romantic individualism and the early modernist infatuation with the Nietzschean superman. Novellas such as Dobri Nemirov's *Koshmar* (Nightmare, 1919) and Georgi Raichev's *Münichük sviat* (A tiny world, 1919), or Vladimir Musakov's unfinished novel *Kürvavi petna* (Bloodstains, 1916, published posthumously in 1921), depict human experiences in the dark world of instincts where the primal forces of human nature rule. The path to this depiction passes through morbidity, hallucinations, madness and death. Kirill Hristov's novel with strong autobiographical projections, *Bezdna. Izpoved na edin umopobürkan* (Abyss. Confession of a lunatic, written 1926, published 1995), recounts the dark chaos of sexual insatiability. Since Hristov did not dare to publish it in his lifetime, it would not be discovered and published until the late 20th century.

The origins of the Professorenroman can be traced back to the Secession prose created by Nikolai Raynov, a professor of art history, who was famous between

the two world wars for his predilection for the then-fashionable ideas of theosophy, and his work demonstrates extensive knowledge of history, philosophy, literature and the arts. However, no one has applied the term Professorenroman to either of Raynov's novels, even though it existed at the time of their publication, and it is doubtful whether the mysticism and theosophy in which this knowledge was immersed be conceived of as "scholarly".

The second half of the 20th century also lacks many examples. The historical fiction of Vera Mutaftchieva, a professor of Ottoman history, seems closest to the characteristics of a Professorenroman, notably her most famous work, *Sluchayat Dzhem* (1966; Eng. trans. *The Case of Cem*, 2024). Haim Oliver's *Roman za edin piyanitsa* (A novel of a drunkard, 2017), which exudes a strong didactic message, was also written in the state socialist period but was rejected by two publishers and only appeared nearly four decades after it was written. Its protagonist is a talented film director and screenwriter making a film called *Zhazhda* (Thirst), for whom alcoholic intoxication became an illusory salvation, as much from an inability to fight external circumstances as from a failure to transcend his own inhibitions.

The specific character and frequency of the Bulgarian Professorenroman in the 21st century can only be understood by paying attention to the role of postmodernism as a source of philosophical ideas, literary examples and social influence. The postmodern genesis of the Professorenroman can be discussed from several angles, of which two of the most visible are the construction and the poetics of the text. Almost all writers seek to transcend the conventions of the genre, but humanities professors in particular relish the opportunity to bend its boundaries to the point where their word alone decides what a novel is. Poetics, as one might expect, involves the full arsenal of familiar postmodern devices. Academic knowledge is unleashed in games of mystification, parody and transtextual reference; the novels abound in overt and covert quotations, juggling with the facts of sciences that we know to be accurate.

Postmodernism's breakthrough for Bulgarian readers came with Umberto Eco, whose international bestseller *Il nome della rosa* (1980; Eng. trans. *The Name of the Rose*, 1983), appeared in Bulgarian in 1985. By that time, it had already become famous among Bulgarian researchers due to a 1983 article by Nikola Georgiev, who analyzed it as an epitome of the postmodern novel. In general, it was the professors who initiated the cult of Eco in Bulgaria. Following the novel's translation in Bulgarian, another professor, Ivaylo Znepolski, unravelled the semiotic fabric of the text, and then a professor of philosophy, Tsocho Boyadzhiev, discussed it in a seminar. It is no coincidence that during the presentation of the novel *Elenite* by Svetlozar Igov, someone called him "Umberto Igo".

After 1989, translations of Jorge Luis Borges were released with great fanfare, along with a highly celebrated translation of Milorad Pavić's *Hazarski rečnik* (1984; Eng. trans. *Dictionary of the Khazars*, 1988). Being both Professorenromane and epitomes of postmodernism, the novels of Eco, Borges, and Pavić showed the way and inspired the courage to break through the hitherto rigid boundaries of notions of scholarship. "It is fiction that gives such a freedom that the arid world of fact and

judgment lacks”³, says Ivan Mladenov in *Raz/sdvoenie*. True, there are not so many “facts and arid judgments” in philosophy and literary studies, yet novel writing professors are predominantly humanities scholars, with the strong desire to express their views.

THE PROFESSORENROMAN IN BULGARIAN LITERARY RESEARCH

In the last twenty years, the use of the term Professorenroman has become quite frequent among Bulgarian scholars. Among the earliest uses of this term in Bulgarian criticism are references to novels by scholars of Bulgarian literature such as Svetlozar Igov, Ancho Kaloyanov, and Valeri Stefanov. In his review of Igov’s *Elenite*, which displeased the author, Boris Minkov notes that “*Elenite* could be called a *Professorenroman* upon which an examination could be conducted, for it is loaded with quotations that are relatively easy to read” (2003, 73).⁴ Antonia Velkova-Gaidardzhieva unequivocally defined Kaloyanov’s *Deveti*⁵ as a Professorenroman because it is “a text web of styles, reminiscences, patterns, biographical reconstructions, silent dialogues, cultural quotations” (2004, 16). In reference to Stefanov’s *Izgubenite magareta*, Georgi Kapriev has spoken of “professor’s prose”, whose “obligatory and inevitably distinguishing specificity is the well-mastered erudition” (2006, 3).

However, the tag of Professor can no longer be literally binding. Firstly, because the word professor simply means teacher in some countries; secondly, because the system of academic positions is very dynamic (today’s assistant professor is tomorrow’s professor), and literary history cannot keep a record of these changes. Practice shows that even within the narrow confines of the time I write about, there are authors with different degrees and positions, as well as those who have moved “up”. This is why the term Professorenroman should be understood more broadly, as a fluid affiliation to an academic milieu.

Given the professional affiliation of the authors, one might expect their works to be “serious” and aimed at what we used to call “high literature”. Such novels undoubtedly exist, and they have even increased in recent times. For example, Ivan Mladenov’s *Raz/sdvoenie* is difficult to the point of impenetrability. The author not only drowns his reader into a chaos of philosophical notions but further provokes his patience with an artificially constructed syntax, which he himself likens to “a kind of a lying policeman – to warn that this is not light reading [...] not a book to read on the subway”.⁶ The majority of authors, however, try to promote their knowledge within the matrix (or matrices) of some story genre. This trend is not new but rather follows the “archaeological” novels of the 19th century. Following Fowles’s *Collector*, however, the aspect of entertainment became of an increasingly postmodern kind; the traditional adventure narrative mixed with other “frivolous” models of popular reading: crime, fantasy, mystery, horror, etc., even parapsychology came to the fore.

Professional erudition in some field or fields of scientific knowledge continues to be the leading edge. It is noteworthy, however, that knowledge in humanities, and to some extent in social studies, is overpowering; the boundary between those, who “know”, and those, who “write” in these fields is increasingly thinning. This explains,

to some extent, the passion for essayistic reflections, which overgrew the skeleton of the plot and which in practice are boring for the greater number of readers.

EXAMPLES OF THE PROFESSORENROMAN IN RECENT BULGARIAN FICTION

In Albena Stambolova's *Dnevnik na artista* (An artist's diary, 2022), access to the text is deliberately hampered in a conscious attempt to reproduce the clinical picture of the psychotic patient's thinking. Following doctoral work in semiotics and psychoanalysis, the author taught at the Sorbonne and is now a special consultant at the private New Bulgarian University. The reader is thus also obliged to be "academic" in a way, if he or she is to engage fully with the novel. With the added traces of decadent novels like Joris-Karl Huysmans's *À rebours* (1884) and Oskar Wilde's *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1890), it becomes clear that *Dnevnik na artista* is aimed at a small, boutique audience and was written with a hope for lasting literary recognition.

Stambolova's protagonist Manol is a young, gifted sculptor who loses his parents, an event that would be traumatic for anyone, and crosses the threshold that leads to madness. After their death, the young man is faced with the impossible task to overcome melancholy and outlive his mourning by coming to terms with the ugliness in the behavior of people he has loved and hated up to that moment. The mental disorder leads him to a long process of therapy in which he is required to keep a diary. The monological narrative unfolds the abyss of human psyche, in which a never-ending war is waged between the destructive power of the instincts and the creative ambitions of the mind.⁷ Professionally trained in psychoanalysis, the author peers into the darkness, interrogating the chaos with the help of classically approached symbols, archetypal formulas and cultural references.

Daniel Valchev, the author of *Nedelniyat prodavach na knigi* (The Sunday book-seller, 2022), is known not as much as a professor in legal studies, but rather as a former minister of education. His novel is an exemplary representative of the modern Professorenroman and even has extra features that would suit other books of this genre. For instance, the stylish and luxurious edition with unusually clear and large print, as if the author foresaw that his readers would be people whose eyesight is already weakened by reading too many books. The protagonist is a professor teaching philosophy of law, not at a Bulgarian university, but at the Sorbonne. He arrives from Paris, albeit without much enthusiasm, to Varna to look for his vanished brother. The imposed journey will gradually turn into a voyage "in search of lost time", ending with an initiation into that kind of knowledge which is not taught anywhere in the world. The criminal thread in the plot is woven with romantic adventure, philosophical treatise, and essayistic reflections on some literary works.

But the most "professorial" aspect of the novel lays in the fact that it is not the professor who is its protagonist, but the books he once had read in his childhood and youth, such as Lermontov's *A Hero of our Time*, Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, and Irwin Shaw's *Evening in Byzantium*. Academic knowledge is also woven into the plot: from law and philosophy to advanced mathematics. A flash of mystery enables

the author to introduce another dimension in which our world dwells; questions are raised about the meaning of human existence, the freedom of personal choice, and the relationship between individual choice and moral responsibility towards other people. The ambition to unfold a verbal fan of knowledge drifts into the middle, then begins to drag. The novel, however, does not rely on a general readership but on an audience of friends, admirers, and (perhaps) colleagues, as is the case with almost all novels of this subgenre.

Nedelniyat prodavach na knigi differs from other Professorenromanen in that it is the only one to contain a scene set in a university environment. In fact, this scene (although not set in Bulgaria) is the closest thing to a campus novel to be found in the Professorenroman written in Bulgarian. The narrative begins with the protagonist walking through the corridors of the Sorbonne and reflecting on the psychology of the art of teaching. The lecture itself is briefly described, without any attention to the setting, but with some observations on the behavior of students in general. At the end of the lecture, a student asks a question, which the professor answers in such a way that he does not appear to be in a hurry to leave the room. Even as an exception to the general rule, *Nedelniyat prodavach na knigi* demonstrates the reluctance of Bulgarian author-professors to focus on the settings and specifics of the place where they work. For the same reason, these authors avoid creating relatively independent characters capable of actively participating in the plot. It is clear, then, that the genre of the campus novel is alien to their preferences, not least because it does not offer them the opportunity to develop the thoughts and experiences of the narrating protagonist.

There is a genuine campus novel in Bulgarian literature of the last decade, Kراسи Зуркова's *Wildalone* (2015, Bulgarian trans. *Samodiva*, 2016), whose author is not a professor but a practicing lawyer, and who does not live in Bulgaria, but in the United States. Zourkova left Bulgaria in the early 1990s to study art history at Princeton, then attended Harvard Law School, and began to practice finance law in New York, Chicago and Los Angeles. At the age of 40, she wrote her first novel in English, *Wildalone*, which was released by the prestigious HarperCollins publishing house. In genre terms, the novel is a blend of contemporary fantasy, witch romance and modern gothic. The plot involves young Thea Slavin, a talented Bulgarian pianist and a freshman at Princeton who struggles to adapt to the challenges of American college life and finds herself entangled in a love triangle with two enigmatic and handsome brothers belonging to the netherworld. She is also about to uncover a terrible secret about her own family in Bulgaria. What seems to have most impressed American readers is the exotic mix of Greek mythology and Bulgarian folk legends. The reviews printed on the book describe it as a "fluid, pulsing, gothic narrative" (*Library Journal*, on the front cover) and "a striking debut" (*Publishers Weekly*, on the back cover).

The title *Wildalone* is itself a neologism, with Zourkova substituting the Bulgarian word *Samodiva* as the title of the 2016 Bulgarian translation (in Bulgarian folklore, samodivas are mystical woodland creatures, young and beautiful maidens who sing and dance in the moonlight, seducing lonely shepherds whom they take away, often

to the netherworld). As can be seen, this Bulgarian campus novel relies on the opportunity to bring an “authentic” Bulgarian mystique to a foreign country. The Bulgarian translation failed to impress critics or the general public. On the other hand, the novel was appreciated in the American environment, which has traditions of both campus culture and campus novel writing.

There is, however, one particular case that stands apart from the novels listed so far: Vladimir Karadzhov’s *Etiopska prikazka* (An Ethiopian tale, 2017). A senior lecturer in economic and social geography at the Southwest University “Neofit Rilski” in Blagoevgrad, Karadzhov researched the history of coffee globally and wrote his “Ethiopian tale” (of 120 pages) that works only with scientifically proven facts, but tells the story in a fairytale style of narrative and in popular language. After the book gained popularity among the general public, the author acted in a way which explains how the traditional academic desire for knowledge may mix with the present-day ambition for greater exposure. He hired the best possible Bulgarian translators in French, German, English and Spanish, then he employed expensively-paid (by Bulgarian standards) foreign specialists to edit their work, so that “it would not feel like a translated novel”.⁸ All this work consumed a great deal of his energy and financial resources; for each of the translations he spent (in his own words), “as much money as buying a used car”. Four books appeared in digital format, in four different languages, successfully sold on Amazon, and St. Cyril and Methodius National Library declared *Etiopska prikazka* a record holder in translations among Bulgarian titles within one calendar year (2018). This seems to be more than was achieved by Georgi Gospodinov, the only Bulgarian winner of the international Booker Prize.

Encouraged by the success of the first book, Karadzhov published a second, similar book, *Okeanska prikazka* (An ocean tale, 2021), this time on the journey of vanilla (one of the three most expensive spices in the world) from a small Mexican tribe through the initial failure to domesticate it in Europe up to the unexpected solution of the problem 200 years later. This book (over twice as long as his first, at 300 pages) is a genuine geographical novel with fully reliable historical and biological information, further supported by over a hundred encyclopaedical footnotes and guaranteed by the three-months work of its scientific consultant, an associate professor of botany⁹. This may be a revelation for readers, but the transformation of the Professorenroman into the *Professorenmärchen* (professor tale) is also a neoliberal gesture. Life in translation of both books may be exemplary for the conception of global literature which favors the circulation of translation at the expense of classical literary qualities and is most clearly visible in David Damrosch’s theory of world literature.

CONCLUSION

The final question to consider is that of the reception of these novels. Some of these authors clearly do not want to be read by the general audience of “mainstream” readers and defend the self-indulgent elitism of the academic intellect. The majority, however, seek a reasonable compromise, offering knowledge for anyone who would reach for it. No one can say for sure how large the audience of the Bulgarian Professorenro-

man is, and to the best of my knowledge, none of them have been published abroad, although a translation alone, of course, does not mean international success.

As for the individuality of an author's signature, it is rather encoded in the combination each author makes for himself. As Svetlozar Igov put it, "I have read so much and experienced so many influences that in the end I came to resemble myself" (2014, n.p.). The question that cannot be answered is: how long will this game of selves be relevant, and what will the future hold for the Professorenroman in the later decades of the 21st century? As a Bulgarian proverb says, "Everything comes in its own time", but also, one might add, in its own setting.

NOTES

- ¹ It seems easy for English researchers to have overlooked the fact that the first "scholarly" novels were actually invented by Lord Edward Bulwer Lytton in the 1830s; the most famous among them, *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1834), had the greatest influence on German professors. In English-language and later French-language literature, subgenre forms developed which at first sight might have something in common with the Professorenroman, for example the *university novel* and the closely related *campus novel*. Russian literary studies, however, use the German term in its honest translation, *professorskij roman* (professor's novel), which is probably where the Bulgarian term comes from.
- ² One example of a professorial character in a non-professor novel is Pavel Ananiev, the history professor in Vladimir Zarev's novel *Obŭrkani v svobodata* (Confused in freedom). His academic presence, however, is reduced to his signature phrase, "All women age except first-year students" (Zarev 2022, 192).
- ³ Unless otherwise stated, all translation from Bulgarian are by the present author.
- ⁴ Svetlozar Igov seems to have taken offence at this definition, which probably did not suit his ambitions. However (and in a true "professor's" manner) he added that a large number of quotations have been encoded in his text ("my book is swarming with quotations"), most of which are not at all "easy to find" (Igov 2014, n.p.).
- ⁵ The title makes a historical reference to September 9, 1944 when the socialist regime was proclaimed in Bulgaria. Ancho Kaloyanov is also professor in Bulgarian literature.
- ⁶ Ivan Mladenov made this statement in an interview for the Bulgarian National Radio in October 2021.
- ⁷ Most novels of insanity are written in the first person, a technique that is meant to make the narrative "authentic", at least in the imagination of its author and those readers who have no real experience of this kind. The storytelling is mostly fragmented and messy in the attempt to imitate the thinking of a mentally ill person.
- ⁸ These details come from the author himself, on the Horizon Program of the Bulgarian National Radio on 13 December 2018.
- ⁹ In just four days, sales put it at number five on Helicon's (the largest bookstore chain in Bulgaria) weekly list. In electronic format, it became one of the top ten best-selling books of the month (according to the official Southwest University website).

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