

Biography: Writer and journalist Pauls Bankovskis (1973) was born in Līgatne, Latvia. He studied glass art at the Riga School for Applied Arts and philosophy at the University of Latvia (1992–1996). His prose was first published in 1993, and a prolific author, he has now published novels, several collections of short stories, books and works of non-fiction and film scripts. His focus tends to shift from Latvian history, its myths, and legends to the realities of the recent Soviet past and the possibilities of the future.

Synopsis: The Soviet Union was a project firmly based in scientific Communism and atheism. In spite of this, a few people in remote areas overgrown with alders kept on fostering centuries-old spiritual traditions. Eastern Orthodox Old Believers were one such group; they found refuge in eastern Latvia. They are at the center of Pauls Bankovskis's novel *Secrets*. The book follows several generations of Old Believers, in a kaleidoscope of love stories and family tragedies. Against an ever-changing backdrop of ruling powers and regimes—and in spite of them—these communities still try to hold on to their old traditions. At first, supernatural beings live near the Old Believers. With time, though, their role in people's diminishes, as the Old Believers' culture loses the ability to fight against the influence of time.

Excerpt

IMAGINE:

At the edge of the courtyard, in the shadow under an apple-tree, there was a beige Moskvitch. There was a fragrance of incense and grief. In front of the door, between the steps and the well, a coffin covered in brown fabric had been hoisted on a couple of sawhorses. In the coffin lay a gray-haired, bearded man in his Sunday's best. He was encircled by mourners: a group of women who, in their black shawls that were pinned

closed at the throat, resembled a flock of crows and men with crumpled hats in their rough,

clumsy hands. And there was also the priest who, dangling the incense bowl to and fro, sang "Sviaty Bozhe".

Emitting a stinky plume of blue smoke, a GAZ truck with sides of its bed down appeared around the corner of the barn. Having turned off the engine, a rosy-cheeked driver got out of the cab. He had on an open leather jacket, a tie and a white shirt – as the occasion dictated.

He and another three men of the mechanical shops and the transport unit (the old electrician Saša Ancupāns, Grishka Trofimov, and the young Meškovskis) lifted up the coffin and pushed it into the black-draped bed of the truck. As soon as the men touched the coffin, the shawl-wrapped women resumed wailing, some felt their legs buckling and held onto their neighbors.

The procession slowly moved away from the house. The priest and some of the women sang a quiet litany. White fog hung over the nearby bog where a couple of decades ago was an overgrown lake inlet and where, as the oldsters maintained, devils lived and sometime previously the old church had sunk to the bottom. The priest headed the procession with his incense. Then came Vassily with a cross. And finally the GAZ with the deceased. Aksyona and Karp supported old Ksenia. Their children. And then the mourners from the collective farm, the mechanical shops, from the village council. As well as the Rigans. Altogether there were almost fifty of them.

The mourners came out onto the highway. The truck's engine roared angrily, the gears crackled.

- Not now, not now, - the driver mumbled to himself. Sweat popped out on his forehead. No way this was happening now, during the funeral of old Kiryak. They repaired only recently in the shops, he grumbled. Must have something to do with the devils. They manage to take on a whole variety of forms – as angels, as fire-spewing monsters, even as your basic animals, like frogs or worms. Nowadays they say that it's just nonsense, but there must be something to it, if people talk about it.

But everything turned out well – the truck slowly crawled out onto the pavement. Some tried to discretely stomp their feet to get rid of the mud. Toward them the old boozehound, bully, and infidel Meškovskis was flying on his bicycle down the hill. Upon seeing the procession, he braked sharply, clumsily jumped off his bicycle, almost falling down, pulled off his hat and quickly crossed himself. He stared after the mourners agape, then continued on his way, pushing the bicycle along, angrily shaking his head from time to time and mumbling something to himself.

Meanwhile it started to rain. The cars that drove past and toward the mourners splattered them with a fine mist. Up front, the priest kept on singing, but it was impossible to hear the words. To the right, the dimly glowing lake could be seen, to the left was the cemetery hill.

The deceased was lifted off the truck bed and carried through the crooked metal gate that was bright blue just about three years earlier.

Kseniya kept wailing and would have thrown herself to the ground if not for Aksyona and Karp who securely held the old woman under her armpits and helped her to pull herself together.

Bright yellow, blue, and white. Metal fencing and crosses, benches, and rusty gates.

The pallbearers stopped. That's where everyone else rested. Grandma and grandpa. Kiryak's father and mother, God save their souls. And sister Gilkeriya. And brother Feoktist, God have mercy on him. And Kiryak was now here to join them.

"Svyaty Bozhe" once more time and, as the litany was sung, the coffin was lowered into the grave. The priest bent down and threw in white forest sand in a crosswise fashion, poured in a few drops of oil, and ashes from the incense ball. The diggers picked up their shovels. The rain abated and a window of bright blue sky appeared among the clouds.

Wreaths were laid heftily onto the grave. From the village council, from the machine and tractor station, from the transport unit, and from the collective farm. With and without ribbons. Fancy flower arrangements and simple bouquets.

The mourners returned home in small groups, three or four people in each, conversing quietly.

- Kiryak had a long life.
- And there was so much he had to live through.
- Yeah, what a fate.
- Three wars.
- And the revolution, don't forget the revolution.
- Of course.
- Three? Really?
- Sure. He was there for the Russian-Japanese one as well.
- I see.
- Life is life, as they say.
- And that's when all these problems began.
- I just have to say – if grandma was not there, who knows how it would have ended.
- Yes, grandma, she was something...
- Do you really remember her?
- Yeah, I was still a child, but I do remember. I was terrified.
- And who wasn't? Even her old man was. They say she saw...

Dry, large snowflakes began to fall from the sky. On the ground and the clothes of the mourners, they quickly melted and disappeared. Chatting in half-whisper, they dragged through the village and, having reached the church, turned into the driveway, walked by the shed, turned the corner of the barn, and entered the yard.

IMAGINE:

The church books were no longer good; corrections were needed: as they were copied over the years, much that was redundant and erroneous had appeared in them, contrary to the genuine faith – that's what the eager improvers thought. And so Maxim the Greek picked up his pen. He found many errors, yet he did not have the Slavic tongue, so, upon seeing that Maxim has done more harm than good, Metropolitan Daniil transferred him to a remote monastery.

But it all did not end there. At the Stoglav Council of 1550, it was decided not to retranslate the books as Maxim had done, but only to compare them to genuinely good and reliable translations. Yet the comparing and correcting was trusted to half-educated protopops and starosts and errors continued to pile up – they grew like mushrooms after rain, nay, indeed like the heads of a dragon.

The more they corrected the worse it got. Archimandrite Dionysius and Arsenius the Deaf claimed to have found actual heresies in Trebnik and other church books. Thank God, their

work too proved to be in vain – after they showed the corrections to the deputy patriarch, Metropolitan John, they were taken to court and sentenced.

Yet Babel would not rest – more than one holy man tried to rewrite The Apostle or the Book of Hours in accordance to his own taste, mixing languages and confusing everything until St Nikon not only rewrote the books in the Latin fashion but even forbade crossing oneself with two fingers and falling to the ground during the Great Fast.

"See, these people are all the same," the Lord said. "And they all speak the same language, and they have begun to do it; and they will not stop doing what they have decided to do. Let us descend and mix up their language, so that no one can understand his neighbor's tongue."

Nikon was nasty – those who were unhappy with his corrections and stuck to the one and only right faith were subject to eradication. Protopop Avvakum was exiled, pop Nikita was relegated to a monastery, daikon Fyodor had his tongue cut out.

Then 1666 came and with it, the rule of Antichrist. Efraim Potemkin and father Avvakum could both see it clearly. "And he had power to give life unto the image of the beast", wrote John in his Revelations, "that the image of the beast should both speak, and cause that as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed. And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in

their foreheads. And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name. Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number *is* Six hundred threescore *and* six."

In the Poshekhonsk district alone close to 1920 people voluntarily burnt themselves to death. Strong in their faith and fearing nothing, the martyrs entered the multitude of apostles and looked into the faces of saints. "Rush, rush into God's realm," Avvakum urged, "Burn in hot flames".

In the autumn of 1668, many fields were left untended; in the spring of 1669, people left their houses, confessed their sins, fasted and awaited archangels' trumpets. By 1690, about 20 thousand faithful had entered fire. There were times when about three thousand people went up in flames at the same time.

In 1685 a law was adopted that stipulated that apostates, which is what the genuine believers were called, should be burned at the stake if they did not renounce their mistaken beliefs even after having been thrice questioned by the court. If they did renounce them, they should be sent to monasteries to be carefully observed. The single ones should be kept there indefinitely, whereas the married ones ought to be freed after a while but they should still be watched and killed if they returned to their erroneous ways. The believers who called for people to self-immolate should be burned themselves. Anyone who would christen

someone – big or small - who had already been christened should be punished by death.

Those who had re-christened themselves should be sent to the local bishop to be re-educated but if that didn't work they should be killed. Those who had given shelter, food or drink to believers and confessed should be subjected to thrashing, and the severity of the punishment should be commensurate with their guilt.

But it was not time yet. Satan was bound for a thousand years not after the birth of Christ but since Resurrection, so Antichrist was to appear 33 years later, in 1702.

And there he was. Any genuine believer knew that Czar Peter the Great was actually an impostor of Jewish descent from the tribe of Dan.

He persecuted the believers with fire and sword, he ridiculed them, and drank the blood of the innocent. He taxed beards, made men and women wear queer clothing, and threatened them with penal servitude. And only Pugachev tried to stand up against him – with a cross, a beard, and denial of all the weight of power.

Yet neither Pugachev nor Napoleon the Third saved the believers in Russia.

So they escaped to Poland and Lithuania. The Polish government allowed them to settle in eastern Latgale, Duke Jacob also had no objections, so the first so-called Old Believer church was built as early as 1660 in Liginiski. The next one was erected in 1699 near Ilūkste.

Those who would not escape, chose death. In 1802 someone by the name of Yushkin buried himself alive. Twenty-five years later, his son and thirty-five other peasants murdered one another. In 1860, fifteen people immolated themselves in the Olonetsk gubernia. In 1897, believers who had been immured in a basement were found in the Terenovsk wetlands. Kovalev who did not deny that he was guilty, expressed regret that he had failed to immure himself. And it was hardly surprising since as late as 1824 turning to genuine faith meant the possibility of being recruited to the army for men and being sold to a brothel for women.

IMAGINE:

Under the apple and cherry trees, a mustard-colored Lada was parked on the side of the yard. It was summer and a new day. In front of the porch, directly under the tree with summer apples, Riga people who had arrived from the city that day and locals were sitting around the table. The alluring and sad swishing of cars was heard from the distant highway; in the house, the Belarusian radio was mumbling in an undertone.

New potatoes with dill were in the pot, home-made curds were in an earthenware bowl, there was fish from the local lake, and cucumbers and tomatoes from the garden.

Everything was home-grown and home-made. Except for the vodka – the vodka was from Riga. And the bread that was cut in thick slices – that too was a present from Riga.

- Have some more, have some more, - Aksyona urged cheerfully. – Give me your plate, I'll put some more on.

- Enough, mom. How much can one eat, - Karp grumbled.

- You hardly had anything. Give me your plate, - and she filled Karp's plate for the second time.

Karps meanwhile expertly filled the small crystal shot glasses.

- Watch out, old man, - Aksyona laughed.

- Don't you start, woman, - he waved his hand, the skin around his eyes creasing, the red nose shining in the sun. – I know, I know.

- Sure, sure, I know how knowledgeable you are.

- Yuri, - he held up the glass in a shaking hand and addressed his son-in-law. – And you too, darling, you too.

- No, no, not for me, - Lena shook her head. – And Yuri shouldn't either.

- It's okay, - he smiled at his beautiful wife and threw his arm around her shoulders.

- Leave me alone, - she shook off his arm – You should rather go and see what the children are into.

- Oh yes, Lenka has quite a character. Taking after her mother, right, Aksyona?

- Yes, yes, and a good thing too, - Aksyona flashed her white-metal teeth.

- What are you worried about? – Karp cooed. – As if you hadn't grown up here yourself. Nothing will happen to them. Here, in nature, is the right place for children. Not with you, in the city. Nowhere is better than here, right, Yuri? Aksyona? Am I right? Life is life. Look, everything we are eating is our own – the taters, the fish, the curds and the milk.

- In the city, we can get it all at a store.

- At a store! What are you talking about, - Karp dismissed it with an annoyed wave. – Are there potatoes like this, this kind of curds?

- Not this kind, another kind.

- No, no, there is no life in the city, - Karp shook his head and stroked his grey moustache.

Cool air was rising from the lake.

- I'll help you, mom, - Lena said, getting up and putting into the plastic tub both Yuri's plate and her own.

- No, no, I'll do it, - Aksyona murmured. – The two of you should take a walk to the lake. And really – see what the children are doing.

Yuri and Lena silently disappeared behind the house, walked past the old oaks with the swing, past the misshapen bath-house and stopped a few steps from the plank.

The brother and sister were sitting in the boat that was chained to the plank and playing cards that they had found in grandpa's room.

Even though the sun had already set, the sky was still yellow and orange. On the other side of the lake, in a sparse stand of trees where once a white manor house stood proudly, now was a pale block of a building made of silicate bricks.

- Why are you doing this? – Yuri asked her quietly. – Why are you trying to provoke them?

It's so nice here.

- Nice? – Lena repeated, vexed. – Drink a bottle of vodka and everywhere seems nice to you.

- Here you go again. We didn't finish it.

- So go and finish it. Go ahead, you want it, don't you?

- No, - Yuri spoke in a half-whisper, probably so that the children would not hear him. – I just wanted to...

- Brother, sister, - Lena called out in a shrill voice. – Time to get ready for bed. Brush your teeth, wash your feet...

- But mom..., - both tried to object.

- What did I say? Toothbrushes and towels are in the room. Get a cup from grandma. We too are coming soon.

The two children reluctantly got out of the boat and ran up the hill.

- Let's take a boat ride, - Yuri suggested and jumped down to the plank. – You want to?

Lena seemed to hesitate; as if looking for an excuse she looked back, but the children had already disappeared behind the house. She bent down, took off her sandals and carefully stepped into the rickety boat. Stale water sloshed around in the bottom of the boat.

Yuri pushed the boat away from the shore and, having carefully stepped into the rocking boat, sat down to the oars. They floated past stands of reeds; he rowed expertly and without the slightest effort – with slow, strong strokes, hardly making a sound.

Lena looked away as if deliberately avoiding her husband's searching gaze. They kept silent to the middle of the lake.

- Just look around, - Yuri broke the silence. – Isn't it nice? What beauty!

- Yeah, yeah, - Lena replied. – When you don't have to live here.

- How's that? – he stopped rowing.

- I'd like to see how long you'd manage here.

- Why wouldn't I? Of course I'd have to get used to it. In the beginning. But any beginning is difficult. You know, sometimes I really think that we should take the kids and...

- No.

- Wait. I didn't finish...

- No.

- But why not?

- Because. No, - she met his glance.

- But it's so...

- I don't like it here, you hear? I've never liked it. Just like mom didn't. And all the other women. Well, with the exception of grandma maybe.

- Now you talk like mom.

- Leave mom alone. Yes, sometimes she may talk funny. But it has nothing to do with her.

- Okay, okay. I'm just saying.

- Let's go back, - Lena said wrapping the cardigan closer around herself. – It's getting cold.

Yuri didn't answer and began to row energetically.

By the time they reached the shore, it was dark, bright stars were out in the sky and directly over the house glowed the silvery Milky Way. Having groped around to find the plank, Yuri carefully jumped to the shore and attached the boat. Grasshoppers were loudly chirping behind the bath-house. A warm and inviting light shone from the windows of the house. The Lithuanian train let out a whistle at the distant station.

They came into the warmth of the kitchen and had to squint because of the light. Two moths were dancing around the lightbulb.

- What were you doing out in the dark? – Aksyona, still busy with various chores, asked. – Aren't you afraid of the devils?

- Mom, quit already with your devils, - Lena yawned.

- The kids waited and waited and finally fell asleep, - mother muttered.

- They need a rest from us sometimes, - Yuri laughed.

- Yeah yeah, city people always need to rest. Whatever happens, they need to rest. How come they get so tired? Yuri?

- Well, from doing some work, - washing his hands, Yuri shrugged and growled without looking at her.

- I don't know, - Aksyona went on. – I somehow don't get a chance to rest. Except when I'm asleep. And even then...

- Okay, okay, go take a rest now, - Lena gently pushed her mother into the room from where Karp's gurgling snores were heard.

Yuri took off his sandals and snuck out barefoot. The grass was covered with an ice cold dew. Plunging into the darkness, he stopped by the lilac bush and opened his flies.

The door creaked open and a beam of bright light crossed the yard. Lena appeared on the threshold.

- Yuri? Is that you, Yuri? – she called quietly.

Yuri ducked into the shadows and did not reply. In his doghouse, Bear growled in his sleep.

The door fell shut with a bang.

Having waited a while, Yuri fished from his pocket a crumpled pack of cigarettes, lit one up and inhaled with pleasure. Squinting he peered into the dark garden, but he might as well have closed his eyes – all he could see was a pulsing black that shimmered along with the night sounds. And then the cigarette was finished, but his eyes remained unaccustomed to the darkness. He threw away the butt and stole back to the house. It was dark in the kitchen, the old tom slinked out past his bare feet. Karp had stopped snoring. He heard voices and the rattle of dishes from the other room.