

**Research Note**

# **Female and male characters in the works of Russian science fiction writer Kir Bulychev**

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## **Introduction**

In Russian science fiction, the ratio of male and female authors is such that the priority always belonged to men. According to researchers<sup>1</sup>, this phenomenon is explained by the fact that the so-called “hard science fiction” was a priority in the Soviet Union, which told readers about the achievements and prospects of real science. Authors described technical details and the operation of various mechanisms, and wrote about exploring new territories. All these topics, as was traditionally believed, may be of interest primarily to men. The main characters of such works, written by male authors, more often became men than women. Female characters were on the sidelines: they could be the helpers of male characters; they could play the role of a “damsel in distress” who the hero needed to save; they could act as a hero’s love, often a fatal woman. However, very rarely did they play an independent role in the plot.

In this work, we are going to talk about a rare, but very bright exception, the book series for teenagers about a girl from the future Alisa Selezneva by Kir Bulychev (1934-2003)<sup>2</sup>. They were written by a male author and were very popular in the late Soviet Union. Several films and animation films based on these books were shot, one of which can be even attributed to the dystopia genre. In this work, we are going to analyze the images of one female (Alisa Selezneva) and several male (her best friends Arkasha Sapozhkov and Pashka Geraskin) main characters to reach a clear understanding of appropriate gender role models for soviet teenagers.

## **The World of the Future in The Books About Alisa’s Adventures**

The book series began in 1965 with the novel “The Girl with Whom Nothing Happens”. Later books were published until 2003 (in 2003, Kir Bulychev died), but in this work we consider only those works that were written before 1991, since then the Soviet Union collapsed and the realities changed. The selected book series is noteworthy in that they are one of the few works of Russian teenage literature of the Soviet period in

the genre of SF, in which the female character plays the main role. In addition, thanks to films and animations, Alisa Selezneva and her adventures became known throughout the Soviet Union, since the television was centralized and all residents watched the same channels. So it can be said without exaggeration that several generations of Soviet schoolchildren grew up in stories about the adventures of Alisa and her friends. After the release of the animated film *The Mystery of the Third Planet* (1981) as well as the films *Guest from the Future* (1985) and *The Island of the Rusty General* (1988), the popularity of books about Alisa could be compared with the popularity of Harry Potter in the 2000s. And just like Harry, Ron and Hermione are a certain ideal of modern teenagers, so Alisa and her friends embodied a certain example of Soviet teenagers.

The story of Alisa takes place in the futuristic Moscow of the twenty-first century. The author does not explicitly mention whether Alisa lives under communism or socialism, but indirect details hint to readers that her world is more like a society of victorious communism, since it lacks money. People can easily move around the planet Earth, as well as fly into space to distant planets. Teenagers from an early age have hobbies, are interested in science and technology, and can choose a major to their liking. There is no social inequality; earthlings live together in a high-tech and convenient world. All diseases, “except for the common cold”, have been managed, there is practically no crime on Earth, and all earthlings are responsible, friendly, and socialized members of society. Alisa describes her contemporaries as follows: “In the future there will be no ordinary people. Five billion exceptional, famous, gifted people will live on Earth”<sup>3</sup>. The world of the future in books about Alisa is utopian, and more like a fairy tale than a real one, but the explanation is simple: this world was created by the author for a children’s and teenage audience. In addition, most of the books belong to Soviet children’s science fiction, in which dreaming of a “bright” and fair future was quite commonplace.

Later, especially in the post-Soviet period narratives, piracy, the slave trade, and violence appear in books about Alisa, but basically, all this exists in deep space, on planets more backward than Earth.

### **Characteristics of the main characters**

Alisa is a girl of school age; in most books, she is 12 years old. Alisa’s appearance is described as follows: this is a blonde girl of high stature and athletic build, usually dressed in “men’s” clothes (shorts and a tank top, or jumpsuit). Alisa is in high school; she is a member of the circle of young naturalists and dreams of becoming a biologist,

like her father. According to the book “Alisa’s Journey” (1974) (“A Girl from the Earth”), Alisa is in the second grade (“After all, the third “B” class left altogether at night in the sack of potatoes on a cargo [spacecraft] barge. They will be in the stadium, and our second grades class are not”), while in the book “A Hundred Years Ahead” (the film *Guest From the Future* based on this novel), Alisa tells the schoolgirl of the late XX century, Yulia Gribkova, that in her time in schools “there are no classes and no letters” (which indicated classes gradation as well), but “only interest groups” (in the film *Guest from the Future*, shot on this story, on the contrary, Alisa says she is in sixth-grade class).

Alone, together with her father or friends, she traveled to many distant planets, in the underground depths of Earth and in Atlantis, as well as in the distant past (including in the “era of legends” 26 thousand years ago) and in the twentieth century (1976).

Alisa is the only child in the family. Her father is a famous cosmozoologist, professor of zoology Igor Seleznev, and director of the Moscow zoo of the future, Cosmozoo. He is the author of many printed works (in particular, the book “Animals of the Far Planets”), and a regular author of the galactic journal “Bulletin of Cosmozoology”. Her mother is a famous architect of the solar system, Kira Selezneva, known for the buildings of the Nukus Stadium and the cultural center on the asteroid Pallas. Alisa spends much more time with her father than with her mother, but, since the books are for children, she has no psychological injuries in this regard.

Alisa’s character is impulsive, energetic, and adventurous. She constantly surprises adults with her childish spontaneity, resourcefulness, and fearlessness. Often her outlandish guesses are more accurate than the scientific hypotheses of adult scientists. Along with peers - especially with her best friend Pasha Geraskin - Alisa, on the contrary, often plays the role of a skeptic and a balanced, calm member of the team. Alisa is honest, and she believes that “if you have the opportunity not to lie, it’s better not to do that”, but she thinks it is permissible to show tricks to her parents or other adults if there is reason to think that adults will interfere with the implementation of plans because of their excessive concern for the welfare and safety of children<sup>4</sup>. She is very independent and often travels in the company of friends or alone, rather than with her parents. Nevertheless, usually, a friendly adult is always present nearby her, but Alisa has to make many decisions alone and she copes with this task perfectly.

Arkady (Arkasha) Sapozhkov and Pavel (Pashka) Geraskin are her best friends and companions. They study with Alisa in the same class (in the Soviet Union and in modern Russia, school classes have a constant composition of students throughout the study

period - from the first grade of elementary school to the last grade of high school, that is, the same students study with each other all 11-12 years) and also attend a circle of young naturalists.

Pashka is a peer, classmate, and best friend of Alisa, a member of the circle of young biologists. Born a month later than Alisa. Outwardly described as a blue-eyed, tall, and fair-haired boy. By nature, he is an incorrigible romantic, bombastic, braggart, and stubborn, unwilling to admit his own mistakes, but a true friend and reliable companion. He has a keen nature, he is constantly in search of adventure, which often leads to disastrous consequences. He is prone to impulsive actions. He constantly gets involved in adventures, and very often Alisa and her friends have to save Pashka and save themselves from the troubles in which Pashka got everyone involved.

In the adaptations, he appears only in the cartoon *Prisoners of Yamagiri-maru* (1988)<sup>5</sup>.

Arkady Sapozhkov is Alisa Selezneva's classmate (at least from the second grade) and her closest friend. He lives in Moscow with a large family - parents, grandfather, grandmother, brothers, and sisters. There is also a cottage in Kratovo, built by the great-grandfather of Arkady Sapozhkov. About relatives, we only know that his great-grandfather Ilya Borisovich received the Nobel Prize for scientific discoveries.

There is no data about Arkady's life before school. In school, he specializes in biology. Together with Alisa and some other classmates, he conducts research at the station of young biologists on Gogolevsky Boulevard in Moscow. He has scientific publications.

He participated with Alisa in space expeditions within our Galaxy for scientific and adventurous purposes.

Arkady Sapozhkov is the exact opposite of Pashka Geraskin. His character is amazingly suited to the path of life that he has chosen for himself. He is an ideal scientist. He is alienated from everything that does not belong to the subject of research, always immersed in scientific creativity, purposeful and active, when the scientific task requires it, scrupulous, methodical, and patient in finding a solution. Phlegmatic and calm at home, he can flare up when it comes to discussing his scientific research or defending his own right. Obviously, an exceptionally successful scientific career awaits him, and he will receive his Nobel Prize, after his grandfather. At the same time, Arkady Sapozhkov is quite attached to friends and even sometimes is able to distract from research for the sake of help and support.

He is described as a teenager slightly above average height with bright red curly

hair and freckles on his face<sup>6</sup>.

## **Characters' Behavior and the Gender Role Model that They Demonstrate to Readers**

Alisa's two main qualities are curiosity and charm. When Alisa was younger and traveled with her father and his space colleagues in search of rare animals, her father described her abilities as follows: "Alisa has wide connections". Thanks to innate sociability and charm, Alisa makes many influential acquaintances on this journey. However, with age, she becomes more modest, accustomed to behaving "as a girl should", that is, she becomes forced to act indirectly more, than directly. In books series where Alisa and her friends fall into medieval societies, she is forced to behave like an average girl: wear a dress, keep quiet; and no one listens to her opinion. On the other hand, in such societies, Alisa remains at large, while Pasha Geraskin, who could not restrain himself and insulted the knight, is seized and detained. Alisa manages to free him only because she is dressed like a princess and those around her do not consider her dangerous.

Among other things, Alisa is smart, observant, courageous, and loyal to her friends and tries not to break her promises and not lie (when it is possible and does not harm security). Along with all her other friends, she goes in for sports, and for schoolchildren from the present (1976), her abilities seem superheroic: she plays basketball very well, can jump over the fence, and run very fast. However, Alisa herself does not consider herself a supergirl - she is modest and not ambitious, as a proper Soviet girl should be.

Best of all, the features of the image of Alisa can be seen in comparing her with another character - her female peer, the alien humanoid slave Zauri from the novel "The War with the Lilliputians" (1992). In early childhood, Zauri was abducted from a prosperous planet by space pirates and sold into slavery, where she spent most of her life. She is a beautiful girl; she has long black hair, dark eyes, and dark skin. Alisa's friends like Pashka and Arkady like her, and this fact makes Alice a little jealous (but she does not give a look). Deprived of slavery of the opportunity to dress beautifully, freed by Alisa and her friends Zauri immediately begins to wear dresses, flirting. But, as Alisa notes, Zauri is "a very spoiled girl". She may cry at the most inopportune moment, become stubborn, or start demanding that everyone take care of her. Alisa believes that all this comes from a lack of education. At the beginning of the story, Zauri was irresponsible, but gradually, thanks to the support of Alisa and her friends, she shows her best qualities and saves her friends from danger. We can say that Zauri

demonstrates a pronounced stereotypical female model of behavior: she is tearful, spontaneous, and capricious, and she likes to dress beautifully and flirt with the opposite sex. In contrast to her, Alisa is restrained, sensible, and behaves correctly with male friends; she tries to suppress her jealousy of Zauri, who Pashka likes (in the book series about Alisa it is not mentioned directly, but some of Alisa's reactions indicate that she has a romantic feeling for Pashka Geraskin). Alice puts in the first place the business, work, and well-being of the team, and all these "girly" experiences for her are much less important.

Due to the fact that Alice is a girl, she manages to resolve some conflicts through diplomatic means, and not through violence, which gravitates to, for example, Pashka. However, pronounced femininity in her behavior is still not observed, in contrast to the alien girl Zauri. Such was the ideal image of a Soviet teenage girl: her business qualities are not inferior to men's, and in the sphere of personal relations she knows how to control herself and is more inclined to compromise than her male friends. And yet, Alisa is often required to keep silent and be more tactful than Pashka and Arkasha: they are more active, more selfish than Alisa, can be carried away by an unexpected idea and put the group's security at risk, or decide that they can solve the problems alone and overestimate their strength.

As a girl, Alisa often manages to refrain from rash steps, stop and think. Despite the fact that their team of three people does not have a leader, sometimes Pashka Geraskin claims to be the clear leader. Arkasha, as a true scientist, prefers to act autonomously. But Alisa, due to her innate charm, diplomacy, and well-developed emotional intelligence, copes well with the duties of an implicit leader. However, as mentioned above, she is modest and not ambitious, and therefore does not take a leadership position in the open. All these qualities were also relevant for women in the Soviet Union (and in modern Russia as well): to work alongside men, and coordinate their actions, but never openly demonstrate their (women's) leadership qualities.

Although some details in the book series indicate that Alisa is not indifferent to Pasha Geraskin, she never speaks openly about her feelings for him. The romantic line between the main characters is underdeveloped. Among the three characters, only Pashka Geraskin clearly falls in love with different girls (not Alisa), since he is a romantic person, spontaneous, and prone to rash acts. More serious people - Alisa and Arkasha - are passionate about work and adventure, they do not have time for such nonsense as romantic hobbies. This attitude about falling in love is also very characteristic of Soviet teenagers since the romantic side of the relationship between the

characters was usually presented in the form of sincere friendship between them, and mutual support, but sex, and carnal love rarely became the subject of description. In the Soviet Union, there was so-called “Puritan” morality, and all topics related to love and affection were under the tacit ban. Especially when it came to literature for children and teenagers. Alisa and her male friends are a team of colleagues working on a difficult task or a group of friends who have fun. They consider any kind of romantic hobbies with each other as a weakness and are in no hurry to indulge themselves in satisfying the need for romantic love. This is probably one of the reasons why Alisa and her friends stay for 12 years old throughout the book series. If they got older, the writer would have to enter a romantic line, and then the age limit of books would have to be increased.

## Conclusion

In modern Russia, one can observe a tendency toward a return to the Soviet model of banning the image of sexual and romantic relationships between teenagers. For instance, for several years there has been a law banning gay propaganda among non-adults<sup>7</sup> (and in November 2022 a law banning LGBT propaganda among adults appeared), and even a flag with the symbols of the LGBT community cannot be displayed publicly so as not to cause uncomfortable questions for children and teenagers (there were curious precedents when vigilant citizens called the police when they saw curtains in the window colors of the rainbow flag). The origins of this tradition can be found in Soviet times when the “Puritan” Soviet morality avoided open conversations on the topic of sexual relations, and homosexuality was considered a disease that should be treated. In addition, nominally men and women both in the Soviet Union and in modern Russia are considered equal and have equal rights and duties. At first glance, it seems that there are no pronounced stereotypical gender differences between them. However, in reality, men predominantly occupy leadership positions, and they are characterized by a more active, more independent life position than women. And women, possessing equal business qualities with men, are still in second positions and are a little shy of their femininity, perceive it as a weakness, imbalance, something that needs to be eliminated and corrected.

Moreover, thanks to the emancipation of Soviet women in the early twentieth century, the modern nuclear Russian family is usually based on a husband and wife both working. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, a new norm emerged in the middle and upper-middle classes that copied the relationship in the traditional American family (or in the traditional Japanese family, where the man works and the woman does the

housework), but for economic reasons, this norm has not become universal.

At the same time, women are still being educated with the idea that a woman should be modest, and unselfish, she should give in to a man and be content with the role of his assistant even if her professional and personal qualities are in no way inferior to a male colleague.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Paul Amnuel, interview with Elena Kushnir, 2018.06.17, <https://knife.media/amnuel-interview/> (accessed November 25, 2022).
- <sup>2</sup> Bulychev, Kir, SFE, *The Encyclopedia of Science Fiction*, [https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/bulychev\\_kir](https://sf-encyclopedia.com/entry/bulychev_kir) (accessed November 25, 2022).
- <sup>3</sup> A film “Guest from the Future” (1985).
- <sup>4</sup> Sergei Lobov, *Fairytale about the Future. Alisa Seleznyova // Mir Fantastiki*, 2009, №7, p. 115-119.
- <sup>5</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>6</sup> Alisa Seleznyova, *Encyclopedia*, <https://alisa.romantiki.ru/?p=193> (accessed November 25, 2022).
- <sup>7</sup> The Russian federal law “for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values”, also known in English-language media as the “gay propaganda law” and the “anti-gay law”, is a bill that was unanimously approved by the State Duma on 11 June 2013 and was signed into law by President Vladimir Putin on 30 June 2013.