

The guest of the Library blog Geros knygos is our colleague Diāna Zuļģe (Latvia). Diāna is a librarian at Liepāja Central Scientific Library branch „Libris“.

It is always interesting to ask our foreign colleagues about the situation in their libraries during the COVID-19 pandemic. How is your Library facing the challenge? How do you reach your users? Do people miss the usual possibility to spend their leisure time in the library?

Last spring, when state of emergency was announced in Latvia, all cultural sites, events and facilities, including libraries, were shut down. At that time we could only provide services remotely. Even now, although we are able to lend books, it is heavily restricted and it's the only thing that can be done on-site. Only one person or individuals from one household can enter library at the same time, no face to face events are allowed, face masks are required, reading rooms are closed, returned books are kept in „quarantine“.

As a smaller library, we cope with restrictions well. Our users are understanding and respectful, but there are some hardships working with certain groups. Many people lack digital skills that are necessary now more than ever, so they can't utilize services and opportunities that libraries offer in full spectrum.

Our work has shifted to digital environment. We interact with users on social media, try to popularize useful resources that we, our main branch or National Library can provide. Users can request and reserve books through digital catalog, e-mail or call us. We hold online lessons with schools.

Of course, we miss interacting with users as we did before, but we also notice that for them, especially children and teens, who spent their free time in library relaxing, socializing with each other and studying, this time is particularly difficult.

What makes you love a book?

In fiction I appreciate immersive stories, captivating language and characters that I can identify with, but if a book is thought-provoking and makes me feel strong emotion of some sort, even bad, I consider it good.

What is your favourite Latvian author (s)?

An author that I've loved from childhood is Zenta Ērgle (1920 – 1998). Her works are about children and youth for children and youth. Her books are fun, witty, adventurous. Political ideologies change, but there are universal problems that teens and young adults face, so her stories are easily understandable even now.

What's been your favorite book-to-movie adaptation?

Even though I saw movie first, „White Oleander“ by Janet Fitch is a great book. I was mesmerized by the movie and could not get it out of my head. It is dark, raw and beautiful story of self-discovery.

Most inspirational book you read last year?

Book that stands out for me is „Beyond Sing the Woods“ by Norwegian author Trygve Gulbrandsen. My mom recommended this book, because it was quite popular in her youth.

Setting takes place in 18th century Norway and it follows three generations of Bjorndal family. It surprised me with it's poetic writing, slow pace and strong characters. It is wise, but understandable, powerful, but gentle and vulnerable. This work might seem too slow for modern reader as it's written in 1930's but it was refreshing and overall beautiful experience for me.

What three books which have impressed you most of all, would you recommend to our readers?

While surfing on the internet, I saw a lot of quotes from Haruki Murakami works. They piqued my interest and I decided to pick up one of his books. It was „Norwegian Wood“. His writing style was not what I expected but it has been one of my favorites ever since.

„My Grandfather was a Cherry Tree“ by Angela Nanetti is a heartfelt and vivid story that is meant for children but can be enjoyed and loved by adults as well.

If you are a fan of magical realism, touching love stories and beautiful writing, Leslye Walton's book „The Strange and Beautiful Sorrows of Ava Lavender“ is for you.

Are digital books competitors to printed books?

To some extent maybe. But digital and printed books have different audiences. There is a time and place for both. Printed books seem to be more familiar. Some people may not have necessary skills or knowledge how to access e-books, some find them hard to read – it can be tiring on eyes.

Nowadays when all of our lives seem to be digital, it's a nice to take printed book in hand, turn page after page, feel something real and physical. Yet for some physical item is a burden and they much more prefer when all their reading material is digital and in one device. E-books are handy when traveling, when you are on a go, need to find information fast and don't have time to spend in library or bookstore. It is also getting more popular to post ones writings online and not print a physical copy at all.

I personally enjoy printed books more, because I like how physical books feel and smell, but if there is not a printed option of my book of choice, I will definitely look for e-book or audiobook of that title.

Have you ever tried writing? Poetry? Prose? If you were writing a book, whom would you imagine as your reader and what would your book be about?

Yes, I tried writing poetry in school as one of many ways to express my teenage angst. Those feelings are gone, so is my will to write. As for prose... I'm too lazy for that. I have many ideas but it's difficult to put them in words and writing process is not something I find joy in. I have a huge admiration for authors and their ability to realize ideas, build worlds, characters, come up with storylines and dialogs, I could never do that.

But if I were writing a book, it would be about relationships, our everyday lives. Maybe tried to put new spin on love triangles or other widely used themes.

Does each generation have a unique connection to the book? What do you think is your generation's approach to the book?

I think so. It comes from how we are introduced to books as a child, what is the popular opinion about reading at certain time period and our own experience – do we think of reading as a chore for school or work, is it a way to escape from routine and relax, are books just a source of information.

Most of the people of my age were required to read in school, mostly classics, which seemed boring and hard to understand compared to TV shows, movies and video games. There seemed to be much more exciting ways to fill our free time than reading. Lately I've noticed that more and more individuals are showing interest in reading. Whether it would be self-improvement books, works of modern authors that are controversial or biographies of well-known personalities.

Gustave Flaubert said: “Do not read, as children do, to amuse yourself, or like the ambitious, for the purpose of instruction. No, read in order to live.” Do you think that nowadays reading for people is just as important and vital as it was characterized by G. Flaubert?

When we opened our doors after lockdown, many users said that what they missed wasn't concerts, theater, cafes but books, library. They missed having access to new material where they can immerse themselves and escape from reality. With all the negativity and frightful news around, bibliotherapy and reading is one of the ways to keep a sane mind.

Thank you for the interesting conversation!

*Photo from Diāna Zuļģe's personal archive
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