

**You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.**

**We are coming up on the one year anniversary of the war in Ukraine. And shortly after the war started last year, I did an episode called A Nation Dreams of Itself, where I spoke with Ukrainian science fiction and fantasy writers. During the course of the war, I've continued to check up on them through social media, but I wanted to talk with them to see how they're doing. I was curious if they've been able to write this year. And how does living through a war affect their ability to be creative? And what kind of stories are they telling?**

**If you didn't hear the episode from last year, here's a quick historical recap. When Ukraine was behind the Iron Curtain, most books were published in Russian. And the Soviet publishers preferred science fiction over fantasy.**

**After the Cold War ended, publishers in Ukraine kept publishing books in Russian because a lot of Ukrainians speak Russian. And they could sell those books to Russian speakers throughout the former Soviet Union.**

**But as Ukraine started to drift away from Russia politically, many Ukrainian writers wanted their books to be published in Ukrainian. And they were using fantasy and folklore to explore their sense of national identity. That trend picked up a lot of momentum in 2014 after Russia took Crimea.**

**Meanwhile in Russia, science fiction started to become more nationalistic and militaristic. And the war between Russia and Ukraine started to play out in imaginary spaces before it bled into real life. Now there are Russian and Ukrainian writers on the front lines.**

**And when the invasion began, the authors I talked with said a lot of Ukrainians were using Lord of the Rings as a metaphor. They cast the Russians as invading Orcs. And weirdly enough Putin got in on the act.**

**Back in December, Putin created nine golden rings, which he gave to eight leaders in Russia's sphere of influence. He kept the ninth ring for himself – which is literally what the evil wizard Sauron did in Lord of the Rings. Every article I read about this ceremony noted that this was a Tolkien reference!**

**SVITLANA: And it's mental, uh, disease. I think because, uh, I truly couldn't believe in this, but I, I read and I found, found this news, and yes, it's true.**

**That is the fiction writer Svitlana Taratorina. The last time we heard from her, she was fleeing to the countryside. Eventually she came back to Kiev because the city is so heavily protected. She says people still live in a constant state of fear, but everyday life goes on.**

SVITLANA: No matter what we have, even cultural events and book presentation and new bookstores, all books, all new books. It's about, uh, life and, and, uh, thinking about future.

***So, so you've been writing this year, right?***

SVITLANA: Yes, yes. Uh, actually, I, uh, I write, and it was a little bit, uh, not expected even for me because, um, the beginning of the, uh, previous year was very awful, uh, full of scary terror. I, uh, completely editing and, uh, writing three short story, for example. And also, I had, uh, finished, uh, I didn't, my new novel and now I am looking, looking forward for this novel to be printed. And, um, I have, I have started working <laugh> for one of the biggest publishing houses in Ukraine in this autumn.

***Wait, wait, hold on. You're working for a publishing house? What are you doing for the publishing house?***

SVITLANA: Yeah, I'm working as a head of, uh, PR, uh, department. I, uh, tried to tell about, uh, Ukrainian new books, uh, in Ukrainian market.

***So, the publishing industry is able to continue in Ukraine. It sounds like that's been almost unaffected, and you're saying even new bookstores are opening?***

SVITLANA: Yes, yes. Uh, and it's amazing actually. Uh, my publishing house, um, we, we, we have a lot of problems because printing facilities are located in Kharkiv region, uh, which is in the east part of Ukraine, and, it's located, uh, very close to the Russian Ukrainian border. They have everyday bombing. And, um, there's list to broken logistics, power supply, uh, and et cetera. But they still working. In this year, we are planning to, to manage, to publish, uh, three, 300 new book titles.

**Her new book, House of Salt, will be published this year as well. It's a science fiction story set in Crimea, where she was born. And Russia took over Crimea in 2014. Her story takes place in the future. And she changed the ending because the war has given her hope.**

SVITLANA: When I started this novel, I actually didn't believe, believe, uh, that Crimea could be returned to Ukraine in the near future. But after, uh, Kherson battles and, and its liberation, I, uh, have strong belief that Crimea will, will be returned, and it'll be not just the mark of the end of the war, but, um, true millstone of Ukrainian's victory. And that is why I, I changed, uh, the finale of this novel.

**Now last year, I interviewed Svitlana with her friend, Volodymyr Arenev. Once again, he joined us again on the call. Volodymyr hasn't written as much this year because he got a job. He's working for a game developer in Ukraine.**

VOLODYMYR: And we are working hard with, uh, the lore of, of our world with, uh, campaign, uh, uh, script and, uh, so on and so on. So, I have just, uh, two weekends, uh, weekend days for writing my, my books. But I'm writing, it's my, it's my work. It's my job. I mean, you know, if you are, uh, for example, uh, soldier, you are fighting. If you are medicine worker, you are work, you are working in, hospital people. And if you are writer, you are writing because it's your job.

***That's, yeah, that's a really good way of putting it. Uh, what is this game that you're working on? Is it, is it like a tabletop game with dice and, and a board? And what kind of world does it take place in?***

VOLODYMYR: It's mobile game. I couldn't tell in this moment, but I could tell we put there some Ukrainian stuff, I mean, uh, some historical and mythological references, and in this moment, uh, sorry, it's, it's all I could, I could tell, I signed papers and couldn't tell more.

**Yes, even in wartime, entertainment companies make you sign NDAs.**

**But for a lot of writers, it's been hard to find that creative spark with everything going on. I also got back in touch with Maria Galina, and she hasn't been able to write fiction since the war began.**

MARIA: It is the problem because, uh, it is very difficult to concentrate, I think, not because, uh, of, uh, air raid and not because of cold. I think that people live in this condition, uh, without electricity for centuries. Uh, but the problem is that you have constant to check up news and, uh, it is very difficult to concentrate after this. So, I think that I write something like a diary and that is all.

**And when she reads the news, the news is so surreal, she feels like fiction can't compete. So, she reads nonfiction – with one exception.**

MARIA: Maybe you'll laugh at me now, Eric, but I like to read Agatha Christie.

***Oh, Agatha Christie?***

MARIA: Yes, I can read it. Because the world of, uh, Agatha Christie is very order like, I mean that there is some kind of order, even if there are crimes, even it, it is also punishment and uh, it is very sane. I'm interested, like you, I'm interested who reads what. And uh, so a lot of people say to me that they can read only books that they read

before, no new books, only the book they read before, no new books. Only the books they read before.

**Volodymyr also finds it challenging to focus. He's constantly checking the news from official sources and social media.**

VOLODYMYR: Every day when you open Facebook, Facebook, you could read, uh, somebody died who you knew very well. Some my students died, uh, for example, and so on.

**I asked Volodymyr and Svitlana what motivates them to keep writing in this environment? Do they want to inspire people or warn them? Is writing fiction a form of escapism? Or therapy?**

VOLODYMYR: It's not, it's not only one motivation. I mean, uh, of course on some levels it could be therapy, but I always thinking about it should be not just therapy for me. If it's therapy just for me, I could write it and then I will not give it to other readers. Because when I write in something, I'm writing for somebody, and it's always dialogue. It's always trying to give some messages, some ideas, some stories for somebody. I understand many people have, uh, so unique experience in these days, and this experience should be written somewhere, uh, because we understand all these things should never be again in our world. So, we need to write about it because we need to tell other people what going on and how terrible all these things and storytelling, uh, give us tools to do it, uh, better.

**Here's Svitlana.**

SVITLANA: Yes, uh, I agree with Volodymyr, it's not a therapy, but, uh, it's, uh, some kind of, in some way writing, uh, helps me stay focused and, uh, distract, distracted from the war, because yes, uh, I, I escape in my text. Even if we, uh, talk about fantasy, it's some kind of mix. Uh, in the one hand, I create new world, uh, when I can live <laugh> and when I can live without my reality. But in other hand, I think about, uh, some historical parallels when I write about alternative history, alternative future, or some kind of, uh, alternative past. Writing is very important, uh, part of the life, and I, I, I think much more important than, than about previous, uh, years.

***Why is it, why is writing more important than ever now?***

SVITLANA: Because, you know, <laugh>, it's, uh, some kind of dramatic, but I, I, I can say...

***You're in a you're in a war. I think you can, uh, I think you have license to say something dramatic. <laugh>.***

SVITLANA: <laugh> Yes, because every day for us, it's, uh, some kind of fight for, for this day. And we, uh, we never can say what, uh, what will be, uh, tomorrow. And, uh, if this tomorrow will be!

***You said earlier too, you said that like, you know, it's something about like, writing is like creating life, and it's about, you know, you're creating a world, uh, writing that comes alive. And then it's also thinking about the future, which, you know, it's assuming that somebody's going to read this someday, this is going to get published someday. You're sort of, um, you're creating something that will have a life, you know, in the future.***

SVITLANA: Yes, yes. It's all about life. Yes, I, I agree. But, uh, uh, about, uh, our motivation, because we have we, we, we dream about future, but we so can imagine, uh, what it'll be.

**Maria Galina says during the war, writing and even reading Ukrainian fiction has become an act of patriotism. They want to preserve their culture and stop it from being dissolved and absorbed into Russia. And by the way, in this clip, you're going to hear some noises in the background while she's talking.**

MARIA: Yeah, I think that there is one of the, um, crimes that Russia do with Ukrainian people now. It is, they, they try to take away history, for example, when, uh, in the territories that are occupied, they do not allow use Ukrainian, uh, textbooks and manuals and, uh, they do not allow study Ukrainian and the Ukrainian literature. So, they try just to, uh, reintegrate it was Russia, but it cannot be reintegrated. It was never integrated really. So how can it be?

**Volodymyr heard a story about a teacher who risked her life to save Ukrainian books – including his books.**

VOLODYMYR: Uh, one teacher from the, uh, small town near the Kiev told me, uh, when Russians came to the city, she tried to save Ukrainian books from the library because she, uh, knew they will burn them, you know, as, as, uh, in, uh, Bradbury's novel.

***Yeah, Fahrenheit, Fahrenheit 451.***

VOLODYMYR: Yeah, yeah, exactly. Yeah. And, uh, she, uh, collect all these books in, um, bags, and then she hides them in, uh, in, in backyard on her house. She came to me and said, say, oh, uh, I saved your book and hides it. And just now I returned, uh, all these books and your books book too in library. So, the books in these days for Ukrainians, uh, it's a symbol of, of, of country, of culture, of, uh, you know, you could fire us, you could, uh, try to, to kill us, but some things we'll save and we'll return. And in stories, you, you try to not cry when, when you hear it, when some people tell you. If

these soldiers will see these books, they, they could just kill them for these books. And, you know, if somebody tell me these words, for example, 5 years ago or 10 years ago, I would say it's too cinematic, too dramatic, too, too bookish. It couldn't be in real life, but it is.

**Another friend told him a story about one of his books that felt like it was out of a movie.**

VOLODYMYR: A friend, uh, says, me, you know, uh, there was a missile and it, it, uh, stood in, in the center of our car, car just stayed near, near the house. And, uh, car, of course, uh, was in fire. And, uh, you know, broken, broken, broken, broken. And then she sends me a photo, and there is my book in this car. And, uh, it's, you know, it's not, uh, in fire. It's, uh, it's very fragile things. When you hear these stories.

***That's such an amazing image of the bomb that goes to the car, and, and your book survives. What is the book? What was the book, which book was it that survived?***

VOLODYMYR: It's Cursed Sword. It's fantasy, uh, but with reference, with part, part of this books of, of the book is, uh, about nowadays.

**I found a description of Cursed Sword on a Ukrainian site. The summary says, "It was in ancient times, now forgotten. Heroes and monsters walked the Earth then, and the former could not always be distinguished from the latter. And the word in those days was sharper than the sword, although swords were able to say their sharp word then."**

**After the break, we hear from a science fiction writer who became a big literary breakout star during the war.**

BREAK

**Last year, I talked with Borys Sydiuk. He translates English language sci fi and fantasy into Ukrainian. And he says Ukrainian has become even more popular in the publishing industry.**

BORYS: All the publishers, all the publishers in Ukraine now stopped publishing anything in Russian, anything. Not because it's, it's a prohibited one language in Ukraine, but, but because, well, uh, to publish books, comics, and so on, in, in the language of your enemy, well, sounds quite funny.

**As I mentioned earlier, Ukrainians had been craving fantasy in reaction to the years of Soviet rule which favored science fiction. But the war tipped the scales back in the opposite direction.**

BORYS: After the war started, local publishers started demanding, uh, local writers to write more hard science fiction rather than fantasy. Maybe because it's, well, we, we started to be more well technically oriented or well more interested in, well, in metal <laugh> say in, in technical achievements.

***You mean in the last year, because you've had to rely so much on technology?***

BORYS: Yeah, because in, in '21, well, uh, uh, most of the, uh, that kind of literature on in the publishers, uh, to-do list, uh, were fantasies as that, uh, all the audience now considers that with, with a sword, you cannot defeat, uh, the Russian invasion, and you need tanks. You need, well, hard metal weapons, <laugh> not a sword defeat the, to defeat the Russian invasion. So, I suppose that that's one of the reasons why science fiction is back.

**And there is one sci-fi book everyone has been buzzing about.**

BORYS: I should tell you that, that there is at least one. Well, uh, I would say new bright Star, uh, in the Ukrainian science fiction. Uh, it's, uh, Max Kidruk, Maxim Kidruk who, uh, even launched his own publishing house recently, about a couple of months ago, and he's just issued that, uh, his first book, well, it's not self-published because it's, his publishing house. So, uh, but his first book was his, uh, it, it is Colony.

**Colony is about a Ukrainian colony on Mars.**

BORYS: Max is very interesting, is, is very interesting, what, not only as a writer, but because it's probably the first time in the Ukrainian market when a writer is also a good marketing specialist and understands not only how to write a book, but how to publish it and how to promote it. He has a, a whole team who works with him, and he involves even his readers to be in his team and to help him to, well, to make better, uh, novels, uh, in this, because Colony is the first novel in the series of novels, as far as I know, there will be at least three books, uh, and he prefer to, to publish it in hard copies rather than in electronics.

**Borys got me in touch with Max Kidruk.**

**Max and his wife started their publishing house last year. It had been a dream of theirs for a long time. They poured their savings into it. But the printing presses are in the East, near the warzone. And when they weren't worried that the**

**facilities would be bombed, they had to wait for them to get back online because the Russians keep targeting power grids.**

MAX: It's damn scary to, to see that you can just lose everything. Like in, in, in an instance. I don't know how, how the hell did they print that, that book, but they did it and they did it actually in time.

**Even then, he had low expectations.**

MAX: Everything was against this book. It's complexity because it's hard science fiction with lots of science and, um, it's just a big book. And I know it's how, how hard to publish like 900 pages book in the TikTok era. And yet here we are. We already, uh, ordered the second print run. The first run was the first print run was 12,000 copies. Uh, it was sold like almost instantly. The second print run will arrive next Monday. And we already sold more than more than three quarters a week. Uh, we actually planning to order the third print run like right away. These numbers are like, they are good. Even four peaceful times for Ukraine, like 20,000 copies within a month and a half. That's like really, really good for like, normal times.

**The inspiration for the book started years ago. He was really concerned about climate change. And he was reading about how the warming of the oceans could lead to a mass extinction of species. And that led him to another obsession – how humans could escape the Earth and start another civilization on Mars.**

**He spent years researching the physics of space travel and exploration to the point where he figured out exactly how there could be an international community of humans on Mars. But he knew his main characters had to be Ukrainian.**

MAX: I mean, I am an Ukrainian, so I write firstly like, and mainly for Ukrainian public, so I have to write something about Ukraine on Mars. So, I started thinking like, how can I, how can I depict Ukrainian diaspora on Mars, like in the most, like, reasonable way? For me, it was silly to, uh, you know, to picture a Ukraine like a huge, uh, space nation. I mean, if you read this, you would like some kind of bullshit. I mean, you, you will not believe in this. So, I was thinking, what, what could we do best? What do we do best right now as a nation? We grow food like potatoes, corns and stuff. And then I realized like, look, we know how to do this. We know how to do this efficiently. So, I decided that my diaspora, Ukrainians on Mars, they grow everything. In this way, so they provide like 70% of food on Mars. And Ukrainians don't have, I mean, they don't, they don't influence some kind of politics, uh, directly because they're not in this kind of the, uh, console of 19, which is the body like, uh, which, uh,



***It's like the UN Security Council sort of like, yeah.***

MAX: They have no direct access to it. But, uh, because of, because they, uh, provide lots of food. This Council of 19, every time, every year goes to Ukrainian diaspora and ask like how many new newborns they can feed, how many new colonies they can, uh, invite from, from the Earth. And in this way, Ukrainians influences politics and processes in the Martian colony. So I really had fun writing this part of the story, how Ukrainians trying to, try to get what they want, you know manipulating with food productions and, and, and stuff.

***Yeah. And I and you are you hired artists too, to help design elements of the, of the colony? Tell me about that.***

MAX: Uh, I can show you like if, if you...

***Yeah, yeah, definitely.***

MAX: Yeah. So, uh, that's one more reason why we decided to start our own publishing house because you can do more.

***Yeah. Can I say by the way, people can't see you right now, but that is a big book that you're holding? <laugh>***

MAX: Yeah, yeah, <laugh> yeah, that's a big book. Uh, I always try to put more efforts to give something extra because I know that right now literature has to fight with lots of things like YouTube and, you know, uh, computer games, uh, TikTok and, and so on. So you have to give something extra for a reader.

**The detail of the images in the book were amazing. He hired a cartographer to create a 3D model of the colony, so they created images of it from every angle. The book also has graphs to explain how the Martian calendar syncs up with Earth and where the flight windows would be. He created charts which detail how many colonists arrived on Mars from the beginning, and how many people were born or died there. And the book also has illustrations of low-flying aircraft.**

MAX: I'm an engineer by the, by the ground. So, I actually developed, I don't know if you can see it.

***Yeah, those are, um, they look like, almost like Martian helicopters.***

MAX: These are Martian converter planes. You know, what is converter plane? Kind of teal trotter. It's kind of a, an, uh, aircraft which, uh, starts like lifts off as a helicopter and then during the normal flight it lowers the engines like this and then proceeds like an, uh, a winged aircraft.

***Well, it makes sense to me why this would be so popular now. I mean, you know, this, I mean, you're in a fight for survival right now. So, to imagine not just Ukraine winning the war, being victorious, being independent again, but continuing to grow and expand and have an outpost on Mars. I think it probably gives people a sense of hope.***

MAX: I think yes, but, um, I wouldn't say this about the book in general because you know, the, uh, title of the whole series is uh, uh, New Dark Ages. So, nothing good happens, uh, in the end, both on Mars and uh, on Earth. And that's another reason, reason why like quick success surprises me, because I view myself as a, like science fiction writer, not the guy who kind of must teach people how they should do. I view myself as a guy who should depict like the worst case scenario in the most realistic way. So, I will show you like, look, this what could happen. It may not, but I mean it really, really could. So, let's just sit and talk. What can we do? So, this will not happen. It's kind of the main, the main point of this book that, um, despite all the achievement, a achievement, we as, as humans, we do not change.

***But it sounds like you're also tapping into a very common theme in science fiction, which is that technology will not save us. That it doesn't matter how advanced our technology is, we are still human, and it will be our flaws, our human flaws that will do us in more so than, you know, technology will not be our destructor or savior necessarily.***

MAX: Yeah. That's basically what my story is about.

**By the way, the book is not available in English yet, but they're working on it.**

**After my episode came out last year, a lot of listeners asked what they could do to support Ukrainian fiction writers. I'll include links again to charitable organizations. But everyone I spoke with said this is also a war to erase their culture and identity. So, any pressure on social media helps.**

**For instance, several people I spoke with talked about WorldCon. WorldCon is an international convention. It's held every year in a different country – this year it's going to be in China. One of the guests of honor will be the Russian science fiction writer Sergei Lukyanenko. Borys has been part of a campaign to get WorldCon to rescind that invitation.**

BORYS: He said that Ukraine has no right to exist. Ukraine, there is no Ukrainians at all, and all Ukrainians should be eliminated. And because it is their land, it's Russian land. And that guy was invited to Chinese WorldCon to be a guest of honor? Wow.

**Borys has also been urging Anglophone writers to boycott Russia.**

BORYS: We ask them to stop, uh, selling licenses to their publishers to stop dealing with, with, with Russian business. Uh, and many of them did that.

**Including Neil Gaiman and Stephen King. That was a big deal. Stephen King, in particular, is hugely popular in Russia. But there are a lot of fantasy writers and readers in Russia who are against Putin and against the war. And they feel like they're being unjustly punished. They're trapped in a dictatorship. They're afraid to speak out. And now they can't even dream of escaping through their favorite Western fantasy books. Volodymyr has heard those arguments and he's not sympathetic.**

VOLODYMYR: I know there is a, a point of view about good readers that good readers, uh, are not, uh, guilty because Putin is bad. Uh, but it's, it was very helpful for us in moral sense, in financial sense, because it's working. I always was very peaceful, and I always was, I always believed we could find some common words, common points of view, but in this moment, it's not a time for me for peaceful trying to, to, you know, to may, maybe, maybe there are good readers and so on, and let's be not so cruel. We could do, uh, more peaceful when we will have peace.

**In another kind of activism. Svitlana and her friends started a YouTube channel. They actually started it before the war. Now become a lifeline. It's about speculative fiction and it's mostly in Ukrainian, but they have interviewed English-language writers like Joe Abercrombie, R.F. Kuang, V.E. Schwab, and Joe Hill, who happens to be the son of Stephen King.**

SVITLANA: It was very, uh, emotional for us. They could speak with their fans, uh, during our online streams. They have a lot, uh, uh, fans in Ukraine. We, uh, had, uh, interview with Joe Hill. It was very interesting. I remember he, he made interesting parallels with another, um, famous writers <laugh>, like, uh, Graham Greene remark. And, uh, Joe Hill said, um, now when I see you, I can understand how they, uh, managed to write, uh, during the Second World War <laugh>. It was funny for, for me...

***To be compared to like Graham Greene? Yeah.***

SVITLANA: Yeah. In all our interviews, we ask our, our colleagues, our new fantasy stars, to, to come in sometime in sometimes to Ukraine, and maybe, oh, I'm sure we, we'll have, uh, some Ukrainian Con and we, uh, invite you or all, uh, fans, uh, who wants to, to see Ukraine, Kiev, our beautiful country in the future, <laugh>, after our win, victory, we, uh, can speak about, uh, about Ukrainian fantasy and a lot of, uh, a good things that we have in Ukraine.

***I would love if you had a, if you had a Ukrainian Con in Kiev, I would, I would love to go <laugh>. That's a wonderful thought. <laugh>.***

SVITLANA: Yeah.

**Borys is hopeful that when the war is over, speculative fiction in Ukraine will be even more popular, and more deeply rooted in Ukrainian themes.**

BORYS: We only can guess, but it'll be definitely much stronger than it was before the February 24. Much stronger.

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Maria Galina, Borys Sydiuk, Volodymyr Arenev, Svitlana Taratorina, and Max Kidruk. I put a link in the show notes to Svitlana's YouTube channel, which is called Fantastic Talks. There are also links to charitable organizations as well.**

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