



About the author:

EVGENIYA (ZHENYA) BERKOVICH is a prize-winning theater director and a poet. She is a member of Kirill Serebrennikov's Seventh Studio and the founder of the independent theater company, SOSO Daughters.

A Russian military court has sentenced her and a playwright Svetlana Petriychuk to six years in prison on charges of "justifying terrorism" in the 2020 play *Finist The Brave Falcon* about women marrying jihadists in Syria. The play had been awarded two prestigious Golden Mask national theatre awards in 2021.

In years following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Berkovich wrote a number of powerful anti-war poems that were published in social media and recited by theater actors and social activists, some of whom are so-called "foreign agents", a state opposition. There are speculations linking Berkovich's arrest and trial with the poems, seeing the play as a pretext for a case and an eventual grave sentence.

Women in Berkovich family have been human rights activists in several generations: her grandmother, Nina Katerli, passed away in 2023, while Berkovich was kept in prison during the case investigation, denied of parole; and so is her mother, Elena Efros.

Through years, Berkovich was active in charity, founding and running a theater festival, *You Are Not Alone*, for children in the orphanages. In 2019, she with her husband adopted two girls, aged 13 and 15, whom she got to know through this charity work.

Zhenya Berkovich wrote her prison tale, *Pets*, for her daughters, but it will definitely travel to a vast adult readership who is open to bold genre and text experiments and wants to support people of art who are in prison and under prosecution. Berkovich wrote *Pets* by hand, sending us notebook sheets, while her friends made copies, deciphered the text, forwarded the printed version back to us and the editor for her notes and questions.

According to Zhenya, writing the story of a cat struggling with odds to re-unite and, ultimately, to free her imprisoned owner, has helped her to survive through these tormenting times. We hope that the fairy tale spirit of the book will unite people in support of Berkovich.

Selected Bibliography

2024 — **Pets**, *novel*

2020 — 2025 — *poetry collections*

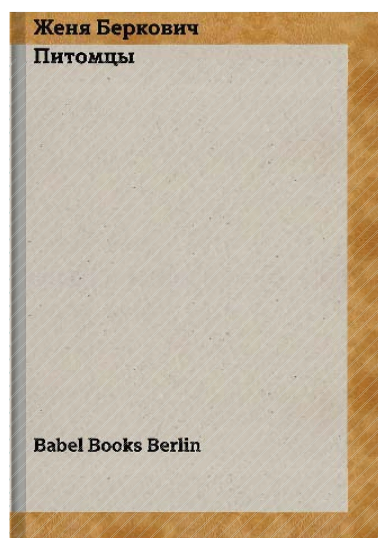
Awards

Anna Politkovskaya Prize 2023

Music Heart of the Theater National Award 2021

Snob Award, nomination Theater 2021

Award-winning theater director and
a poet sentenced to prison



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Czech Maraton

Theatre rights
Carinthian Summer Festival, Austria

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PETS

Zhenya Berkovich, a celebrated theater director now serving a six-year prison term following a fabricated, politically charged case, has written a book that upends the tradition of prison writing in Russia. *Pets* is a sharply humorous — and, quite surprisingly, hopeful — tale for adults that depicts prison life from the perspective of its animal inhabitants: mostly cats, but with a whimsical involvement of a (white) crow.

There's Cat, a free stray cat and the leader of the cats' gang — residents of the prison known as Purrrison. As a true gang leader with a strict hierarchy, Cat is cunning, strong and resilient — all qualities vital for survival in the harsh prison environment. Ironically, Cat, a prison cat, treasures his freedom above all, and his pragmatic approach helps him lead the gang, provide for himself and the kittens, and maintain a peace treaty and balanced co-existence with other inhabitants of the prison quarters, including rats and the old lonely dog. This carefully maintained balance works smoothly until the sudden intrusion of a crow named Irky, whose naivety, impulsiveness and impracticality immediately disrupt the prison's established order.

Irky, a young and clueless crow, lands in the prison courtyard, covered in fresh white paint from an unfortunate encounter with a newly painted birch tree. But it is not only the white paint that makes the crow a proper embodiment of a "white crow." Raised by humans in a deli/café, Irky has no experience of survival, but has learned to read and even speak human language. After the café owner passed away, Irky sets out on a journey as an independent bird — until her flight is disrupted by a tree's bulk. Accustomed to pet/owner dynamics, she sees Cat as "her" cat, of which, luckily for her, he remains unaware.

Paradoxically, her abrupt arrival intervenes in a riot plot within the cat gang, as younger and stronger cats

seek to undermine Cat's status as the Cat in Charge. Irky persuades Cat to run a "rescue" operation for a human inmate — for the sake of Shiny, a British domestic cat and another central character. Shiny has been brought to prison in a desperate quest to reunite with her recently arrested and confined owner. With her once-pristine fur, delicate demeanor and surgically removed claws, Shiny would be a justified target for the constantly underfed inhabitants of Purrrison, rats and cats alike. Yet Cat and Irky decide otherwise.

With their own lives and the existence of all animal inhabitants of the prison in mortal danger, the newly bonded friends concoct an intricate plan to reunite the owner and the domestic cat, succeeding — against numerous odds and disruptions — in an impossible mission: to release the human inmate from prison.

Through vivid descriptions, hilarious dialogues, eccentric poetic interludes, and a mix of dark humor and poignant moments, Berkovich paints a complex portrait of life in confinement, where the boundaries between humans and animals blur, and survival depends on friendship and loyalty, but also on luck, wit — and, ultimately, an enduring hope for freedom.

Selected quotes

Pets is a thriller with humor. A phantasmagoria from the lives of animals in prison: cats, crows, rats, and even cockroaches — with witty dialogues, funny verses, and a perfect happy ending. <...> Berkovich masterfully, with a fine sense of rhythm, sprinkles real characters and true details of prison life into this bright, life-affirming reality at the necessary moments. <...> She enriches her daily experiences in prison with hope.

But this is not a self-delusion in the sense of "everything will be fine," but the daring declaration "I will not despair." A witty, free world full of joie de vivre, like something out of dreams and favorite cartoons, she transfers into her prison world — a true testimony of disobedience.

Anna Narinskaya
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung