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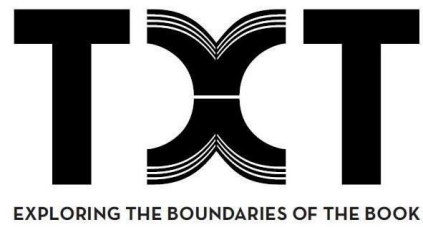
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Mescheryakov Publishing House

Books as Collectibles

By Ksenia Papazova

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Compared to many other publishing enterprises, this Moscow-based publishing house appeared out of nowhere. Launched in 2005 by a former vice-president of Rosbank, one of the largest banks in Russia, this small private publishing house managed to swiftly find its own niche on the Russian book market. The owner and the founder of the company, Vadim Mescheryakov, started a publishing house on surprisingly practical grounds: his wife wanted to find work after seven years of staying home to take care of their child. This was a chance to run a company of their own. At first, Mescheryakov planned just to give a hand to his wife in managing the company when needed, but step by step he got so involved in this business that he left his position in the bank in 2008 in order to fully devote himself to this new challenging activity. Needless to say, many of his friends and former colleagues were very skeptical about his chances to become successful, and they had a point. With no previous experience in publishing and few opportunities to enter a Russian book market saturated by

other publishing houses, his endeavour did not look very promising. Nevertheless, Mescheryakov was inspired by his dreams and followed his intuition as well as his literary taste. Finally, his business made net profits of eight million rubles on ninety-million-ruble sales by 2011¹ and now his publishing house employs 18 people and publishes 100-120 titles per year.²

Among its first published and noticeable titles was the book *La Science Amusante*—one of Mescheryakov's 'bestselling nonfiction titles for kids and teenagers'³—by the French journalist Arthur Good (1853-1928) who used the pseudonym *Tôm Tit* for his works. This book together with *200 Best Works* by Herluf Bidstrup were successful enough to keep the business going.

At this point, it is interesting to mention that the book design in this publishing house is worked out under the direction of Vadim Mescheryakov too, its owner and editor-in-chief. Ironically, a publishing house with no history (it is only a decade old) made its name by creating and publishing a new series of books called

Kniga s Istoriej (The Book with History). This series consists of books appearing in print around the world in near the end of the 19th to the beginning of the 20th centuries. These books represent reprints from their originals (design, original illustrations) but usually with a special ‘vintage’ touch to them; the books are new, but they look very old and worn-out. What a reader can see contradicts what your hand feels: dirty spots and stains on pages (Fig. 1); traces of mould and water; damaged and glued together bindings.

Indeed, these books look like they have a long story to tell their new readers. These ‘marks of time’ perhaps serve as a quality label for parents who buy these books for their children, reminding them of traditions of good quality literature.

The rounded corners of the half-cloth binding, and a slipcase in the same decrepit style as the book it contains are an interesting detail that contributes to the unique experience of reading, or just holding such a book and fingering it through. To correspond the original typeface of the books a new typeface called ‘William’ was used. Created by the Russian designer

Maria Doreuli in 2010 as a graduation project at the Moscow State University of Printing, this typeface is a modification of the classical 18th-century English typeface Caslon for Cyrillic alphabet.⁴

Children’s Stories from Dickens was the first book to open this vintage books series, printed as a reprint of the edition published in 1910 in England. Despite



Fig. 1: Dirty pages of a new book. Courtesy of the publisher.

being entirely new and ‘freshly’ printed in hardcover with bright pictures, this book has all the characteristics of a read-to-tatters book (Fig. 2). In fact, the whole series of these vintage books owe its birth to this 1910 English edition: when Mescheryakov’s staff saw this book, they were so impressed with the quality and beauty of this almost centenary volume that it was decided to reproduce this book in order to show its splendor to their readers. The response of their readers to the book was extremely favourable and

within three years, the publishing house published twelve books in this series. This ‘vintage book’ experiment did not pass unnoticed—some other Russian publishing houses launched similar products of their own.

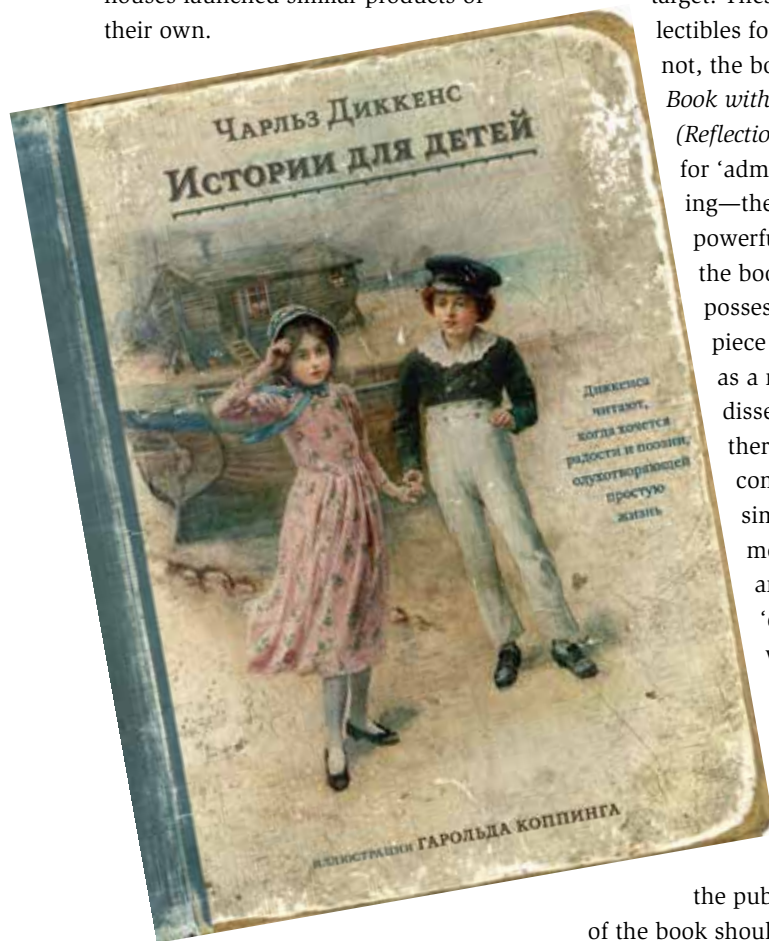


Fig. 2: It is difficult to distinguish the original book published in 1910 from its reprint published in 2010. Courtesy of the publisher.

The volume of copies published in this series may vary from 1500 to 3000 or even 5000 copies. However, as the publisher claims, there is no need to publish these books in greater volume because these

books are fairly expensive and, partially as a consequence, they are not meant for mass distribution—quite opposite, book-hunters and connoisseurs are their main target. These books are real collectibles for them. Intentionally or not, the books especially from *The Book with History and Otrazhenija (Reflections)* series are books more for ‘admiration’ than for reading—these editions have such powerful visual effect: these are the books that one wants to possess and they resemble a piece of art more than serving as a medium for knowledge dissemination. However, there is a certain turn in the company’s policy to make simpler books that are meant primary for reading and cannot be seen just as ‘decorative book-objects which can be kept on bookshelves without being read’. However, it does not mean that from now on only ‘visually empty’ books will be published. As

the publisher realised the form of the book should not be more important than its content and the active and sophisticated design may be out of place or even prevent readers from adequate comprehension of the ideas of the author of the book. Rather opposite, ‘a free space of a white page can be a much better frame for presenting the illustrations of prominent artists than original designers’ mats and patterns’. This new vision and philosophy of the publishing house found its reflection

in a new series called *Bolshoe Illustrirovannoe Sobranie Sochinenij* (*The Large Illustrated Collection of Works*). Again the readers' reaction was very enthusiastic.

In this regard, it is also worth mentioning that the rebranding of *The Book with History* started last year and a new series of books called *Malaya Kniga s Istoriej* (*The Little Book with History*) was launched. The same content and design approach is used as for its bigger brother: the same fonts and bindings, the brand mats with

'dirty spots' for pages. What is different is its format: it is almost two times smaller and it makes the books more 'cosy' and easier to hold while reading (Fig. 3). Some other printing luxuries such as rounded corners and a cardboard slipcase were removed from the series, which resulted in a nearly 50% reduction of the retail price, but still these books possess the same 'charm of vintage' as the bigger series.

There were some attempts to experiment with electronic books and applications but 'we could not find anything interesting in this area'. And this is not surprising: the books with such a powerful visual and haptic appeal are unlikely to be thrust into the digital form. It may be

assumed that at the moment this is just the case when the all-mighty digital medium turns out to be powerless and unable to comprehend all the unique

characteristics of the physical object. And let's not forget about the smell of newly printed books either. Moreover, 'we strongly believe that many new generations of children will still use paper books and even the most perfect electronic medium will fail to substitute the sensation which paper books offer to us'.

To sum up,

here are the main series of quality children's books released by Mescheryakov Publishing House:

- *The Book with History* – pricey limited editions of classical works: some of them are published as abridged versions while others are not truncated and may contain explanatory commentaries). Among them there are such titles as: *The Happy Prince and Other Stories* by O. Wilde, *Alice in Wonderland* by L. Carroll, *Undine* by F. de la Motte Fouqué and many others;
- *The Little Book with History* (at the moment there have been 8 books published in this series: 6 of them are rebranded published titles from *The Book with History* and two are completely new).



Figure 3 *The Book with History* and *The Little Book with History* series. Courtesy of the publisher.



Figure 4: *Crane's feathers. Japanese tales* (2012) from the Reflections series. Courtesy of the publisher.

- *Reflections* – national fairy tales (Fig. 4) with classical illustrations by the French illustrator Edmund Dulac (1882-1953), the English book illustrator Arthur Rackham (1867-1939), the Swedish painter and illustrator John Bauer (1882-1918), etc. In 2011, this series of books was awarded a special diploma of the Russian book illustration contest ‘The image of the book’.

- *Pero Zhar-Ptitsy (The feather of the Firebird)* – classical children’s literature with illustrations of the masters of the Soviet period and Russian prominent illustrators such as G. Kalinovsky, P. Tatarnikov, N. Kochergin, E. Rachev and others.

- *Kameshki (Little Stones)* – softcover books of tales for the youngest.

- *Masterskaja chudes (Workshop of Wonders)* – tales for older children.

- *The Large Illustrated Collection of*

Works – children’s books written by famous Soviet authors such as Kir Bulychov, Vladislav Petrovich Krapivin and others; with explanatory commentaries and additional materials.

Printing beautiful and aesthetically ‘right’ sets of postcards was another novelty of Mescheryakov Publishing House. When

Mescheryakov came up with this idea, no one expected that his postcards would be in high demand. Perhaps Mescheryakov’s success is a result of satisfying his own aesthetics and beautifully printed things which in turn conveys nostalgic feelings to people who cherish thumbing through collections of old postcards. Also, Mescheryakov Publishing House offers notebooks and other office supplies.

Today Mescheryakov mostly specialises in children’s literature but also publishes non-fiction books and books for adults. The publishing house’s mission is to publish excellent content with high-quality printing, even if it means a considerable rise in price. As Meshcheryakov puts it:⁵

We have forged a reputation for reliable quality and strong commitment to children’s books ever since we launched our first title. Readers are aware of the

Meshcheryakov brand and know that our books are priced higher not because we want to exploit their love for our books, but simply because of the high cost of producing them.

The young Mescheryakov publishing house produces mainly for the Russian book market and its official website has only a Russian version.⁶ However, they have connections to several European publishing houses such as Hodder and Stoughton (UK), Salani Editore (Italy) and Prestel Verlag (Germany): 10 per cent of Mescheryakov's books are translations from foreign languages.⁷ Luckily for European readers, some of Mescheryakov's books in their original design were published in the German language by its

subsidiary company IDMI Verlag (Austria) (among them some books from *The Book with History* series).

While the history of Mescheryakov Publishing House dates back only a few years, its books have a recognizable mark of quality and design, and are loved by its readers. As Mescheryakov explained in one of his interviews: 'Who will remember V. Mescheryakov from Rosbank in thirty to fifty years? Nobody! But the books will remain'.⁸ What the future will bring is difficult to tell, as the fate of small publishing companies in this changing digital world is uncertain. Yet, Mescheryakov believes that there will always be a demand for children's books, especially for high-quality books. ■

Notes

1. 'Who will remember Mescheryakov from Rosbank in thirty-fifty years? Nobody! But the books will remain': Interview to Russian Forbes, April 15, 2011, n. pag. ('Кто лет через 30-50 вспомнит Мещерякова из Росбанка? Никто. А книги останутся', *Forbes*, 15 апреля 2011 <<http://www.forbes.ru/mneniya-opinion/66700-kto-let-cherез-30-50-vspomnit-meshcheryakova-iz-rosbanka-nikto-knigi-ostanutsy>>) (1 June 2014).
2. The information about the publishing house was provided courtesy of its editor, Aleksandra Kabanova.
3. T. Tan, 'Meshcheryakov on Cooking and Children's Books: Publishing in Russia 2012', *Publishers Weekly*, May 14, 2012, n. pag. <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/international-book-news/article/51944-meshcheryakov-on-cooking-and-children-s-books-publishing-in-russia-2012.html>> (22 June 2014).
4. The 'William' typeface can be found here: <<http://mariadoreuli.com/2012/02/02/william/>> (25 June 2014).
5. T. Tan, 'Meshcheryakov on Cooking and Children's Books: Publishing in Russia 2012', *Publishers Weekly*, May 14, 2012, n. pag. <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/international-book-news/article/51944-meshcheryakov-on-cooking-and-children-s-books-publishing-in-russia-2012.html>> (22 June 2014).
6. Official website: <<http://www.idmkniga.ru/>> (22 June 2014).
7. T. Tan, *Publishing in Russia: Special Report 2011* (Publishers Weekly, 2011), p. 12. (Also available via <<http://www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/international/trade-shows/article/46789-publishing-in-russia-special-report-2011.html>> (1 June 2014)).
8. 'Who will remember Mescheryakov from Rosbank in thirty-fifty years? Nobody! But the books will remain': Interview to Russian Forbes, April 15, 2011, n. pag. ('Кто лет через 30-50 вспомнит Мещерякова из Росбанка? Никто. А книги останутся', *Forbes*, 15 апреля 2011 <<http://www.forbes.ru/mneniya-opinion/66700-kto-let-cherез-30-50-vspomnit-meshcheryakova-iz-rosbanka-nikto-knigi-ostanutsy>>) (1 June 2014).