

[DOI: 10.20472/AHC.2018.003.002](https://doi.org/10.20472/AHC.2018.003.002)

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## **20TH CENTURY HISTORY OF LATVIA IN LITERARY NARRATIVES**

### **Abstract:**

The research focuses on contemporary Latvian fiction that reflects the history of the 20th century. Since 2015, the number of such works in Latvia has grown rapidly. To a great extent, it has been facilitated by the today's historical political situation, namely, the fact that the year 2018 is the centenary of the Republic of Latvia, which becomes an incentive to activate the attempts of restoration and understanding of the state's history. The analysis of fictional narratives is carried out by using the ideas of New Historicism and Literary anthropology, as well as the theories of collective memory.

Writing history in literary form not only constructs a shared space of memories, but also provides an opportunity to reflect, understand and create a national identity. By means of fictional narratives, the past becomes a factor in creating solidarity. Writers develop peculiar testimonies for a certain period of time - they focus on both the relatively recent past, which can be described by their own and their contemporaries' memories, as well as earlier events, which are described by using archival documents, oral testimonies, diaries and other materials. When representing the past, the narration strategies characteristic to fiction are combined with the reliance on historical documents, thus creating contemporary literary genres.

### **Keywords:**

Latvian fiction, History, New Historicism, Literary anthropology, Collective memory, National identity

## 1 Introduction

The amount of contemporary Latvian fiction that reflects on the history of the 20th century has grown dramatically since 2015. To a great extent, it has been facilitated by today's historical political situation, namely, the fact that the year 2018 is the centenary of the Republic of Latvia. It becomes an incentive to activate the attempts of restoration and understanding of the state's history, which results in various manifestations of culture products: films and TV series about Latvian history are being shot, monuments are being erected, memorable events are being organized, research is being carried out, and fiction books are being published. The celebration of Latvia's centenary provides an opportunity for and encourages attempts to solve problems accumulated in a national cultural consciousness which often become the reason for political manipulations. For artists it is both a challenge and a new incentive for their creative endeavours, since through art, indirectly, society's social memory is formed, the values of a national identity are updated, and society's self-reflection which enriches a social capital is developed.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century with its numerous important events is extremely significant for Latvia's history which affect and shape people's socio-cultural consciousness nowadays, for example, the revolution of 1905, the establishment of an independent state in 1918, deportations, World War II, the years of Soviet occupation, the restoration of the independent state, etc. Modern research shows that Latvia's residents have poor knowledge about historic events in their state. Research mentions 20<sup>th</sup> century history as an exception as compared to earlier years, as, lately, numerous researches into it have been funded and carried out. (Kaprāns, 2017, 17)

Nevertheless, the residents' knowledge is often limited to general facts, whose understanding and perception requires the development of critical thinking. (Kaprāns, Austers, 2017). Novels about 20<sup>th</sup> century history published during the last years are not only an interesting fact of art, or a new approach towards reflection of history in Latvian literature, but they are also a significant public act which helps integrate the most important turning points in 20<sup>th</sup> century history into the system of public consciousness.

A large number of novels devoted to Latvia's 20<sup>th</sup> century history and published over the last years appeared within the series "We. Latvia, 20<sup>th</sup> century" devoted to the centenary of Latvia. A writer and historian Gundega Repse was the initiator of the series who attracted 13 authors to the project and encouraged each of them to write one novel about a specific period of the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. Gundega Repse says: "Once in the summer, when, it seemed, that the public climate was extremely depressive, the level of social consciousness was low, and the culture sickened, besides that, looking at how people in Estonia and Lithuania were coping with the issues of their history, there appeared some determination – why we cannot.

I had an idea to attempt to write a collection of short stories. But at the same time when everything was arranged, and the project was successfully implemented, I had a thought that it would be great to also create a series of novels. As far as I know, there is nothing like it, at least in Europe" (Taps..). Therefore, the idea that writing novels about the 20<sup>th</sup> century history is directly

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<sup>1</sup> Writing and publication of these novels became possible thanks to the implemented grant programme "Promotion of a National Identity" of the State Culture Capital Foundation.

related to the rise of a national self-consciousness and promotion of the significance of a national identity was widely announced.

There are other significant novels created by the writers' individual inner impulse, and which are not included into the abovementioned series of novels, for example, "Pieci pirksti" (*Five Fingers*) by Mara Zalite, 2013, "Putekļi smilšu pulkstenī" (*Dust in a Sand Clock*) by Arno Jundze, 2015, etc. Historic research related to the collective memory, publication and interpretation of documents, reviews of a traumatic historic period, etc. are published alongside literary works. Such an intense appeal to the history, undoubtedly, highlights an internal need of the Latvian nation to record and reflect on its collective memory, as well as it provides an opportunity to get rid of a traumatic experience by means of narrating it.

## 2 Methodological Framework

It seems reasonable to apply theoretical ideas of New Historicism for the analysis of situations in Latvian historic novels and their perception. New Historicism allows us to consider historic documentation and research carried out by historians in the same perspective with fiction works, interpreting them as texts about certain historic stages. S. Greenblatt and C. Gallagher believe that the past history will be further developed through literary education (Gallagher, Greenblatt, 2001, 28). This viewpoint follows from one of the most important principles of New Historicism to perceive history not as a series of cause-effect relations which has a linear development, but to see how different discourses, which conflict and deny one another, interact in every historic period. Outlining the situation of a certain historic period, it is impossible to determine one absolute truth, and not the fact itself, but the way it is told about comes to the forefront. It follows from this thesis that analysis of any historic epoch is subjective, as when reviewing various discourses, a researcher chooses the ones that are closer to him, completely or partially neglecting the others. Therefore, any analysis of historic events is incomplete, as it reflects only a part of the historic view. (Tyson 2006, 290) In this perspective, a literary text becomes a fully-fledged historic text because any description of history is virtually a text, and therefore, there is a possibility to interpret it, and consequently, a border between non-fictional and literary texts becomes indistinct. When assessing from the viewpoint of a possible effect on a recipient, a literary text has more possibilities to actively form the public historic consciousness, because it, by means of a catharsis effect, has a greater impact on the emotional sphere of a person, and, therefore, it remains brighter in memory.

American literary theorist Walter Benn Michaels says that literature is part of culture (Michaels 1987). Theorists of anthropology and New Historicism, in turn, interpret any act of culture as a text material making attempts to use the historic context described in the work as a basis to better understand the culture in which this text has been created.

Therefore, the appeal to the depiction of the 20<sup>th</sup> century historic events in modern Latvian fiction should be perceived not only as reflection and interpretation of a certain historic epoch but also as a vivid testimony to spiritual needs of modern society. The celebration of Latvia's centenary has become a reason and opportunity to speak about the facts that were suppressed earlier because of various reasons. Dori Laub writes: "The longer the story remains untold, the more distorted it becomes in the survivor's conception of it, so much so that the survivor doubts the reality of the actual events" (Laub 1992). Addressing the 20th century history through describing it in fiction,

allows healing cultural traumas, telling painful events. It also provides an opportunity to recall, tell and consolidate memories for the future generations forming the continuity of the collective historic consciousness.

### **3 Basic techniques for forming history narrative in modern Latvian novels.**

Novels about Latvia's 20<sup>th</sup> century history written in recent years use various techniques that not only create an authenticity effect, but they also give the impression of documentary, which makes readers believe that the described events happened to someone in reality. One of the most famous of these texts is the novel by Pauls Bankovskis "18" about the end of World War I and the time of the establishment of the state of Latvia. The novel is based on several levels gradually convincing its readers that everything described in the novel is true. It begins with the description of a situation in the present, when a family arrives at the country house and found there their grandfather's things, among which there is a camera with a memory card. The photographs preserved on the memory card give the impression of being old; they are described one by one, very precisely, in a businesslike and absolutely unemotional manner. The protagonist strives to understand which places he can see on photographs, and when they could have been taken. In the next part of the novel, the narrator changes, he is not our contemporary but a person who survived the end of World War I and the time of the establishment of the Latvian state. In order to display the events, the form of a diary is used. Besides that, the author's comments are specially emphasized in some places, which makes the message more reliable.

The diary form used in the main part of the novel creates a contradictory impression. On the one hand, the view of an eyewitness of the events and a reader's belief in the fact that all events described reproduce the text of the diary found in the country house, create an authenticity effect. On the other hand, an experienced and critically thinking reader realizes that a diary is an extremely subjective form of self-expression, and all the described events are considered from the perspective of one person's perception. Besides that, this person did not have a motivation to strive for objectivity, as people write diaries mainly for themselves.

The final part of the novel is again written from the modern perspective, and the form of narration is also a diary whose entries are dated including the date and month but the year is not indicated. It is important that in order to describe the attitude of a narrator who lives in our time, the author chooses the first person plural form, which makes the narrative more objective adding an effect of greater authenticity. In this way the author maintains the balance on the edge between objectivity and subjectivity, documentary and fiction, and creates an effect of authenticity. Nevertheless, a reader understands clearly that everything narrated is a view of only one person (this character changes at different stages of reading because, in general, the narrative is created by two narrators), one of many possible viewpoints.

There are two viewpoints emphasized in a circle composition which are created by two narrators – one of them is an eyewitness of the 1917 -1918 events, but another one lives in the present. "One lives in obscurity and speculation about his future, as well as about the events happening in the present; the other one faces the uncertainty trying to understand the past evidence and its relation with today's reality". (Bankovskis, 2014, 167) Applying this narrative strategy, the author creates the narrative about the past as well as he strives to understand the role of these events in today's situation in Latvia. Describing one of the most significant for Latvia historic stages – the

time when the state of Latvia had been established, Pauls Bankovskis reflects on the necessity of existence of the state of Latvia, on the nature of Latvian culture and the code of Latvian identity. Historic events happening during a few centuries are one of the most significant factor of a national identity's formation which has been affecting and shaping the destiny of the people until nowadays, defining the ability for independent thinking and behaviour of people, the feeling of inner freedom, desire to create their own destiny and take on the responsibility for the development of the state. The novel reflects on the idea that historic events also affect arts, culture, and everyday life, shaping and nuancing the national identity. The author points out that "the history is not the past that is under the threat of oblivion. It is what is left in the present - inside each of us, in the nature, in the language". (Bankovskis, 2014, 169) The historic context of the foundation of the state of Latvia allows P. Bankovskis to focus on the idea of the national identity of modern residents of Latvia. The author directly (for example, the protagonist's speculations on the national identity and the history of Latvian people) and indirectly (having included into the plot the main events of the development of the state of Latvia and searching for explanations of the modern situation in the past) states that a person's identity is determined by their ancestral roots. Nevertheless, the protagonist does not feel it – he feels neither like a Latvian who is a descendant of Karkow Poles, nor a Latvian who is a descendant of Riga Germans. He feels in the present like a Latvian. Nevertheless, despite the fact that a modern person does not feel certain ethnic roots, his identity to a greater extent is comprised of a collective historic memory which is reflected in folklore, as well as in the language, nature, everyday life, and in the intangible system of values which a bearer of a certain culture perceives like his own.

Besides the abovementioned narrative techniques (a narrative from the first person singular or plural, diaries, descriptions of photos, gradual immersion into the distant past), there are other techniques that create the effect of authenticity and reality, and applied by authors of modern novels who have chosen to use the 20<sup>th</sup> century historic events as a background. For example, Maris Berzins in his novel "Svina garša" (*The Taste of Lead*) in the beginning of every chapter adds a few excerpts from the newspapers of the time when the novel is set, the beginning of World War II. This technique presents the events described in the chapter as well as allows a reader to better understand the time which is being told about; it also introduces several opinions in the narrative, the opinions which witnessed the events, this way making the narrative more objective. Including publicist texts into the novel makes a reader put more trust in the author. Besides that, this technique for creating a text erases traditional boundaries between a historic source and literary text, and offers to focus on the subjective interpretation of the perception of the world of the characters and specific historic events.

Traditionally, a reader's consciousness perceives newspaper fragments of a certain time as a more reliable source than literary texts. However, assessing journalistic works from a theoretical standpoint, we can say that any journalistic text is determined by ideological trends, the author's subjective perception of the world, reasons for writing the text, as well as other extra-textual conditions. From this point of view, modern literary fiction about the 20th century Latvian history is considered as one of the ways of writing the history and it coexists with descriptions made by historians, opinions by witnesses, publicist works, and archival documents.

The description of everyday scenes which provides all tiny details and which allows a reader to fully experience the atmosphere of the depicted time is a significant technique for creating a text

in modern Latvian novels about 20<sup>th</sup> century history. The main characters of the novel are ordinary people who suffer by an unfortunate coincidence, but not because they decided to actively participate in the events and “to make” history. The characters’ emotional experience is close and clear to every reader, as during major historic events they live their lives, their interests, work, psychological twists and turns, family problems, etc. Novels pay a lot of attention to the indirect psychological characteristics of the characters which appear in the action; the inclusion into the text various details emphasizes the characters’ subjective worldview. This technique is opposite to both the official history and historic novel of the past, where events are either grouped around significant, famous historic characters, or were created under the influence of these characters.

## Conclusion

Modern Latvian novels about the 20th century history use traditional strategies of narrative that depicts that past, for example, the narrative from the first person singular and plural, or the third person singular, the view on the events from the protagonist’s perspective, depiction of psychological conflicts, as well as innovative methods are introduced: for example, the inclusion of a historic document, introduction of a neutral documentary descriptive segment, focus on the description of everyday life. According to the development of the history of literature, a lack of adventure story line, actualization of the recent past, etc. can be considered as the elements not peculiar to a historic novel.

Writers create original testimonies about a certain time; both the relatively recent past which can be described on the basis of your own or your contemporaries’ memories, and more remote events in descriptions of which the authors use archival documents, oral testimonies, diaries and other materials; historic documents are also sometimes cited in literary texts. There are two different approaches used when creating novels about 20<sup>th</sup> century history – a remote, from the point of view of time, look at past events which involves the use of documentary materials for the research in and depiction of the atmosphere of the given time, and the use and depiction of a personal experience, which in some cases allows emphasizing an autobiographical component in novels. This way the issue of the relation between documentary and subjectivity is emphasized.

The Latvian writer Gundega Repse believes that the publication of these types of novels is a kind of gesture of resistance to the course for oblivion of history, deliberate degradation, all sorts of historical and political treats that are in the air. (Taps..)

The published novels become one of the ways of writing the history: the events described in them and their interpretation (which inevitably is determined by the authors’ subjective viewpoint) in a collective memory of the future society will probably become stronger historic facts than any documentary historic evidence and data of historic research.

History in modern Latvian novels is interpreted as a total of various inexplicable discourses, in which reasons for a modern collective public consciousness, outlook and human identity are searched for.

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