

Polish Sci-Fi & Fantasy

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Dear readers,

There are two suns that shine over Polish fantasy: Stanisław Lem, the godfather of science fiction in Poland and, at once, its brightest star, and Andrzej Sapkowski, whose *supernova* has patronised local fantasy for years. It is no exaggeration to assume that these two giants are already known to readers in every latitude. But this is not all that Polish fantasy has to offer. Now the time has come for creators who may be less known, but equally talented.

Jacek Dukaj, Rafał Kosik, or Cezary Zbierchowski follow the trail of hard science fiction. Anna Brzezińska and Robert M. Wegner represent epic fantasy. Others, such as Radek Rak, Marta Kisiel-Małecka, Jarosław Grzędowicz, Tomasz Kołodziejczak, Paweł Majka, or Krzysztof Piskorski, bravely explore the borders of various conventions, exotic worlds, and literary sensibilities. What they all have in common is that each of the books presented is a wonderful feed for imagination.

We have seen how much this means after a long year of the pandemic and social isolation. It was authors - of books, series, games - who accompanied us throughout this time.

It seems that intelligent escapism has never been so necessary, intriguing, and advisable. The creators following in the footsteps of Lem and Sapkowski are the best example of this.

Michał Cetnarowski

Stanisław Lem

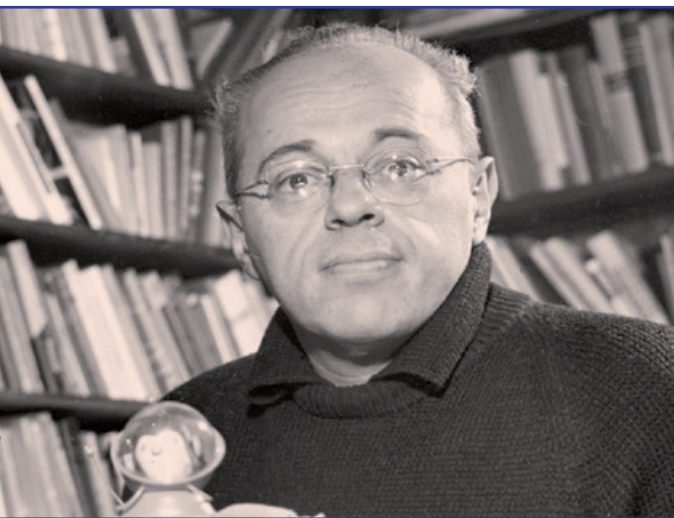


Photo © Lucjan Fogiel

The greatest and the invincible

He loved marzipan and halva and when it came to alcohol, he even drank sweet liqueurs. He was also an enthusiastic skier. He spoke Latin, German, French, English, Ukrainian and Russian. The books of Stanisław Lem - for it is Lem we're talking about - have been translated into 40 languages with over 30 million copies sold.

He is considered a 'science-fiction writer', but - although he undoubtedly wrote SF - Lem himself objected to being pigeonholed in that way. He thought of himself primarily as a philosopher who was mainly interested in the evolution of science and civilisation. His books enjoyed - and still enjoy - undiminished interest and deserved fame. 2021 will see the hundredth anniversary of the birth and the fifteenth anniversary of the death of one of the greatest, and certainly one of the most independent and original of Polish writers.

He was born in Lwów (now Lviv, Ukraine), where he studied medicine. His studies were interrupted by the Second World War. Lem found work as a mechanic's assistant and a welder in a German company that recycled metal from damaged military equipment. His love of various mechanisms, robots, and cars, which Lem was truly passionate about in his private life, accompanied him through his entire life.

His career as a writer only began after the war, and he quickly became popular among readers hungry for exotic content, through which Lem travelled with great freedom, not only beyond the boundaries of social realist territory, but also wandering to the limits of the universe's origins. His fame reached its peak in the nineteen-sixties when the writer began publishing works that brought him fame outside Poland, too. It's impossible to mention them all, but at least a few of them ought to be namechecked.

Eden is a story in the spirit of classic adventure SF, although with a highly bitter tinge. A starship carrying a crew of terrestrial astronauts crash land on a planet whose inhabitants have created a civilisation based on bioengineering. However, experiments with the genotype of the citizens of the global state haven't come to much. The earthlings appear just when genocide is being committed on the planet. The cruelty of the exterminations is all the greater considering it doesn't exist in the consciousness of the Edenians, since it has been driven out of the language by official propaganda. The question is whether the intervention of the group of arrivals will be dictated by ethics limited to earthly reality. Or is the human-centric interpretation of what is happening on the planet just some kind of colonial rape?

Years of life

1921-2006

Selected works

Peace on Earth, 1987
Fiasco, 1986
The Chain of Chance, 1976
Hospital of the Transfiguration, 1975
The Futurological Congress, 1973
Imaginary Magnitude, 1973
A Perfect Vacuum, 1971
His Master's Voice, 1968
Tales of Pirx the Pilot, 1968
Cyberiad, 1965
The Invincible, 1964
Summa technologiae, 1964
Fables for robots, 1964
Solaris, 1961
Eden, 1959
The Star Diaries, 1954

Foreign language translations

His books are well known around the world and are a part of humankind literary heritage.

Translation rights

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SCIENCE FICTION



The 1961 *Solaris*, which often appears in lists presenting the most important books of the 20th century, represents a genuine literary revolution. Instead of focussing on a 'space adventure', Lem revealed himself in it as a 'science-fiction philosopher', and his deliberations about the possibility - or rather impossibility - of cosmic contact with 'brothers in mind' represented a really new quality. *The Invincible* - the story of a rescue mission landing on a planet ravaged by an exotic, mechanical form of life, the Baroque and irreverent *Fables for Robots*, the similarly humorous-philosophical *Star Diaries* as well as *Summa Technologiae* - a volume of philosophical-futurological essays displaying the incredible scope of the author's intellectual horizons - these titles only confirmed the diagnosis.

From that period also comes *The Cyberiad* - a series of sophisticated stories about the adventures of two robot constructors, Trurl and Klapaucius, who ceaselessly compete with each other in a more or less spiteful rivalry and more than once save entire worlds. The free-flowing story combines a philosophical tale with humour, and the entire series is considered by many readers Lem's most perfect work of fiction. The picture is completed by *Tales of Pirx the Pilot* - probably the most classic science fiction in the author's work, with masterfully constructed storylines, and the pessimistic *His Master's Voice*, where Lem finally predicts the impossibility of contact with alien civilisations, as well as *The Futurological Congress*, which was made into the 2013 movie *The Congress* by Ari Folman. The protagonist of the latter work is Ijon Tichy, a cosmic vagabond and celestial Baron Munchausen, whose greatest talent seems to be the ability to become caught up in all sorts of difficulties. This time, he takes part in the Eighth World Futurology Congress to discuss the problem of overpopulation in a world with extremely unstable social and political situations. Does it sound familiar? And Lem published it in 1971! Soon, savage street fighting transforms into a civil war. Tichy and a handful of participants hide in a canal which is then infected by hallucinogens used to quell the disturbances. From that moment, he descends into a series of illusions where

the reader doesn't know what is a narcotic vision and what the honest truth. How to escape from a cage of grotesque visions, the bars of which are formed by one's own mind? Where to search for the indicators of truth since everything may turn out to be manipulation and lies? Today, this 1971 book sounds more current than ever, in a world rocked by terrorist attacks and a pandemic crisis, where it is becoming increasingly difficult to separate the truth from fake news.

In later years, the writer gradually moved away from fiction, leaning more towards the search for completely new forms of expression. Examples of such work are *A Perfect Vacuum* and *Imaginary Magnitude* - absolutely ingenious collections of reviews and introductions to fictional non-existent books, in which Lem tested all sorts of philosophical ideas and concepts, condensed into the size of short essays. Its continuation was *Golem XIV*, a very ambitious post-humanist novel told from the point of view of the eponymous artificial intelligence, which is several times more intellectually powerful than human beings.

Lem finally abandoned fiction in the 1980s by writing *Peace on Earth* - an anti-war story featuring Ijon Tichy, the hero of *Star Diaries*, and *Fiasco*, where he said goodbye to Pirx. In subsequent years, he mainly expressed himself in the form of articles.

In his work, Stanisław Lem usually concerned himself with the evolution of science and its influence on civilisation, the issue of human epistemological possibilities, and the place of humankind in the universe. That may sound very serious and ambitious, but he unvaryingly presented his deliberations in an extremely attractive form.

A planetoid and the first Polish scientific satellite were named after him. Andrei Tarkovsky and Steven Soderbergh brought *Solaris* to the big screen. Lem's bold speculations continue to be an unattainable benchmark of reasoning taken to its logical, absolute conclusion. And it would appear that today, his deliberations are just as topical as they were when he put them down on paper. For the writer often explored the limits of time and the borders of the existing universe.

Jacek Dukaj



Photo © Albert Zawada

The successor

In Poland, Jacek Dukaj is called the ‘second Lem’. Were he to write in English, one ought be saying the ‘second Stephenson’ or the ‘second Pynchon’. None of those epithets seem fair, though, for there is no other writer like him in the world right now.

Born in 1974, he is mainly associated with SF, but for years, has successfully moved beyond the genre. He made his debut at 16 and was an immediate hit with readers. The combination of a SF aesthetic with apocalyptic subject matter meant the young author couldn’t easily be pigeonholed. Dukaj’s later work only confirmed that.

His first long stories or mini-novels were published as *In the Land of Unbelievers* which to this day enjoys a justified cult status among fans. It included the novella *Cathedral*, which a young Tomek Bagiński - better known today as a co-creator of the Netflix *Witcher* series - turned into an animated short film which received an Oscar nomination in 2003. The novel *Xavras Wyżryn* - an alternative history of Europe, with the Bolsheviks having conquered the West - was also published around that time. Set at the end of the 20th century, the book sees a unit of Polish insurgents under the command of the eponymous leader, heading for Moscow armed with an atom bomb, with no thought for the civilian population or the risks to themselves. How can they be so sure of success?

Dukaj’s subsequent novels cemented his reputation as a ‘worthy successor to Lem’. It may be true that the two authors operate in different literary styles and themes, but, at the same time, they both mark out wide horizons and the ability to bravely extrapolate the processes that set the tone for entire civilisations. *Black Oceans* is a cyber noir work which today - with the game *Cyberpunk 2077* premiering - seems even more timely than it was two decades ago. And *An Ideal Imperfection* takes transhumanistic ideas to an extreme by examining what the logical evolution of intelligence throughout the entire known universe might be. In the West, Neal Stephenson (*Snow Crash*), Greg Egan (*Diaspora*) and Charles Stross (*Accelerando*) have written similar things. That should have sufficed for Dukaj to establish his position as one of the most compelling contemporary authors in Poland, though the real breakthroughs were yet to come.

Other Songs is an epic novel set in a world where the principles of physics as described by Aristotle are true: matter consists of only the five classical elements - earth, water, air, fire, and ether - and planet Earth is at the centre of the universe. When Aliens land, it turns out that their Form is utterly incompatible with the Form of humans, and, as a result, all attempts at making

Born

1974

Selected works

Po piśmie (After Writing), 2019
Imperium chmur (The Empire of Clouds), 2018
Starość Axolotla (The Old Axolotl), 2015
Lód (Ice), 2007
Perfekcyjna niedoskonałość (An Ideal Imperfection), 2004
Inne pieśni (Other Songs), 2003
Czarne oceany (Black Oceans), 2001
W kraju niewiernych (In the Land of Unbelievers), 2000
Xavras Wyżryn, 1997

Selected awards

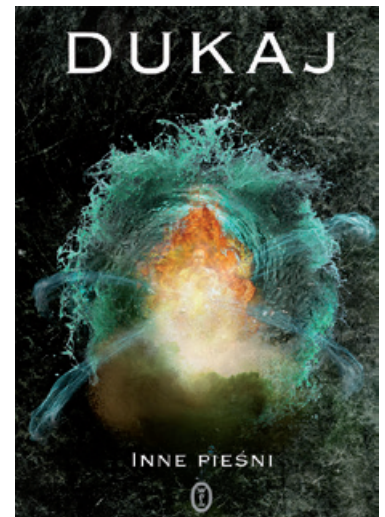
Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2000, 2001, 2003, 2004, 2007, 2010)
European Union Prize for Literature (2009)
Kościelski Foundation Award (2008)
Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2008)

Foreign language translations

Rights to *The Old Axolotl* have been sold to Hungary, Russia, and Ukraine.
Other works by Dukaj have been published in Czech Republic, Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, and Slovakia.
The UK edition of *Ice* is in progress.

Translation rights

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contact automatically trigger war. This brief description doesn't convey the wealth of the world created by Dukaj, full of neologisms based on ancient Greek, appealing details and, above all, extremely compelling characters.

It is probably *Ice*, however, that is Dukaj's magnum opus. This time, in order to build an alternate world, the author draws on quantum physics, research into liquid helium, which at a temperature of absolute zero appears to turn the arrow of entropy the other way around, and reflections on history, or more precisely to what extent it's an objective 'force' governing the world in the image of alternative laws of physics. This weighty novel - literally and metaphorically - is set in the second decade of the 20th century, first in Poland, which has remained under Russian occupation, and then in ice-bound Tsarist Russia. For in Dukaj's world, the First World War never happened, the Central and Allied Powers are still around, and everything east of the River Vistula is covered by a mysterious form of 'ice' - a phenomenon whose source lies in the explosion of the Tunguska meteorite. Benedykt Gierosławski, a minor swindler manipulated by the secret police, whose father reportedly acquired in Siberia the secret of contact with the Gleissen - mysterious Ice Angels - journeys into this exotic, icy interior. Thomas Pynchon might have written similar things were he to try his hand at science fiction. For his novel *Ice*, Dukaj received the Kościelski Award and the European Union Prize for Literature (2009).

Actually, the writer has by now received dozens of awards. Despite his books having been translated into English, German, Russian, Czech, and Hungarian, Dukaj still hasn't been properly discovered outside Poland. The Netflix series *Into the Night*, of which Dukaj - together with Tomek Bagiński - is an executive producer, might prove just such a chance. What is more, the popular

Netflix production is based on the short novel *The Old Axolotl*, which Dukaj originally wrote as an experimental, multimedia e-book, and it has already been translated into English. The writer's newest work is *The Empire of Clouds*, a novella presenting an alternative history of Japan, which entered the 20th century, and the clashes between the great powers in possession of the secret ability to manufacture an airborne fleet constructed of a metal lighter than air.

Dukaj is also well-known as an extremely interesting essayist. His most recent books - where the author with extraordinary insight examines the condition of a civilisation transformed by modern technologies, driven by the Internet, social media and visual culture - have been compiled into the collection *After Writing*. The titular essay is an attempt to portray humanity as it enters the third era - following the oral and written - of the evolution of civilisation: a period of the 'direct transfer of experience'.

The writer presents here as an outstanding intellectual, with his finger on the pulse of the most topical contemporary transformations, drawing attention to the dubious contexts of the emerging changes, the benefits deriving from them - and their unexpected perils. In other words, he's doing exactly what he has done up to now in his own genre-challenging fiction: he shows human beings subject to the pressures of technologies which are changing the world into a post-humanistic sandpit with opportunities and threats hitherto unavailable to any human generation. In a landscape of endless recycling, where most commentators intone that 'it's all been done', Dukaj's brilliant, original and often shocking suggestions have the power to throw off old patterns of thought and force us to think again about the world and the future of our civilisation.

Rafał Kosik



Photo © Mikołaj Starzyński

The heir of the classic Sci-Fi

Is it possible to write science fiction that offers modern content while remaining rooted in the classic spirit of the genre? Rafał Kosik, one of the leading Polish science fantasy authors, proves it can be done.

Rafał Kosik's work is paradoxical in a fascinating way. The author manages to address various kinds of readers who don't usually mix - unless it's in a queue for his autograph. Younger children will want Kosik's autograph on his series *Amelia and Kuba*, set in a world that seems contemporary, but with the first glimpses of 'future' already seeping into their lives. Teen readers, however, will be holding one of the many books from the *Felix, Net and Nika* series; without doubt the writer's most popular work. To put it in perspective, the series earned Kosik a status similar to that enjoyed by J.K. Rowling and her *Harry Potter*, albeit on a national scale. He published more than a dozen novels in the series that sold in almost a million copies. There is a feature film adaptation, and the books were translated into several foreign languages. On top of it, the books were included in the primary school reading list - after a long campaign led by children themselves, who wanted to read and discuss their favourite books at school. In the same queue, there would be quite a few adults waiting for their autographs, too. Before moving on to children's and young adult genre, Kosik debuted with *Mars*, a science-fiction novel for older readers. Subsequently, he returned to the genre with more novels: *Vertical*, *Chameleon* and *Rosary* - the latter two receiving double recognition, i.e. both the Janusz A. Zajdel Award (presented by fans) and the Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (presented by a jury of specialists). In the Polish market, this kind of accomplishment is comparable to receiving both Hugo and Nebula Awards for two books in a row. In his adult

Born

1971

Selected works

SF novels for adults

Różaniec (Rosary), 2017

Kameleon (Chameleon), 2008

Vertical, 2006

Mars, 2003

Books for children & YA

Amelia i Kuba series, 2014-2018

Felix, Net & Nika series, 2004-2015 - over 800,000 copies sold

Selected awards

Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2018), Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2017) - *Rosary*

Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2009), Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2008) - *Chameleon*

Foreign language translations

Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Ukraine, Russia, Germany - in anthologies

Translation rights

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writing, Kosik creates fantasy that draws on the great masters of science fiction, such as Stanisław Lem, Philip K. Dick, or Ray Bradbury. His work is full of bold concepts, focused on science rather than on fiction used in order to examine the challenges Kosik sees looming in our future. When looking for comparisons with other contemporary writers, one might point towards Liu Cixin, who also channels the spirit of the Golden Age Sci-Fi in his books. But whereas Liu paints his stories on a broad galactic canvas – describing wars waged across all of the Universe with weaponised laws of physics as warfare of choice – Kosik prefers to turn his gaze towards human condition and focus on more personal stories. By examining particular examples of Kosik’s work, we can point to the various inspirations behind each of his four Sci-Fi books. *Mars* is an obvious nod to Ray Bradbury, with a hint of Phillip K. Dick. It’s a tale of the colonisation of the Red Planet, told from the year 2040, when the process of terraformation began, to 2340 – Mars now inhabited, and the secrets of its previous residents coming to light. The ambitious *Vertical*, however, is a nod towards the New Wave of Sci-Fi. For this novel, Kosik designed a world of elevator-like cities that move up and down on vertical cables that stretch infinitely in both directions. In *Chameleon* – probably the most Lem-esque book in Kosik’s portfolio – we follow a scientific mission from Earth and a mysterious planet where a seemingly human-like civilisation is developing. And finally, in the 2017 *Rosary*, we enter a remarkable world – an artificial

ring of city-worlds inhabited by the last vestiges of humanity who fled from a no-longer inhabitable Earth. In terms of plot, it echoes with Richard Morgan’s *Altered Carbon*. *Rosary* is also the best example of the unique literary amalgam offered by Kosik. In general, it is a story of a large-scale project – the titular Rosary, not unlike the Ring from Larry Niven’s cult novel. Like the past masters of Sci-Fi, the Polish writer knows how to make his readers admire technology and kindle the enthusiasm for human potential similar to the awe that inspired Sci-Fi writers in the years of the first Moon missions. At the same time, Kosik’s works are firmly rooted in the present day, where technology and social changes are an extrapolation of the current tendencies. This is what makes his stories so topical and provocative; the present is always reflected in the futures he creates, whether concerning the development of AI, or the relinquishing our privacy to governments (in exchange for safety) and corporations (in exchange for goods and services). He even addresses the issue of economic changes and the increasing stratification of societies; in this regard, there is something of Charlie Brooker’s *Black Mirror* in Kosik’s writing. On one level, Kosik’s writing offers us escapism; on the other, however, it allows us to take a different look on our surroundings. His prose shows us the looming consequences of our actions; it sends us a warning while also trying to predict and prepare us for a reality that awaits us just around the corner. And that’s something only the best science fiction can do.

Cezary Zbierzchowski



Photo © Mikołaj Starzyński

Adrenaline-fuelled hard Sci-Fi

What makes Cezary Zbierzchowski's books all the more remarkable is that few authors can write like he does: combining stunning action with science fantasy rooted in real science. They sound as if Neal Stephenson rewrote Richard Morgan's novels.

For almost a decade after his debut, Cezary Zbierzchowski was not unlike Ted Chiang in the Polish science fantasy; he only published short stories, and no more than two or three a year. And yet, it was enough to make an impact on his readers; over time, he built a brand as one of Poland's leading SF writers. Hence, when in 2013 he finally published his first novel *Holocaust F*, the long-awaited premiere was welcomed with excitement. The book was nominated for the Janusz A. Zajdel Award (a readers' choice award) and the Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (granted by a jury of literature experts).

Holocaust F is an action-packed, hard SF thriller. It is a vision of cyborgised humanity that has fulfilled all of its dreams: the entirety of knowledge is available at anyone's fingertips, and it can be transferred directly to the brain in a millisecond, just as experiences such as a holiday in Hawaii or a parachute jump. On top of that, the new humans have tamed their ultimate foe: death. By using technology to save human consciousness on digital drives, they could then transfer it between bodies. In short: humans became gods. And they destroyed the world, handing it over to corporations that now run it. Human race abandoned reality for its simulation, preferring to live in the recordings of other people's lives rather than their own. Richard Morgan described something similar in *Altered Carbon*, but Zbierzchowski went one step up and discovered layers much darker than we might have expected. This path also led him to the inevitable war between corporate predators fighting over the husk of our world. Where Morgan chose crime fiction, Cezary Zbierzchowski went for military SF. As a result, descriptions of an extremely technologised society are intertwined with explosive action scenes.

Zbierzchowski's second novel, *Distortion*, is an action-packed SF, but no longer focused on portraying a dystopian future. *Distortion* reads as if Cezary Zbierzchowski wrote a reportage on the Iraq war, but moved the action to a fictitious future into the world of Ramma, where all of his books are set (a mirror image of our world, just in a different geopolitical setting). It is a universal story about contemporary war in its new disguise, often described as a 'stabilising mission'. It is a conflict

Born

1975

Selected works

Distortion, 2019

Holocaust F, 2013

Requiem dla lalek (Requiem for Dolls), 2008

Selected awards

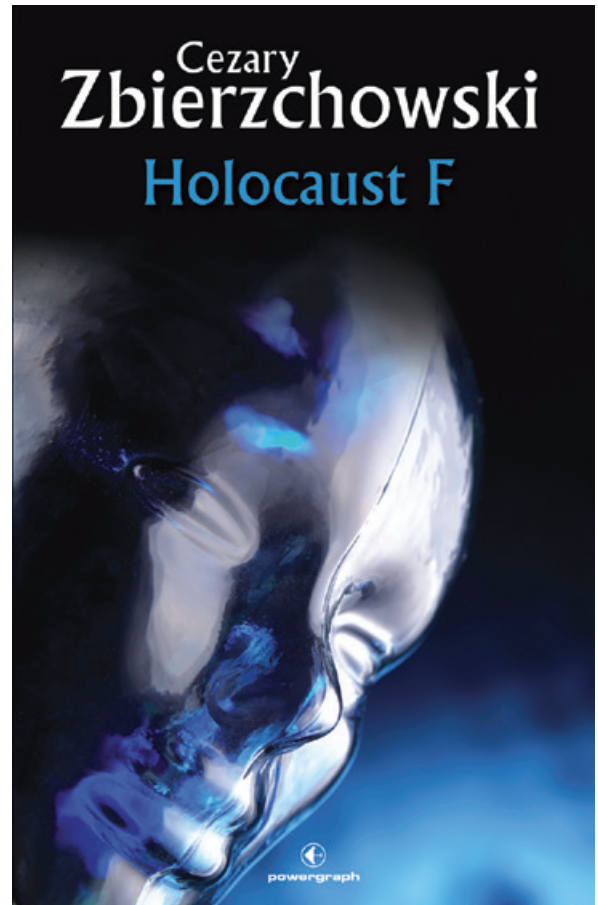
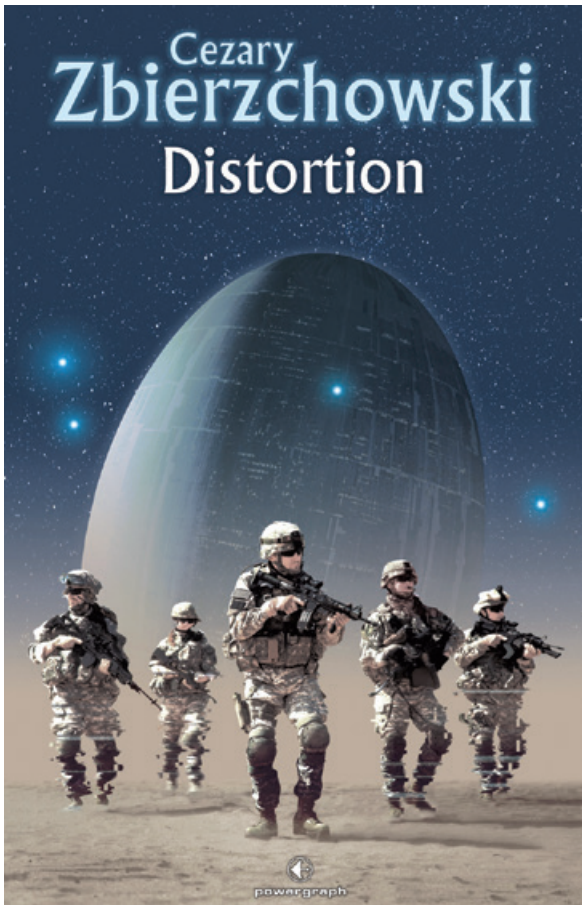
Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2020) nomination - *Distortion*

Janusz A. Zajdel Award nomination, Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2014) - *Holocaust F*

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with a desperate enemy who doesn't fight openly; in such war, anyone can be an assailant, including the elderly and children. In such conflict, the villains are not always easy to recognise.

Distortion is an outstanding novel; it combines meticulously realistic portrayal of a soldier's life at a military base in a besieged country with science-fantasy themes - and yet, the latter do not twist the documentary-like quality of the prose. The strength of *Distortion* runs in the true portrayal of the experience of war. Zbierzchowski shows us what war does to one's mental health and how it feels to live under constant threat - which is destructive, but also adrenaline-heavy in an addictive way. Zbierzchowski shows how such conditions of live change soldiers, making them different from 'ordinary' people, and, as a result, holding them back from returning to normality.

In this regard, the author managed to achieve something similar to what Joe Haldeman did in *The Forever War* - he used Sci-Fi scaffolding to discuss the actual experience of war, and, by removing the context of war (Vietnam in Haldeman's case and Iraq for Zbierzchowski), the writers made the stories more universal and timeless.

Distortion is a fictional reportage that only benefits from being a work of fiction. It is also a display of Cezary

Zbierzchowski's literary talent. The author controls the tension perfectly, masterfully rendering the extraordinary 'boredom' of everyday military life. Every moment is tense, stretched to breaking point - even on those days when nothing happens, when driving through a town or village is just that, and every passer-by isn't a potential killer. This quality makes the book read like an unput-downable thriller right up until the finale that pushes the storyline towards Sci-Fi again, bringing us an unexpected ending.

Zwierzchowski's writing offers a bridge between two lands. On the one side, there is what the great Sci-Fi masters wrote many years ago - bold, complex visions of the future, using fantasy as means of conveying universal truths and a mirror to reflect reality. On the other, there is contemporary literature where pace and originality are just as sought-after in a book as they are in a blockbuster. Stories like this emerge from transformations we observe around us today. Our relationship with technology is becoming closer and closer, inevitably making us change. Zbierzchowski asks questions about how this relationship is going to look like tomorrow, in a year, in a decade, and he tries to imagine a world where we continue down that path. His visions are rather unsettling.

Paweł Majka



Photo © publisher materials

Audacious science fantasy

His work includes both ambitious space operas in the spirit of Frank Herbert's *Dune*, as well as breathtakingly original New Weird novels in the mould of China Miéville. Paweł Majka is rare among authors in being as confident with magic-infused fantasy as he is with hard SF. And a common thread in all his books is an imagination of extraordinary wealth and scope.

As a matter of fact, Paweł Majka has a sure touch with every sub-genre of fantasy. Almost all of his texts are typified by a picaresque spirit, the ability for daring combinations of water and fire, magic with hard SF, and humour with drama. The writer worked for several years for local newspapers and radio, then for a national Polish television station, and perhaps it was his experiences there that taught him how to construct original characters.

He debuted with the popular novel *Peace of the Worlds*, written in the best traditions of weird fiction, exemplified by the work of China Miéville. Thus, Aliens land on Earth in the 20th century. Unlike H.G. Wells and his *War of the Worlds*, their strength doesn't lie in conventional weapons, but in being able to breathe new life into myths, legends and beliefs. And soon, literary characters, old heroes, and folk tribunes in the mould of Robin Hood become reactivated by a 'myth bomb' to repel the invaders. Majka moves effortlessly between various literary registers, creating an intriguing and detailed world, without letting the pace of the story drop for a moment. His books, including *Peace of the Worlds*, are above all compelling adventure stories, drawing in particular from picaresque and gangster novels, but set in exotic literary worlds. His debut won him the Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award, to which, a year later, he added a second one. This time for *Heavenly Pastures*, an epic space opera about a large-scale cosmic war, with echoes

Born

1972

Selected works

Czerwone żniwa tom 1 i 2 (*Red Harvest* vol. 1 and 2), 2019-2020

Berserk: Spowiednik (*Berserk: Confessor*), 2019

Berserk, 2017

Niebiańskie pastwiska (*Heavenly Pastures*), 2015

Pokój światów (*Peace of the Worlds*), 2014

Selected awards

Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award, Janusz A. Zajdel Award nomination (2016) - *Heavenly Pastures*

Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award, Janusz A. Zajdel Award nomination (2015) - *Peace of the Worlds*

Translation rights

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of the work of Peter F. Hamilton, Frank Herbert's *Dune*, and also the unique militarist style of Glen Cook's fantasy series, *The Black Company*.

Thus, the greatest ever war of humanity in the universe is coming to an end. Entire systems have been destroyed, war has claimed the lives of countless beings, and the wrecks of orbiting cities are falling onto war-ravaged planets. The League of Shared Space is gearing up to rebuild itself after crushing a civil war, but is it even possible considering the extent of the destruction? Against this backdrop of smoking ruins, a war correspondent is on the lookout for new subjects. A private detective accepts a mysterious job, while a general on the losing side is intoxicated by the foolish thought that there is still hope for him and his soldiers. Meanwhile, a handful of theoretically victorious veterans discover that their new leaders have condemned them to death. And what's more, it may turn out that death is only the start of even bigger problems... It's already clear from this brief synopsis that Majka has written a novel rivaling within the purview of Brandon Sanderson's work.

Berserk - the first volume of Majka's post-apocalyptic two-volume work - was published almost at the same time, followed by *Confessor*. This is unfamiliar post-apocalyptic literature which takes off where other similar novels usually end. The characters of *Berserk* have been seized by the titular bloodthirsty madness. Like *Night of the Living Dead* or *World War Z*, people transformed into zombies kill their neighbours with no

thought about who they attack. At one moment, however, everything stops, and people come to their senses, but with no memory of the brutal events. No one recalls who killed whom and who fell victim. All that is certain is that everybody has blood on their hands. And it's at that moment that the author begins his story. Aside from the fact that the mystery behind the events remains unsolved right up to the end, Majka's duology also perfectly applies to the world today, with a no-holds-barred media war and widespread uncertainty about whether yesterday's allies will turn out to be tomorrow's enemies.

The author is no stranger to teaming up with other writers. He and Radosław Rusak had already published two volumes of the trilogy *Red Harvest*, which offers an alternative 20th century where the Third World War breaks out in the nineteen-sixties at the height of the Cold War. But this time, also, it's only the jumping-off point. For it soon turns out that the covert operations of special troops sent to recover some historical artefacts possessing extraordinary powers have the same chance of determining the results of the conflict as battles fought by armies on frontlines. *Red Harvest* is ultimately military fantasy, delivering high-speed action and a spectacularly described plot. However, here also, the world's true nature differs from the usual portrayals of heroes in this genre and the military themes are accompanied by mythology, once again enriching this uncharacteristic literary concoction.

Andrzej Sapkowski



Photo © Bogdan Uznański

The grand-master of fantasy

Andrzej Sapkowski achieved global fame from adaptations of his work: first, the series of video games by CD Projekt Red, and then a Netflix series. Today, the *Witcher* is a [global] phenomenon, and Sapkowski's books have been translated into nearly 40 languages.

Despite the publicity the games and TV series earned the *Witcher*, it would be unwise to equate Andrzej Sapkowski's work with the adaptations of his books. This Polish fantasy author's writing had enjoyed staggering success well before CD Projekt Red and Netflix even existed. A measure of what Sapkowski has achieved is the fact that when the *Witcher* books first appeared in the early 1990s, no publishers were interested in Polish fantasy; readers didn't know Polish fantasy writers, and the market was flooded with a tsunami of American and British literature that was never published in Poland under the communist regime. In order to establish himself, Andrzej Sapkowski had to single-handedly create a demand for home-grown fantasy. In the end, he managed to accomplish much more than that.

The *Witcher* book series quickly found a readership outside the fantasy community, which, remarkably, honoured it with three Janusz A. Zajdel Awards – the most important fantasy literature prize in Poland. The series soon won the hearts of readers and critics alike and scooped up the prestigious *Polityka* Passport Award of the *Polityka* weekly magazine. Previous to that, only Stanisław Lem – the author of *Solaris* – had achieved similar success.

What's so special about Andrzej Sapkowski's writing? What have millions of delighted readers found in

Born

1948

Selected works

Trylogia husycka (Hussite Trilogy), 2002-2006
Cykl wiedźmiński (The Witcher Saga), 1990-2013

Selected awards

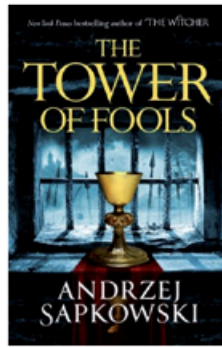
Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2002) – *Narrenturm – Hussite Trilogy*
Janusz A. Zajdel Award (1994) – *Narrenturm – The Witcher Saga – Blood of Elves*

Foreign language translations

UK, USA, China, France, Greece, Spain, Japan, South Korea, Germany, Portugal, Russia, Czech Republic, Ukraine, Hungary, Turkey, Sweden, Norway, Slovakia, Romania, Denmark, The Netherlands, Finland

Translation rights

Patricia Pasqualini Literary Agency
pasqualini.patricia@wanadoo.fr



the Witcher? The first crucial component was the rich, somewhat post-Tolkienesque fantasy world. There are elves and dwarves straight out of the Middle Earth; we also encounter dryads, mages, and many other fantastic beings, from ghouls prowling around graveyards, to various kinds of vampires and werewolves, all the way to dragons. And finally, there's our Witcher - a mutant, created by science and magic in order to protect humans from the evil, who hunts all those monsters. Sounds like clichéd generic tropes, doesn't it? Except that Sapkowski breathed a different spirit into his world and characters, giving them moral dilemmas and emotions that made them truly human in their imperfections and complexities. In a classical fantasy, the warrior wields his sword without thinking, while Geralt of Rivia is a living crucible of emotions. He is a mutant whose dilemmas come from questioning his own nature, and who - by debating his own humanity - shows us what it means to be truly human. Like the best realistic writing, stories about the Witcher are a mirror in which readers and their reality are reflected. Sapkowski's novels are the tales of love, power, friendship, revenge, as well as evil great and small (and about the invalidity of such distinctions). Moreover, the author examines xenophobia, racism, and even ecology. While writing about a fictional Neverland, Andrzej Sapkowski created stories so profoundly human in their message that they go beyond the boundaries of a fantasy genre and resonate in every reader.

This is something Sapkowski has in common with George R.R. Martin, also born in 1948. *A Song of Ice and Fire*, though full of dragons and ice zombies, was firmly

founded in its realistic protagonists and communicated universal messages about power, truth and honour. This way, it could be viewed not just through the lens of its genre, but simply as a meaningful and universal story. Anyone who hasn't got over *Game of Thrones* ending and is waiting impatiently for *The Winds of Winter* should go for Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher Saga* - it's the only fantasy capable of filling that gap.

While still on the subject of Martin's work, it should be noted that the tales of Westeros are largely founded in the real history of Europe, including the Wars of the Roses. Sapkowski has a similar love for history, as can be seen in his Hussite Trilogy (written in 2002-2006) which merges fantasy with the historical setting of the 15th-century Hussite Wars. In these novels, the writer once again created extremely compelling characters and threw them into the maelstrom of an exciting adventure while displaying his incredible erudition and historical knowledge. Sapkowski displayed such skill at combining the two that *The Tower of Fools* - the first in the Hussite Trilogy - was nominated for the Nike Literary Award, the most prestigious Polish literary prize. The author himself considers the series his greatest achievement.

Andrzej Sapkowski's work is known for being so good that it defies categorisation as fantasy or so-called mainstream literature. It also transcends language barriers, as demonstrated by the enthusiastic reception in the English-language fantasy world: Sapkowski received the David Gemmell Award for Fantasy for *Blood of Elves* and the World Fantasy Award for Lifetime Achievement.

Robert M. Wegner



Photo © Mikołaj Starzyński

A rising star

Publishers are fond of using marketing labels such as ‘the next King, Martin, or Rowling’. What to do when, like in the case of Robert M. Wegner, a similar label – ‘the heir to Andrzej Sapkowski’ – seems entirely apt?

Robert M. Wegner is currently the most popular fantasy star in Poland, an author who is now also well known among readers in the Czech Republic and Russia, where he has also become a phenomenon and built up an impressive fanbase. He debuted with military Science Fiction, but his monumental series, *Tales of the Meekhan Borderlands*, which now numbers five fat volumes, has quickly become his marquee work. According to the author, a few more books are needed to complete the series. We can rely on Wegner’s promise, since, unlike George R.R. Martin, he conscientiously tries to bring out each new volume of the series at regular intervals, every two or three years. On the other hand, he differs from Sapkowski in that while the author of the Witcher Saga focussed on retelling familiar fairy tales clothed in new fantasy raiment, Wegner has created from scratch a complicated, huge and intriguing world, whose history is bewildering and whose vastness makes your head spin. *Tales...* is a dazzling mixture of the picaresque, in the spirit of Scott Lynch’s *Gentleman Bastard* series, military fantasy written in a similar vein to Glen Cook’s *Black Company* and a worldbuilding masterpiece in the style of Steven Erikson’s *Malazan Book of the Fallen*. Additionally, the series has won six Janusz A. Zajdel Awards (Poland’s Hugos), two Jerzy Żuławski Literary Awards (the equivalent of Nebulas) and was selected Fantasy of the Year in Russia.

The first book of *Tales of the Meekhan Borderlands* has the subtitle *North-South*, because the story is set on the southern and northern borders of the titular

Born

1972

Selected works

Opowieści z meekhańskiego pogranicza (Tales of the Meekhan Borderlands, series) 2012

Selected awards

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2018), Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2019) – *Tales of the Meekhan Borderlands. Every Dead Dream*

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2015), Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2016) – *Tales of the Meekhan Borderlands. Memory of All Words*

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2012), Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2013) – *Tales of the Meekhan Borderlands. A Sky of Steel*

Foreign language translations

Russia, Czech Republic, Ukraine

Translation rights

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Meekhan Empire. The protagonists of *North* are a unit of the mountain guard, charged with protecting the empire's borders from the Ahers, a people something like the Inuits, but seen through a fantasy filter, whose shamans use powerful, savage magic. In the *South*, meanwhile, we meet Yatech, a warrior from the Issaram tribe who fights with obsidian swords, and who cannot show his face to anyone apart from members of his tribe, at the risk of losing his soul.

Tales of the Meekhan Borderlands. East-West takes the reader to the other ends of the Empire. We patrol the eastern border through the eyes of the men of Genno Laskolnyk – his steppe unit is made up of peerless, free horsemen, who learned their skills during wars against Mongol-like nomads trying to invade Meekhan. Each warrior of the general – who is more of a father than a leader – also has mysterious magical abilities which come in handy at unexpected moments and often get them of extreme difficulties. *West*, however, is the story of Altsin, a petty thief from a coastal metropolis, who by accident comes into the possession of a powerful artefact, an ancient sword – or rather what is hidden inside it. After being wounded by the blade of the ancient sword, the thief's soul becomes bound to a shattered fragment of the soul of Raegwyr, the god of war. And thus begins a fierce battle to determine who will dominate whom: either the god will defeat the man, or the man will harness the ancient Power. A further character then makes an appearance. It is Deana, Yatech's sister, a master sword-fighter, once a fugitive from her own tribe, but now the ruler of a kingdom in the Distant South, who must deal with a slave uprising and her own unexpected pregnancy.

With sure touch Wegner spins a tale involving a great variety of cultures, protagonists and points of view, even-handedly allowing the numerous protagonists of this incredibly rich and colourful world to have their say. Additionally, he is capable of infusing into his books real emotion – the honour of highlanders from the North, the sense of responsibility of the southern tribes, the brothers in arms of the eastern *czaardan*, the insoluble dilemma of a common thief who doesn't want to change into an inhuman deity: between his desire for revenge and his need to retain his humanity.

Later volumes develop a story about the Wars of the Gods, who shaped that world centuries earlier and continue to remotely exert an influence on it. In *A Sky of Steel* we accompany a caravan of Verdanno wagons who must fight their way through to the other side of a mountain range, while constantly under attack. In *Memory of All Words* we meet Altsin, who is trying to solve the riddle of the being who is fighting with him in his own body. In *Every Dead Dream*, we look at Meekhan through Deana's eyes and observe her road from being cast out of her own tribe to becoming one of the most important figures for the future of the Empire. One of Wegner's undeniable assets is that all his stories are universal, written in a language lending itself to translation and also accessible to readers from various cultural circles.

At a time when readers are more and more fed up with ubiquitous cynicism, Wegner reminds us in his own remarkable way that there's another way of writing and that we can remind ourselves of fundamental values without lurching into pathos.

Jarosław Grzędowicz



Photo © publisher materials

In the hell of Hieronymus Bosch

In his writing, Jarosław Grzędowicz invites readers to extraordinary lands where beauty and nightmares straight from the paintings of the Dutch master artist, Hieronymus Bosch, are interwoven. And everything is described with the panache of a juicy big-screen blockbuster.

Grzędowicz publishes quite rarely, but today, he's one of the most popular fantasy writers in Poland. Scepticism regarding the changes in the contemporary world has become his trademark. He joined the ranks of leading Polish fantasy writers at the beginning of the new millennium, when he published his *Book of Autumn Demons*: a collection of gripping horror stories which was very positively received by critics and readers alike. The author, following Stephen King's example, focusses more on cultural background, psychological credibility and disturbing atmosphere than paranormal special effects.

A husband, the head of a family, is suddenly left with nothing to live on. A therapist whose own life story is a mystery. A young woman caught up in a toxic relationship. An old woman still grieving her lost husband. The characters of Grzędowicz's portraits undergo existential crises where the fantasy brings colours and flavours to the fore. An undoubted influence on the evocativeness of these books is the author's style, which is flowing, colourful and at the same time precise, able in a single sentence to render the complex nature of the detail he is describing.

Then came *The Lord of the Ice Garden*, the series that made the author a star. It was first written to poke

Born

1965

Selected works

Hel-3 (Helium-3), 2017

Księga jesiennych demonów (Book of Autumn Demons), 2012

Popiół i kurz (Ashes and Dust), 2006

Pan Lodowego Ogrodu, seria (The Lord of the Ice Garden, series) 2005-2012

Selected awards

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2006) - *Ashes and Dust*

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2005) - *The Lord of the Ice Garden, Vol. 1*

Foreign language translations

Russia, Czech Republic

Translation rights

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literary fun at Andrzej Sapkowski's *The Witcher Saga*. Grzędowicz's protagonist, Vuko Drakkainen, is also a tough, grumpy character, except that he owes his extraordinary 'powers', instincts and training not to magic, but to advanced technology from the world of science fiction. For a parasitical computer-fungus has been grafted into his brain, owing to which seeing in the darkness, improvements in hearing and tactical abilities, as well as speeded-up reactions all become possible.

The macho Drakkainen lands alone on a distant planet. His task is to bring back a research crew and - like *Hard to Be a God* by the Strugatsky brothers - under no circumstances to interfere in an alien culture. It quickly turns out, however, that it is the worst possible moment for an operation like that with a war of the gods that might destroy the entire planet raging. It turns out that magic is alive and well in the world he has been sent to, turning upside down all the protagonist's former knowledge.

The Lord of the Ice Garden is one great original extravaganza, as Grzędowicz takes his readers on a multi-thread epic journey through a world literally drawn from Hieronymus Bosch's hellish paintings. Will an attachment to individualism and scepticism regarding contemporariness be a help or a hindrance in a quasi-medieval world divided by barriers? There is both a Scandinavian and Oriental flavour in the series, and it has deservedly garnered numerous fantasy awards and distinctions.

These cinematic inclinations quickly became, in any case, the author's trademark - *Ashes and Dust*, his next book, is crying out to be brought to the screen. The story from the Between world can be located somewhere between horror and urban fantasy and resembles in this regard the Neil Gaiman books *American Gods* and *Neverwhere*, the big-screen *Constantine* or Jim Butcher's *Dresden Files* series, but in a darker form. The

anonymous hero, who refers to himself as 'Charon', has the ability to move through the antechamber of the beyond, where evil gathers trying to capture the human world. Demons of sudden death also prowl there, and it is peopled by lost souls who don't know that they have crossed a metaphysical border and have ended up in a non-world covered in ashes and dust. Charon, a contemporary shaman, who rides a motorbike and faces off demonic beings with a sawn-off shotgun, is perhaps not the best, but certainly the only guide that can be hoped for.

Switching genres after *The Lord of the Ice Garden* and *Ashes and Dust*, the author turned to science fiction. *Helium-3* is dystopian, post-cyberpunk short-range science fiction, in which Grzędowicz once again shows himself as a sceptical judge of contemporariness, seeing more dangers than benefits in the process of modernization. And that ought to be enough to sketch a painting of a dystopian reality, yet Grzędowicz adds one more element to that jigsaw puzzle - the titular Helium-3 - an element occurring on the Moon that might heal the earthly energetics. But first, its deposits have to be exploited. A fierce battle for the lunar treasure trove begins between transnational concerns and certain authoritarian governments that train their citizens to be unreflective consumers. The protagonist - a cross between an investigative vlogger and a whistle-blower - believes that suitably delivered information may still be able to shock and wake up society. But can an individual still achieve anything in a world increasingly numbed by fake news, where only access to power matters? In *Helium-3*, Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* meets Warren Ellis's comic book series *Transmetropolitan* and *The Social Dilemma*, the Netflix documentary about abuses in social media.

Radek Rak



Photo © Mikołaj Starzyński

Fairy tales for adults

He wrote only three novels so far, and yet Radek Rak has already cemented his status as one of the most esteemed contemporary Polish writers. His talent for creating new mythologies brings to mind that of J.R.R. Tolkien, and his dreamlike stories clearly reflect Bruno Schulz's influences.

Radek Rak was the first fantasy author to win the Nike Literary Award, the most prestigious Polish literary award, taking over the master of fantasy Andrzej Sapkowski, the author of the *Witcher* series, who was 'only' shortlisted for the accolade. At the same time, Rak's novel *The Tale of the Serpent's Heart* won him the Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award, granted by a jury of literature experts, and was shortlisted for the Janusz A. Zajdel Award, the most important fantasy literature prize in Poland, which is selected by the readers. Since the times of Stanisław Lem, there hasn't been such unanimous agreement between the critics and fans when it came to appreciating the author's talent.

Radek Rak is himself a child of two worlds. On the one hand, his work is clearly inspired by J.R.R. Tolkien. He does not, however, try to copy the world of Middle Earth, but rather expresses his love of myths and legends, revealing the desire to create the new tales of his native country. Just as Tolkien turned *Beowulf* and the Nordic myths into a tale about Middle Earth - creating a world with a history stretching over thousands of years - so did Radek Rak, infusing magic into the Polish land, finding inspiration in folklore and local legends. Rak also often mentions Bruno Schulz as a source of inspiration. His love for the author of *The Street of Crocodiles* is even more noticeable than his love for Tolkien; Rak doesn't transport us to the new fantastic lands, but to a dreamlike version of the real world. He doesn't build new realities, preferring to enrich our own with a pinch of the extraordinary.

The plot of his debut novel, *I love you, Lilith*, begins with a love triangle between Robert, painter Iwona, and doctor Małgorzata, who both work in a sanatorium where the man is staying. The remote, emptyish Kurhaus straight out of Schulz's pages soon becomes the backdrop for a story sizzling with eroticism, described in extraordinarily sensual and vivid language. Schulz's town of Drohobych is also referred to in the book. *I love you, Lilith* soon goes beyond a story about a particular man and a particular woman to become a chapter of the eternal story of the male and female elements (it's no accident that the name of the biblical Adam's first wife appears in the title). This brings us closer to a mythological structure: a story fundamental to our identity. Here, Rak

Born

1987

Selected works

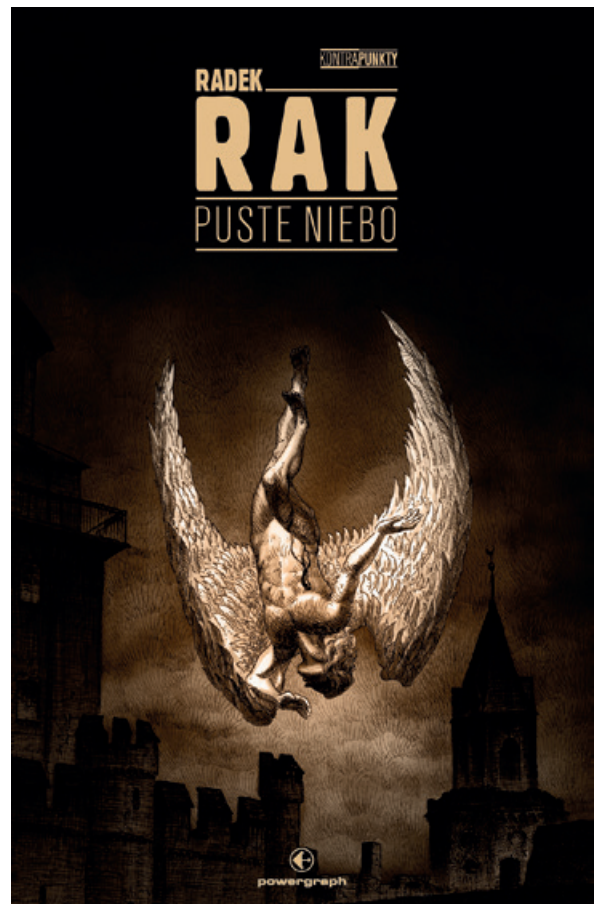
Baśń o wężowym sercu (*The Tale of the Serpent's Heart*), 2019
Puste niebo (*Empty Heaven*), 2016
Kocham cię, Lilith (*I Love You Lilith*), 2014

Selected awards

Nike Literary Award, Janusz A. Zajdel Award, Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2020) - *The Tale of the Serpent's Heart*
Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2017) - *Empty Heaven*

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reveals his early impulses to create a sweeping story, in a way of containing great meaning rather than just great fiction - it is not the 'here and now' that matters to him as much as the universal truths.

This derives from a dichotomy within Radek Rak himself. The writer grew up reading fantasy novels, but now searches for new paths in his works. Rak merges myths with sensuality, legends with the body, and magic with desire. His worlds are as fantastic as they are close to us, often existing nearby - hidden but real. He writes fairy tales for adults; at times, they are teeming with eroticism, but remain brutal and often rooted in real history.

Good examples of both 'fairy-tale' and 'adult' qualities of Rak's writing is his second novel, *The Empty Sky*. It's an adventure that wouldn't be out of place in Neil Gaiman's portfolio, one that could be placed alongside *Stardust*. The young hero, Tołpi, gets caught up in serious trouble when he accidentally destroys the Moon. In order to fix the damage, a little devil convinces Tołpi to travel to the city of Lublin in search of somebody who could glue the broken Moon back together. When he arrives there, he discovers that Lublin has its own secret and magical places (just like the London in Gaiman's *Neverwhere*), and that strange creatures lurk in shadows and remote corners. Rak, however, doesn't focus on the fantasy alone - there are bloody fights to be had with communists and Tołpi's sexual initiation to be experi-

enced. The story is also laced with unusual symbolism of dead angels and other marvels of a 'Lublin that doesn't exist'. In *The Empty Sky*, the source of marvels might be the sight of dreams flying across a starry night, or the most mundane of wonders - another person's body.

Radek Rak's latest novel - *The Tale of a the Serpent's Heart* - has gained most attention, however. We are transported to 19th-century Poland and the region of Galicia which, at that time, belonged to the Austrian partition. The hero of this story is Jakób Szela, fictionalised version of the real leader of a peasant revolt, Jakub Szela. Rak describes the reality of peasant life, which in practice wasn't far from slavery, with the noble classes having the power of life and death over their subjects, considered nothing more than property. In this regard, the novel has the strength of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, for it provides a similar description - through a lens of fantasy - of a dreadfully cruel time when one person could own another. At the same time, aside from the bloody peasant uprising, Radek Rak finds the beauty of local legends in historical Galicia. He expands those stories, lacing them with his own magical tales. History intertwines with magic, creating a story that's both fictional and very real - a painfully relevant portrait of Poland at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when people were born either superior or inferior.

Krzysztof Piskorski



Photo © Agnieszka Sobczak-Piskorska

A cartographer of non-existent lands

Krzysztof Piskorski studied archaeology and IT, worked as a journalist for a computer magazine and as a translator, wrote screenplays, as well as debuted as an author not of prose, but of... a classic role-playing game. All those influences and experiences contribute to his writing.

At Eurocon in 2009, the writer was awarded the Encouragement Award of the European Science Fiction Society (ESFS) for the most promising young writer. His subsequent books showed that the investment was justified. Piskorski's books are with good reason compared to such works as William Gibson and Bruce Sterling's *The Difference Engine*, Ian R. MacLeod's *The Light Ages* and Alan Moore's *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, particularly in its original, comic book version. Piskorski enjoys making use of untypical scenery, and the original worlds he created in his books quickly became his speciality. He started with what appeared a quite conventional trilogy: *The Story of the Sands*, which was set in a fantasy Neverland inspired by the Arabian Peninsula. It was his later two-volume *Grudge/Splinter* that fully showcased the author's gifts.

It is set during the Napoleonic Wars, and Piskorski combined in it an alternative history of the nineteenth century with a story about parallel worlds. The discovery of ether in the eighteenth century led to the opening of portals connecting our planet with the New Earth. The mini-series is set at the time of the Napoleonic Wars, which didn't finish in 1815. Since there was no Waterloo, the French Empire continues to expand. In 1819, Napoleon is at the height of his powers, and the fighting has

Born

1982

Selected works

Czterdzieści i cztery (Forty-Four), 2016

Cienioryt (Shadow Image), 2013

Krawędź czasu (The Edge of Time), 2011

Zadra (Grudge), 2008-2009

Opowieść piasków (The Story of Sands, series), 2005-2007

Selected awards

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2016), Jerzy Żułowski Literary Award (2017) - *Forty-Four*

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2013), Jerzy Żułowski Literary Award (2014) - *Shadow Image*

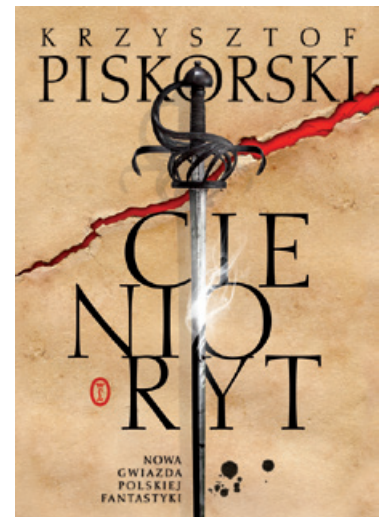
Encouragement Award of the European Science Fiction Society (2009)

Jerzy Żułowski Literary Award (2009) - *Grudge*

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Wydawnictwo Literackie

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shifted to battlefields in the New World. The protagonist is a young scientist, Maurice Dalmont, who is engaged to a Polish woman whose brother is setting off to New Europe in order to fight under Bonaparte for the independence of his country, which was plundered by the partitioning powers.

The characters' epic stories are told against the backdrop of the history of the alternative version of Europe. Fighting rages simultaneously on two fronts, in other words, in 'our' world and on the New Earth, where aside from the colonisers' armies there are also natives. Who will win? Can force of arms vanquish moral arguments? Piskorski shows us that dreams of conquests always have their hidden costs. The book draws both on the traditions of adventure novels, as well as literary and cinematic steampunk, and it quickly enchanted readers with the evocative strength of its invented world.

He confirmed in subsequent books that his award was no accident. *The Edge of Time* combines the subjects of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century, fortune-telling, and time travel. Maxim, searching for his roots, finds himself on the city's other side. In a district that has vanished from maps, a mysterious machine is devouring reality, time is curling up into ribbons, and pocket worlds prey on each other. Themes include the Tree of Life and furious demiurges, fortune-telling and thinking machines, magic and the Industrial Revolution, and the sophisticated story with its multiple storylines is only resolved at the end when each part falls into place, like the elements of a complex clockwork mechanism.

Confirmation of the author's original imagination was also seen in *Shadow Image*. Piskorski also draws on historical backdrops - but this time in a seventeenth-century Spanish version, reflected, of course, in a crooked, fantasy looking glass. In the port town of Serivie, every

shadow is a window to a dangerous and mysterious shadow-space, through which adepts of the secret arts dig tunnels. Six grandees are fighting for influence in the town, not hesitating to assert their rights using poison, betrayal and cold steel. The young king is struggling to hold on to power, the Inquisition is growing in strength, and there are mysteries on the other side of the shadow that will affect the fate of the world. An old fencing teacher - straight out of Arturo Pérez-Reverte's Captain Alatriste novels - tossed into the mix of this swashbuckling fantasy is our guide to these attractions.

When, in 2016, the author returned to the world of *Grudge*, his position was already established. The title *Forty-Four* refers to the romantic mysticism of Adam Mickiewicz, one of Poland's greatest romantic poets, and Piskorski once again transports his readers into the reality of ether and the New Earth, but a few decades after the events in *Grudge*. This time the arena for the events is an alternative Europe in the title year of 1844. Among the characters appear other romantic poets - including Lord Byron himself - except here, they are placed in untypical, very astonishing roles. Who will turn out to be a revolutionary, and who will abandon their former ideals? *Forty-Four* is steampunk adventure literature, which at the same time channels a grander literary tradition. Piskorski makes use of popular fantasy genres and sets it against the broader background of the era. Piskorski gained recognition for the book both from readers (the Janusz A. Zajdel Award) and critics (the Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award).

In any case, the author continues to astonish us. His newest work is a... board game called *Tainted Grail*, for which Piskorski co-wrote the storyline. Donations on crowdfunding website Kickstarter raised a record 6 million dollars in only a few days, which might serve as the best recommendation for the author's work.

Anna Brzezińska



Photo © Andrzej Banaś

Between fantasy and history

If, instead of the history of England and the War of the Roses, George R. R. Martin had taken as the basis of his series the history, legends and myths of the eastern marches of Europe, he would have written like Anna Brzezińska, perhaps the most original Polish author to navigate the space between history and fantasy.

Her debut *Saga about the Brigand Twardokęsek* is a monumental four-volume work, which begins like a classic quasi-medieval Tolkienesque fantasy, to then, page after page, increasingly head off in its own direction. The eponymous brigand is the leader of a small gang operating in the Dead Cow Pass. When, tired of those reprehensible practices, he begins to long for somewhere to live where he can settle down in his old age, troubles begin at once. By stealing treasure gathered by the entire gang, he sets off an avalanche of events that lead him quite literally face to face with the most powerful rulers of that world – and unpredictable, mysterious gods.

Soon, on the tangled tracks of the Lands of the Inner Sea, he is joined by red-haired Szarka – a favourite of the gods, who is meant to kill one of them – and Koźlarz, a renegade prince trying to recover his inheritance. But in truth it's only the start of an entire kaleidoscope of colourful characters: nuns, princes, warriors, priests, exotic deities, knights, brigands and princes – each of which has their own story to tell. Brzezińska has managed to breathe new life into a familiar genre, also because of the extraordinary 'historical' stylization of the language she uses. It certainly helped that she is a historian by love and education, and has a PhD in Medieval Studies from the Central European University in Budapest. And although for the first period of her career she mainly wrote fantasy, that influence is clearly visible. Her writing stands out for her great attention to detail. Brzezińska has the remarkable ability to create believable and nuanced worlds, and her plots are mainly set in various historical scenes. That applies equally whether her work is realistic or fantastic.

Brzezińska shows another face in the *Tales from Wilżyńska Valley* series. It's also fantasy, but this time written in a lighter, intelligently humorous form – a little like Terry Pratchett, but with feminine sensitivity. Naomi Novik (*Uprooted*) and Catherynne M. Valente (*Deathless*) have written similar things, but Brzezińska, who, like them, is an excellent writer, has added subtle humour. Wilżyńska Valley is hidden among mountains and although the local ruler and priest might think differently, Granny Jagódka, a plain-spoken witch, rules it with absolute power, sure of herself and very dangerous. Her magical interventions at first change the fate

Born

1971

Selected works

Woda na sicie. Apokryf czarownicy (The Apocrypha of a Witch), 2018

Opowieści z Wilżyńskiej Doliny (Tales from Wilżyńska Valley, series), 2002-2011

Wielka Wojna (The Great War, series), 2007-2008

Wody głębokie jak niebo (Water as Deep as the Sky), 2005

Saga o Zbójcu Twardokęsku (Saga about the Brigand Twardokęsek, series), 1999-2009

Selected awards

Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2019) – *The Apocrypha of a Witch*

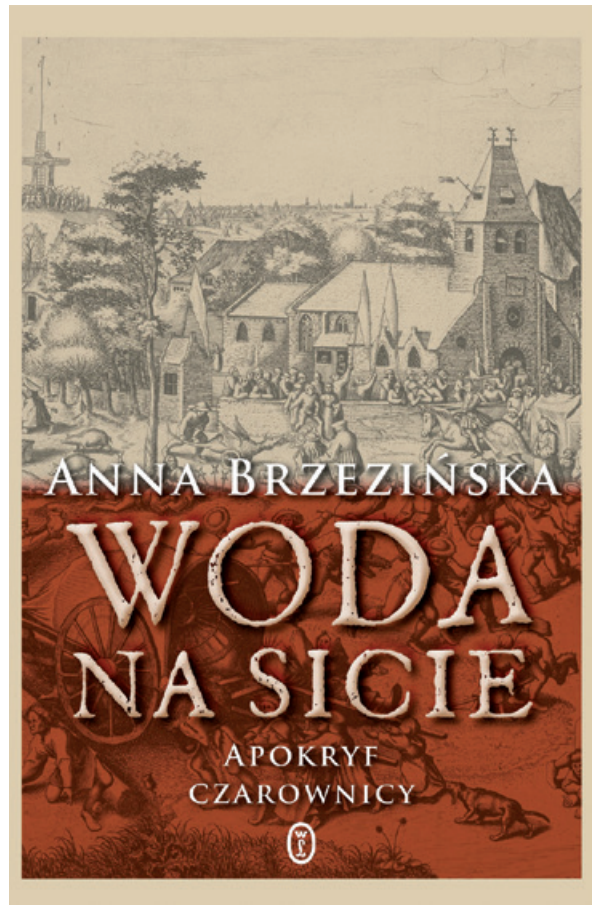
Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2009) – *The Great War – No Man's Land*

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2000) – *Saga about the Brigand Twardokęsek – The Viper's Harp*

Translation rights

Wydawnictwo Literackie

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of a swineherd who falls in love with the richest girl in the village, the gorgeous miller's daughter, the village harlot and a highland robber girl. The witch gains in notoriety and soon the wider world becomes aware of the residents of the small village. Except what matters most to Jagódka is peace and quiet, and she's prepared to do a lot to get it.

Water as Deep as the Sky - a collection of short stories set in a land based on Renaissance Italy - and the two-volume series *The Great War*, written with her husband, Grzegorz Wiśniewski, marks a return to serious fantasy. In the first, the author takes readers to the marble city of Gull Coasts, which resembles clouds built of white stone, to the wild mountains of Monti Serpillini, where there are dragons and grazing goats with worryingly crosswise pupils, as well as to the Archipelago of Purple Foam, which is coloured by the blood of dead giants. The peninsula is a land full of mages, philosophers and dangerous demons, summoned by the power of complicated formulae. The author returns to a similar setting in *Water on a Sieve. The Apocrypha of a Witch*, which is an astonishing reconstruction of the testimonies torn from a witch held by inquisitors. What is true and what is false in this story of a woman under torture? Who really got caught in the trap - and who set it?

The Great War, in turn, transports readers to the battlefields of the First World War, where a supernatural

horror isn't at all the most terrible thing soldiers might encounter. Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* meets the horrors of Richard Matheson, and Brzezińska again with sure touch sketches the portraits of her remarkable characters, described in beautiful language and seemingly cast into a story with no way out. *For the King, the Fatherland and a Handful of Gold* apparently begins as a light wartime story about brave warriors, who - like the heroes of the movie *Kelly's Heroes* - have identified the chance of making a killing in the turmoil of war. A parody of heart-warming wartime stories, seasoned with a pinch of fantasy, it soon shows its true face, however, and sarcasm is replaced by bitterness and a sober anti-war warning. *No-Man's Land* leaves no illusions from the outset that the trenches are no place for an unreflective 'male adventure' and that war is above all an abyss of despair. During the hell of heavy artillery fire, you can't be sure of anything - except perhaps the fact that death always remains closer at hand than anyone would dare to admit.

Brzezińska, a three-times winner of the Janusz A. Zajdel Award, is known for her insightful historical articles, and this time has made use of her scholarly knowledge in the service of her prose, creating a universal and moving tale, which right from the get-go is a compelling mystery that will first confuse readers and then disturb them.

Tomasz Kołodziejczak



Photo © Paweł Okrzesik

A feast for imagination

There are many familiar elements in the prose of Tomasz Kołodziejczak - from the stories about humankind defending itself against space invaders to Tolkienesque elves and balrogs. All this, however, has been processed by the writer's remarkable imagination.

Tomasz Kołodziejczak's literary portfolio is defined by two series, located at opposite sides of the fantasy spectrum: science fiction in *The Solar Dominion* and fantasy in *The Last Republic*. Although they belong to different orders, the two series have a lot in common: not only the original and sweeping worldbuilding, but also an extraordinary attention to detail and coherent inner logic of their reality, be it remote future in which humanity colonised other planets or Europe occupied by dark magical creatures. It all reads as though the sensitivity of both Frank Herbert (*Dune*) and J.R.R. Tolkien (*The Lord of the Rings*) have been merged into one writer.

The Solar Dominion, written in the 1990s, is a space opera with a distinct militarist flavour. The series takes us several centuries into the future when people have mastered interstellar flight and successfully colonised other planets. The humanity, dispersed over hundreds of planets and divided into various factions, is now beginning to unify - being incorporated into the mighty Solar Dominion by force. One of the last refuges of independence is the planet Gladius. Its inhabitants are trapped, however, because mysterious Aliens appeared in their world. They are *korgards*, a civilisation of considerable technological superiority over humans. It is also an unimaginably cruel race of beings who empty entire cities of their human populations, transporting them to their unassailable Forts.

The writing clearly shows a trace of the Polish soul - the soul of a nation that historically was always caught between two mighty powers, often becoming the stage for wars between them and fortifying its spirit in its fight for independence. Kołodziejczak turns the unique experience of his homeland into a fascinating fictional dilemma, additionally enhancing *The Solar Dominion* with an attempt to describe truly incomprehensible Alien being: not little green men who can speak English for some reason, but creatures so different that all attempts at communication have to come to nothing. The result is riveting, as though Peter Watts's dark writing with its extraordinary ideas was merged with the scope and originality of Alastair Reynolds's space operas.

Born

1967

Selected works

Ostatnia Rzeczpospolita (*The Last Republic*, series), 2010-2014

Dominium Solarne (*The Solar Dominion*, series), 1996-2011

Selected awards

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (1996) - *The Solar Dominion* - *Colour of Flags*

Translation rights

Tomasz Kołodziejczak

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As a matter of fact, Tomasz Kołodziejczak has made the creation of such original literary amalgams his trademark. Like *The Solar Dominion*, his other series *The Last Republic* - which he is currently writing - feeds on the classics only to offer something completely original in the end. A fantasy fusion cuisine, if you will.

The spiritual patron of *The Last Republic* is, without doubt, J.R.R. Tolkien, whose Middle Earth provides the basis for the creation of the novel's world. At the same time, Kołodziejczak reimagines everything up to the point where the final result is nothing like the work of Tolkien. It is a militaristic fantasy played out in a post-apocalyptic version of contemporary Europe, where destruction was brought upon humankind by magical beings from another dimension, almost identical to the creatures of Tolkien's books (which is where he borrows names like 'balrog'). Poland, now ruled by an elf king, is one of the last bastions in the sea of darkness the world has become - apart from a handful of other countries, such as Japan and the USA - and is trying not to yield to the advancing powers of darkness. There is an underlying sense of menace throughout the series, together with the atmosphere of the besieged stronghold that Poland has become. To use a Tolkien reference again: one might imagine the Middle Earth after the triumph of Sauron, transformed by his cruel power, orcs

oppressing the land, and Lothlorien and Rivendell still standing as the bastions of good - small islands in a sea of darkness.

The Last Republic is also one of the most extraordinary portraits of Poland in the contemporary pop culture - it could be described as an example of *polpunk*; a world in which the 'Polishness', our history and tradition, become integral elements of the fantasticality of the story, providing ingredients for the magic that resists the powers of evil. It's a very original way of infusing a novel with the Polish spirit - not in the form of a historical lecture, but by the striking 'embodiment' of ideas that Poles identify with their homeland, and turning them into ammunition to take down the balrogs.

Tomasz Kołodziejczak accomplishes originality by feeding his imagination with works of the classics of fantasy and science fiction and then processing them with his Polish 'spirit'. Readers from other parts of the world might recognise some elements and see traces of inspiration from the work of Tolkien or Marvano's comic book *The Forever War* (based on Joe Haldeman's novel). But ultimately, the writer carries his readers off to the new fantasy lands, which might incidentally tell them something about a certain European country on the Vistula River.

Marta Kisiel



Photo © Malwina Musialska

Funny and fantastic

Marta Kisiel is an extremely versatile author who creates stories for children, young adults and adult readers. Her growing collection of awards confirms that she can handle all of those genres and is establishing her status as a writer specialised in humorous fantasy.

This Polish writer moves effortlessly between books for various age groups and enjoys success in all those categories. Kisiel's bibliography consists of three popular series: the children's *Little Imp*, the young adult series *For Life*, and *The Wrocław Series*, which is more likely to appeal to adults.

The *For Life* series is the most popular of Kisiel's publications, and it consists of three books so far: *For Life*, *Lower Power*, and *Magic Eyes*. The main character, Konrad Romańczuk, inherits a small Gothic house called Lichotka, nestled away in a remote countryside. Konrad soon discovers he cannot simply enjoy his new property as it turns out to be inhabited by very unusual residents – ranging from an angel Imp who can't stop sneezing, to Crackers, a tentacled creature who lives in the pantry. A comedy of errors ensues, doubling as a heart-warming story about friendship and the search for one's place on earth. As a character, Romańczuk might remind you of Richard Mayhew from Neil Gaiman's *Neverwhere*, even though his adventures are less dangerous and heroic than Mayhew's and more like the trials and tribulations of the father from *Fortunately, the Milk*.

The short story *For Life* (translated into English by Kate Webster) later gave the foundation for the novel published under the same title. The story was selected by Jeff and Ann VanderMeer for the anthology *The Big Book of Modern Fantasy*. For *Ształawila*, a story set in the same universe, Kisiel received the Janusz A. Zajdel Award, the most prestigious Polish fantasy literature accolade.

Born

1982

Selected works

for adults

Cykl wrocławski (The Wrocław Series), 2014-2020

for children & YA

Mate Licho (Little Imp, series), 2018-2020

Dożywocie (For Life, series), 2010-2019

Selected awards

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2018) – *The First Word* (short story)

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2017) – *Ształawila* (short story)

Translation rights

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The *Little Imp* series stems out of the young adult novel *For Life*. In this series, which opens with the book *Little Imp and the Poor Wretch's Secret*, the hero isn't the adult Konrad, but nine-year-old Bożydar, who turns out to be the titular Poor Wretch. The angel Imp, the creature Crackers, and several other familiar characters return, although this time they 'look after' an unruly boy who cannot help but keep getting into trouble. The story begins when little Bożydar, for the first time in his life, has to make do without his omnipresent guardian angel. An adventure awaits – a little frightful at first, but very exciting in the end.

Bożydar and Imp return in the later books: *Little Imp and the Stone Angel* and *Little Imp and the Summer with a Devil*. This series earned Marta Kisiel the Ferdinand the Great Award and won her the prestigious Book of the Year for the Polish Section of IBBY 2019 in the children's literature category.

The latest entry in Kisiel's bibliography is the three-volume *Wrocław Series* beginning with *Nomen omen*. As usual, the books contain a lot of humour typical for Kisiel, as well as effortless writing and vibrant characters. There are some new elements, too – a generous pinch of horror and a rich historical backdrop. The result – especially the latest novel in the cycle, *Crying* – are not unlike Indiana Jones movies or *The Goonies*. There is a strong sense of adventure and a large hit of adrenaline; but, this time, it is served with a side of real menace. It's a somewhat bitter read; while taking us for

an adventure, Kisiel doesn't shirk from more challenging topics, such as having to start one's life over in a new place and coping with difficult family relationships.

In *The Wrocław Series*, Kisiel experiments with various literary genres. *Nomen omen* uses elements of crime fiction, *The Depths* turns out to be more of a horror story, and *Crying* is closer to an adventure. Whatever the background, and whether the main character is Salka Przygoda (*Nomen omen*) or the Stern sisters (*The Depths* and *Crying*), the author always delivers the usual goods: exciting protagonists who come alive in wonderfully written, dynamic dialogues full of wit and humour. And all of it comes complete with snippets of history of Wrocław and its surroundings, as well as with a generous helping of magic and horror.

For her novel *The Depths*, Marta Kisiel was nominated for the Jerzy Żułowski Literary Award, presented by a jury of literature experts. Kisiel's reputation as a skilled adult fiction was cemented by the Janusz A. Zajdel Award for her short story *The First Word*, which is a bitter take on the saying about being careful what we wish for.

Marta Kisiel's writing can be compared to Neil Gaiman's. Like the author of *Coraline*, she knows how to use danger, even in stories for children, and in her adult fiction, not unlike *Stardust* and *Neverwhere*, she can conjure up exciting adventures for more mature readers. Just like Gaiman, she combines effervescent style and humour with the ability to pull on our heartstrings.

The Polish Book Institute

The Polish Book Institute is a national institution established by the Polish Ministry of Culture. It has been running in Cracow since January 2004. The Institute's basic aims are to influence the reading public and to popularise books and reading within Poland, as well as to promote Polish literature worldwide. These aims are accomplished by:

- // promoting the best Polish books and their authors;
- // organising study visits for translators and foreign publishers;
- // increasing the number of translations from Polish into foreign languages with the help of the ©POLAND Translation Programme and Sample Translations ©POLAND;
- // making information on Polish books and the Polish publishing market accessible to foreign consumers.

The Institute organises literary programmes to promote Polish books at international book fairs, appearances by Polish writers at literary festivals, and within the scope of programmes designed to promote Polish culture worldwide, it publishes an annual catalogue *New Books from Poland*.

The Polish Book Institute is also the publisher of cultural journals covering mainly literature and theatre (*Akcent*, *Dialog*, *Literatura na świecie*, *Nowe Książki*, *Odra*, *Teatr*, *Teatr Lalek*, and *Twórczość*).



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Selected Polish Book Institute programmes

The ©POLAND Translation Programme - The Book Institute provides financial support for publishers aiming to publish works of Polish literature in foreign-language translations.

Since 1999, the ©POLAND Translation Programme has provided about 2,500 grants for translations into 47 different languages published in 63 countries. The average grant was worth approximately € 3,500.

The Book Institute can help cover the costs of publishing the following types of works:

- // literature - prose, poetry, and dramas
- // works in the humanities, broadly conceived, whether older or contemporary (with particular regard for books devoted to the culture and literature of Poland)
- // non-fiction literature (literary reportage, biographies, memoirs, essays)
- // historical works (essays and popular history, barring specialist and academic works)
- // literature for children and young people
- // comics.

The financial contribution of the Book Institute is designed to support the following publication costs:

- // translation
- // copyright license
- // printing.

Sample Translations ©Poland - The aim of this programme is to encourage translators to present Polish books to foreign publishers.

The programme may cover up to 20 pages of the translation. The translator must have published a minimum of one translation in book form before making an application.

The Translators' College - This programme provides study visits for translators of Polish literature. Each year in Cracow, and from 2019 also in Warsaw, we host a group of translators, for whom we provide the proper conditions for peaceful work on translations, library searches, as well as meetings with authors and experts. By 2020, 144 translators from 37 countries had already taken part.

Full information on our programmes, including a list of grants awarded to date and a funding application form can be found on the Book Institute's website, www.bookinstitute.pl.

For further information please contact:

Elżbieta Wierzchowska, e.wierzchowska@bookinstitute.pl.

The Found in Translation Award is given to the translator(s) of the finest book-length translation of Polish literature into English published in the previous calendar year. The winner receives a prize of 16,000 zlotys and a one-month residency in Krakow. The Book Institute has presented this award in partnership with the Polish Cultural Institutes in London and New York on an annual basis since 2008.

Recent winners:

2021 // Ewa Małachowska-Pasek and Megan Thomas, for *The Career of Nicodemus Dyzma* by Tadeusz Dołęga-Mostowicz

2020 // Anna Zaranko, for *The Memoir of an Anti-Hero* by Kornel Filipowicz

2019 // Madeline G. Levine, for *Collected Stories* by Bruno Schulz

2018 // Jennifer Croft, for *Flights* by Olga Tokarczuk

The Transatlantyk Prize has been awarded annually by the Book Institute since 2005 to outstanding ambassadors of Polish literature abroad. Its aim is to promote Polish literature on the world market and to provide a focal point for translators of Polish literature and its promoters (publishers, literary critics, academics and organisers of cultural events). The prize is worth €10,000.

Recent winners:

2021 // Tokimasa Sekiguchi

2020 // Ewa Thompson

2019 // Hendrik Lindepuu

2018 // Antonia Lloyd-Jones

2017 // Lajos Pálfalvi

2016 // Constantin Geambașu

Seminars for Foreign Publishers – Since 2006, the Book Institute has invited groups of publishers from various countries to Krakow to show them what Polish literature has to offer. During the study visit, they attend meetings with writers, publishers and critics to encourage them to publish Polish literature.

The World Congress of Translators of Polish Literature, which has been organized every four years since 2005. Around two hundred and fifty translators from all over the world attend meetings with writers critics and academics. The Congress provides an opportunity to find out more about Polish literature, meet colleagues from other countries and exchange information, ideas and opinions.

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