

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

**Science fiction has long imagined a universal translator, from Star Trek to Doctor Who to The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy. Since none of that technology exists, we have to rely on human beings. And literature translators have a big challenge when translating fantasy, because fantasy and sci-fi are already creating worlds that are foreign to the reader, even if it's in your own language.**

**There's been a lot written about what gets in lost in translation, but I've been wondering if anything is gained? I think of a story as a living organism. It needs to adapt to survive in a new language or culture. And after its translated, it may not be the same story anymore, but it gets to keep growing and thriving. In today's episode, we are going to go around to world, to look at four different ways that fantasy literature has changed from language to another.**

## **Chapter 1: The Hebrew Hobbit.**

**Chen Malul (Chen Ma-LOOL with chai sound) is an editor at the National Library of Israel. When he was a teenager, the first Lord of the Rings movie came out, and he was excited to find a copy of The Hobbit in Hebrew at his local bookstore. There was a blurb on the back cover, which said the book was translated by Israeli fighter pilots, which sounded strange to him -- but at the time, he just wanted to dive into the book.**

**CHEN: I remember that I really loved the book but the story of the pilots that translated it in prison, it wasn't a story that didn't research until much, much later.**

**The pilots flew in the late '60s and early '70s during The War of Attrition between Egypt and Israel. It was a bombing campaign carried out by both sides.**

**Six Israeli pilots were captured and brought to a prison on Cairo. They did have contact with their families during their three years as POWs. One of pilots, Rami Harpaz (har-PAZ), was sent a copy of The Hobbit in English. There weren't any Hebrew translations of The Hobbit. Harpaz was one of the few pilots that understood English, and he knew his comrades were dying for something to read. So, he came up with a project for them to do.**

**CHEN: First of all, they started translating, uh, sentences or expressions from the book, but then they discovered it it's a fun activity that, uh, helps them, uh, forget about their**

stay in prison. So, they decided to translate the whole book. It took them four months and they did it in pairs.

**And they did it in very cramped living conditions.**

CHEN: It wasn't an idyllic time for anyone. I mean, they got on each other's nerves all the time and they, they were pretty much, most of the time bored out of their minds. They try not to bother each other but they did bother each other. I mean, you're always with the same people for three years.

***Yeah, I read, they had shouting matches about some of the translation.***

CHEN: They're shouting at each other. The they're bickering about the way to translate this or that, or the way to translate poems about doors are trying to steal a treasure from, uh, from a dragon. I mean, it's a, it's almost a fantasy story itself. I mean, if someone were to write it, you know, you wouldn't believe it.

**I find it interesting how national identity can be fused on to a fantasy story. The Hobbits have been described by scholars as quintessential English country folk. And Tolkien said that he modeled the dwarves after Jews, or what he thought of Jews, as a strange and bellicose people who are good with money. He even based the dwarfish language off what he thought Hebrew sounded like. But that's not how the characters come across in Hebrew. In fact, in the pilot's translation, the character of Bilbo reminds Chen of a classic archetype from Yiddish folklore.**

CHEN: Bilbo, who is, uh, a bit of a grudging person at the beginning. Uh, so we have a lot of, uh, Yiddish jokes, the jokes in Yiddish, the trope of the angry old men. So some of it, I think, rubs off into translation, even though it's in Hebrew, but there is a Yiddish translation, a much later one.

**After the pilots were freed in the early '70s, they became heroes in Israel. Books were written about them. There was even a play about them which was being performed up until the pandemic. I think one of the reasons why their story was so appealing is that they held on to their sense of dignity in captivity and these tough guys passed the time during the nerdiest thing possible. Chen can't help but read their version of The Hobbit without thinking of their situation.**

CHEN: The whole story about the fighting in the Hobbit and the battles, they get further meaning, an enhanced meaning

**Today, there are two professional translations of The Hobbit into Hebrew.**

CHEN: And the pilots' translation is actually considered the worst one. I mean, because there weren't any, uh, official or professional translator then, but this is the one I read as a teenager and distance still is my most, uh, the one I love the most and I read all of them.

***Why, tell me, why is it the one you love the most?***

CHEN: Because it's not a professional translation, there's something I don't know, even childish about it. And obviously the backstory which now I know, I think it really enhances the story. And it's a lovely translation. If it, even if they didn't get everything right.

**The Hobbit went through a subtle adjustment as it moved from language to another. But other fantasy books have gone through more dramatic changes.**

## **Chapter 2: The Russian Oz.**

**Olga Zilberbourg (Zil-bur-BURG) grew up in the Soviet Union. When she was a kid, her favorite book was The Magician of Emerald City – or as we know it, The Wizard of Oz. And she loved the book because of the main character.**

OLGA: This head girl protagonist. Soviet books did not have girls as protagonists. And that was, that was really exciting.

**As we all know, the protagonist of the story is Ellie Smith, who lived in Kansas with her parents until a hurricane took Ellie and her talking dog Totoshka all the way to The Magic Land where they met a Wizard named Goodwin.**

**Yeah, the guy who translated The Wizard of Oz took a lot of liberties with the story. And the publishers intentionally mislead people to think the translator, Alexander Volkov, had written the book. Volkov even wrote sequels to his version of story, which had nothing to do with the sequels that L. Frank Baum wrote.**

**In fact, if someone told Olga that The Magician of Emerald City was a translation of an American book by L. Frank Baum, she would've thought, that's American propaganda.**

OLGA: It would. It would have been very strange. I don't think I would have believed it. I don't, I don't think, uh, yeah, I don't think I would have believed that, uh, Volkov, didn't create it.

**Alexander Volkov grew up quite poor, and he was a self-taught scholar. In 1939, when the Wizard of Oz movie came out, a friend lent him the original book. Volkov loved it so much, he didn't want to return it. So, he made a project to translate it into Russian. He also had young kids, and he wanted them to read it.**

**Olga says in the USSR, the authors of children's books often saw themselves as being on a mission to invent a new type of literature for Soviet children. And as far as the government was concerned, international copyright laws had no jurisdiction behind the Iron Curtain.**

OLGA: This was not unprecedented for an author to take, uh, an old story and to change it and make it more suitable for Soviet children. But with Volkov I think there's more to it than that. I think he's, he's genuinely adapting it to his audience. You know, he's writing this as somebody who, who who's a big fan is maybe in a little bit like a fan fiction.

**So, the corn fields of Kansas were changed to wheat fields --- which is a big crop in Russia. The Wicket Witch of the West was more like Baba Yaga, who is a witch-type character from Russian folklore. The Wicked Witch of the East created the hurricane -- not tornado -- which brought Ellie to the Magic Land because the witch was angry humanity was destroying the environment.**

OLGA: You know, Soviet the Soviet Union. It was all about trying to change the environment, trying to modify the environment in which we lived to, to make serve people.

**That was not the only subtle critique of the government in Volkov's version of the story.**

OLGA: Some of the fears of the 1930s are reflected in his retelling Goodwin represents a Stalin type figure. And Oz in this version is Goodwin somebody, somebody named Goodwin. He is somebody who is a feared person by everyone in the, in the kingdom. And in this, in this land, nobody who mentions his name, you know, is, is happy about him or once Ellie to go there. And what's interesting too, is that when Scarecrow ascends to, to, Oz's position, he, all of a sudden start to think of himself as, uh, somebody who must be obeyed and who can give orders. He becomes quite a nasty person, all of a sudden, you know, there's awareness of the position of power that, that instills fear in people and that it must do so.

**But the biggest change was Volkov's depiction of Kansas. In the original book, Baum described Kansas as very drab and gray. That language actually inspired the black and white sequence in the movie.**

**But Volkov made the farmers into a glorious proletariat. They really looked out for each other. And Ellie had fun in the decadent bourgeois Emerald City but there's no place like the homeland. And as a kid, Olga didn't dream of going to The Magic Land. She wanted to see this place called Kansas!**

OLGA: Oh, absolutely. Kansas was the dream. Yeah, it was. We, we, I remember when I was older, like 10 or 11, a friend, my friend and I who had read the books and we had like the whole six set of Volkov books. We, we dug a hole, but went to, um, Kansas, we dug a hole in our sandbox and there was a pretty massive hole actually.

***Wow. Have you been to Kansas?***

OLGA: I have actually, I have my husband and I drove cross country once from Boston to San Francisco and we absolutely went through Kansas because I had to go there.

***I mean, you, I mean, obviously you didn't go in with the mind of a child, you know, but, but what did you think compared to your image of Kansas?***

OLGA: It was actually, it was a pretty emotional experience. Uh, I remember it was, it was very, very windy. It was probably the strongest wind I've seen it was. And you know, it was a striking place. The sadness, a little of the flatness of the highway we drove on was striking, and I forget what they called. Those plants that roll around the stumble weeds.

***Oh tumbleweeds!***

OLGA: Yeah. I picked up a tumbleweed and I kept it for years and years. So it disintegrated into dust.

***Oh my God, wow!***

**Today, Olga is reading the Russian version of the book to her son, even though they live in California.**

OLGA: Something about it, like for instance, the dog Toto, he can talk and he's, he's cute and funny. And he, he has some of the best lines and he's very helpful. And then, I mean, it's inevitable that growing up in the U.S. I think it is inevitable that he'll, he'll come across the Wizard of Oz, the real story on his own but I do think that there is room for this book.

**Olga says she still sees the world through the lens of having grown up in the Soviet Union. And Volkov's version of the story reminds her of home, even if she knows the homeland where she came from was no Kansas.**

OLGA: This book is my culture. It's a part of, part of my culture that I have to give. And it, which is, you know, Soviet culture. And I'm really grateful for Volkov for adapting it in, in the ways that he did that made it acceptable to the censors, to the editors, to the whole publishing structure.

**After the break, we'll switch into the challenges of translating fantasy literature into English, especially in the hottest market for translated sci-fi right now: China.**

## **BREAK**

### **Chapter 3: Chinese sci-fi.**

**If you've heard of any Chinese science fiction novel, it's probably The Three Body Problem. It's a 2008 novel about an alien invasion that was translated by the Chinese American writer Ken Liu. In fact, Ken Liu has translated so many works, he's sparked a demand for Chinese sci-fi from American readers and publishers.**

**I reached out to Ken and he told me that he's not available to talk about translations, because he's focusing on his own original fiction. But he recommended that I talk with Emily Jin, who is one of the young translators that he trained to carry on the work. Emily was studying in the U.S. until the pandemic. Now she's back home in Beijing (bay-Jing), and she's busy as ever translating Chinese sci-fi.**

EMILY: I guess, because I've also been just thinking about translation as an art in general. Um, but to me it's sort of like the cognitive mapping in the sense that a story is made of big and small concepts. And it's all kind of up in the air in the realm of the abstract and language is the interface in which these stories are communicated. And, and this is also kind of tapping into, um, Ken's advice to me, which is as long to kind of capture the aura of the original writer. There are many ways that you can deal with the translation, so you don't really have to make it literal when the literal doesn't work that way.

**To give you some historical background: science fiction was actually banned in China during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and '70s. But today, the Chinese government is encouraging sci-fi because they believe that it will help stimulate the imaginations of Chinese tech developers. And the government is supporting movies with big special effects to compete with Hollywood -- although these films have to fit The Party's content guidelines**

**But Emily says, what's going in literary circles is much more ad hoc.**

EMILY: It's just like a small group of hardcore fans. Um, I guess like to put a frankly, a bunch of nerds, just having fun with reading each other's stories.

**One of the most common questions she gets is what defines Chinese sci-fi. But she says:**

EMILY: Chinese science fiction writers are just as diverse as writers from anywhere else in the world. And they come from very different geographic and educational backgrounds. They have different fields of interest. One might write about the near future. Another might write about space and going to Mars. And they're just very different.

**She suspects that a lot of Anglophone readers – meaning readers who come from predominantly English-speaking countries – are reading Chinese sci-fi to get a glimpse into modern China, beyond the headlines. And she says if there is a common theme in Chinese sci-fi, it tends to be about day-to-day life, because the pace of change has been so rapid that living in China over the last two decades has felt like living in a science fiction novel.**

EMILY: So there's one, I guess, sub-genre of science fiction that we've coined here called science fiction realism, which portrays specifically a near future instead of like kind of outer space or a far future or alternative history. It's just about the near future. And I think specifically in China, this is a way to deal with people's future anxiety or future shock, however you want to put it.

**In fact, she thinks some Chinese readers rely on sci-fi too much to give them a glimpse of what's to come.**

EMILY: I think they consider science fiction as this genre that carries this prophetic weight on its shoulders and people turn it to even for like, I guess, spiritual needs in a way to have science fiction stand in the place of religion. They're all rushing towards this genre and demanding a certain kind of future emerge from the texts that they're reading.

**Another common question she often gets is whether it's challenging to translate sci-fi because of all the pseudo-scientific terms. She says that's not hard. The bigger challenge is explaining the cultural context in which the stories take place. And she's cautious about what she calls the Anglophone gaze.**

EMILY: If you care too much about the gaze, sometimes the translator will fall into the trap of this self-butchering Americanization, where you would deliberately kind of try to wipe out the cultural nuances in the original to make it especially suitable for an Anglophone, or really just a lot of times American reader or on the other hand, when some translators want to feed in that feed into that curiosity of Anglophone reader, there's a danger of this self-orientation. You would kind of heighten what's strange about the story and make it sound even kind of stranger than it should be in the English version.

**Orientalism has been rampant in Western fantasy, from Flash Gordon, with its villain Emperor Ming the Merciless, to Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom.**

**Emily says even traditional folklore characters like a dragon, or a phoenix are very different from the way they've been portrayed in Western pop culture. So, when she's translating a story that incorporates one of those fantasy characters:**

EMILY: It's hard for both the writer and the translator to figure out a way to not let this story in English fall into the predetermined kind of structures or ideas already set down by, um, Western writers through their exoticization. For instance, unlike in the Disney movie *Mulan*, the quote unquote Phoenix in China's culture, which, um, its name is feng, it actually doesn't carry that whole fire rebirth property at all. So similarly, when I come, uh, come across the feng in Chinese, and when I'm trying to translate it, I also avoid using the word Phoenix to avoid pinning these kinds of unbelonging characteristics onto this creature. After talking to the original writer, um, we would oftentimes add an extra description talking about what this creature is really like in Chinese culture, and to try to establish it as its own thing.

**Or to use more recent history, she once translated a time travel story that took place during the author's childhood, when it was common for teachers to hit students with rulers.**

EMILY: But it's very hard to kind of deliver that in English. That would not sound like child abuse, but also the plot is just so needed because that explains why the tagging is hates his teacher so much, which costs a whole misunderstanding and kind of led him to do his whole time traveling.

**So, she worked with the writer to restructure that section.**



EMILY: And the way we ended up doing it is still kind of keeping the idea of like the teacher tapping the student's Palm with a ruler, but we added more of the kind of psychological humiliation of how that act made the protagonist feel. Instead of focusing on the quote, unquote more graphic details of how the world is like how he's being kind of literally hit.

**Chinese sci-fi isn't the only East Asian speculative fiction getting attention in the West. That brings me to chapter 4: Korean sci-fi literature.**

**Recently, the Korean branch of Netflix announced they were adapting several Korean sci-fi novels, which is unusual because Korean sci-fi literature is still a fairly new genre. Most Korean sci-fi movies or shows are original ideas that come from the filmmakers.**

**I talked with two literary translators in Seoul. And they're a married couple! Gord Sellar, who is originally from Canada, and his wife Jihyun (gee-HUN) Park.**

GORD: Um, well, actually you should speak first because you're the one who starts the process,

JIHYUN: Right? Yeah. So at the beginning we need to choose the story and I'm very a fast reader, so I can go, wooosh, whoosh, it's done.

**And then Gord takes a stab at translating it.**

GORD: Then I email it to her and she reads it and tears her hair out saying that's not what I meant, then we sit down together and go through it and refine a lot of the nuance.

**They look for stories that don't need a lot of cultural context, but they still have challenges – like translating stories about corporal punishment in schools.**

JIHYUN: I think it's been five years it's been banned to hit your hit the students,

GORD: This is the funny thing about like, you know, when you, when you go to another culture, genre actually can, can exist that you've never imagined in Korean horror.

There's a very specific Korean horror genre of like high school, just because high school is so hellish for so many kids.

**But not because of bullies -- because of the pressure adults put on the kids. And there's another cultural misunderstanding they have to watch out for.**

**When I used to take writing classes in college, I was taught that the protagonist always has to be active. Their decisions need to drive every plot point in the story, or else I was criticized for having a quote “passive protagonist.” But Gord says “passive protagonists” are common in Korean literature.**

**They were once translating a story about an old woman who checks into a retirement home where the residents are pampered for 24 hours before they’re put to death. The story was a social satire. And they were concerned that Anglophone readers might think the protagonist accepted her fate way too quickly. So, they worked with the writer to reshape the story to give the character more agency, even if it was just in her mind.**

GORD: For me it’s been a learning experience because I also was like, you know, trained or brought up or whatever in, in that environment of like protagonist must be active. Right. And there’s a certain sort of degree to which that’s fantasy, right? Like most of us are not completely active about in every area of our lives. Most of us are not constantly fighting for our values or liberty or whatever. Um, and so like, it’s kind of interesting to see a literature where sometimes the systems are just much bigger than you and more powerful than you, and you can’t really fight them. And for me that, that, that can be interesting stories that sort of examine. So how do people who have no way of resisting or fighting back survive or deal with living in those conditions?

**Korean sci-fi is also shaped by its history. When Jihyun (gee-HUN) was young, the government heavily promoted Western sci-fi that that was rooted in science.**

JIHYUN: Before, it was mainly about like how to introduce, how to make our citizens more stronger in science, to make the world, uh, make the country more prosper. That was the main idea at the beginning.

**Today a lot of writers in Korea rebel against that by writing more fantastical fiction. And in the ‘90s, Korean translators had a lot more freedom to choose the novels that they wanted to translate. And since many of the translators were women, they were drawn towards American writers like Ursula K. le Guin.**

GORD: She is one of the voices that became part of the canon in a very prominent way. Um, and hasn’t been so crowded out by, you know, all like by the oodles and oodles of male writers, and that’s not, that’s not an unconscious thing. I remember, um, you know what, I will not name her in case there’s a backlash on this, but I remember one prominent translator, uh, that, uh, is that said, you know, you know, all of those, those like, uh, you know, sexist, male writers, I just, why translate that.

**And those translations inspired a lot of Korean women to write sci-fi.**

JIHYN: And also I went to a bookstore recently and I've never seen a science fiction book in a bestseller shelf, but I saw like three of them there. And it's an all woman writer. So, and their characters are woman too.

***Why are so many Korean women drawn to sci-fi? Why can't they express their concerns in like, non-fantasy literature?***

JIHYN: If I see a mainstream fiction that has a woman, active protagonist, trying to like kick ass and then I'll think is the science fiction, because it's so different from the reality.

***Huh.***

GORD: I mean the one example is the story we translated too

JIHYN: Flower?

GORD: Flowers

JIHYN: Yeah, I was thinking about that too.

GORD And it's an interesting story because

JIHYN: Yeah,

GORD: Go ahead.

JIHYN: Now, you go ahead!

GORD: I mean, it's an interesting story. It was really interesting for me to watch deacon talk about that story because, uh, the, the trick with that story is that, so there's the idea that there's these, these flowers you can plant that then becomes, like they become the, um, routers for like a secondary internet where you're not being surveilled and you're not being like controlled and, and that's sort of like a second subsidiary intranet. Um, and so there's this woman, who's like a rebel who's going around the country and planting these things. Um, but the story is not told from the point of view of the rebel, it's told by it from the point of view of her sister who is visiting her in prison. And who's like, Oh, I don't know why she's such a troublemaker. And like, Oh, she's so annoying. And like, kind of really down on what her sister did. Like, I don't know why she was making so much trouble for our family and, and that kind of thing. So, it's a really interesting story because you have a really active character, but it's not the protagonist.

**As I was talking with them, I kept wondering if there is a toxic backlash to all this feminist sci-fi. Jihyun (gee-HUN) says not in literature because it's far outside mainstream culture. Although that could change. For now, most of the backlash is in web comics, which are really popular.**

JIHYN: There are lots of science fiction web comics. If anyone is any artist, is writing a comic about like a feminism idea in it. And then they get attacked so severely on the comment, it's a pretty bad.

**Emily Jin says when it comes to Chinese sci-fi, she's has noticed a backlash in the U.S. from people who see it as a threat. And I've noticed in articles about Chinese sci-fi, the headlines often use words like "China's soft power" or "China's secret weapon."**

EMILY: Just even now I've heard kind of more people on the radical side saying that we should boycott Chinese science fiction because it's a poison to our mind that it carries somehow the magical like propaganda of God knows what and it's, and I'm just like that's nonsense.

**Emily and other translators have warned Western readers, don't try to understand an entire country or culture through the work of a single writer – but it's so tempting to do that. When I encounter something foreign, it's hard not to make assumptions and interpret the differences through my own cultural lens. Although the deeper I go into other cultures through sci-fi and fantasy, the more I realize how little I truly know about them.**

**And as we've seen, there can be schisms within a society, where people who look at the same stories but see very different things. Even when we try to understand each other, I keep thinking of the Chinese proverb that we're sleeping in the same bed, dreaming different dreams.**

**That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Chen Malul, Olga Zilberbourg, Emily Jin, Gord sellar and Jihyn (gee-HUN) Park. By the way, I put a list of some of the stories they mentioned in the show notes.**

**By the way, this episode was inspired by your suggestions for topics to explore, so thanks to everyone who chimed in on social media.**

**You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at emolinsky and imagine worlds pod. If you really like the show, please leave a review wherever you get podcasts or do a shout out on social media. That always helps people discover Imaginary Worlds.**

**The best way to support Imaginary Worlds is to donate on Patreon. At different levels you can get either free Imaginary Worlds stickers, a mug, a t-shirt, and a link to a Dropbox account, which has the full-length interviews of every guest in every episode. You can learn more at [imaginaryworldspodcast.org](http://imaginaryworldspodcast.org).**