

# 'DIARY OF A MAD HOUSEWIFE' — RUSSIAN STYLE

*Why life is so hard for Olga*

A WEEK LIKE ANY OTHER by Natalya Baranskaya  
*Novy Mir*: MOSCOW

Novels exploring the middle-class angst of the housewife are a staple of the American book market. In Russia, however, they are something new. The fidelity with which Natalya Baranskaya portrayed the spiritual barrenness of life in modern Moscow struck an answering chord in reviewer Tamara Rezvova, writing in *Literaturnaya Rossiya* ("Literary Russia"), the organ of the Russian Writers' Union.

FROM SIX O'CLOCK on Monday morning to midnight on Sunday Olga Voronkova's life is ruled by the alarm clock, the "infernal gadget" which goes off whether or not she cared for her sick child until four in the morning, or managed to fall asleep at midnight after preparing supper, washing the dishes, washing the children's clothes, sewing and mending and still not getting around to fixing the fastener on her own skirt.

The alarm clock's ring awakens fears. Olga has much to be afraid of: she could be fired for missing work because of the children's illness; she might be late and fall trying to catch a moving bus; she might endanger the plant's quarterly quota; she might

become pregnant—and with a third child she will never get that promotion; it will go instead to her rival Lydia, happy to have neither husband nor children. Olga and the other three mothers in her group have no time for lunch: each must use the lunch hour to run to the store and do the day's shopping.

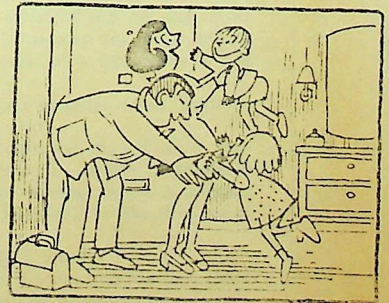
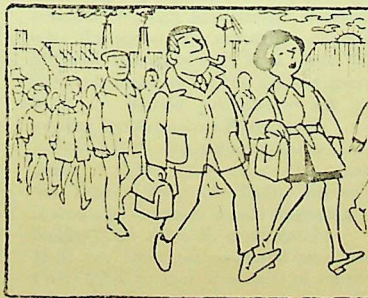
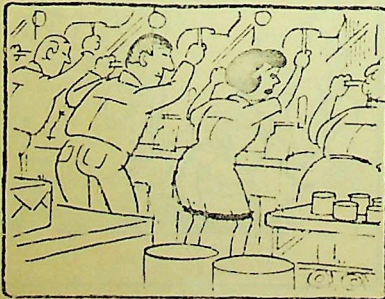
The heroine of *Nedelyakak Nedelya* ("A Week Like Any Other"), a short novel by Natalya Baranskaya, suffers from the "Saint Matthew complex," the name given by sociologists to the lack of time in modern life, in keeping with the scriptural saying that "to him that hath shall be given; but from him that hath not shall be taken away."

On the surface it would seem

that Olga has everything a young woman could want: at 26 she has a loving husband and two children in day school, a degree, an interesting job in construction plastics and a three-room apartment in a new building.

Do you know what sport Olga engages in? Running. "Run here, run there. A shopping bag in each hand, back and forth, streetcars, buses, subways, we have no stores where I live. After one year, they still haven't been built." Statistics show that this heroine's troubles are not unique, but common to people in all large cities. Employees in Moscow, Leningrad, Novosibirsk, Gorki, Sverdlovsk quit their jobs, sometimes after ten or 20 years, no longer able to face the fatiguing and nonsensical waste of time spent in commuting and the endless waiting in line for transportation between home and work.

Olga should be happy but she is not. At work she worries about the house and at home she worries about work. She has no time for the hairdresser, for a stroll through Moscow or to read the





book she got as a present two years ago. The Voronkov couple cannot think of theater, parties or museums—there is no one to take care of the children if they go out.

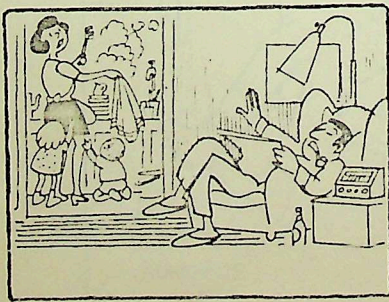
The Voronkovs have typical quarrels, such as, for instance, over the 78 days that Olga took off from work when the children were ill. "If you count all the days you've lost," complains her husband, "you have only earned 60 rubles [about \$67.20] a month." To which Olga replies: "Do you want me to give up altogether? What about my education, my degree, my experience? And, besides, we can't live on your pay."

Her husband says he is sorry. No one is at fault, really, and yet life is intolerable. Scarcely a day passes when Olga does not cry, either over some mishap at work, or at home, where she feels that no matter how much she does, there is still more to be done, while her youth slips away.

Why is life so hard for Olga?

After all, someday the stores will be finished in her neighborhood, so that she will not have to drag her shopping bag all across town. Her little ones will grow up; a new subway line will someday serve her area. But will these improvements make her happy?

The trouble with Olga is that her life lacks spiritual content. We have accumulated experience—political, military, economic. But now the new generation must



"Never, Magda! Who brings more money to the house, you or I?"  
Gantius in NBI, Copenhagen

## A LADY KNOCKS ON THE ACADEMIE'S DOOR...

Translated from ELLE, Paris

Since the Académie Française was founded in 1635, history has not recorded that any of the literary "immortals" successfully nominated a woman for one of the 40 seats. Françoise Parturier is the second woman to have thought of it and she nominated herself (the first was novelist Pauline Savari in 1893). The author of *Five-Day Lover* and "An Open Letter to Men" sees no reason why she, as a popular and respected writer, shouldn't crash the sacred barrier. Voting takes place in mid-January. Marie-Françoise Leclère from the Paris women's magazine *Elle* had a brief chat with Mme. Parturier:

**MARIE-FRANÇOISE LECLÈRE:** What gave you the idea of putting yourself up as a candidate for the Académie Française?

**FRANÇOISE PARTURIER:** I began thinking about it while working on "An Open Letter to Men"—which I wrote back in 1967 and which was published early in 1968. Then the May '68 events happened and seemed to support certain ideas I've been expressing over the past ten or fifteen years. I've always been rather ahead of the times. I thought that women should act now—not in such a way as to alienate men—but politely, seriously, with dignity. And since I am a writer and not a woman of action—say, a politician, doctor or nurse—I decided the only action open to me that would suit my profession would be to enter the Académie.

**M-F. L.:** Did it take you a while to decide?

**PARTURIER:** Not at all. But then the idea had been ripening in my subconscious, so to speak, for a long time. What is interesting—and this should prove the difference between the feminine and the masculine worlds—is that the women whom I discussed it with all said: "It's impossible, you won't be able to do it, they'll never let you get away with it." While all the men I mentioned it to said: "A marvelous idea. We'll send you the by-laws of the Académie. Study them carefully. We'll talk to our own lawyers about it." And so they acted immediately—because they were already in the habit of acting. That in itself was already a very important experience for me.

**M-F. L.:** What do you want to demonstrate by your action?

**PARTURIER:** Many things. First, that the masculine world, which is profoundly convinced that women are inferior beings, is never hostile to a woman who stands up for herself—if she has the necessary abilities to back her action. What she does might not give them pleasure, but they won't oppose it. In any case, not openly. Second, I think it's essential to show other women how much more they're capable of doing than they themselves may think possible. Women have fought to obtain certain freedoms and rights over the years. The numerous enemies of women try to use emancipation for their own base ends. The role of a woman is to use her emancipation for the highest goals.

**M-F. L.:** Would you like to see women conquer other bastions besides the Académie Française?

**PARTURIER:** Speaking frankly, in presenting myself as a candidate I didn't want to conquer any bastion. It was a symbolic act. Even if there are finally one or two women at the Académie, it won't have much actual importance. They will be like the "token Negroes" in the U.S. government.

**M-F. L.:** Have you received any insulting letters?

**PARTURIER:** Out of a total of more than a thousand letters, there were only four obscene ones. And all four were signed by men.





gather a new kind of experience—that of the ethical meaning of daily life.

Olga's maternal instinct expresses itself in purely biological terms. She worries about her children's health and looks, but not about teaching them to strive for good, to resist evil, to distinguish falsehood from truth, to learn compassion and tact. At work Olga is instinctively drawn to the other mothers with whom she shares concern for the physical well-being of the children. And just as instinctively she shies away from her childless col-

leagues because "they don't know what life is really like."

It is a pity, but the mental and spiritual poverty of people like Olga cannot but affect the quality of their work. Life constantly demands new ideas and new solutions to problems. But Olga is incapable of thinking beyond her immediate worries—money, children, shopping. In vain her husband tries to interest her in current events, such as space exploration, the Vietnam war, Czechoslovakia, sports and art. Her mind is full of what to buy: a raincoat for him, shoes and a

dress for herself, summer things for the children. These things are necessary, of course—let's not be hypocritical about it. The tragedy comes when they become the entire content of life.

The novel ends as it began, on a note of hopelessness. Apparently there is no way out. Olga wakes up in the middle of the night, not knowing why she is so full of anxiety.

Perhaps the problem of our times is deeper than the "Saint Matthew complex."

Tamara Rezova in  
LITERATURNAYA ROSSIYA, Moscow



"It says here that in South Africa the whites do nothing at all and the blacks do all the work—outrageous!"

Markus in STERN, Hamburg