

## “Our literature will speak about victory, life, death, loss, love, and peace”: A Conversation with Olga Derkachova



**OLGA DERKACHOVA**  
in a photograph from her own  
archive

**OLGA DERKACHOVA** – (born 16.08.1978, Kalush) – writer, doctor of philology, professor of Vasyl Stefanyk Precarpathian National University (Ukraine). Her main area of research includes modern Ukrainian literature and children’s literature. The author of the following monographs: *Kontsepsiia svitu v lirytsi Arkadiia Kazky* [The Concept of the World in Arkadiy Kazka’s Lyrics] (2005) and *Svit u teksti* [The World in Text] (2013), *Mizh movchanniam i svitom: Liryka Bohdana Tomenchuka. Sfery buttia* [Between Silence and the World: Lyrics by Bohdan Tomenchuk. Spheres of Being] (2019). She is also the author of textbooks such as: *Literaturna kazka Velykoi Brytanii* [British Literary Tale] (2012; co-authored with Solomiya Ushnevich), *Literaturna kazka Nimechchyny ta Avstrii* [German and Austrian Literary Tale] (2013; co-authored with Solomiya Ushnevich), *Literaturna kazka Pol’shchi* [Polish Literary Tale] (2014; co-authored with Solomiya Ushnevich), *Literatura ta inkluziia* [Literature and Inclusion] (2020; co-authored with Solomiya Ushnevich). Moreover, Derkachova is an author of fiction: *Syndrom pidsnizhnyka* [The Snowdrop Syndrome] (2006), *Za londons’kym chasom* [According to the London Time] (2008), *Kramnytsia shchastia* [The Store of Happiness] (2013), *Hurtivniia shtuchnykh kvitiv* [The Artificial Flowers Wholesale] (2014), *Povydro z iabluk* [The Apple Jam] (2014), *Koly prokyneshsia* [When You Wake Up] (2015), *Trykotazhni metelyky* [The Knitted Butterflies] (2015), *Dim Terezy* [Teresa’s House] (2018), and *Pal’to britans’koi korolevi* [The Coat of British Queen] (2018). She lives and works in Ivano-Frankivsk.

**Weronika Kostecka, Anna Mik, Marta Niewieczyża, Maciej Skowera, Karolina Stępień:** Let us start our conversation with basic facts: could you please tell us what place children's literature has in the overall book market in Ukraine?

**Olga Derkachova:** According to the Book Chamber of Ukraine ([http://www.ukrbook.net/statistika/statistika\\_2021.pdf](http://www.ukrbook.net/statistika/statistika_2021.pdf); retrieved June 6, 2022) – in 2021, 21,095 books and brochures with a circulation of 44753.6 thousand copies were published. Children's and adolescent literature accounts 2813 books with a circulation of 5213 thousand copies; in 2022, so far, 2357 books and brochures with a circulation of 1083.9 thousand copies. To compare: fiction for adults – 4157 books with 3599.7 thousand copies (in 2021).

That is an impressive number! What trends are evident in recent Ukrainian children's and young adult literature? And what are the most popular and interesting themes and genres?

These books do not moralise, but educate, entertain, and engage in a dialogue with young readers. Ukrainian authors have become more open and franker, and are not afraid to address tough topics. They deal with the themes of war, disabilities, environmental responsibility, growing up, corporeality, life and death, and the presence of the Other in literature.

The number of realistic fiction books (9+, 13+) and children's and teenage fantasy is increasing. Moreover, there are a lot of informational children's books, wimmelbooks, and other kinds of picturebooks for kids. The theme of the deconstruction of Soviet ideology is also explored – recent books demythologise life in the USSR. At the same time, the Ukrainian past is revisited. Poetry for children is quite popular too.

What about the illustrations in Ukrainian children's books?

Ukrainian illustrators of children's books include Vladyslav Yerko, Kost Lavro, Kateryna Shtanko, Oleg Petrenko-Zanevsky, Maksym Palenko, Natalka Haida, Olga Degtyareva, Rostyslav Popsky, Olga Gavrilova, Ivan Sulima, Polina Doroshenko, Violetta Borigard, Oksana Bula, Andriy Lesiv, Romana Romanyshyn, Volodymyr Shtanko, and many others.

There are publishers who work in a 'traditional' manner, and there are those who are not afraid of new trends like embroidered drawings, drawings on silk, or collages. To be more specific, young illustrators tend to follow global trends and patterns.

Thanks to you, we now know a little bit more about contemporary Ukrainian literature, so it is time to talk about tradition – what are the classics read across the generations?

Children and teenagers read Ukrainian classic literature: Taras Shevchenko, Ivan Franko, Lesya Ukrainka, Vasyl Stefanyk, Mykhailo Kotsiubynsky, Mykola Khvylovy, Ivan Bahrianyi, etc. (if you want to understand the cruelty of Russian soldiers in Ukraine, I recommend reading Taras Shevchenko, Ulas Samchuk, Ivan Bahrianyi, and Vasyl Barka). In addition to that, books by Vsevolod Nestayko, Volodymyr Rutkivsky, Halyna Malyk, Zirka Menzatyuk, Vasyl Koroliv-Stary, and Yevhen Hutsalo are quite popular among young readers. There is also the well-known series *Uljubleni virši* [Favorite Poems] (published by A-ba-ba-ha-la-ma-ha), which includes works by such renowned authors as Olena Pchilka, Platon Voronko, Natalia Zabyla, Mykola Vinhranovsky, and others.

In this context – what readings are discussed in schools? Is there a compulsory reading list in Ukrainian schools?

Both Ukrainian and foreign literature is included in the school reading list. These are both classic and modern works. The primary school also offers textbooks with texts by contemporary Ukrainian authors.

There is a compulsory reading list specified in curricular guidelines, and non-compulsory reading lists for summertime created by teachers. Various book sites, such as Barabooka (<https://www.barabooka.com.ua/>; retrieved June 6, 2022), also provide recommended reading lists for children.

What about the market in the eastern part of the country – is it different than in the western one?

The market is the same everywhere in Ukraine, because Ukrainian publishing houses work for the whole country, not just for a single region or a few regions. Although, it is clear that the percentage of Russian and Ukrainian buyers varied across regions. However, it should be noted that since 2014 (the beginning of the war with Russia) the collections of eastern Ukraine libraries have been complemented by Ukrainian-language publications. And publishers have been releasing more books in Ukrainian. Children from all over Ukraine love books by Sashko Dermansky or Ivan Andrusyak, and enjoy reading the Ukrainian translation of *Harry Potter*.

Our conversation takes place shortly after the escalation of the armed invasion of your country, therefore we have to address this topic: does Ukrainian children's and young adult literature touch upon issues related to Russia's long-term aggression against Ukraine? In what ways? What are the most important titles when it comes to war literature for young audiences?

Yes, there is a variety of Ukrainian books that revolve around war. These books usually deal with loss: the loss of home, happy life, and loved ones. We have war literature by both Ukrainian and foreign authors. And these books are not just about the current war.

One of the most important and interesting examples is the *Kiborgi* [Cyborgs] comic series based on real events of the Russo-Ukrainian war of 2014, published by Nash Format. *Viina, shcho zminyla Rondo* [How War Changed Rondo] (2015) – a book by Romana Romanyshyn and Andriy Lesiv (which was translated into several languages, including Polish) – says that the war has no heart and no language, but affects everyone and leaves scars on everyone. In *Miï tato stav zirkoïu* [My Dad Has Become a Star] (2015), Halyna Kyrpa reflects upon death, barricades, and refugees, and how to explain to a child that dad will never come home and can no longer protect his family, even though he shines from the sky as a star. Khrystyna Lukaschuk's *Kazka pro Maidan* [The Maidan's Tale] (2014) makes an attempt to talk to children about truth, pain, loss, and the victory of good over evil.

When it comes to translations, *Vid viïni plachut'* [They Cry Because of War], a collection of 1970s poems by Hebrew author Tirza Atar, describes the Second World War through the eyes of a 7-year-old girl whose father is at war. Another example is Marcin Szczygielski's *Arka Czasu* [Ark of Time] (2013), translated from Polish by Božena Antonák and published in Ukraine in 2016 as *Kovčeg času*, which suggests that war takes away all the good, bright people, and human joy. There are also Ukrainian translations of Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*, written between 1942 and 1944, Markus Zusak's *The Book Thief* (2005), John Boyne's *The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas* (2008), and Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014), which can be read by teenagers.

And in your opinion, is there a place for Ukraine in Russian children's literature? Are themes related to Russia's aggression against Ukraine addressed in any way – propagandistically or against the official discourse, metaphorically?

I am not competent to answer this question because since 2014 (after the Russian annexation of Crimea and the outbreak of the war) I have lost interest

in the Russian book market. Also, Ukraine has banned the import of books from Russian publishers. Books glorifying the Russian military and filled with Soviet symbols, militarising children's minds, propagating imperial thinking and loyalty, or even approving Russia's wars and conflicts against the rest of the world, were banned earlier. And of course, anti-Ukrainian propaganda has been present in Russia for many years.

**What can or should children's literature do in the context of the Russian attack and war? What role does or may it play?**

This literature has much to say to the world and readers. Ukrainian children's literature will continue to promote Ukrainian and European values, deal with moral and ethical questions of good and bad, emphasise inclusion, depict war as the greatest evil and tragedy as well as call the enemy the enemy, the hero the hero, and friends friends. It will celebrate the heroics of our resistance, tell the stories about exploits and wonderful people, talk about life and education of children in basements, shelters, under fire, without water and food, and bear witness to the courage and patriotism of young Ukrainians. Our literature will speak about victory, life, death, loss, love, and peace. Thanks to it, children may learn how to protect their lives, how and where to look for a bomb shelter, what to take with them, what to do if they see unexploded ordnance, as many areas of Ukraine have not yet been cleared. Many children, especially those who escaped from the occupied territories and the ruins of their destroyed homes, miraculously survived but suffered severe wounds, may not be ready yet to read these books, because their experience of war is too fresh and too painful. These topics are more familiar to children now than before the war.

**Having said this – how much has the war affected the children's and young adult book market in Ukraine?**

This war is destroying not only our infrastructure, but also our economy. On the one hand, Ukraine's publishing industry is now going through a difficult time. Some bookstores and publishing houses are unable to resume their work and print books. The general rise in prices will not go unnoticed and neither will the increase in book prices. However, on the other hand, Ukrainian children's books are becoming increasingly popular in those countries which take in a large number of Ukrainian refugees, so the number of books bought abroad is growing.

Have you recently noticed an increased interest in Ukrainian children's literature among foreign publishers? Which books are being translated, and which ones do you dream of being translated into, for example, Polish or English?

I hope that our children's and young adult books about the Russian-Ukrainian war will be translated into other languages. I believe that, for example, the Polish or English young reader may be interested in the works by Ivan An-drusyak, Sashko Dermansky, Andriy Bachynsky, Oksana Drachkovska, Zirka Menzatyuk, Dara Korniy, Anastasia Nikulina, Serhii Hrydin, and many other Ukrainian authors.

Every year more than a hundred translations of Ukrainian books are published abroad. There are also translations of the following Ukrainian children's books: Kateryna Mikhalitsyna and Oksana Bula's *Hto roste v sadu* [Who Grows in the Garden] and *Hto roste u parku* [Who Grows in the Park] (2018), Oksana Bula's *Zubr šukaê gnizdo* [Bison is Looking for a Nest] (2016) and *Vedmid' ne hoče spati* [Bear Does Not Want to Sleep] (2016), Halyna Vdovychenko's *36 i 6 kotiv* [36 and 6 Cats] (2015), Maria Zhuchenko's *Abetka monstiv* [ABC of Monsters] (2017).

Is Polish children's and young adult literature available in translation in Ukraine? What titles? Are they read?

Yes, we have a lot of good Ukrainian translations of Polish children's and YA books for children and young adults. They are read and loved. Some examples include translations published by Urbino publishing house (some of them – thanks to the support of the ©Poland Translation Program). These are, for instance, classic works by Jan Brzechwa, Maria Konopnicka, or Janusz Korczak as well as contemporary books by Justyna Bednarek, Emilia Dziubak, Małgorzata Gutowska-Adamczyk, Joanna Jagiełło (with her 2012 *Kava z kardamonom* [Coffee with Cardamom] being included in Ukraine's school reading list), Grzegorz Kasdepke, Barbara Kosmowska (her 2007 *Pozoločena ribka* [Gold Plated Fish] is also included in Ukraine's school curriculum), Nikola Kucharska, Katarzyna Ryrych, Joanna Weiss, and Przemysław Wechterowicz and Emilia Dziubak. And this is not the entire list!

Thank you for the conversation!