

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

**Like many people in the world, I can't stop thinking about Ukraine. And Ukraine was never just a place on the map for me. The Molinsky family emigrated from Ukraine. My grandfather was 15 when he came here, and he told us many stories of his childhood in Ukraine.**

**So, in the last few weeks, I've begun to wonder, what is Ukrainian science fiction or fantasy like? How does a country dream about itself through its speculative fiction?**

**Now back in 2017, I did an episode about Soviet science fiction. So, I reached out to one of my guests from that episode for suggestions. And she put me in touch with a writer in Ukraine. And that person put me in touch with more writers in Ukraine.**

**I wasn't sure if they'd be able to talk with me, but I got the sense they were glad to have the chance to talk about something other than the war. But the war was never far from their minds.**

**Like I spoke with Maria Galina. She lives in Odessa, and for now, she's staying put.**

***All right. Well, first of all, uh, how are you doing?***

MARIA: Uh, I don't know really. Cause I'm Odessa and in Odessa, there is comparative calm here unless I'm shooting from the sea, but to compare, for example, for Kharkiv or Kyiv it is very, very calm

**When life was much calmer, she wrote novels. One was about folk legends of Lviv.**

MARIA: And Lviv the is the city in the west of Ukraine. And there is a lot of legends, which is connected with some mystical creations, mystical creations in Lviv. And it is very closely connected with Poland and Polish folklore, for example.

**I also spoke with Svitlana Taratorina and her friend, Volodymir Arenev. Svitlana from Kyiv, but like many Ukrainians, she fled to Lviv because it's on the far west border next to Poland.**

SVITLANA: But before the war, I wrote the novels sci-fi and fantasy novels and some comics and the book for children. And I, I, I liked this very much, but now I can't say when I will be able to write again.

**Her friend Volodymir wrote over 20 science fiction and fantasy books, including novels like Ashes of Dragon Bones.**

VOLODYMYR: And it's about dragon, uh, bones, uh, in, in the ground, because some, uh, in, in past dragons were ruled these countries and, uh, the tyranny, uh, builds this empire.

**But these days, he's staying put in the countryside, far from his home in Kyiv.**

VOLODYMYR: Now, now I'm sitting here, and I don't write, but I hope I will, maybe near days because sometimes you just need to do this, just for harmonization.

**It may be challenging for some writers to feel creative at a time like this, but it's also tempting to dream about other worlds when the real world is so terrifying. In fact, Svitlana says even the way her friends have been talking about the war, they keep referring to fantasy epics.**

SVITLANA: Like we called, uh, our enemy, our, uh, Russian invaders, orcs, like from Tolkien saga. Yes. On today in news, I read, uh, we called, uh, some, uh, troops on, um, and yeah, the Kyiv, who are lost in our forest, we called, uh, him like, uh, wildings.

VOLODYMYR: From Martin?

***Yeah, yeah. From George Martin. Yeah.***

SVITLANA: They write like this and we, uh, we called, uh, ourselves Gondor and we fight against Mordor.

**Maria Galina also said that the story which is giving her the most inspiration these days is Lord of the Rings.**

MARIA: In the situation in Ukraine now, Tolkien is a very psychotherapy psychotherapeutic literature because there is Mordor, there is side of darkness and there is side of light and there is no shades, there is just, you have to do very true things. You have to do the right things because there is binary world. And in this, we now exist in this binary world in Ukraine.

***Yeah, that makes a lot of sense because I remember in this country, after 9/11, a lot of people found comfort in, or as you said almost psychotherapeutic comfort in Tolkien and the Lord of the Rings movies, because it is this binary world of***

*light and dark, but it doesn't feel simplistic. It actually feels quite scary when you're the one who has to confront these forces that have attacked or invaded you.*

MARIA: Yeah. It is very scary. And I, myself now look, uh, the Lord of the Rings movie. *Oh really? Yeah. You've been watching it again.*

MARIA: Yeah. Again, and again.

*FRODO: I wish the ring had never come to me; I wish none of this had happened*  
*GANDALF: So, do all who live to see such times, but that is not for them to decide. All you have to decide is what to do with the time that is been given to you.*

**When it comes to life imitating art, there's been a lot of discussion about how President Zelensky was an actor on a sitcom about a regular guy who becomes president, and the parallels between real life and fiction are eerie.**

**But as I looked into the way speculative fiction has developed in Eastern Europe, I discovered this conflict has also been playing out in imaginary spaces for Russians and Ukrainians long before it spilled out into the real world.**

**We will explore that after break.**

## **BREAK**

**During the Soviet era, Ukrainian speculative fiction was published in Russian. And after the fall of the Soviet Union, Ukrainian authors still wrote and published their books in Russian because they wanted to sell them in a much bigger market.**

**But when Russia took Crimea in 2014. Svitlana and Volodymir told me, that was a wakeup call not just politically but culturally.**

SVITLANA: I think, um, appeared, a lot of writers who started writing in this moment, like me and we start, uh, right. Uh, first of all, from Ukraine language, we, um, had an idea to develop Ukraine language, um, uh, science fiction and fantasy.

***So if I was to a lot of, if I could read, understand <laugh> Ukrainian, if I was to read a lot of Ukrainian speculative fiction since 2014, would I notice certain themes coming up certain, um, uh, certain genres people like, and you know, what, what would I observe to say like, oh, you know, I've noticed that a lot of Ukrainian, uh, speculative fiction is about this and speaks to these particular themes.***

SVITLANA: I think...

VOLODYMYR: I would say...

SVITLANA: All... <laughs>

VOLODYMYR: OK. Tell, tell!

SVITLANA: All our books. It's, it's so Ukrainian and all books of Volodymyr, is so Ukrainian. Uh, it's about our land, our tradition, our folklore, our history it's about us and for us, uh, first of all, uh, but about us, uh, for other world.

VOLODYMYR: I would say many of our stories, uh, I mean, novels and stories wrote in these days are about war and, uh, about occupation and about, about our history in postcolonial point of view, because, uh, many, many people want to, uh, explore ourselves and what we could, how, how we could do this by the story, by our traditions, by the understanding where exactly we are in, in this whole world, what is our role? History, alternative history, you know, subgenre, is one of our very important, uh, parts of science fiction and fantasy, and then fantasy surely, uh, fantasy about ancient times, uh, when we had foundation of our country.

**Another really popular subgenre is magic realism, where the world appears to be realistic but there's a touch of magic to it.**

VOLODYMYR: It's a huge and very, very old subgenre. Why? Because, uh, in Soviet Ukraine, it was one of a few subgenres from science fiction and fantasy. It was okay. You could write it. It's okay when you, when you write it. One of most important, our, uh, writers at all, not in genre, uh, Serhiy Zhadan, he wrote in, uh, magic realism. And he, he works with our past, postcolonial, uh, traumas and tried to understand who we are when we go move out from, from the shadow of, uh, Soviet empire.

**Now, I also talked Borys Sydiuk. When we talked, he was staying put in Kyiv with much difficulty. When the Soviet empire collapsed, he got into the field of translating speculative fiction into English.**

BORYS: And in '90s well, every second book issued in this country passed through my hands, well I mean science fiction books.

**Although he says science fiction has never been as popular in Ukraine as it has been in Russia. A big part of the Soviet mission was focusing on how they're pushing towards the future.**

BORYS: Even during Soviet times. So the Ukrainian science fiction, Ukrainian language say science fiction was different from those in Russian language because, uh, Russian science fiction, Russia rather was as forwards to American and English in the British

science fiction, uh, with the spacecrafts well science fiction machines. And so on. Ukrainian, well, speculative fiction say not a science fiction. Speculative fiction were always been more magic with urban legends. It's rather, uh, based on fairy tales than on science fiction.

***So, I know nothing about Ukrainian folklore. What's an example of a uniquely Ukrainian folk lore character that comes up a lot, or is adapted into different fantasy novels?***

BORYS: One of the most interesting character in, in the well in the folklore and in speculative fiction used in, in our current literature is Mavka. Mavka is a girl who lives in the swamp in the dark forest. It is considered to be evil, but in Ukraine literature, it is not always evil. So, there are a lot of, uh, plots, uh, about, uh, usually it's romantic. You, you know, that, uh, Mavka can fall and love with some handsome boy and tried to attract him and to bring him to, to swamp. And so on.

**He's kind of chuckling at the idea, but with every folklore tale, it depends on how you spin it, how you make it resonate with modern day audiences. But Borys says another difference between Russian and Ukrainian speculative fiction is how seriously that genre is taken in each country.**

BORYS: Actually, Ukrainian readers do not make a big difference between the, between so called mainstream and, and speculative fiction. Actually, it is all literature. In Russia. The difference is in Russia, in the Russian culture, they say that mainstream literature is, is better. It's a big literature while the science fiction or fantasy literature is well, little brother or little sister, you know, in Ukraine, no, in Ukraine it's all just literature. If you read a book, if you read a novel, it doesn't matter if it's science fiction is its fantasy or mainstream. It's a book.

**And Maria Galina says there's an economic reason why speculative fiction has to be good enough in Ukraine to compete with realistic fiction. It comes down to the price of paper.**

MARIA: Here there was very high prices on publishing process for paper, for process of publishing books. So, Ukraine has to develop highbrow speculative fiction. For example, here we have the biggest literature prize in Ukraine. It is literature prize in Ukraine and in the final of this prize, one of the finalists is the folk fantasy of Volodymyr Arenev, and it is very interesting phenomenon. I cannot maybe, uh, imagine something like this in Russia.

**If the finalist for that literature prize sounds familiar, that's because Volodymyr Arenev is Svitlana's friend, who we heard from earlier.**

**As Ukrainian writers have been fostering a sense of national identity through folklore and fantasy, Russian writers have been fantasizing about their country in very different ways.**

**Volodymir says, in the early 2000s, Russian and Ukrainian writers were very friendly with each other. But the first major break happened around 2005 after the Orange Revolution. It was a political movement in Ukraine where the people demanded a more Western European style of government, that was more democratic, and more accountable.**

VOLODYMIR: Yes. And in this moment, uh, many voices, uh, from Russia, from our friends, they thought, uh, we should be very quiet, very friendly, always. We don't have a right to think about other way, other way of our future.

**I also talked with Ukrainians who had emigrated to the United States -- like Anatoly Belilovsky. Anatoly lives in New York, and he's translated Ukrainian speculative fiction into English.**

**He says, in the early 2000s, Ukrainian and Russian writers were attending the same fantasy conventions, like WorldCon, which is a con that's held in a different country every year. Russian and Ukrainian writers were becoming friends on Facebook.**

TOLYA: Oh, absolutely. They all sort started out in the same, in the same group and on the, at the same cons in the same circles back, and then it all went to hell. I think, uh, right now there are science fiction authors who have been at the same cons in the '90s who are now in charge of, uh, entire military units on both sides of the conflict it's as if, Heinlein and Asimov ended up on opposite sides of the civil war.

**Even though these two communities have drifted over the last 17 years, Svitlana and Volodymir were still horrified to see their Russian colleagues endorse and promote Putin's propaganda about the war in Ukraine.**

SVITLANA: They were, uh, our colleagues. Uh, but now they, uh, uh, our enemy and one of these authors, if I'm not mistake now is a guest of honor at WorldCon in 2023. Uh, but....

VOLODYMIR: Sergei Lukyanenko Why, why would, we could speak about it? Sergei Lukyanenko, after translated in, in English, he says, we need to bomb all these cities and all and so on and so on. And he's the guest of honor of WorldCon 2023

SVITLANA: In China, that, that it'll be in China.

**The Russian sci-fi writer that they're talking about has been so anti-Ukraine, he even refused to allow his books to be published in the Ukrainian language.**

**And this turn to the right didn't just happen in the political world; it happened inside the fantasy worlds of Russian science fiction authors.**

**Alex Shvartsman is a Ukrainian-American living in New York. He writes fantasy books and does translations. And he says, a lot of Russian fantasy novels are not political. But:**

ALEX: But there's also an entire huge industry of popular and populist novels that are very much kind of making their bread on the idea of reemergent Russia and, uh, uh, Russia regaining its place in the world, often through some kind of an invention or maybe, you know, the Russian people are the ones that contacted the aliens or, or, or developed the star drive or something happened that, that made Russia a great power again. So that definitely has been a fairly common theme in Russian fiction, in Russian speculative fiction in recent years.

***And how does that happen? So, you're saying it's, it's a lot of, is it a lot of it through science fiction, the Russians contact of the aliens, or is there any kind of like historical revisionism through historical fantasy?***

ALEX: There's both, uh, so far as the fantasy elements go, there is a very popular, uh, subgenre now called popadanets, which is a word that, uh, refers to somebody who got somewhere. So essentially, it's, uh, you know, you, it's not necessarily that they're going into a, a fantasy universe. It could be somebody who is a modern person that ends up in previous era, in the historical periods. For example, there's a very, very popular series of novels about a modern era Russian nuclear submarine that ends up, you know, back in, you know, going back in time to the 19, late 1930s and basically ends up destroying the Nazis and then subsequently defeating the Americans as well.

**There's been over 20 novels about this time traveling Russian nuclear submarine. Anatoly says beyond putting America in its place:**

TOLYA: Also, at one point, they're putting Ukrainians in their place, by the way, just by the way, the interesting part of that is, yeah, they mess with a lot of things. They steal the, the ship that's taking, that's taking uranium from, uh, Belgian Congo to the U.S., but there's only one person they actually go out and assassinate in the United States. And it's very interesting who that person is. It's Hyman Rickover.

***Who?***

TOLYA: Hyman Rickover the father of the nuclear submarine fleet.

***Oh, huh.***

TOLYA: Basically, the one person they consider irreplaceable in all of United States in the 1940s is Hyman Rickover.

**I also learned Hyman Rickover was born in Poland, when it was occupied by Russia. His family fled to the U.S. to escape anti-Semitism.**

**And while Ukrainian culture has been moving towards a model of diversity and tolerance, Russian culture has gone in the opposite direction under Putin. That shows up in Russian speculative fiction as well.**

TOLYA: Because, uh, of the association with homophobia, transphobia with the Russian government, the people who would be likely to be more feminist and, uh, more inclusive have drifted toward the, the Ukrainian point of view in their fiction. Even if they're not actually Ukrainian.

**Ukrainian writers have been watching this imperial march of Russian fantasy for a while. That's another reason why they've developed a more protective stance in their literature. Even if their novels aren't overtly political -- just the fact that they're set in Ukraine, and written in Ukrainian, makes them stand apart. Again, here's Maria.**

MARIA: I think that there are the stories of national spirit of it based it on Ukraine and folklore, because first of all, they need to build the past their own past, not as the past of the empire or part of empire, but the past of the quite independent country.

**For example, Svitlana wrote a novel in 2019 called Lazarus which is set on the eve of the First World War. It's about Ukrainian folklore characters that are forced to live in ghettos.**

SVITLANA: My, my, my book, I think it's, uh, about, uh, our postcolonial trauma, uh, because, uh, my folk creatures who, uh, lived in Kyiv in the beginning of the century, they fight for their, uh, their land. And this moment they, uh, the part of big empire who discriminates these creatures in, in the Kyiv of, uh, and, um, my book about time, um, uh, before first war, uh, in real life. And it was difficult but hopeful time for us in real, in our history.

**Now some of her work is more directly political, like her second novel is a post-apocalyptic story that's set in Crimea.**



SVITLANA: And, uh, for, for me this language of speculative fiction, give me a possibility to write about this very hard, very, very hard time, and, uh, I was born in, in Crimea, and, uh, eight years. I, I can't, uh, go to, to my, to my home.

***What, in, in this future that you imagine, what can you describe a little bit what this future of Crimea is in your book?***

SVITLANA: In my book, and I, I, I love, uh, fantasy for this, uh, fantasy. Give our hope, uh, for, uh, for victory and for, for good future for, for all of us.

**And Borys told me about a project that's a collaboration between different fantasy writers across Ukraine.**

BORYS: There is a very interesting project, which is run where now, and they issued just the first books it's called the agency independence it's as projects where, uh, while many leading Ukrainian writers come together, uh, gather together to make the, uh, a common world, things like what, what DC comics do, or, uh, Marvel do with their world, you know,

***Oh, like a shared, a shared universe.***

BORYS: Yes. Others came together and created, uh, created a world around Ukraine as a country, as a nation. And there is an agency that protects the country, on many from, in reality, in, in time, in parallel worlds.

***Interesting. So, so they have the, so they, basically, the writers have said, let's create this agency of independence. We'll each keep writing our own, our own stuff, but let's agree that in all of our books, this agency of independence exists, and we can even borrow characters from each other's books, because this is a shared universe.***

BORYS: Exactly. Because it's really, it's really very interesting project really.

**Borys put me in touch with the organizer of the project, who told me they have over 30 writers involved -- all of them established Ukrainian sci-fi and fantasy writers. This agency of independence mostly fights against a Russian agency called Wings of State Security, which is trying to undermine Ukraine with its supernatural abilities. The characters also face off against Ukraine against time travelers, necromancers, and doppelgangers. So far they've published one anthology of short stories. They were planning on publishing more, and they were hoping to develop a comic book and a TV series -- but the war put everything on hold.**

**In the news, I've seen a lot of inspiring stories about how Ukrainians are standing their ground, often in very creative ways. But if Vladimir Putin's goal is to**

conquer Ukraine, he's going to have to also snuff out the idea of Ukrainian independence. And he will fail, because to do that, he'd have to conquer the imaginations of the people of Ukraine. And that's one place his army can never go.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Maria Galina, Borys Sydiuk, Volodymir Arenev, Svitlana Taratorina, Alex Shvartsman, and Anatoly Belilovsky.

I put links in the show notes to various charities you can give to that are helping to resettle refugees.

Now unfortunately, most of Svitlana, Maria and Volodymir's novels have not been translated into English – at least not yet -- but Alex Shvartsman who lives in the U.S. writes in English and his new novel *The Middling Affliction* comes out in May.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can like the show on Facebook and Instagram. I also tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod.

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