

文学之城

CIUDADES DE LA LITERATURA



UNESCO  
**CITIES OF  
LITERATURE**

UNESCO  
**CITIES OF  
LITERATURE**

2024-25 MA Publishing  
University of Exeter



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**‘For anyone who has ever wondered what the UNESCO City of Literature designation means, in all of its marvellous diversity, this beautifully-produced book is your answer. From Ukrainian war poets, to cross-cultural horror fiction, to reflections on the value of translation or of little magazines – it is all here. This book does what all the best books about literature do: it makes you want to read more.’**

*Prof. Christopher Morash, FTCD, MRIA, Seamus Heaney Professor of Irish Writing,  
Trinity College Dublin*

**‘This publication is the best proof that the global UNESCO Cities of Literature network is vital and vibrant! In essays, interviews, and literary texts, it brings together voices from all over the world that present literary activities and local literary traditions linked to global trends. Whether residencies, bibliobuses or literary nights, whether traditional oral literatures or new horror fictions, whether voices from the frontlines that must not fall silent or silent book clubs: literature connects and overcomes, it translates worlds and experiences. Absolutely recommendable!’**

*Dr. Karen Struve, Professor of French and Francophone Studies/Literature,  
University of Bremen*

**‘This is a thoughtful and valuable collection of reflections on the role of the UNESCO Cities of Literature network – and broader cooperation between literary organizations – in fostering the movement of words and ideas across borders. In particular, its reflections on the faculty of international literature and translation in providing witness, preserving cultural heritage, and protecting cultural rights in times of conflict is evident and of timely importance.’**

*Will Forrester, Head of Literature Programmes, English PEN*

**‘In the pages of this student-crafted publication, you'll find work that embodies the very essence of UNESCO's Creative Cities Network – a testament to literature's power to connect, to heal, to inspire. Exeter's City of Literature designation isn't just about the books that have been written here; it's about the stories still being told and the voices rising from classrooms and cafes, from libraries and bedrooms. In these essays, interviews, and narratives, you'll experience a global conversation unfolding, proof that storytelling knows no borders and that the written word remains one of humanity's most enduring acts of survival and hope.’**

*Anna Cohn Orchard, Executive Director, Exeter UNESCO City of Literature*

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# INTRODUCTION

## D-M Withers and Kate Wallis

In 2019, Exeter was awarded a UNESCO City of Literature designation in recognition of ‘outstanding contributions to culture and creativity’, and to the wealth of literary heritage in the city. Exeter’s application to join the Creative Cities Network was rooted not only in Devon’s 1000-year unbroken history of making books and popularizing reading (from ‘The Exeter Book’ to Agatha Christie), but also in the strength of the partnership that cohered around it. The steering group for the UNESCO City of Literature bid, chaired by Exeter City Council, brought together partners from across education, heritage and culture, including Devon County Council, University of Exeter, Exeter College, Exeter Cathedral, Libraries Unlimited and literature development agency Literature Works. Five years on, Exeter’s UNESCO City of Literature status continues to facilitate partnerships and exchanges that strengthen literary activity and the visibility of books within the city and the wider Devon region.

In 2021, Anna Cohn Orchard was appointed as the inaugural Executive Director of Exeter City of Literature and worked to establish the organization as a new independent charity. With a small team working under her energetic leadership, Exeter City of Literature have helped to welcome cutting-edge authors to the city, established regular book-centred community events, and placed literature’s relationship to wellbeing at the heart of their work. In 2022, internationally acclaimed author and editor Roxane Gay visited and spoke to a packed – and captivated – lecture theatre in the university’s Forum building. Before the talk, Gay held a Q&A salon with sixth-form students from Exeter College, providing advice about writing and insight navigating the publishing industry. After the event, Gay chatted with members of the audience while signing copies of her books, which had been made available for sale by Exeter’s independent bookshop Bookbag. This is a striking example of the unique opportunities that extend beyond the university and nurture potential and imagination within the community; these events have been made possible through the City of Literature designation.

Exeter City of Literature have helped fashion new bookish communities, not only through their successful, annual Book Market (reaching over 2000 people), but also through reading-based initiatives like City Reads or the popular

Silent Book Club. Silent Book Club is part of a global movement of reading-based socializing: a ‘de-plugged’ event in which attendees immerse themselves in the therapeutic act of reading. As a review essay featured in this collection highlights, Exeter’s iteration of the Silent Book Club deliberately foregrounds the relationship between wellbeing and reading (see pp. 169-175). This speaks directly to ‘wellbeing through literature’ as one of Exeter City of Literature’s articulated areas of focus for developing the city – alongside ‘place making’ and ‘talent development’ (Exeter City of Literature). Another powerful example of an initiative that progresses work in all three of these areas is their innovative course, ‘Introduction to Bibliotherapy and Counselling Skills’, which is the first of its kind to be offered in Britain. Launched in 2021, the programme develops a therapeutic approach that uses literature to help people better understand and cope with the world around them, and trainees go on to provide bibliotherapy sessions in the community through schools, libraries and literary events.

As Cohn Orchard highlighted in a recent interview with one of our MA Publishing students, ‘there are two parts to being a City of Literature’: one is ‘what you do for your own city’, but interlinked is the work of relationship-building and advocacy for the sector that comes with being part of a wider global network. There are currently fifty-three Cities of Literature, located in thirty-nine countries, spanning six continents, and the prestige, opportunities and benefits that flow from Exeter’s position within this international community are undeniable. Our MA Publishing programme at the University of Exeter launched in 2021 and has been lucky to grow alongside Exeter establishing its identity as a UNESCO City of Literature. We’ve been able to build a generative working relationship through a shared commitment to nurturing Exeter as a hub for the publishing industry and literary community in the South West, with talent development and retention as vital to this. Concurrently, literary activity supported by the UNESCO designation has opened up opportunities for our students to learn and gain valuable industry-facing experience, while also drawing in new students to apply for the programme each year.

In recognition of this, we were excited about the idea of challenging our 2024-25 MA Publishing cohort to produce a publication that would celebrate and explore what it means to pursue this degree from within a UNESCO City of Literature. Through this, we wanted to create an opportunity to learn from and engage with literary initiatives and communities in locations as diverse and physically distant as Melbourne, Montevideo or Bremen, while providing a space to ask critical questions about UNESCO’s role in the transnational exchange and circulation of culture.

## UNESCO and the Global Literary Marketplace

2025 marks the eightieth anniversary of UNESCO, an organization established in the aftermath of the Second World War with the ambition to promote international cooperation and foster peace, security and understanding through shared cultural, scientific and educational initiatives. From its inception, UNESCO has shaped the architecture of global publishing industries through funding literacy, exchange and translation programmes (Intrator, 105-137). This focus on translation as a vehicle for fostering intercultural collaboration and exchange continues today, as detailed in ‘The Importance of Translation,’ featured in this collection (see pp. 124-133). UNESCO’s impact on global literary culture has also been rigorously critiqued by scholars. In *UNESCO and the Fate of the Literary*, Sarah Brouillette highlights how the organization’s early soft-power focus on literature, economic and cultural development ultimately served to reinforce the colonial dynamics and uneven power relations within the global literary field that its cultural diplomatic programmes sought to undo. These critiques of UNESCO’s impact are important to take seriously. At the same time, as Asha Rogers points out, even ‘watered down’ UNESCO Conventions, like that of the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions (introduced in the UK 7 March 2008), buttress progressive cultural interventions that seek to ‘redress the structural imbalances of the literary field’. This was the case in 2017, when the legitimacy of the Jhalak Prize for Book of the Year by a Writer of Colour was contested by right wing politicians (Rogers 184-185). While far from perfect – or anywhere near enough – cultural policy instruments that support marginalized writers and publishers to sustain innovative practices have value in preserving democratic enclaves within the industry.

It is tempting to dismiss the UNESCO project for being ineffective: nothing more than an expression of liberal idealism undermined by neoliberal commodification. Brouillette’s account foregrounds the emphasis of the City of Literature programme on developing cultural tourism and the creative economy, problematizing this as a branding of self-sustaining literary production that does nothing to ‘address larger industry imbalances or unevenness’ (103). And, when faced with contemporary politics, we may conclude that large, multilateral institutions set up after the Second World War have failed, abjectly. By the same token, there is just as much evidence that institutions like UNESCO, institutions born with *good* intentions, are being fatally undermined by the many nefarious forces exacerbating ethno-nationalism, border violence, war, genocide, hate and inequity. In this context, UNESCO’s very existence is a reminder of common sense ‘ideals that seemed so universally desirable after

1945: respect for freedom, tolerance for the otherness of beliefs and ways of life; solidarity with human suffering; and a sense of moral responsibility for the weak and persecuted’ (Mishra).

## Building Narratives

While literature’s relationship to the branding and economic development of cities is certainly something that several of the pieces featured in this collection touch on, it is not the theme that emerges most strongly through our students’ work. Instead, woven into the structure and concerns of this collection are ideas of heritage, survival, connection and community. ‘Heritage’ frames the opening section of UNESCO Cities of Literature; here we see the ways in which individual stories from *Momotarō* to ‘The Bremen Town Musicians’ have shaped the imagination of particular Cities of Literature over time – both spatially and in terms of their literary production (see pp. 19-30). And yet literary heritage is shown not to be fixed and static, but able to shapeshift and reinvent itself for new forms, times and spaces: the mythical figure of Baba Yaga has roots in Eastern European folklore yet remains a visible inspiration for contemporary horror and thriller writers from Japan to the USA (see pp. 21-24). A review of the World Goedam Collection – an innovative publication that brings together writers from fourteen UNESCO Cities of Literature to work within the Korean genre of ‘goedam’ (strange and scary tales) – draws attention to horror as a universal genre that speaks to collective human fears, while also showing how culturally-specific stories and myths can travel and haunt across times and spaces (see pp. 43-50). Notably, Bucheon’s own contribution by sci-fi writer Lee ShinJoo builds out from South African mythology and stories of the terrifying ‘grootslang’ monster.

The second section is framed around ‘survival’ and powerfully speaks to literature’s role as a form of collective activism in relation to the immediate violence of war and conflict, as well as the slow violence of climate change. ‘Culture, Connections and Community’ documents the inspiring commitment of Ukrainian creatives, during the Russian invasion, to using writing as a form of resistance. Alongside this, the piece highlights the work of the UNESCO Cities of Literature network in amplifying these voices through a series of translation projects and literary events (see pp. 61-72). Moreover, ‘Oral Narratives and Cultural Connectivity’ engages with Indigenous literature, specifically oral narratives, focusing in detail on work taking place in South Africa-based Cities of Literature. This essay argues that oral literatures offer a particularly apposite form for reshaping global discourse in ways that ‘challenge neocolonial ideas

and issues of changing environments’, while examining the kinds of literary infrastructure needed – including literary festivals – to make their work more visible and valued (see pp. 73-83).

The idea of ‘connection’ runs visibly across the entire collection and reinforces exchanges across different periods of literary history, geographies and media as enabling of ‘bibliodiversity’ (Hawthorne). The collection’s third section places particular emphasis on exploring cross-cultural and intergenerational connections, and connections as generative of creativity. Exeter City of Literature leads the network’s Residencies Working Group, and a series of interviews with writers hosted by Barcelona, Heidelberg and Nanjing is testament to the ways in which short windows of cultural exchange can support much longer-term shifts in practice and perspective (see pp. 95-102). The section’s final essay on ‘The Importance of Translation’ reinforces that the movement of ideas and writing across languages is vital to inter-cultural communication and diversifying forms of cultural exchange within both the Cities of Literature network and global literary space (see pp. 124-133).

Our final section focuses on ‘community’, and the different ways that books can connect and heal readers. ‘Bibliobuses’ have captured the imagination of students, for their potential to distribute books, information and literacy, and we feature projects based in Lyon, Lahore and Vilnius (see pp. 137-146). We’ve even got our own bibliobus mascot that travels across the pages of the book – one of the many brilliant illustrations created by Aarya Shetty who is part of our 24-25 MA Publishing cohort. Bookshops as curators and creators of community are highlighted in our interview with organizers of La Noche de las Librerías, a bookselling festival held in Montevideo (see pp. 161-168).

Alongside the essays, reviews and interviews that have all been researched and written by the MA Publishing students – we wanted this collection to directly engage readers with some of the most exciting creative writing currently being produced in UNESCO Cities of Literature. We asked writer and academic Davina Quinlivan to commission the four pieces of short fiction shared here and, as she evocatively documents in her ‘Afterword’, these weave new connections and communities together between Exeter, Edinburgh, Grenada and Lviv. Each of the short stories uniquely resonates across and between the collection’s themes. Amanthi Harris’s ‘The Kiss’, directly showcases the possibilities of bookshops and writing residencies as sites for building transnational creative communities. In Ira Sukrungruang’s ‘The Devouring’, the heritage of place and stories haunt the narrator until they finally consume him. The stories by Devika Ponnambalam and Natalia Matolinets, drawing on the motifs of water and jewellery respectively, both highlight the intergenerational connections that endure and reverberate despite the shifts and disruptions of a changing and violent world. Matolinets’s ‘All Necklaces Shielding the Goddess’ has been

carefully translated from Ukrainian by Hanna Leliv, and the two have worked closely and collaboratively together while war remains an everyday reality in Ukraine. Matolinets has navigated work on this piece while contending with blackouts, internet disconnections, and nightly Russian drone and missile attacks. This story is testament to the resilience of Ukraine’s creative community – foregrounded through our ‘survival’ section – and we are particularly proud to have had the opportunity to amplify Matolinets’s voice through this publication.

Collectively, the pieces brought together through UNESCO Cities of Literature work to generate a greater awareness of the literary histories and the range of literary activities taking place throughout cities within this network. However, the UNESCO Cities of Literature programme is certainly not the only reason why literature is thriving in these locations. For example, Exeter City of Literature have been able to build on and add value to existing literary assets and infrastructure in the region. These include long-standing South West-based literary development organizations like Literature Works, or newer players like Bookbag. This independent bookshop and social space has recently published its first pamphlet, *Fore Street Stories*, inspired by the human geography of a street which historically was home to Exeter’s newspaper and printing trades, and today is a hub of thriving, independent businesses.

Benefiting from the language and translation skills of our MA Publishing students, arguably the representation of the UNESCO Cities of Literature network shared here is more expansively global in its emphasis than the realities. Exeter is one of five UK Cities of Literature, and over half of the fifty-three cities in the network are based in Europe, while only two cities in South America have been awarded the designation, and South Africa is currently the only one of Africa’s fifty-three countries with a City of Literature. Despite this, we were keen for this collection to ensure a more equitable geographical balance: to more evenly showcase literary activities from each continent, and more strongly foreground and amplify the work of global South voices within the network. Through this, tensions and imbalances emerge, particularly in relation to the kinds of literary heritage UNESCO places most value on, or which cities have access to increased resources to support literary production through being part of this network. And yet the collection remains primarily celebratory in tone, with interviewees speaking in even more direct and passionate ways about the tangible impact of the City of Literature designation than we perhaps looked for or anticipated. Matthew Parkinson-Bennett highlights that Dublin-based independent publisher Little Island print the City of Literature logo on the back cover of every book they publish and argues for this shaping in important ways how their publications are ‘making their way into the wider world’ (see pp. 41-2). While Mia Nie reflects that she owes ‘her entire creative career to The Wheeler Centre’ – a hub for books,



ideas and writing that was directly created through Melbourne's successful bid to become a City of Literature (see pp. 103-111).

This publication has been supported and strengthened by close dialogue with Anna Cohn Orchard, Liv Hooper and Jordan Thomas: the Exeter City of Literature team. We are hugely grateful for the links, insights and ideas they have shared. The 24-25 MA Publishing cohort at the University of Exeter deserve many plaudits for their hard work creating this publication; they have co-authored, edited, designed, typeset and illustrated this book. What you hold in your hands – or read from a screen – is an embodiment of their skill, determination, imagination and care. We are proud that our programme offers students the opportunity to exercise their agency and talents through the creation of a collaboratively authored book – and even prouder of the ways this cohort of students has risen to that challenge. *UNESCO Cities of Literature* is a project that connects the cohort with each other but, importantly, through the global focus of the publication, with literary and reading communities across the world. We look forward to the conversations started here forging ongoing connections in Exeter, across other Cities of Literature globally and beyond.

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**HERITAGE**

## FOLKLORE AND LITERARY IDENTITY

### *Momotarō, Baba Yaga and 'The Bremen Town Musicians'*

**Saige Foreman, Lia Slater and Anna-Lena Konder**

Folklore is a fundamental part of the identity of continents, countries and cities, allowing us to share culture through its ability to let us explore other 'culture[s] from the inside out; just as we look into ourselves' (Kourteva). As such, folktales remain a crucial tradition that ensure histories and cultures are continually engaged within society, carrying on a legacy specific to a particular place. Here we explore the tale of *Momotarō*, the figure of Baba Yaga and the fairy tale 'The Bremen Town Musicians', linked to Okayama, Eastern Europe and Bremen respectively. These folktales are a key part of the literary identity of the UNESCO Cities of Literature Okayama, Wrocław and Bremen, and have consequently been adapted in various ways. Their adaptations range from politically motivated propaganda, tools to explore questions of morality across different regions, to marketing and branding. However, it should be noted that these tales are not limited to these cities and instead transcend national and cultural borders through their universal themes and core messaging. Therefore, many countries have adapted and assimilated these stories into their cultures, creating a shared sense of community on a global scale, keeping these tales alive for years to come.

### **Okayama and *Momotarō***

**Saige Foreman**

*Momotarō* is a folktale with strong links to the Japanese City of Literature, Okayama. The tale dates back to the Edo period (1603–1868), where it was first told through the form of literature such as children's literature and manga. However, *Momotarō* was also portrayed in different mediums such as art and propaganda and became an oral tale. *Momotarō*, or 'Peach Boy', is the tale of a young boy born from or inside a peach depending on the version of the story.

He is found by an old couple that chooses to raise the boy, believing he was bestowed to them by the gods to be their son. The titular Momotarō is later accompanied by a dog, a monkey and a pheasant as he goes on to defeat an ogre or, in some retellings, a demon. It has been suggested that *Momotarō* was inspired by the legend of Prince Kibitsu-hiko-no-Mikoto, who defeated the demon Ura. This increases the resonance of this folktale's historical connections, as well as its links to the city of Okayama.

The story is a symbol of heroism, righteousness and bravery, and as such has echoed in different ways at different times throughout Japan's national consciousness. The tale has taken on different roles throughout history and is embedded within Japanese culture. Therefore, young children recognize the importance of keeping the folktale alive. A period that highlights the story as a pillar of Japanese society and culture is the Meiji period (1686–1912), when Japan was at war with China. During this time, Japan used the tale of *Momotarō* as a primary part of its nationalistic propaganda (Antoni 155); *Momotarō* was also later used as propaganda during World War II. Japan's first animated feature film *Momotarō: Sacred Sailors* was released in 1945 and encouraged support for Japanese forces by depicting the defeat of an overwhelmed British army.

*Momotarō* is deeply rooted in Okayama historically through architectural structures and cultural exhibitions. At JR Okayama station, there is a statue of Momotarō accompanied by his three companions; there is also a street named Momotarō Odori right in front of the station. The presence of *Momotarō* within the city in this way demonstrates the pride Okayama has for this folktale. In addition, Okayama has two shrines – Kibitsu-hiko and Kibitsu-jinja – which enshrine Prince Kibitsu-hiko-no-Mikoto and therefore strongly link his story to the origins of *Momotarō*. Indeed, on the outskirts of Okayama is Kinojo Castle, where the demon Ura was rumoured to have been defeated. Finally, there is also a museum named



The statue of Momotarō at JR Okayama station  
Photo by Akio Miki JP

Momotarō's Karakuri Museum which contains various interactive ways that tourists can experience this folktale, including magic tricks and film screenings.

Okayama was awarded the title City of Literature by UNESCO in 2023, becoming the first city in Japan to receive this designation ('Okayama'). In the official leaflet of Okayama City of Literature, the 'folktale of Momotarō' is introduced as an important aspect of its newfound status. *Momotarō*'s roots in the city are emphasized alongside the ways in which the 'folktale has widely spread among children [through] picture books' ('Okayama'). The leaflet also highlights the literary awards established in the city specifically to support children's literature and Japanese literary heritage. These include The Jōji Tsubota Literary Award, The Citizen's Fairy Tale Award and The Okayama Citizens' Literature and Art. These awards can be viewed as a way of building on the legacy of *Momotarō* to engage with the public. *Momotarō*, therefore, continues to position folktales and children's literature at the core of Okayama's culture.

**'The story is a symbol of heroism, righteousness and bravery, and as such has echoed in different ways at different times throughout Japan's national consciousness.'**

Multiple versions of *Momotarō* have been shared over the years within Japan, drawing on different forms of literature and media. However, the original story has not changed in terms of structure. Instead, minor details, such as the kind of dumpling Momotarō is supplied with, or whether he was born from a peach or a woman who ate a peach, shift and alter. *Momotarō* as a children's book has not only been translated but taken up globally by different authors including a 1972 edition published by Hawaii-based publisher Island Heritage, which was illustrated by George Suyeoka. A more modern example of this phenomenon is Margaret Dilloway's *Momotarō* series published in 2017 by Disney's Hyperion imprint.

## Eastern Europe and Baba Yaga Lia Slater

The tale of Baba Yaga can be traced across the Slavic diaspora as a central mythological figure, integral to the storytelling traditions of countries including Russia, Ukraine and Poland. Although Baba Yaga's history is rooted in early



Depiction of Baba Yaga's Hut

Slavic oral traditions, her emergence in written literature dates back to the seventeenth century (Barnett).

As a mythical figure, Baba Yaga is important due to her ability to transcend borders and be adapted globally. The earliest known representations of Baba Yaga can be found on traditional wood blocks or lubki from the 1600s, highlighting the usage of Baba Yaga's character across various narratives and forms of art (Spisak). Baba Yaga has been labelled a pagan goddess by some scholars ('Baba Yaga' 10:27). Although

her character is morally

ambiguous and disputed, there are clear links between Baba Yaga and different mythological figures, such as the Greek goddess Persephone, due to their shared association with nature, and the Norse god of mischief Loki (Barnett). Baba Yaga was popularized by the Russian fairy tale collector and writer Vasily Levshin, who included the tale in his nineteenth-century collection (Spisak).

Although there are hundreds of renditions and variations of Baba Yaga as a folktale character, she generally appears to be a tall, gaunt woman, often depicted as a witch with a prominent nose ('Baba Yaga' 1:30). She is known to identify people in the forest through scent and in some adaptations is even a cannibalistic figure ('Baba Yaga' 2:05). The etymology behind Baba Yaga is synonymous with the witch figure; in some regions, Baba Yaga simply means 'old woman' but in other places connotes a more supernatural being (Encyclopaedia Britannica). In Poland, Baba Yaga (sometimes referred to as Baba Jaga) is a supernatural cannibalistic witch, supporting the translation of her name as an 'evil-tempered old woman' (Cooper 83).

A particularly striking aspect of the Baba Yaga tale is that she lives in a moving house that walks through the forest on large chicken legs. The house appears to spin on an axis and she uses a pestle and mortar to fly through the forest, low to the ground, sweeping her tracks (Barnett). The Russian fairy tale *Vasilisa the Beautiful* by Alexander Nikolayevich Afanasyev popularized the Baba Yaga figure in the mid-nineteenth century. In this fairy tale, Baba Yaga

aids Vasilisa and is depicted as a guardian, indicating the incongruities between Baba Yaga's appearance and morals ('Baba Yaga' 5:21). Therefore, Baba Yaga has been used by different authors in opposing ways; she is at times depicted as a cannibal and at other times a guardian – an empowered feminist character derived from pagan goddesses (Zipes VII).

Until the mid-nineteenth century, Baba Yaga was largely limited to Eastern European literature, yet a rise in translation practices and globalization, which followed from the end of the Cold War in 1989, began to proliferate the story internationally ('Baba Yaga' 3:20). Baba Yaga has had an immense impact on the culture and literary histories of folktales in the Slavic region, however, the tale has now spread globally, particularly in East Asia. In Northern China, Russian literature is routinely translated and therefore Baba Yaga has become a popular character amongst children, with renditions in various books and TV shows (Barnett). The nature elements of the tale are echoed in East Asian folklore, where mountains and forests are often associated with spirituality. Japanese author Akira Otani's novel *The Night of Baba Yaga* utilizes the symbol of Baba Yaga as a morally ambiguous, empowered female character in a modern adaptation of this traditional tale, emphasizing its global reach (Otani). Similarly, the Japanese folklore character Yama-uba shares traits with Baba Yaga, as a character driven by envy, which elucidates her cannibalistic tendencies and reclusive nature (Reider 63). More recently, *Into the Forest: Tales of Baba Yaga*, a compilation of short stories published in 2022 by the independent publisher Black Spot Books, highlights women horror writers who have collectively written twenty-three different variations of the Baba Yaga character within this publication (Barnett).

**'As a mythical figure, Baba Yaga is important due to her ability to transcend borders and be adapted globally.'**

In 2019 UNESCO granted City of Literature status to Wrocław, the Polish city with a rich folktale history. In Wrocław, the miniature replica city series includes a gingerbread town, where Baba Yaga's home is depicted. The miniature town includes Baba Yaga's chicken leg house, made from 200 kg of honey and over 50 kg of various spices ('Wrocław'). The miniature city focuses on the lands of the Lower Silesia province in Poland and highlights the culturally important elements of the region (Kolejkowo). The inclusion of Baba Yaga's house in this model is a testament to the cultural significance of the tale and its links to the geographic landscape of Lower Silesia.

The figure of Baba Yaga has become prolific throughout the arts, particularly in film and modern media. This is testament to the versatility of the character, enabling Baba Yaga to be utilized as a story-telling device, regardless of culture



or community. The Japanese film *Spirited Away* by Studio Ghibli has an elderly character named Yubaba as the main villain of the film. Yubaba evokes Baba Yaga visually and through her characterization (*Spirited Away*). Baba Yaga is referred to throughout the John Wick films as an invisible assassin. According to folklore, Baba Yaga would accompany Death personified through the forest which links to the narrative of John Wick, the assassin (Barnett). Baba Yaga seems to represent a ‘desacralized omnipotent goddess’ whose morality changes to suit the needs of the narrative (Zipes XI). These modern interpretations of Baba Yaga highlight the significance she holds as a character to this day, as well as elucidating the interdisciplinary and intersectional ways that folktales have evolved internationally throughout time.

## Bremen and ‘The Bremen Town Musicians’

Anna-Lena Konder

‘The Bremen Town Musicians’ was first published in the second edition of the *Kinder- und Hausmärchen (KHM)* in 1819. Unlike a lot of the other *KHM* fairy tales, ‘The Bremen Town Musicians’ underwent about twenty changes between its first publication and the last edition published by the Brothers Grimm in 1857 (Rölleke 297). However, it should be noted that the Brothers Grimm did not write the fairy tales included in the *KHM*, but rather collected and wrote down oral folklore transmitted to them by around a dozen fairy tale contributors, such as Katharina Dorothea Viehmann and August von Haxthausen (Brand-Kruth, *Re: Bitte* [27 Nov. 2024]; Brand-Kruth, *Re: Bitte* [2 Dec. 2024]). The Brothers Grimm (particularly Wilhelm) did, however, make their own changes to the different tales.

In the Grimms’ version of the tale, four animals – a donkey, a dog, a cat and a rooster – are about to be killed as they are deemed too old to be useful. Under the leadership of the donkey, they decide to contest their fate and seek their fortune as town musicians in Bremen. On their way to Bremen, when they are settling down for the night in a forest, they see a light in the distance, belonging to a house. The house is occupied by robbers having a good meal and the animals decide to chase them out by positioning themselves on top of each other in front of the window and then invading the building. Later that night, one robber comes back but the animals successfully defend the house. Ironically, the town musicians never actually reach Bremen as they like the house so much that they decide to make it their home.

The core structure of the fairy tale has roots in Flanders, France and Germany. The Brothers Grimm do credit the German origin, noting that the fairy tale

draws on stories in Georg Rollenhagen’s *Froschmeuseler* and Hans Sachs’s *Der Kecklein*, as well as highlight the connection to Nivardus von Ghent’s animal epic *Isengrimus*, though they do not explicitly mention the text’s Flemish origins (Brand-Kruth, ‘Die Bremer’; Uther 69-70; Grimm and Grimm [vol. 3] 54). The Brothers Grimm did, however, make their unique adaptations to the fairy tale. Earlier versions of the tale included wild animals instead of robbers but did not include the animals standing on top of each other as a pyramid in front of the house, nor did they include the animals sleeping in the forest (Brand-Kruth, *Re: Bitte* [25 Oct. 2024]). The particular choice of the animals as a donkey, a dog, a cat and a rooster also occurred in the Grimms’ version for the first time (Brand-Kruth, *Re: Bitte* [25 Oct. 2024]).

While ‘The Bremen Town Musicians’ is a fixture of Bremen’s literary identity, the general concept of the fairy tale is not unique to Germany. Fairy tales with a similar general structure (animals leaving, getting to a house, getting rid of the occupants of said house) as the ‘Town Musicians’ are grouped together in the ATU (Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index) as type 130, highlighting just how many countries and cultures have their own version of the tale (e.g. *The Animals and the Devil* in Finland). This is not surprising since folktales travel, are adapted and subsequently absorbed into different cultures (Joosen and Lathey 2-5). Nonetheless, the way we know the fairy tale today, with the specific choice of animals, the animal pyramid and the attack on the human robbers, goes back to the version published by the Brothers Grimm in 1819 (Brand-Kruth, *Re: Bitte* [27 Nov. 2024]).

The Grimms’ version has been translated into over sixty languages and adapted into various media, including slightly naughty picture books, such as the one published by Edition Temmen, a Bremen-based publisher, which includes a small image of a woman with her breasts exposed. It was also adapted in 2024 into the anime *The Grimm Variations* (Temmen). The episode titled ‘The Town Musicians of Bremen’ of the anime is a dystopian Western version of the Grimms’ fairy tale, in which the animals are reimagined as humans, seeking a place to belong and fighting for justice against gangsters.



The Bremen Town Musicians in their iconic pyramid next to the Bremen Town Hall



While the anime certainly changes elements from the Grimms' version, this adaptation still retains some of the core themes of the fairy tale.

Heralded through the animals but especially through the donkey, the Grimms' fairy tale promotes a 'say yes to life' approach, highlighting the possibility of wish fulfilment through courage and action (Brand-Kruth, *Auf* 67). Through this lens, the fairy tale deals with 'existential topics like ageing, social injustice and migration, but also solidarity, tolerance and freedom [...] topics that never lose relevance and remain timelessly contemporary' ('Bremen'). While the main characters of the fairy tale are animals, the core messaging of the fairy tale is generally applicable to human life – after all, why else would it resonate so much with people that Bremen made the fairy tale a focal point of its identity?

The fairy tale is a central, ever-present part of Bremen's identity – a 'stroke of luck' as Dr Dieter Brand-Kruth, a folklorist specializing in the fairy tale, calls it (*Re: Bitte* [25 Oct. 2024]). The Hanseatic city of Bremen is inherently connected with the tale through the city's mention in the title 'The Bremen Town Musicians' as well as the symbolic meaning that it holds for the animals as a place of hope within the tale, even if the animals never reach the city. Through labelling itself as a 'cosmopolitan, tolerant and colourful' city, welcoming people from all over the world, Bremen is trying to live up to the image presented in the fairy tale, effectively using the tale as a form of branding ('Bremen'; Brand-Kruth, *Re: Bitte*. [25 Oct. 2024; own translation]).

**'The fairy tale has given Bremen an identity independent from its historical background as a Hanseatic city [...] It has given the city the ability to connect cultures, ideas and thoughts through the universal medium of literature.'**

This form of branding is particularly visible through the symbol of the animal pyramid. Since 1953, Bremen has boasted a statue of the town musicians standing on top of each other in their iconic pyramid by Gerhard Marcks next to the town hall ('Bremer'; Brand-Kruth, *Re: Bitte* [2 Dec. 2024]). Throughout the city, there are several more statues as well as artwork relating to the fairy tale ('Bremer'). Moreover, the town musicians have an international presence in other countries as political symbolism (Latvia), loaned artwork (Slovakia) or the commercial rebranding of a shopping street (Japan), visually showcasing the fairy tale's ability to connect cultures on a local as well as international level (Wolschke; 'Donkey'; 'Welcome').

Within Bremen, the fairy tale is often incorporated into the cultural and literary scene through performances, art and events as well as book adaptations

such as Edition Temmen's version, which was illustrated by Janosch (Brand-Kruth, *Re: Bitte* [25 Oct. 2024]; 'Tierischer'). This incorporation also extends to future plans for the city. For example, the year 2026 will see the opening of the 'Stadtmusikanten- und Literaturhaus' with planned edutainment exhibitions around the Brothers Grimm and the Town Musicians as well as possible use as an event space for Bremen's cultural and literary scene ('Senat'; 'Stadtmusikanten- und Literaturhaus'; Brand-Kruth, *Re: Bitte* [25 Oct. 2024]).

Despite the fact that most cities don't use 'a fairy tale as the main thing to attract tourists', the fairy tale has given Bremen an identity independent from its historical background as a Hanseatic city (Temmen). It has given the city the ability to connect cultures, ideas and thoughts through the universal medium of literature. After all, 'without the fairy tale, Bremen would surely not have become a City of Literature in 2023' (Brand-Kruth, *Re: Bitte* [25 Oct. 2024, own translation]).



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## DUBLIN’S INDEPENDENT PUBLISHERS

### The Stinging Fly and Little Island

Amy Floyd and Abigail Barrow

In late October 2024, we approached Declan Meade and Matthew Parkinson-Bennett, both independent publishers working in Dublin for The Stinging Fly and Little Island respectively. The aim was to find out more about the current literary and publishing climate in Ireland and we were specifically interested in the work of these two Irish publishing houses. Kindly, both Declan and Matthew agreed to be interviewed by us, and we explored themes of international outreach, Dublin’s maintenance of the City of Literature accolade, and the celebration of Irish literary development. The conversations that followed provoked reflections on the importance of promoting Irish voices on a global level while remaining faithful to the heritage that defines Ireland’s literary scene.

**‘It’s important that they have access to Irish editors, so that they can tell Irish stories, because every culture needs to tell its own stories and to celebrate them.’**

Declan Meade co-founded The Stinging Fly with Aoife Kavanagh in 1997 in Dublin. It is a literary magazine, independent publisher and registered charity that seeks out promising new writers and makes their publication dreams a reality.

**Amy Floyd: We were wondering if you could give us a bit of background about the process of establishing *The Stinging Fly* as a magazine, and then how that developed enough to become an imprint?**

**Declan Meade:** So, I’d come to Dublin in my mid-twenties in the mid-1990s. I was interested in trying to write myself, and I joined a couple of writing groups, did a couple of workshops at the Irish Writers Centre. So, I’m meeting





Declan Meade  
Co-founder of The Stinging Fly

these writers and trying to write, they're complaining about the fact that there's nowhere to send their work, and they're very frustrated by this and disillusioned by it. A friend of mine, Aoife, had gone off to do an MA in Publishing in Galway, which I think is the only university in Ireland that has that programme. She had done that, and was interested in getting experience in publishing, and we both worked for a while at the James Joyce Centre together. So, it was just conversations with her that led to thinking, well, maybe we'll try setting up the magazine, because that would give Aoife experience, and it would mean that I was doing something to counter this problem for all the writers I was meeting.

Before that, I really hadn't thought of publishing as a career option for myself. I'd enjoyed English in school, and people had suggested teaching and journalism, but I think that traditionally, people went into publishing because it was a family business or that type of thing; it was for people of a certain class, and people of a certain circle.

Literary magazines tend to come and go, and it just was the case that there wasn't much happening on the literary magazine front in Dublin at that time and in Ireland. Even now, when there are plenty of them in Ireland, there are writers who still feel there aren't enough. So, we set it up to resolve these issues; we put out a call for submissions and the submissions came in, and then we decided to do a second issue, because it felt like a worthwhile thing to do. And in my twenties, I was looking around for something that would give me a purpose. We worked on the second issue together and Aoife then decided that she was going to go off to do something else. I suppose I had caught the bug by that point. I could see that it was worth continuing and something that I wanted to do and I could give myself over to it in a vocational kind of way. And then, of course, as I was doing it, I was learning more about the great tradition of literary magazines in Ireland. I was also looking at other magazines internationally and how they function, taking inspiration from that.

In terms of slowly building towards the press... it was the fact that we were publishing these writers, giving them the chance to get a story and some poems published. The conversations then turned to: 'What happens next for the writers that we're publishing?' And it was clear that, particularly for those

writing short stories, there was a dearth of opportunities for them to progress beyond publishing in the magazine, because people aren't so interested in publishing short-story collections. And though I think that situation has changed somewhat, at the time it was definitely an issue, so I started to think about publishing them. It was also the fact that I knew that publication in the magazine was viewed on a certain level and book publication was viewed on a different level. There was more significance for the newer writer coming through in terms of their progression as writers and building a career for themselves.

**Amy Floyd:** We noticed that both the magazine and the imprint continue to have this focus upon the short story. Is there a particular importance in it for yourself, or any reason that continues to be a focus of both the imprint and the magazine?

**Declan Meade:** Short stories were what I was trying to write myself, and so there was that interest. How I came to be interested in the short story goes back to my primary school days, where we had a teacher who would get us all to write one every week. As someone coming from a non-literary background, short stories still feel to me like a very accessible way to enter the world of writing. They deliver so much in terms of beauty and possibility. So as a reader, I love them. As a writer, I think it's possible anyone can at least have a goal of writing a short story. And because I had had that experience in school where you were told to write a short story and you just did it, in like forty-five minutes. Now, when you start to write them as an adult, it's a different situation. You realize how difficult it is, and how complicated it can be with the artistry that's involved in writing a really good short story. They are always going to be a big part of what we do.

**Amy Floyd:** The magazine has always had an open submission format. You take writers on this journey from having little to no commercial success, to being published. How does it feel to be the facilitator of that growth from square one to success?



*Stinging Fly Stories*



**Declan Meade:** Well, it's great. I mean, it's fantastic. Now that we have the press working alongside the magazine, it means that we do see writers come through and we run more and more workshops. So that means that somebody might start with doing a workshop with us, followed on by being published with a story in the magazine, followed on by a book publication. That's exactly what happened with Wendy Erskine, who started by submitting the first story that she ever wrote to apply for the workshop. She got a place, and then we published her first story. She's about to publish her first novel next year. And there are so many writers who we have initially said no to work from, but we continue encouraging them to keep submitting. In the next issue that we're publishing next month, I know one writer who did our summer school a few years ago and has submitted four or five times to the magazine, and is now finally going to be published in it.

One of the things that the new writer has to figure out as they get started is what kind of writer they're going to be, and what their personal goals are for writing. It's a difficult area to make a living. For some writers, it may just be occasionally publishing a story in a magazine, and that gives them great satisfaction. But there are other writers who will move on to be published by us and then by other publishers and internationally. What we want to do is provide those opportunities for writers to get started, and then it's up to them, always, how far they want to go. But I suppose we are trying to make it possible, in those difficult early stages, to give them the opportunity they need, to help them along the path to those first experiences of being edited and published. To give them a good experience, and hopefully have work that they can look back on with pride.

**Abigail Barrow:** That's very reassuring for aspiring writers, that those kinds of opportunities are out there. As an independent publishing house, how important would you say it is to give a voice especially to Irish writers when the industry's 'Big Five' dominates the US and the UK?

**Declan Meade:** Again, I think it's important that there is a place where the new writer can send their work here in Ireland. It's important that they have access to Irish editors so that they can tell Irish stories, because every culture needs to tell its own stories and to celebrate them. The best way for that to happen is if there's a strong Irish publishing scene, and that does mean an independent publishing scene. But at the same time, two or three of the 'Big Five' have offices and imprints here as well. So, they are part of that process, of that ecosystem and infrastructure that allows Irish writers to talk to an Irish audience. Having a vibrant Irish publishing scene certainly helps the newer writer because our

editors will get what the writer is trying to do and see the importance of it. That might not be as immediately apparent if the editor is in London or Edinburgh or New York. So that's really important.

**Abigail Barrow:** Do you have any idea on sales that are posted within Ireland versus internationally?

**Declan Meade:** I'm not great at keeping track of our sales, but I would say in terms of distribution into shops, probably 70% of our sales at least are within Ireland. In terms of international sales though, we're relying on our website. So, sales subscriptions are very important. When we get coverage in something like *The New York Times* or *The Guardian*, that tends to lead to a big jump in international subscriptions, which is very welcome because we also want to tell the story of modern Ireland to that international audience.

It's worth pointing out that most Irish writers, and certainly literary fiction writers, generally end up with a British publisher and then, potentially, an additional American publisher. That tends to happen because of distribution; the bigger publishers will be serving a bigger market and can therefore afford to pay writers bigger advances, which is hugely important. So, we tend to get to publish a first book by a writer, maybe a second book in some cases, but the writer will usually move on to publish with a British publishing house. And that's something we like to see happen, because it means that the author is doing well. They have a better chance of sustaining a career as a writer if they have access to that bigger market through the bigger publisher.

**Abigail Barrow:** Have you noticed an increase in attention and support for Irish publications and writers since Dublin's designation as a UNESCO City of Literature, and since you started working in the industry?

**Declan Meade:** Any city looking for a designation from UNESCO has to have a healthy, vibrant, current scene. So, part of the reason that Dublin got the designation were the workshops provided by the Irish Writers Centre, the sound publishing system in Ireland, good independent companies, good magazines on the go, like ourselves and *The Dublin Review*, and a lot of newer magazines. The designation can be taken away from the city unless they can show that they're still supporting and developing literature, so the UNESCO office here in Dublin has been instrumental in getting other literary projects and magazines off the ground and providing support for writers. It becomes a bit self-sustaining with their help.

In the time that we've been publishing, there definitely has been a new wave of Irish writers come through, and I think we've played a part in that,



which is exciting. But certainly, during the early life of the magazine, I was being asked, 'Why aren't there more Irish writers?' and now I'm being asked, 'Where have they all come from?' That does come in waves, but the current wave seems to be a much steadier progression. We started in 1997 and that was the year that Trinity started its MPhil in Creative Writing. Since then, all the other colleges and universities around Ireland have begun some sort of creative writing programme. So, that's obviously feeding into this surge in the number of writers. There was also a theory that, just before the economic crash, Ireland's economy had been booming, so when creative people left college, they were getting jobs in advertising and things like that. They had opportunities to earn money in those industries and maybe weren't therefore choosing to go down different artistic paths. Whereas, when the crash happened, people didn't have those opportunities to work, so instead they were going, 'Well, we may as well become a writer or become a visual artist.' A 'nothing to lose' type of situation. Then, obviously, the success of major writers, like Sally Rooney, encourages people. She makes it look so easy that I'm sure there are a few people who have attempted to give up the day job since!

**Abigail Barrow: Finally, how does *The Stinging Fly* balance its dedication to discovering new voices and new writers, while also promoting and preserving Ireland's literary heritage?**

**Declan Meade:** To me, this is something that's just a function of the magazine and the organization becoming older and more mature. It would have started out very much because of those early conversations I had with writers, and they were early-stage writers who were just getting started. But then you start to get a clearer view of how publishing and the whole artistic scene works. I think as well, there needs to be opportunities for writers throughout their careers. The older generations of writers, and writers who have died, also need to have their work protected and valued. That's why we came to publish Maeve Brennan, a writer who had not been published in Ireland during her lifetime or in the UK, but had been published in America, where she lived. That work was being revived in America, but it wasn't coming over to this side of the Atlantic – not in a sustained way, anyway. So that was an opportunity for us to publish a very good writer, who we felt that younger readers should be reading and have access to. We need all kinds of different voices.

When you look at some of the writing that came through Ireland in the 50s, 60s, 70s and 80s, that was as important in its day as the new work that we are publishing now. It is all a continuum and that's kind of where we fit in now – trying to keep all of that work alive. The new writing that's produced going forward will be enriched by older work still being available to readers

and writers. We can't lose sight of what's been happening, particularly because writing tends to be a great way to document social change, and Ireland has come through massive social change in the last twenty years. There were writers who were pushing for that through the 70s and 80s and 90s. We'd just lose out as a society if we didn't hold on to that.

**'We're proud to contribute to Dublin remaining as a City of Literature'.**

Matthew Parkinson-Bennett is the CEO of Little Island, where he began working in 2017 as a publisher. He first got into publishing when he worked for Oxford University Press editing educational books, before becoming a freelance editor. Matthew holds degrees in English and Philosophy from University College Dublin and the University of Oxford. Little Island are excited to be publishing a Young Adult debut called *A Fix of Light* by Kel Menton in Spring 2025, as well as *The Brightest Star*, the sequel to Meg Grehan's beloved verse novel *The Deepest Breath*.

**Abigail Barrow: Your website makes visible your company's 'outward-looking, international' approach. Can you tell us a bit more about this?**

**Matthew Parkinson-Bennett:** We are an Irish publisher. We're based in Ireland, almost all of our writers are Irish, we're funded partly by the Irish Arts Council, and we also receive some funding from other Irish bodies like Culture Ireland and Literature Ireland. But the 'outward-looking, international' approach is both a matter of politics and ethos, in that we see ourselves as a publisher for the world. It's also a matter of the books we publish and how we market and sell our books.

Other Irish publishers also have distribution in the UK and the US, but I think we are unique in the degree of emphasis we put on distribution outside of Ireland. For example, we warehouse our stock in the UK and the US and have no warehouse in Ireland. I think we're pretty much the only Irish publisher which doesn't have distribution out of Gill, who have the monopoly on distribution in Ireland. We make a large portion of our sales outside of Ireland, which is reflected in the books that we publish. We do have a minority of our books that are quite 'Ireland-focused' in their content, or their thematic content, and we will always publish some books of that nature. The core of what we publish are Irish books by Irish creators for an international audience. And so, we mostly publish fiction, mostly middle grade and YA fiction. We don't do any adult publishing.



When we're assessing a book, we think, 'Is this going to work for Waterstones in the UK? What's the reception going to be like for this book in the US?' Selling translation rights is a really important part of our business. We'll also be thinking about the global non-English language potential for a book as well. We are just back from the Frankfurt Book Fair, and we were pitching our books to a lot of international publishers, primarily for translation. From a publishing point of view, having that international emphasis has certain interesting advantages,



Matthew Parkinson-Bennett  
CEO and Publisher of Little Island

for example, we publish quite a few verse novels. The market for verse novels in the UK and Ireland is improving, but in Ireland in particular, it's very difficult to sell rights in verse novels because a lot of markets are just not familiar with the form at all. But, since we started selling directly into the US in 2022 – there's a huge verse novel market in the US – it has made it a lot easier for us to be able to confidently acquire verse novels because we know that, 'Okay, it might be a little tricky in our home market, but it can work in the US'. That international emphasis has an influence on what we publish and acquire and look for.

**Abigail Barrow: Your slogan is 'Books Create Waves', which suggests a belief in the transformative power of literature for children and young readers. With this in mind, how do you go about selecting stories that you believe will make this kind of impact, and specifically how does this become linked to promoting Ireland's rich literary heritage?**

**Matthew Parkinson-Bennett:** 'Books Create Waves' has a few meanings for us. It means that we want to publish books that 'make waves' in the world, like a 'splash', to get people talking and have an impact. We don't publish quiet books. We don't necessarily publish books that, to continue the water metaphor, 'go with the current', so we're not always looking at what's happening in the market and how we could capitalize on that. We aspire to lead the market rather than follow it. One question we ask when we're considering a book is: 'Is this a book that will get people writing articles about it and talking about it? Is it a book that's going to make an impact on the world?' As a small publisher, we feel that that's important.

'Books Create Waves' also means that books have the power to have an impact on individuals. The way I like to put it is, a book has the power to stir the sea within. They're books that will be meaningful to young readers, not simply entertaining. There's nothing wrong with entertainment, and we hope our books are entertaining too, but our focus is books that will have a meaningful impact on people. We hope to publish books that will last.

With issues such as diversity, inclusion and representation, everybody is talking about all of them all the time. I really don't want to sound 'bandwagon-y' or tokenistic about it, but trying to represent experiences and identities that have not previously been well-represented in children's books has always been important to everything that we do. We broke the mould in publishing queer Irish children's books. I don't want to claim that we're the first people to ever have gone anywhere near that subject matter, but we have been quite pioneering in that area going back over the years. More recently, our focus has been looking to represent the diversity of cultural and ethnic experiences in Irish society. Partly that's to do with the social side of our mission; but it's also because those are stories which will have an impact on certain readers. There is nothing as gratifying as hearing people say: 'You've published the book that I wish I could've read when I was eight'. Because that means that hopefully there will be eight-year-olds out there who will find that book and it will be really important to them.

In terms of promoting Ireland's 'rich literary heritage', the rich literary heritage that we talk about in Ireland comes in various forms. There are the great modernist writers like Joyce and Beckett. More recently there are poets like Heaney, Longley, Mahon and Boland. But the children's literary heritage doesn't really get much of a look-in when we talk about our literary heritage. So, I think we see our contribution to Ireland's literary tradition as flying the flag for writing for young readers. At the moment, there's a huge amount of great literary talent in Ireland writing for young readers, coming out of both Irish and British publishers, and unpublished authors. Linking back to the 'international, outward-looking' approach that we take, we're very proud, for example, to go to the Frankfurt Book Fair and represent Irish writing for young people, because in that context we're mostly there with adult publishers. We're proud to be going out to the world and saying: 'We know all about the Heaneys and Joyces, but there's great richness in the children's literature coming out of Ireland as well'.

**Amy Floyd: It's great to get a sense of how Little Island is very much about following an individual path, and that it's very important to you to not be weighed down by other things going on in the industry when you're following your own direction and your own mission.**



**Matthew Parkinson-Bennett:** You have to be aware of what's going on around you, keeping an eye on what's out on the table at your local bookshop and what's selling. It would be foolish to completely exclude that from our thinking. But we take the attitude of aspiring to change the market and influence the market rather than just follow it. We've published some books over the years that I know were turned down by bigger houses, and I suspect it's got to do with people being a little scared of some of the content. We have published a few things over the years where you kind of think: [sucks teeth] 'Is somebody going to try and attack us over this?', but our experience is: no. If you publish what you think is good and you're trying to be a bit courageous about it, the market rewards it, because people actually want to see books about less commonly discussed topics such as sexual assault and queer experience.

**Amy Floyd:** I'm interested in this outward-looking approach. If you're writing for an international audience, how do you ensure that the Irish experience is understandable and appealing to diverse cultures around the world?

**Matthew Parkinson-Bennett:** I think if you were trying to publish a book for the entire world that could be sold anywhere, it would inevitably be really bland. Because, you'll always have different cultural sensitivities, different preferences and so on. You can't try and publish something where you think: 'This is going to sell absolutely everywhere'. Just coming from Frankfurt, I've had conversations with some people who are saying: 'We love this area of your publishing, but we can't consider this area of your publishing, because it's just not going to work in our country'. That's fine. I think that the receptivity to specifically Irish content will vary hugely market to market.

We were just talking about a book that we have coming out which is largely about someone doing the Leaving Cert, which is like the Irish equivalent of A-Levels. And we're going, 'What are people going to think about that? From a rights-selling point of view, is that going to be an impediment?' And I think there are some countries, where people are used to reading a lot of work in translation, where people will just think: 'Okay, that's the exam they do, obviously. Every country has some kind of exam at the end of school, that's what they call theirs, that's fine'. And then there may be countries where they are a little bit less used to reading in translation, where they might balk at that. That's fine. We don't want to take all the Irish flavour out of the books, because that wouldn't be any good for the Irish market or for the books.

Generally, in the US, which in some ways you might stereotype as a bit of a culturally closed place, there's great receptivity to the stuff that we're publishing, and I think it's because it stands apart, and a lot of that is to do with its Irishness.

And I'm not just talking about Irish-American communities, I'm talking about in general. Having said that, we publish some books that we just wouldn't even bother trying to sell translation rights in because they're just so heavily Irish. What we've done sometimes in US editions of our books, for example, is we've put in a glossary of terms if there's a colloquial Hiberno-English term, or a bit of use of the Irish language. Or we might put in a note at the front of the book giving a little bit of cultural context to help the reader. You also have to think about the fact that you're writing for young readers, and they might need a little bit of help working things out if they're not as knowledgeable of the world. Glossaries are always appreciated.

**Amy Floyd:** Finally, our publication is focused upon the UNESCO Cities of Literature network. Little Island was founded in 2010, which is the same year that Dublin was designated as a City of Literature. How do you see Little Island's work either being linked to Dublin as a UNESCO City of Literature, or contributing to the growth of Dublin as a City of Literature?

**Matthew Parkinson-Bennett:** We're really proud to be in a city that's a UNESCO City of Literature and to be contributing something to the next chapter of Dublin's literary story. We try to think in an all-island way, rather than a very Dublin-centric way; a lot of our authors are outside Dublin, but we are here in Dublin and we're proud of that. We actually print the UNESCO City of Literature logo on the back of all of our books, which most Dublin publishers don't do. We do that partly to be proud of who we are and where we're from, and also I think it gives an interesting extra angle to the books. I think for our books making their way in the wider world, people seeing 'Oh, this is from a UNESCO City of Literature, this is from a place with a really strong literary history and heritage', just helps the impression of the books.



Back cover of *Once Upon a Place* (Little Island, 2018)



We're proud to contribute to Dublin *remaining* as a City of Literature. It's not just a historic thing; it's a living thing today with literary production going on in the city. Of course, a lot of Irish writers publish outside Ireland with British publishers, for various very sensible reasons. The Irish publishing industry is less well developed than the Irish writing industry, or literary industry, in that we've got all these amazing writers, but publishing companies tend to be quite small in Ireland. So, we're proud that we're sticking up for the publishing side of literary culture as well as the actual writing side.

 If you are interested in finding out more about Declan's work at *The Stinging Fly*, or Matthew's work at *Little Island*, you can visit the following websites: [www.stingingfly.org](http://www.stingingfly.org) and [www.littleisland.ie](http://www.littleisland.ie) 

## UNIFIED GLOBAL FEARS

### A Review of the *World Goedam Collection*

Mia Manton, Aarya Shetty and Jessica Wallbank

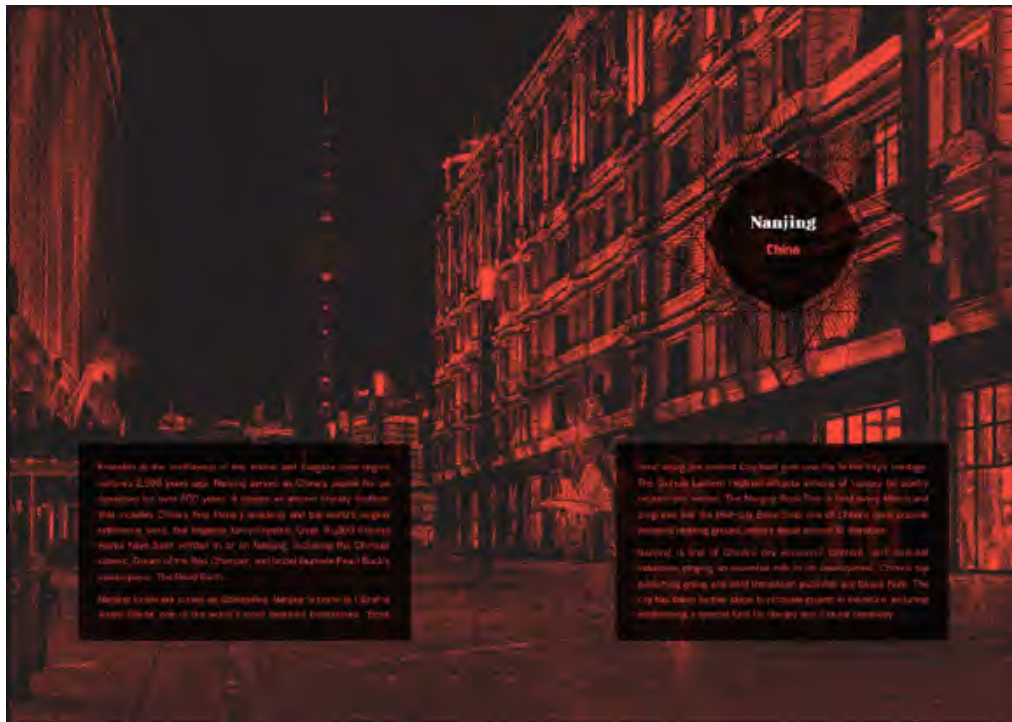
Horror stories have been used to dive deep into cultural fears and folklore for centuries, reflecting personal and societal anxieties. The 2022 *World Goedam Collection* exemplifies this tradition by gathering supernatural tales from fourteen authors in ten UNESCO Cities of Literature across four continents, including Nanjing, Exeter, Durban and Bucheon. Created in partnership with the Bucheon International Fantastic Film Festival, the collection aims to preserve and share Korea's Goedam – or traditional scary tales – with a global audience. It offers a chance to explore how horror can speak to universal fears while reflecting the unique traditions and histories of each individual city. The strength of horror is that it is rooted in 'our own world', giving it that eerie connection that makes each story feel personal yet universal (Fabrizi 3). Each story is a cultural artefact, giving us insight into the fears and folklore that shape a particular society.

**'The *World Goedam Collection* writes horror through the lens of loss and grief, whether that be personal, societal or cultural.'**

However, it is not just the stories that make this collection special – the visual design and translators' efforts ensure that cultural nuances transmit across borders. It is available in both Korean and English, making it accessible to a wider readership – whether readers are there for the chills, or a form of cultural exploration. Translating isn't just about the words; it's about carrying over entire cultural worlds (Van de Pol-Tegge 146). In bringing together stories from diverse cities around the globe through the frame of horror, readers have the chance to experience cultural depth in an accessible form.

Visually, the *World Goedam Collection* draws on traditional horror tropes. The dark, atmospheric design is full of haunting imagery, with red and black eerie fonts that set the tone for each story's world. Each city's section features





The Nanjing title page of the *World Goedam Collection*

a title page with a local landmark, giving the readers a visual stimulus for the tale, whilst illuminating the unique cultural interpretations of fear. This artistic attention visually enhances the climate of horror, making the collection feel cohesive despite the cultural diversity of the stories. American translation theorist Lawrence Venuti noted how translators are often ‘invisible’ (2). However, in this case, the translator biographies included at the start of each story give readers an insight into their role in preserving the unique voices of each culture. This not only highlights their expertise but also their commitment and the vital work of literary collaboration through the UNESCO Cities of Literature network that enabled this project to be globally accessible.

The collection explores several themes that are deeply rooted in folklore and shared human anxieties, reflecting the similarities that the horror genre can bring across diverse cultural traditions. These include the supernatural, psychological horror, cultural identity and history, and environmental fears. Its blend of local and universal themes highlights the ways that horror can serve as both a personal reflection and mode for collective storytelling. Most strikingly, the themes of loss and grief are explored in powerful ways within several of the stories. In the stories from Nanjing, Exeter, Durban and Bucheon, the horror genre is used to explore these pervasive social realities. This not only gives us a glimpse into the unique fears of each culture, but also highlights the shared anxieties that connect us all.

In ‘The Straw People’ by Yu Yiming, from Nanjing, readers are pulled into

a chilling tale that feels unsettlingly intimate, as if it is whispering an old, half-forgotten secret about the consequences of leaving one’s roots behind. The story follows a protagonist returning to his ancestral village, a place now worn and faded with time, much like the rituals he once dismissed as mere superstitions of the past. Yet, his homecoming is not just about facing a place – it is about confronting his own tangled connection to family and heritage. He encounters strange straw effigies: eerie figures bound up in centuries-old customs. These effigies are not simply creepy; they stand in symbolically for his ancestors and the cultural expectations he has ignored for too long.

What makes ‘The Straw People’ so powerful is how Yiming taps into the horror of forgetting. There is a raw, almost uncomfortable, recognition here: the idea that in leaving behind old customs and beliefs, we risk losing pieces of ourselves. The old village and its haunting effigies act as a contrast to the more contemporary village nearby, a place that’s seemingly moved on from these ancestral ties. The conflict between the two villages is not just geographical; it is a clash between embracing the future and the dread of losing a part of ourselves along the way.

**‘This is not just another ghost story – it is a haunting reflection on identity, loss and the unbreakable, sometimes haunting bond of family.’**

It is fascinating how Yiming takes a concept deeply rooted in Chinese belief systems, like straw figures used in rituals as symbols of protection or vessels for ancestral spirits, and turns this into vessels of fear and grief. The straw effigies seem to pulsate with a warning: if you forget us, you risk being forgotten too. It is this very personal, intergenerational horror that resonates. As people, we are not just afraid of ghosts; we are also afraid of becoming the person we might be if we cut ourselves off from our family and culture.

By including ‘The Straw People’ in the *World Goedam Collection*, the editors have shown that horror can go beyond the surface level of supernatural scares. Here, horror becomes a way of processing the deeper anxieties that come with modernity; the terrifying possibility that the past we leave behind might never truly leave us. Through this story, Yiming reminds the readers that losing our heritage might mean more than forgetting our roots; it might mean facing the dark consequences that emerge when we no longer know who we are. This is not just another ghost story – it is a haunting reflection on identity, loss and the unbreakable, sometimes haunting bond of family.

Similarly, Exeter’s ‘Moor-birds’ by Beth Howell, at its heart, is a story that delves into the themes of grief, loss and familial legacy, presenting a chilling landscape where the past lingers as an active and unsettling presence. It is



a haunting tale set against an eerie, desolate moorland. Howell, who lives in Devon and grew up in Cornwall, draws from her deep connection to the landscape of the South West, known for its rugged terrain and moorlands. Her interest in local folklore and haunting tales of the region informs the story's eerie atmosphere.

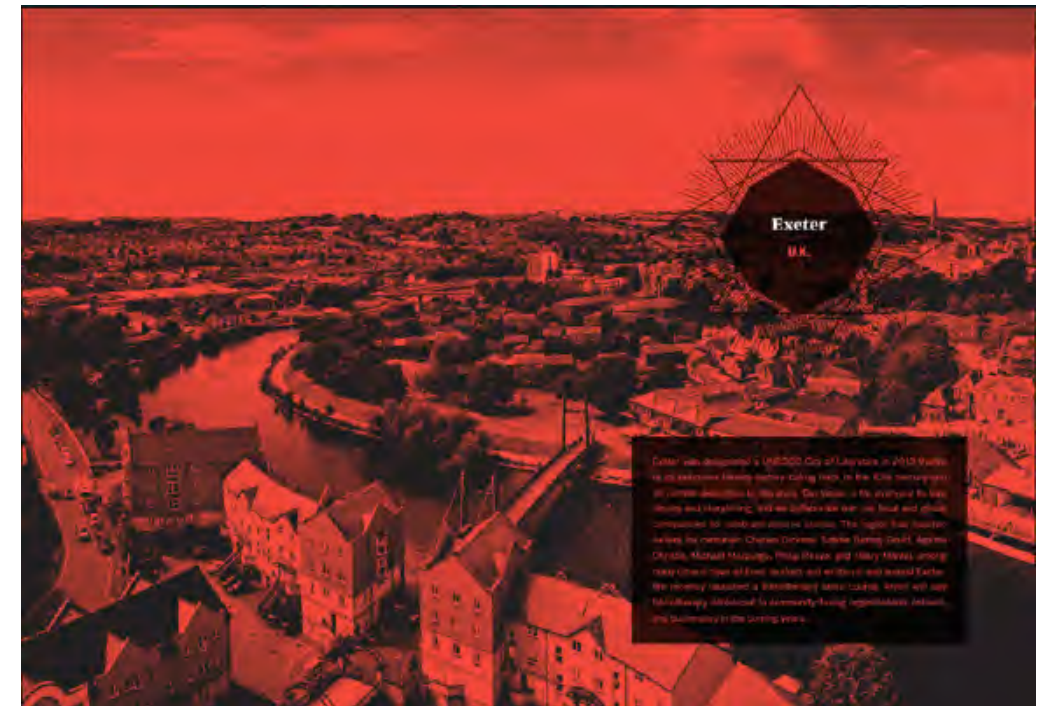
'Moor-birds' centres on Lilah, who lives with her father Aster in a dilapidated, shipwrecked hulk that once symbolized her parents' idealistic, artistic vision. This place, however, has decayed along with the dreams it once held, weighed down by unspoken grief over the sudden disappearance of Lilah's mother, Cora. A passionate environmentalist, Cora had been deeply connected to the moor; her vanishing – presumed to be caused by the land she loved – therefore intensifies the sorrowful aura of the story. Her absence haunts not only her family but also the landscape itself, as unexplained phenomena disturb the moorland and its inhabitants.

**'Howell intertwines grief and the supernatural to depict the tension between memory and reality.'**

Howell intertwines grief and the supernatural to depict the tension between memory and reality. The recurring motif of dead birds, mysteriously appearing and disappearing, echoes the unresolved loss that Lilah and Aster experience. Each instance of these 'moor-birds' symbolizes Cora's ghostly presence, representing a motherly warmth transformed into something both protective and unnervingly spectral. As Lilah matures, her unresolved grief manifests in eerie, sleepwalking episodes and a growing sense of disconnection from her family's past – a past embedded in the traditions and folklore of the moorland.

The tragedy within 'Moor-birds' is not only the literal loss of Cora but the gradual emotional erosion it causes within Lilah and Aster. Howell's story suggests that grief, when left to fester, becomes part of the landscape: a haunting force that can fracture even the strongest familial bonds. In the *World Goedam Collection*, 'Moor-birds' stands out for its exploration of grief's long shadows and how they twist personal memories into chilling, lasting echoes of those we've lost.

Durban's short story 'Grandfather's Visit' by Angelina N. Sithebe explores a different facet of this emotional weight, focusing on how grief can manifest as terrifying visions. This tale focuses on a girl named Thula, who is experiencing nightmares about her grandfather, Mkhulu, returning in the night to cause havoc within the house and then trying to kill her grandmother, Gogo. It presents loss through the trauma of a child who misses her grandparent, struggling to come to terms with this loss while she has nightmares that demonize him. 'Grandfather's Visit' draws on the past, from both the ancient past when referring to her ancestral guardian, but also recent years from when her grandfather passed, symbolizing



The Exeter title page of the *World Goedam Collection*

how the past can be comforting but also traumatic. Through these links of the past, Sithebe's short story portrays the complexity of loss and grief and the ways in which it can be all-consuming.

'Grandfather's Visit' seems to embody the belief that if the death of a loved one should occur and the person does not grieve sufficiently, then they should suffer too. This is shown when Gogo gets attacked by Mkhulu and Thula does not; it seems as though Thula is still grieving for her grandfather, whereas Gogo is punished for not grieving enough. We – as humans – can understand how complex grief is; sometimes it can feel overwhelming, while other times we can feel stuck and unable to express our emotions. This story explores the guilt that someone might experience if they do not feel as though they have grieved enough for a loved one and how those ghosts can come back to haunt them. Sithebe, author of the 'disturbing South African story,' *Holy Hill*, is a writer known for her discomfiting storytelling ('Holy Hill'). Her writing style suggests that this tale could also be a commentary on not being able to open up about feelings towards grief, and lying to oneself as well as others as a result. The lack of communication between Gogo and Thula could perhaps have manifested as an internal dread about their deceased loved one. It is not his spirit that is haunting them, it is themselves.

'Grandfather's Visit' provides an illuminating insight into an emotion that can cloud one's mind and overwhelm people differently both mentally and

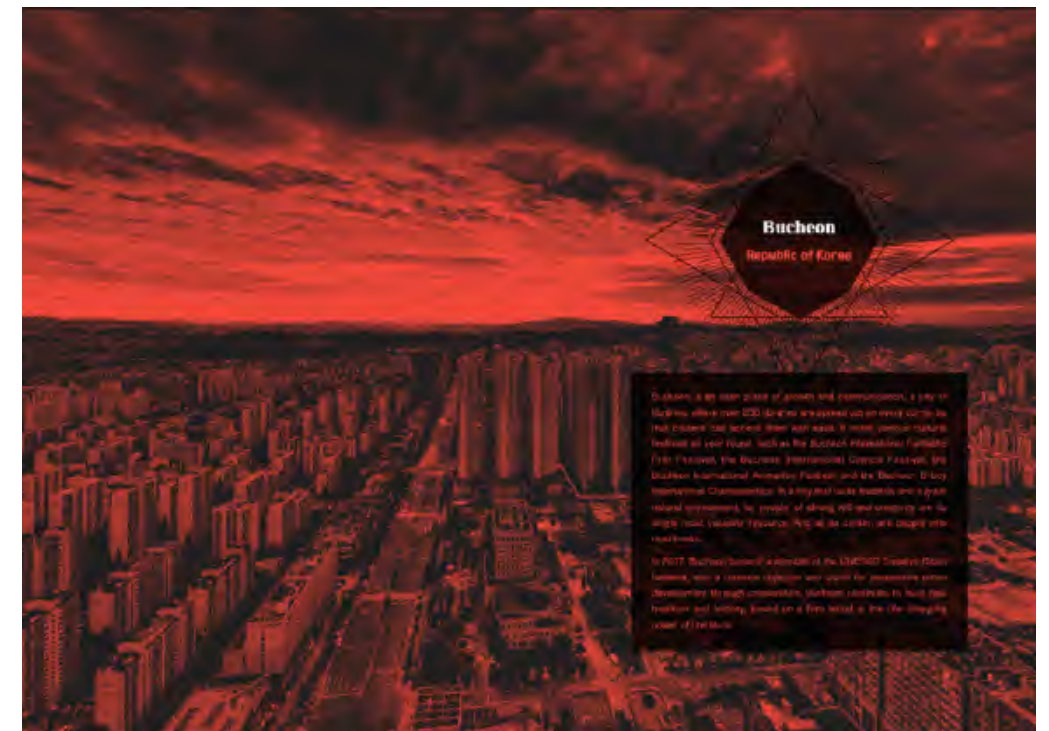


physically through the supernatural and the monstrous. In different ways across different stories the *World Goedam Collection* writes horror through the lens of loss and grief, whether that be personal, societal or cultural. By amalgamating the moral conscience of being truthful with themes of loss and grief in ‘Grandfather’s Visit’, it presents conflicting moral decisions alongside personal emotional conflicts. As well as ‘Grandfather’s Visit’ being a commentary on grief and loss and how it can engulf people, the story could be read as a message to help people avoid any horror and misery just by being true to oneself.

The underlying emotional fear of loss and grief intrinsically connects ‘Grandfather’s Visit’ to stories from other UNESCO cities in the *World Goedam Collection*. This is strongly visible in ‘The Grootslang’s Piano’ by Lee ShinJoo from Bucheon. In this story, we can see a cultural transfer from South Africa into Bucheon through the South African mythological creature of the Grootslang. The Grootslang ‘resembles a snake mixed with an elephant’ that dwells in deep caves; whoever stumbles into the cave must present the creature with something of great value if they wish to live (207). ShinJoo’s commentary within this publication is about lying and not keeping promises; this plays out through the Grootslang and in the process, the story simultaneously explores experiences of losing oneself and the grief that comes with it.

This first-person perspective narrative in ‘The Grootslang’s Piano’ shows the disturbing encounter with this mythological creature while they are on a South African culture expedition. The narrator promises to give the Grootslang a piano as a gift in exchange for their life. However, they trick the Grootslang and do not return to give him the gift. Instead the narrator travels from South Africa to Korea, thinking that they will escape. We then see a series of horrific things happening to the narrator, for example, a woman turning up at their door and chewing broken glass. A nightmare becomes a reality, and we see the Grootslang torturing the narrator by making them unable to move from their bed with a high fever, while chilling music comes from the once-promised piano. The narrator’s broken promise and deceit haunts them, until they physically can’t live anymore, and they start coughing out bits of themselves until there is nothing left.

ShinJoo highlights loss and grief in a way that is special to the *World Goedam Collection*, as it centres around the loss of oneself. Although the Grootslang is monstrous and is depicted as an evil being within folklore – which can also be seen through the changes in font size and colour when the mythological creature is talking – it is clear that the narrator is also at fault. The deceitful actions chosen by the narrator pave their way into losing themselves and, in turn, grieving for what could have been and what could have changed. ShinJoo here is showing us the need to confront problems, otherwise they could devour you from the inside out.



The Bucheon title page of the *World Goedam Collection*

In the *World Goedam Collection*, we see supernatural elements used to tap into deeper societal issues, and this approach feels both powerful and resonant. Through its format, we are drawn into an immersive experience where every choice – from font to colour scheme to evocative city images – reflects the haunting tone of the horror genre. These stories remind us that fears rooted in local experiences often carry a universal impact, reaching beyond any single setting. With careful translation, each story stays true to its origins, allowing us to access and appreciate the cultural layers within. To us, the collection offers more than ghostly tales or folklore. We find not just chilling stories but unified global fears – ones that feel urgent and deeply relevant.



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## THE DEVOURING

Ira Sukrungruang

I cannot rid the thought of you from my mind, friend.

The other day, I flipped through the discarded books in the house and found one that had not escaped your scrawl. You had a penchant for writing in books, which drove our mothers mad. Do you remember? You were punished, of course – but it did not stop you from leaving a part of you in those books. Like the one I encountered – tattered, the spine hanging onto brittle pages. It was there I discovered the elegant scrawl of your name, letters like the gentle slope of hills. Seeing your name transported me back to a time when we were boys, when we lived in this house.

Or rather, the house lived in us.

I suppose we can never rid ourselves of this house. It has constructed itself in the centre of our minds, this Victorian structure in the jungle; a reminder of when the missionaries long ago wanted to educate the ‘primitive people’ in the ways of God. They took control of the countries surrounding ours, claimed their riches as their own and executed those who did not yield to their command. With us, they were unsuccessful; we had our own ways, ways our mothers beat into us through endless repetition of precepts and chants. Endless, like the busy work of ants. Our mothers attempted to erase whatever colonial temptation there was left – an impossibility – and then began restoration of the house after decades of neglect.

The jungle would have claimed the house had it not been for our mothers: vines snaking in and out of every crack in the wood, twining along the columns, sprouting through the cracks in the steps – the roof was a carpet of moss. Perhaps it should have. Not long after we came to it, the lot of us drawn to this house like moths to fire. We were children, lost and poor and abandoned, without any sense of right and wrong or the direction of wind or sun.

I will tell you now, friend, when I found the book with your name within its pages, it was like a pleasing breeze blew through me. And to be cool in the heat of a jungle is supernatural in itself. Back then, we were never cool, sleeping in a crowded room upstairs, so many of us crammed on the floor. We woke in puddles of our own perspiration. The nights left us parched and desperate. It was then that our mothers came with a bucket of water. However much we spilled, whatever wet we left, the house sucked in. We could never escape it.

That is not entirely true, is it? You escaped. You left.

I do not begrudge you, friend. For so long I have missed your companionship,

your body next to mine. I miss you still. All these years I have wondered what kind of life you are living and whether it is a good one. Whether you think of me, us, our mothers, the house. When you left, all that remained was memory. It is how I fill my days – the reliving of it – especially now, when all is silent save for the chittering of bugs, the slithering of snakes, the mocking croak of toads.

There are ghosts here. I am sure of it. Sometimes I see them. Some of them are white; many are not. I know you saw them too. Do you remember our talk of spirits? I would tell you I felt eyes on me, always, and it was not our mothers'. It was something else. As if within the folds of the wallpaper in the dining room, eyes followed us. In the crack in the hallway, eyes were there too. At the base of the toilet, eyes. This was why some days I wet myself, too afraid to go to the bathroom. Our mothers would rage at my accidents, but their punishment never overshadowed the fear I carried within me. Those eyes – they kept me awake. Made me scream at night and stir the dogs into howling. You would tell me that if there were ghosts, we would catch them. Together. That brought solace to my heart which always seemed on the verge of breaking.

I have a memory that brings about laughter and sadness and fear, a wild mix. My memory is a wild mix. Do you remember the time when I had not slept for days, in fear of ghosts and eyes, and you said you would prove to me there was nothing to be afraid of? We sneaked into our mothers' room and stole their powder, the one that made their faces white. I had never been so scared in my life. Their room was like much of the house – bare, with only the necessities – a mirror, a bed, a chair. Yet in the room hung a portrait of a white man, severe in disposition, as all white men are apt to be, his hand on top of a Bible. It was peculiar, I thought, to find a painting of a white man in our mothers' room, when our mothers spoke so ill of them. He wore the garb of royalty. Not like ours. All colour had leached away from the portrait, giving the man an appearance of gloom and despair and self-importance – an appearance all white men share.

White men are greedy; they misuse power. To them, we will forever be known as the Kingdom of Siam, a name that identifies the colour of our skin, a name carrying with it connotations of the uneducated. I could not take my eyes off the white man. I felt his eyes on me. The same eyes I felt all around the house. I froze. I could not move an inch. It was as if the portrait of that white man, whoever he was, contained a power I could not break. You pulled me away and whispered harshly in my ear to leave the room. We had what we came for. The powder. That man, however, he never left. White men never do, do they? They linger.

We sprinkled our mothers' powder over the floors in the hunt for disembodied footprints. Proof that we were indeed haunted. That ghosts did

exist. Alas, there were none, only the skittering prints of roaches and spiders and what appeared to be the trail of a lizard's tail.

Our mothers found out our thievery, but you took the blame. Said it was you who stole the powder from their room. No one else. You, who absorbed the punishment which echoed throughout the house – slashes and cries and moans. You, who returned to our room days later, wet faced and weak, yet smiling, telling me there was nothing to be afraid of. *You see*, you said, *no ghosts*. I did not believe you.

I carry with me so many memories, friend. I have infinite time to swim in them now. Memory is how I bring you back. How I stave off the ghosts and the sounds of the house and the whispers. Memory is what keeps me intact. I am not strong like you. You, I believe, hail from a lineage of kings, ones that thundered into war on the backs of mighty elephants, ones who wagered the freedom of their people on a cock fight. You, who were not afraid of our mothers and their cruelty. You, who cried silently when you thought no one was listening.

There is another memory, one that overshadows the rest: an afternoon, when we were young and on a rare occasion, were allowed outside the house. You were enthralled by a line of ants making their way to the upturned sand of their home. You knelt above it, curling yourself into a shell, and no matter how much I prodded you to come along, told you that our mothers were calling us back, you remained motionless, eyes fixed on one point. You were so still I thought you had become stone, like those statues in English gardens, the ones that come to life at nightfall. What stirred you finally was a boot annihilating the ant's home in a puff of dust. It was one of the other children, though which one I do not remember. There were so many of us then, the house was full of us. Like little candies in a wide-open mouth.

It is so silent now, friend. Silence has snaked into the rooms now that it is only me tending this dark place, a silence like the firm clench of a hand around a throat. My throat.

When the sun descends and the house darkens and it is only me sitting and waiting, the ants return. Some are dead – their bodies smeared into the ground. Some march on to a home that no longer exists. But the ones I remember are the most familiar – the ones that rolled into a ball when met with violence. It is as if their last moment of life was to curl into themselves and become a mini-world inside this larger world of peril. It is macabre to possess this thought, but I find their bodies beautiful. Their deaths beautiful. To cease to exist and become a planet.

Ah!

A madness of thoughts, and then I am overcome. Caught in a whirl. Feeling the rush of who we once were and who we have become. This is what I imagine



the dying feel. Their lived moments avalanching. What memory do you suppose they still on? What is it that steals their last breath? If I ponder too long on thoughts such as this, the depth of my isolation becomes insurmountable. I fear I am unable to crawl out of this hole I find myself in, unable to rid myself of this past, this house, our mothers. You.

So much has changed. Yet so much has remained untouched, like the layers of dust accrued over the years. Is that not the nature of living? To be covered in dust. In the powder of life.

Look at me. At my wandering mind. Skittering ants. Ants. They are here now – those ants. And with them your devastation from that afternoon, your breakdown, your tears raining on the ground, a rain for the dead and dying. What a storm those little planets might have witnessed! A flood! Overflowing the cracks and crevices of their earth!

Do you remember the peculiar thing you did that afternoon? You blew on those ants, blew whilst you wept, blew on their tiny planetary bodies, as if your breath could resurrect them into being. I have been pondering that moment for so long I sometimes feel the wind from your mouth on my face. Why did you do this? Were you blowing back time, reversing the order of things until the ants were alive and well, and making the long trek home after a hard day's work? Or perhaps you blew back time even further, more than seconds and minutes, but months and weeks and years until we were nothing. No you. No me. No white men. No mothers. No house.

To possess such a power! To be erased!

Our mothers came running at the sound of your despair. Anger and torment tangled the muscles in your body. Your face twisted in anguish. You moaned and howled. Kicked and scratched. From your mouth came sounds no boy should ever make, sounds of pent-up rage and despair of such a depth I have never heard since. I wonder if that was the day you decided to leave us. Leave me. You would endure this torment no longer.

Our mothers told us that the stories we tell become the bones in our bodies. Our mothers said a lot of things. They said you would come home.

Home is such a curious word. Such a round sound. Home. I used to dream of a home that was ours. A home where we could do what we wanted, when we wanted to. A home free from ghosts and mothers and white men. Such a perfect life. I entertain this thought and smile. Our next lives must be better than this one. Whatever wrongs we have committed will be forgiven when we are born again.

To even entertain the possibility of such a life! What a thought! What a joy! Yet.

The world is cruel. In whatever life we are reincarnated into, this will never change. The world does not care for us, the forsaken. There will always be

white men. There will always be houses like ours. Mothers, like ours. The world is full of those who conquer and those who are conquered. The weak remain weak. The poor remain poor.

My breath punctures the air of the dead house! Like knives!

It is getting late here, friend. The dark deepens. Especially now. There is no one here but me and my memories of you, of us, of them.

I lie. Am lying. Have always lied.

Everyone is here, friend. Everyone haunts. Everyone hurts. There are so many ghosts. They are real. You must believe me. They close in around me. There is no need for powder to verify their existence. I hear them. Rustling. Whispering. Moving. *Open the door, they say. Let us out. We are your mothers. You cannot do this to mothers. We have done nothing but love you. Love you. Love you. Love you.*

Love. Another curious word. The house is empty of it. It knows nothing of it. It knows nothing. But you are full of it. Your heart. Love. Have you found it in whatever life you are in? Does it keep you safe and warm? Does it cradle you? Like I once did on those long, hot nights. Love. The good kind. The gentle kind. The love I know scalds and whips and pierces and cleaves and leaves. Like you. Like those ants. Those tiny planets! Their home of dust! Crawling all over me! There are so many of them, alive and quivering. They bite. They eat. They gnaw. I am their house now. If I feed one, I feed them all. I let them feast. There is very little left.

The longer I stay, the louder the voices. Their whispers. They grow frantic. Such a choir of desperateness! *Let us out. Let us out. Let us out. Out. Out. Out. We love you. We love you. We love you. You. You. You.* I sit in the dark, outside the room that was ours. Curled into myself. A world. I feel their thudding, like a collective heart. The white man's heart. Our mothers' heart. The house's heart. Mine. Thudding throughout the core of me, in my ears, so loud. Behind me. Our mothers. They want us back. All of us. They will not quiet until I let them out. Until I succumb. Our mothers. Let them devour me. Like ants. Let them take my bones and the stories in them.

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**SURVIVAL**

## **CULTURE, CONNECTIONS AND COMMUNITY**

### **Ukrainian War Poetry as Resistance**

**Emily Godfrey and Emily W**

It has been over 900 days since the illegal invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces. Following the invasion, there has been an outpouring of support for Ukraine, which has extended to the culture sector. This article examines how the UNESCO Cities of Literature have supported Ukraine by providing a voice for them during this period, remembering those lost through war, and providing economic aid to help revive and maintain their cultural heritage. The UNESCO Cities of Literature network continues to stand with Ukraine against hate and violence.

### **UNESCO Cities of Literature and Ukraine**

Since the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, the network has been divided by war. Ukraine has two Cities of Literature: Lviv and Odesa. Russia also has a City of Literature: Ulyanovsk.

Recognized as the cultural capital of Ukraine, Lviv became a City of Literature in 2015. Lviv has been described as ‘the place of the unbreakable poet’ (‘Connections with UNESCO Creative Cities’); the outpouring of war poetry from across Ukraine proves that this is undoubtedly true.

**‘War and hate hinder the possibility for peaceful  
collaboration, deprive us of art, and of those  
making it.’**

Lviv is renowned for its legacy in printing, which is reflected in its population of printers, writers and readers (‘Lviv-City of Literature’). Even before the war,





A destroyed regional youth library in Chernihiv, 11 April 2022.

Photo by Kovalchuk Victor / UNIAN.

Lviv preserved and celebrated the voices of Ukrainian writers. Projects like ‘The (Un)Forgotten Names of Literary Lviv’, which uncovers the stories of historic Lviv writers and ‘Chubay. Ukraine. Love. POETY’, a project celebrating twentieth-century Lviv poet Hryhoriy Chubay, are a testament to this.

Odesa became a City of Literature in 2019, and has a long multicultural literary history, hosting artists like Mark Twain, Anton Chekhov and Ukrainian writer Nikolai Gogol (Depping). Maya Dimerli, coordinator of the Odesa City of Literature office, states that ‘Odesa has always been the city of freedom for open hearts and minds’ (Depping). The Odesa Museum of Literature, established in 1977, celebrates the writers and literary visitors of the city, containing over 80,000 unique manuscripts, books and other artefacts (Depping). This museum is now a target of bombs, as Russia moves to erase Ukrainian culture.

## Targeting Ukrainian Culture

The goal of the UNESCO Cities of Literature network was to encourage communication and collaboration across global borders. However, in February 2022 the network made the difficult decision to cease communication with Ulyanovsk to show support for Ukraine. Many Cities of Literature are funded

by their individual governments with Ulyanovsk City of Literature being no exception. The network felt, therefore, that they could not morally collaborate with a city whose government is intent on destroying not only the Ukrainian people, but their culture.

**‘Language for many Ukrainians has become a subject fraught with tragedy since the outbreak of the war.’**

Although the cultural theft of Ukraine has accelerated since the invasion, this is not a new phenomenon (Havrylov). The intensity of this process has not gone unnoticed, as poet Boris Khersonsky writes, ‘You’ve appropriated something that belongs to someone else’ (Manchester City of Literature). Furthermore, Havrylov states that ‘the theft of Ukrainian cultural heritage during the Russian invasion of Ukraine is the largest since the Second World War’. Therefore, by severing ties with Ulyanovsk, the UNESCO network vocalized their protest of Russia’s cultural theft.

In particular, the invasion has had terrible consequences for the Ukrainian culture sector because of Russia’s deliberate targeting of cultural spokespeople (D’Silva). In October 2023, *The Kyiv Independent* published the article ‘These Ukrainian Artists, Writers Were Killed by Russia’s War’, documenting the lives and artistic legacy of those lost in the war (Khalilova). As of June 2024, more than a hundred writers and artists have been reported as killed by Russian forces in Ukraine, including the soldier poet Maksym Kryvtsov, killed shortly after the publication of his collection *Verses from the Trench* (Merrington, ‘Voices from an Endangered Culture’). War and hate hinder the possibility for peaceful collaboration, deprive us of art, and of those making it.

Since the invasion, Ukraine has witnessed a surge in poetry reading and writing as a form of resistance (‘Voices from an Endangered Culture’). Bohdana Brylynska, Lviv City of Literature’s Head of Office, said, ‘The level of reading as leisure among young people has increased, and this [...] is due to the need to find a safe place that is far from the events surrounding Ukrainians now’ (‘standwithUkraine’). Poetry has become so essential to the Ukrainian cultural consciousness that there is a dedicated government website – Poetry of the Free – with over 37,000 submissions from the general public (Méheut and Mitiuk). The war has birthed a new generation of Ukrainians dedicated to creating as much art as possible, hoping that some will withstand the destruction. The UNESCO Cities of Literature network is determined to ensure these voices are heard globally.

## Early UNESCO Involvement: The Stand with Ukraine Writers Fund 2022

Following the initial outbreak of the war, Wrocław, City of Literature in Poland, appealed to the network (Wrocław Literature House) on behalf of Ukraine. The goal of ‘Stand with Ukrainian Writers’ was to provide financial support for Ukrainians in the literary profession who had lost their livelihood. The Stand with Ukrainian Writers Fund was subsequently agreed and spearheaded by the President of the International Publishers Association (IPA) (UNESCO). The Fund cooperated closely with the Ukrainian Cities of Literature to recognize the needs of Ukrainian writers effectively. As the President of the IPA astutely articulated, ‘The literary world, I believe, offers a gateway to peace, and it is our collective humanitarian duty as the global literary community to come together in support of this noble initiative’ (Wrocław Literature House).

**‘The war has birthed a new generation of Ukrainians dedicated to creating as much art as possible, hoping that some will withstand the destruction.’**

In September 2022, support was extended to publish children’s books in Ukrainian for refugees who fled to Poland. Over 50,000 refugee children are expected to have access to these titles (‘UNESCO World Book Capital Cities join forces for Ukraine’). During the initial outbreak of the war, the mobilization of the UNESCO network has ensured Ukrainian children receive access to literature in their native language and allowed their writers to produce literature despite Russia’s attempts to eradicate their language.

## The Threads of Ukraine

Language for many Ukrainians has become a subject fraught with tragedy since the outbreak of the war. This is made evident in Odesa’s contribution to the Threads project. In February 2024, Manchester City of Literature launched the project Threads in conjunction with the Reading for Odesa project. Threads is an exhibition of multilingual writing and art from across the UNESCO network and explores what ‘threads’ mean to cultures across the globe.

The importance of Ukrainian folktales and heritage is exemplified throughout Odesa’s interpretation of the Threads project. In Odesa, civilians

weave threads to create the camouflaging nets used by the Ukrainian military. Maya Dimerli sees these nets as a kind of kikimora, a fairytale fabric that protects those protecting Ukraine (‘Threads: Odesa – Manchester City of Literature’). This thinking allows Dimerli and the net weavers of Odesa to imagine a future in which the evil is finally banished and good can be restored.

However, for Maria Galina, poet, biologist and member of Ukrainian PEN (a human rights organization), the future of Ukraine is steeped in tragedy. Galina weaves ‘I write in the language that kills us’ into the winter camouflaging nets (‘Threads: Odesa’). This is a clear expression of the grief the Russian language, native to many Ukrainians, now brings. Through the Threads project, Odesa juxtaposes the hope for future peace with the harsh reality of war. The network exposes us to the nuances of this conflict and the people at the heart of the war, fighting to save the country and culture they love. Manchester City of Literature strongly believes that ‘books can help connect people to each other [...] and that the network of the UNESCO Cities of Literature is a symbol of both connection and support’ (IMLD 2024: ‘Reading for Odesa’). Through its collaborations with Ukraine, UNESCO is proving this thesis correct.

## Reading for Odesa

To commemorate the two-year anniversary of the invasion, Reading for Odesa took place across the network on 24 February 2024. The project was helmed by Milan City of Literature upon the forced closure of the Odesa Museum of Literature. These readings were livestreamed in the belief that literature ‘can always constitute an instrument of memory and collective conscience, even in times of war’ (‘Reading for Odesa’). The network strives to celebrate art across the network even at times where this may prove difficult.

Ukrainian poets, such as Serhiy Zhadan, Boris Khersonsky and Ilya Kaminsky, lent their voices to the event. ‘Lovely is the Dnipro’ by Nikolai Gogol (a Ukrainian-



Ukrainian poet and translator Yuliya Musakovska  
Photo by Alex Zakletsky

born Russophone novelist, 1809-1851) was read at the Reading for Odesa Manchester event (Manchester City of Literature). In choosing a reading from a historic Ukrainian writer, we are reminded of the rich Ukrainian culture that is on the verge of

erasure. Gogol's position as a Ukrainian national and a Russian-language novelist emphasizes the difficult emotions many Ukrainians, like Galina, now harbour towards Russia.

Indeed, Gogol's poem is an ode to the Dnipro, a river that flows from Russia through Ukraine. In June 2023, the Kakhovka dam on the Dnipro was destroyed whilst under Russian control (BBC News, 'Ukraine Dam: Maps and Before and After Images'). The destruction of the dam flooded nearby villages and contaminated the river with '150 tonnes of industrial lubricant' (BBC News, 'Ukraine Dam: What We Know About Nova Kakhovka Incident'). 'Deep, deep blue [the Dnipro] flows, spreading its waters' (Manchester City of Literature), waters that are now poisoned. Gogol's poem in praise of Ukraine's natural beauty juxtaposed with the current landscape of war provides a harsh reminder of the tangible effects of Russia's invasion. The Reading for Odesa event therefore reminds us of Ukraine's rich literary history and natural beauty that is an ongoing target of destruction.

## Ukrainian Wartime Poetry and Translation

Translation has played an instrumental role in ensuring that the voice of Ukraine is not destroyed. During the Reading for Odesa project, Ukrainian war poetry was read by the Devon Ukrainian Association (DUA) and was subsequently shared throughout the Cities of Literature network ('Translating Cultures — Exeter City of Literature'). In collaboration with the University of Exeter, the DUA ran a series of workshops under the banner Ukrainian War Poetry: Translating Experience, inviting Ukrainian refugees to read poetry and creatively 'translate' their experience to provide therapeutic relief ('Translating Cultures').



Ukrainian poet and radio host Olena Huseinova

One of the poets whose work was read at this event, Artur Dron, had an English translation of his 2023 collection of frontline war poetry *We Were Here* published by Jantar Publishing in November 2024 (Merrington, 'Modern Languages Academics Help to Bring Ukrainian Poetry from the Frontline'). This collection was translated by prominent Ukrainian poet

Yuliya Musakovska with support from academics in the University of Exeter's Department of Languages, Cultures and Visual Studies. Poets Fiona Benson and Charlotte Shevchenko Knight were instrumental in the editing process of this collection. The translation of Dron's poetry into English is a vital step in articulating the Ukrainian wartime experience into the anglophone sphere, introducing the wider world to the new wave of Ukrainian literature written in defiance of Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine (Merrington, 'Language Experts to Translate').

**'Literature can always constitute an instrument of memory and collective conscience, even in times of war.'**

The University of Exeter has also been instrumental in the Voices from an Endangered Culture: Ukrainian Wartime Poetry project. This venture was born from Exeter City of Literature's 2023 Translating Cultures project. During the latter event, Olena Huseinova and Yuliya Musakovska, in conjunction with Lviv City of Literature, read poetry from individuals fighting on the frontlines and from colleagues who had tragically lost their lives in the war (Merrington, 'Powerful Ukrainian War Poetry Finds Voice in English Translations'). Exeter in turn invited Lviv to select some poems that would be suitable for translation into English. The Voices from an Endangered Culture project was led by Professor Hugh Roberts working with Professor Helen Vassallo from the University of Exeter's Department of Language, Cultures and Visual Studies. Vassallo states that 'poetry is one of the means through which Ukrainians are resisting Russian cultural oppression [...] It is essential that their voices are heard as widely as possible' ('Ukrainian War Poetry'). The importance of translation cannot be undersold; all Ukrainian poetry quoted in this article has been translated into English, enabling us to share a tiny part of their experience in this horrific war. The poems selected were translated by Yuliya Kostyuk, with the support of Roberts and Vassallo ('Ukrainian War Poetry'). In collaboration with the Exeter and Manchester Cities of Literature, the University of Exeter organized a series of readings, discussions and workshops focusing on the outpouring of new writing from Ukraine ('Reading for Odesa'). In discussion with Roberts and Vassallo, Ukrainian poet Musakovska suggested the event name Voices from an Endangered Culture. Musakovska's point was to move away from the narrative of resilience and to draw attention to the existential threat. Proceeds from the event went to Hospitallers, a Ukrainian voluntary organization of paramedics saving lives at the frontlines ('Hospitallers Medical Battalion').

## Voices from the Frontlines

The UNESCO Cities of Literature network has been instrumental in sharing Ukrainian voices; it therefore felt crucial to represent these voices in this article. These powerful poems were shared with the network during the Voices from an Endangered Culture project and Reading for Odesa.

Dmytro Lazutkin, winner of the Ukrainian Literature Prize (The Taras Shevchenko Prize 2024), read ‘Rolling Stones (Paint it Black)’ at Kyiv’s Arsenal Book Fair, an event in memory of artists killed during Russia’s illegal occupation of Ukraine. This video was streamed as part of the Voices from an Endangered Culture project (‘Ukrainian War Poetry’). Lazutkin, among many things, is a poet and has joined the Ukrainian military since the war (‘Story #148. “Life Gains New Value When at War’’). Lazutkin is intent on preserving the country he loves from the cruel hands of would-be oppressors. He effectively asks: ‘What are we fighting for?’ and critically addresses those who see the war as a means of upholding ‘the stability of European democracy’, and not a means of survival for all Ukrainians (Exeter City of Literature, ‘Dmytro Lazutkin – “Rolling Stones (Paint It Black)’’).

In his poem ‘Prayer’, translated into English in January 2024 in response to the Translating Cultures event, Artur Dron powerfully captures what prayer means in wartime. The juxtaposition between the language often associated with the Bible and the jarring realities explored in the poem create an unresolved feeling of tension. This tension is exemplified in the line ‘let us put you together from your scattered body parts/Particles, as they say in church’ (Exeter City of Literature, “Prayer” by Artur Dron). ‘Particles’ is a term occasionally used in the Catholic church, referring to the consecrated wafers given to those who present themselves at the altar (All You Need to Know About the Hosts and Particles). An odd cannibalistic image emerges in these lines, perhaps as a commentary on the occasionally surreal experience of religion and war.

A particularly striking reading from the Reading for Odesa project was recorded by Exeter City of Literature. “Mary” to “Golgotha” by Maksym Kryvtsov was read in English by Roberts. Kryvtsov was killed by Russian forces on the frontline on 7 January 2024 (‘Ukrainian War Poetry’). His use of Christian verse and imagery in this poem is startlingly powerful. Using call signs, Kryvtsov compares the sacrifices of soldiers on the frontline to the sacrifice of Jesus. The poem carries with it a sense of impending doom, amplified by the analogical title, “Mary” to “Golgotha”. ‘Golgotha’ is death, a death ‘Mary’ and the reader are called to witness. ‘Golgotha’ is the ultimate, and utterly selfless sacrifice, a sacrifice Kryvtsov made; ‘Let the cup of war

pass from me, but if it does not, I will drink from it thirstily’ (Exeter City of Literature, ‘Maksym Kryvtsov – “Mary” to “Golgotha’’).

These poems exemplify the horrors that Ukrainians face. The UNESCO Cities of Literature network is using its influence to disseminate the groundbreaking poetry that Ukraine is creating in the face of unsurmountable odds.

## The Uncertain Future of Ukraine

‘Our Waking Breath: a poem-letter from Scotland to Ukraine’ was curated in 2022 following a call-out to the public for submissions of lines of poetry in solidarity with the people of Ukraine. This poem was later submitted for the Reading for Odesa event in 2024. The Scottish Poetry Library commissioned two translations of the poem into Ukrainian by Ostap Slyvynsky and Natalia Drapak (Jamie). This poem exemplifies the hope and support the UNESCO Cities of Literature have provided and continue to provide Ukraine. The following is a stanza from this poem in English. The sentiments expressed in this poem from 2022 have only been heightened by a further two years of war, and counting:

In all the darkness, brave ones  
in all your grief, we know  
your faces will lift again.

These words reflect hope for Ukraine. It is through the support of networks like UNESCO that this poetry reaches us, outside of Ukraine, at all. The UNESCO Cities of Literature network allows us to celebrate the new wave of poetry that is arising in Ukraine, whilst also condemning the circumstances that have brought it into being. Thanks to the tireless efforts of networks, such as the UNESCO Cities of Literature, and – most crucially – those fighting on the frontlines, Ukraine resists being silenced. Through culture, connections, and community, Ukraine will once again be free.



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## ORAL NARRATIVES AND CULTURAL CONNECTIVITY

### A Spoken Bridge

Yasmine Arasteh, Aarya Shetty and Emily Pink

Spanning centuries and continents, oral narratives are deeply rooted in the histories and identities of Indigenous communities. Unlike the written word, oral stories are not bound by ink. In this sense, they are a transformative tool, functioning as an invaluable and powerful artistic medium, transcending the page. However, oral literary forms continue to lack visibility in global anglophone networks – underrepresented in the literary pages of newspapers and in literary studies courses offered by universities. As Isabel Hofmeyr highlights, 'Oral literature need not be isolated from literacy and other media, existing in some mythical "traditional" sphere removed from international space and literate time' (88). As we discuss, it is this very fluidity that makes oral storytelling a particularly compelling form for discussing pressing environmental and social issues.

A dive into UNESCO's City of Literature initiative offers extensive insight into the successes and challenges faced by contemporary storytellers in preserving these works, as well as the role of such narratives in both historical and present contexts. With a focus on South Africa alongside broader Oceanic networks, we will explore the extent and ways in which UNESCO's literary networks can amplify Indigenous voices by building cross-cultural bridges, to honour and celebrate oral narratives. By embracing Indigenous storytelling in the literary landscape, UNESCO Cities of Literature can cultivate deeper global connections, support marginalized voices and create a platform for these narratives to resonate with transnational audiences in ways that are enabling of

**'Festivals are the foundation that we create for story sharing and storytelling to actually take place. They mould our communities and shape our heritage.'**



change. After all, what is the purpose of literature, in any form, if not to be a springboard upon which one's voice can be heard, celebrated and learned from?

## Voices of Defiance

Siphindile Hlongwa, Curator of Durban's Time of the Writer and Poetry Africa festivals, affirms that oral narratives have long served as a means of preserving and expressing South African Indigenous cultural knowledge, belief and history. Hlongwa notes that as oral histories faced neglect, misrepresentation and deformation by capitalist and Apartheid systems, the storyteller's dissenting voice was used dynamically and powerfully in acts of protest and preservation. Understanding South African oral narratives can help us to contextualize their present role as a powerful literary tool.

Speaking on the 'revolutionary' poetic works often featured within Durban's literary festivals, Hlongwa says, 'Being a post-Apartheid era in South Africa, we ask ourselves, did we even get the freedom that we were fighting for? Yes, we did. But then more things creep up... and you realize; no, this should be voiced. This should be exposed. We say Steve Biko did not die for this.' Hlongwa's assertion reflects the oral story's ongoing position as a powerful form of artistic protest. Crucially, the very existence of the oral story is contingent upon a performer. Serving as the conduit for oral works, storytellers skilfully perform and guide each rendition, enabling stories to ebb and flow, mobilizing in dialogue with the surrounding world. A common misconception surrounding the storyteller themselves, as Hofmeyr highlights, is that the role is an innately feminine one (91). Hofmeyr details how this assumption was largely born from the South African National Party's forced displacement of native populations within the country's period of 'betterment planning' during the Apartheid era. Seeking to develop South Africa's rural lands by directly obstructing the organization of native chiefdoms, the expulsion and urbanization of Indigenous territories effaced communal gathering points and largely eradicated typically male spaces for oral performance. Comparatively, female storytellers, whose locales often revolved around familial and homely spaces, remained in place, ultimately leading to a shift in the perceived role of oral performers and fuelling a largely gendered view of South African oral storytelling (Hofmeyr 90). In these townships, storytellers adapted their narratives to reflect, document and oppose life under Apartheid (Scheub 14).

Today, there are around thirty native languages spoken throughout South Africa. Nine Indigenous African languages are formally recognized as official national languages by the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa,



Siphindile Hlongwa, Curator for Poetry Africa

alongside Afrikaans, a daughter language of Dutch, and English ('South Africa's Official Languages: A Multilingual Identity and Cultural Heritage'). It is no secret that the erosion of native language alongside Indigenous knowledge is a bleak, yet certain, neocolonial tactic, imposed to eradicate identity and heritage. Yet, despite centuries of linguistic, religious and racial oppression, South Africa's Indigenous languages prevail and are spoken domestically by millions (Hemkyr 15). Indigenous oral narratives are, therefore, a vital artistic medium that can be leveraged to preserve and protect native languages.

Raised in South Africa's Eastern Cape region, writer, activist and storyteller Sindiwe Magona has played a key role in documenting the impacts of Apartheid on women and family dynamics in urban settings through her work, famously combining traditional storytelling structures with contemporary themes. By writing and performing in both Xhosa and English, Magona's work has represented community resilience, cultural survival and resistance, underscoring the transformative and progressive role of oral storytelling within circles of social discourse and the importance of linguistic preservation. In recognition of her profound impact on South African literature, the Amazwi South African Museum of Literature unveiled an exhibition in 2023 titled Sindiwe Magona: A Conscience of the Nation. The exhibition paid tribute to Magona's remarkable contributions as a storyteller and activist, celebrating her legacy as one of South Africa's most influential literary voices. In the same year, Buffalo City earned its status as South Africa's second UNESCO City of Literature, highlighting



the city's rich literary heritage. This initiative extends beyond Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality itself; it aims to elevate Amazwi's national standing as a museum dedicated to South African literature, benefiting a broader cultural ecosystem that includes local libraries, universities, bookstores, independent publishers and authors across the province. By fostering collaboration and highlighting the region's literary assets, this recognition enhances Buffalo's cultural landscape and promises lasting change for both the local community and their national literary heritage, reinforcing the strength of the South African oral story as a form of literary activism.

## Contemporary Oral Narratives in South Africa and Beyond

Achieving its UNESCO City of Literature status in 2017, Durban boasts a powerful and active literary network, foregrounding the different types of structures and foundations that can support oral storytellers in building sustainable careers and preserving Indigenous heritage. Located within the heart of this network is the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Centre for Creative Arts. The centre hosts several successful arts festivals in the municipality's largest city, heralding a diverse group of South African storytellers, poets, writers and artists to the stage. The literary festivals Time of the Writer and Poetry Africa are shaped by Siphindile Hlongwa's curatorial guidance and keen eye for new talent, as she highlights: 'Festivals are the foundation that we create for story sharing and storytelling to actually take place. They mould our communities and shape our heritage.'

The annual Poetry Africa festival is amongst Durban's key events working to celebrate South African literary histories and push back against dominant narratives, echoing UNESCO's creative aims to celebrate and connect global writers, performers and audiences. By promoting artists who merge genres both within the continent and beyond, those involved are frequently celebrated for their ability to subvert literary norms whilst paying homage



Olive Olusegun  
2024 Poetry Africa National Slam Champion

to South Africa's artistic endeavours. 'Inspiring, life changing and electrifying' is how Hlongwa described the international, cross-genre festival's 2024 stint.

Self-described 'Kengerian poet with a South African accent' (Olusegun) Olive Olusegun is amongst those showcasing the transnational reach of artists who blur the lines between traditional poetic structures and oral performance. Olusegun's multidisciplinary performances merge poetry, art and architecture to share stories, offering a unique and innovative approach to poetic oral narration, whilst bridging the gap between the spoken and the written word. Simultaneously, her approach actively dismantles harmful Eurocentric notions of oral storytelling as a largely immobile and archaic literary form (Hofmeyr 90), prompting a multifaceted yet nuanced view of South African oral performance styles. Olusegun's recent championing of Poetry Africa's slam competition, and her plans to represent South Africa in Mexico's World Championships in 2025, signal the popularity and relevance of such forms within literary spaces for intergenerational and international audiences alike.

Prior to her slam poetry win, the Quay Words literature programme in Exeter – Durban's fellow UNESCO City of Literature – was fortunate to host Olusegun as their international writer-in-residence in March 2024, in partnership with Poetry Africa. Quay Words's collaborative event focused on explorations of heritage, allowing Olusegun to share work focused on women's stories as well as her own multicultural identity. Such structures display how UNESCO's City of Literature initiative is able to actively make space to support and illuminate oral literatures, prompting global engagement with contemporary forms of oral narration. Poetry Africa, and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, undoubtedly provide crucial platforms to promote, preserve and celebrate South African oral storytelling. By ensuring collaborative, proactive and engaging support for these platforms, UNESCO's literary initiatives have the potential to build upon existing structures and propel these artists and stories into global spheres.

Elsewhere in Pretoria, South Africa, Dr Nomsa Mdlalose and her foundation, Zintsomi, represent a key infrastructure working to nurture and progress leadership in the professionalization of storytelling within the contemporary African landscape, by turning oral narration into a recognized, viable career pathway. Through mentorship, training and career-building opportunities, Zintsomi is developing a new generation of storytellers, to 'carry the baton forward' as Hlongwa describes, in a way that resonates with contemporary audiences ('About Zintsomi'). In promoting this environment, Zintsomi highlights the critical role that dedicated spaces and networks play in supporting and illuminating oral literatures today. Unlike the more readily formalized domains of written literature, oral storytelling has often lacked institutional recognition amongst global audiences. Mdlalose actively addresses this gap by creating structures where storytellers are not only trained, but are also encouraged, to





explore new avenues for performance and audience engagement. Mdlalose offers an innovative model for the sustainable preservation of Indigenous narratives by providing storytellers with the resources to refine their craft, develop storytelling products and reach transnational audiences ('About Zintsomi'). Unlike written forms, oral literature, dubbed 'orature' by Ugandan scholars Pio Zirimu and Austen Bukenya in the 1960s, is inherently dynamic, emotive and communal (Kiguli 1534). By bridging traditional and modern storytelling forms, Zintsomi illustrates that oral literature is not a relic of the past but a living, adaptable art form. Through its work, Zintsomi demonstrates the transformative potential of oral storytelling as a tool for cultural preservation and social empowerment, affirming and celebrating its place within the spectrum of literary activism in South Africa and beyond.

## Oral Storytelling: On Speaking to the Land

One area where the transformative potential of oral literature might have a particularly vital role to play currently is in relation to environmental justice. Siphindile Hlongwa asserts that literary exploration of climate change is ongoing in South Africa, with many poets writing and 'advocating for climate justice'. As we hurtle towards climate catastrophe, it makes sense that oral storytelling, a form suited to adaptation and fluidity, works to educate and inform listeners of the almost unbelievable realities that we face across the world. The work must be done to produce and distribute oral stories relating to the climate crisis and ensure that the methods for this are not rooted in capitalism and colonialism. In other words, oral stories can address issues of climate by championing intersectionality, while refusing to discount the sociopolitical consequences of the climate crisis.

**'Oral literary forms can articulate the need to regain control over colonial and capitalist hierarchies as a method of rebellion.'**

An example of a South African legend that continues to be frequently retold in new forms is that of Queen Modjadji, or the rain queen. The female leaders of the Balobedu tribe were celebrated for their ability to manipulate rainfall. Located in northern South Africa, known to be cruelly arid, this control of the weather allowed for unrivalled power in the region for centuries. Modjaji Books, one of South Africa's most successful independent publishers, derives its name

from this story that has been passed down through oral tradition. Focusing exclusively on female voices, the publisher notes that they are 'Making rain for southern African women writers' (Modjaji).

Oral narratives also have a strong tradition in South Africa responding to issues of environmental destruction and linked colonial violence. Oral stories have been utilized as a method to construct notions of home and belonging in a form referred to as lifela (Coplan 414). These lifela were often performed in mine compounds by Lesotho-migrants living in South Africa and reflect upon such 'experiences as mine labour and ritual initiation' (Coplan 418). Coplan highlights the tumultuous life within the mines while being displaced from home, noting 'these songs are part of the effort to maintain an integrated, positive self-concept despite the social displacement, fragmentation and dehumanization inherent in the migratory labour system' (419). As seen in response to issues of extractivism, oral literary forms can articulate the need to regain control over colonial and capitalist hierarchies as a method of rebellion.

As literature rapidly transforms and evolves in tandem with the world around it, oral storytelling remains a testament to literary resilience, transformation and creativity. Not only do oral and wider Indigenous narratives challenge issues of cultural erosion and neocolonial structures, but they are also intrinsically linked to questions of land, identity and heritage. Like the work being done by Modjaji Books in cultivating and nourishing the ability of female writers to vocalize their experience and creative flair, there is a need to reconfigure how these stories are then transferred between literary spaces. We suggest that there is an opportunity for the UNESCO Cities of Literature network to more visibly



2024 Poetry Africa Festival Participants



vocalize the importance of oral stories in conveying issues of intersectional environmentalism. The network has a unique and crucial position in connecting literary spaces, and through this, it can champion marginalized voices.

Durban's rich literary scene is amplified through social media to transport spoken word to a wider, global audience. The @poetryafrica Instagram page displays an array of spoken word pieces through Reels and regularly promotes events like their slam competitions. Social media can assist in creating platforms for marginalized voices through its self-publishing and real-time format, but growth hinges on audience engagement and algorithm reaction. Recordings of long-spoken oral stories help to cement them, as a response to global issues like climate change. Social media can, therefore, be a vehicle to destabilize colonial ties. Yet there is a huge responsibility on individuals to help facilitate this change. While we do see environmental-themed poems and speeches across the media at present, there is much to be done to amplify voices from those disproportionately impacted by issues of changing climates, whilst simultaneously rejecting a Eurocentric perception of environmental breakdown.

Siphindile Hlongwa is eager for UNESCO to invest more time and resources into Durban's rich literary scene, as she questions how much literary creativity they could have nurtured should they have had more support from the network. As an instrument of political and environmental activism, the oral narrative's intangible nature need not impede its recognition as a medium for progressive literary input. By promoting and engaging with this work, UNESCO's City of Literature initiative has the potential to catalyse a shift into oral storytelling, making it an intrinsic and crucial literary form within global conversations of climate crisis.

## Building Bridges: Community-based Networks

Building on our arguments for the UNESCO Cities of Literature programme to support the dissemination of Indigenous texts and oral narratives in transnational settings, our final section looks at some of the exciting work already taking place in the network. It also explores the potential for building a stronger literary infrastructure to sustain and support these efforts. A notable example is the collaboration between Dunedin and Seattle, both UNESCO Cities of Literature, which hosted a landmark event – Indigenous Poetry and Perspectives – in December 2021. This event exemplifies the power of cross-city partnerships in elevating Indigenous voices, broadening audiences and reinforcing the global significance of Indigenous storytelling. The Dunedin–Seattle collaboration, held as a virtual event due to pandemic restrictions, was designed to celebrate and spotlight Indigenous writers from both cities and

showcase the diversity of Indigenous literature in a way that bridges cultures and continents. The event featured prominent Indigenous writers, including Iona Winter from Dunedin, whose work is deeply rooted in her Waitaha, Kāi Māmoy and Kāi Tahu ancestry. Joining Winter was Rena Priest, an enrolled member of the Lhaq'temish, also known as Lummi Nation, and a Washington State Poet Laureate, as well as Sasha LaPointe, a Pacific Northwest native whose writing confronts themes of trauma and resilience.

The success of the Dunedin–Seattle event underscores the importance of continued efforts to integrate Indigenous voices within global literary networks. By providing Indigenous authors with the space necessary to share their personal and cultural narratives, this collaboration highlights how UNESCO Cities of Literature can facilitate meaningful cultural exchanges and foster appreciation for the complexities of Indigenous identities, histories and traditions. Such initiatives not only benefit Indigenous communities but also enrich the cultural landscape of the UNESCO cities themselves, underscoring the value of diversity and inclusion in literature.

**‘Oral narratives have the unique ability to transcend space and time.’**

A key challenge for Indigenous authors lies in navigating the mainstream publishing industry, which often prioritizes commercially viable works over those that reflect cultural specificity and nuance. Community-led publishing initiatives offer an alternative, by creating platforms for Indigenous voices that operate outside traditional, Eurocentric frameworks. For instance, the city of Québec has made significant strides in fostering Indigenous literature. The city's grant programme for cultural organizations, funded jointly by the city and province's Ministry of Culture, is accessible to organizations based in Wendake, ensuring essential financial support for Indigenous-led projects. Partnerships with organizations such as Kwe, a First Nations festival, and Kwahiatonhk!, the organizers of the First Nation Book Fair, extend these efforts further. These collaborations facilitate events like thematic book displays in libraries, activities featuring First Nations artists and a writer's residency for emerging Indigenous authors at Québec's Maison de la Littérature. Wendake also plays a central role in initiatives like the Toponymy exhibition, showcasing its cultural heritage as part of Québec's literary landscape. Beyond these city-level programmes, literary organizations such as the Morrin Centre host events celebrating First Nations storytellers, with projects like Celestia, a multidisciplinary installation by Canada's creative cities, featuring Wendat artists. These sustained efforts highlight the role of community-led initiatives in promoting Indigenous voices and fostering cross-cultural connections.



Digital and print formats also play a key role in this preservation and expansion. With the growing digital landscape, many Indigenous communities are finding new ways to record and share their stories, moving beyond traditional oral forms to reach younger audiences. Online platforms, archives and virtual storytelling sessions have become invaluable for Indigenous writers seeking to preserve oral traditions, while adapting to the modern world. Siphindile Hlongwa notes the crucial role that online spaces can play in disseminating Indigenous narratives, enabling the ‘intangible’ oral story to be shared globally. By offering workshops on the uses and benefits of intellectual property at Poetry Africa, Indigenous communities are increasingly able to monetize their work, as Hlongwa notes, actively ‘empowering the youth in terms of other spaces where their work can actually exist’. These efforts offer a model for how Indigenous literature can leverage technology to both preserve and celebrate cultural narratives.

The path forward requires continued support from local and global communities, as well as a commitment to valuing these narratives not only as literature, but as essential cultural expressions that enrich the human experience. Indigenous literature is not merely an aesthetic or intellectual pursuit; it is an assertion of identity, a repository of cultural knowledge, and a medium through which Indigenous communities connect with their heritage and share it with the world.

Oral narratives have the unique ability to transcend space and time and unlike the written word, can respond to the present moment when spoken. It requires a response from its audience, becomes whole once performed and is then entrusted to the hands of others. Characteristics of the oral form make it an exceptional format to challenge neocolonial ideas and issues of changing environments. From language revitalization projects to the promotion of international literary festivals, a combination of global and local efforts focused on inclusivity and a decolonized Western canon can assist in the increased presence of Indigenous narratives within literary spheres. Similarly, wider academic, community and policy-driven support for Indigenous narratives, both written and oral, can ensure the preservation and promotion of these powerful stories. As literature engages with online platforms, visual documentation and social media can be leveraged to support the survival of oral traditions, overcoming questions of authentic dissemination and affirming the oral story’s status as a progressive and vital literary medium. Looking ahead, continued connection, via UNESCO Cities of Literature or otherwise, can ensure the growth, preservation and inclusion of these narratives.

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## A DREAM TO THE SLEEPING SOUL

Devika Ponnambalam

You tread across your father's back in gentle steps. You assume he belongs to you, but he does not belong to you, nor you to him. You do not know this yet, because you are a child. You only know this back, this landscape upon which you tread, on a bed beside a window, every day, once a day, when the sun is at its peak, in this hot country.

You remember a window, one without glass, where wire netting keeps out the mosquitoes but not the heat. A concrete playground separates two blocks of flats. Windows sit on top of each other, tilting under the great weight of the tropics. The world, it seemed to you then, had been emptied of life, and the only ones were you – just you – and him, now and forever, Father and Daughter.

You listen to his intake of breath, and its release, a wave gently retreating from a sandy shore. Though you have never seen the sea, it exists, a myth in your mind, in picture books and inside the TV. It laps silently some miles from this room, a deep mystery to you – the South China Sea. You do not know of the rainforest beyond, of the ancient creatures that climb its dark canopies, or of the birds that carry 691 songs. You only know of this back upon which you walk in the silence of the afternoon heat, and of the sorrowful beat of your innocent heart. These are the words you whisper over and over: *The sea is far below me, and I am not going to fall.* You will not allow yourself to fall.

You will not allow yourself to think of the mother who left. You do not remember the tenderness of her touch or the day of her leaving. On that day, you ran. And you ran. You ran so fast until you fell to your knees in the dust. Then, you wept. You do not remember the mother, whose scent you imagine must taste of bitter fruit, the scent of a woman. You do not think of that day because the memory of it has become an ache in the pit of your belly, an ache deeper than the ache of each long afternoon. Your mother now resides in an empty corner of your gaunt body, and you will not speak the question that lies on the tips of your rose-pink lips.

*When is Amma coming back?*

You continue walking with your little bird's feet and your beating heart in this room – your tomb – trapped eternally beside your father, while outside, the sun keeps climbing in the wide, open sky. When it falls, that king of kings, sinking into your imaginary ocean, the children of the estate come out to play. They will come together on your concrete playground to enact their daily ritual of catching and killing one another in a game of Cowboys and Indians. You



have decided that next time – or perhaps today – you will not be an Indian. You will insist on being a Cowboy, and you will run with your brown bird's feet across that concrete lake to catch the Indians. And you will not. Not be caught.

You have placed both feet on either side of your father's sturdy shoulders when your older sister appears at the bedroom door. She is not in her school uniform but is wearing the bell-bottoms your mother made for her. You do not want to think of those days, the ones she spent with her head bowed over the blue denim fabric, late into the night, and your sister's joy when she pulled them on, then twirled in them, laughing, laughing. You remember the quiet anger on your father's stern face and his words: *You're not wearing that outside, it's too tight.* You remember your mother's protests: *They're all wearing them – even the Malay girls.* His anger dissipated when he saw your sister's face, her tears like huge raindrops threatening to fall. You did not know then that, when he looked at her – his eldest – he saw the spectre of his own mother in the shape of her mouth, the dark round of her eyes, her skin luminous as a lotus flower at dawn.

Your sister studies your father who lies like a fallen log beneath your featherless form. Your thin arms outstretched. You in turn scrutinize the sister as beautiful as the girl who won Miss World, sure that she is up to something. She carries on looking at the half-visible face of your shared captor, transfixed by that one closed eyelid, which might spring open at any moment. She speaks a word into the void, an offering, softly at first, then boldly, repeating the word that lives in both your bodies because you are his daughters, vessels containing your father's spilled seed.

*Appa.*

Your sister says it a third time, to be sure, and waits for him, your father, to open his clay-bound eyes. You wait too, child formed of the mud of your earth-father-maker, child still forming, the steam rising from your damp skin, your moulded limbs. The red thread in your belly ties itself into knots as you watch your sister and surrogate mother, the sister who could be Miss World, repeat the word a fourth time. A question to the incandescent noon.

*Appa?*

Your sister turns quickly on her bare heels, bell-bottoms swinging, and disappears into the darkness of the hallway beyond. You step down nimbly to follow suit but, for a breath, are held back by the powerlessness of your father, his blind soul and your own innate power. You imagine he's a monster, put to sleep by a divine oath, or a character trapped between the pages of a fairy tale. You imagine the real world is the one that lives now and breathes behind those closed eyelids, while this room in which you exist, along with this afternoon in which you are held, is the dream. It will vanish when your father, your appa, awakes.

You push your bony feet into your Bata flip-flops and run – run with your

matchstick legs – down the shadowy hallway to the front room beyond. You do not stop at your brother's door, or before the face of your grandmother, held upon the cupboard altar, until you reach the front room with your father's rattan chair – where your mother used to sit nursing a coffee. Once, you went to her while your appa slept and laid your head in the crook of her arm, and that was when you discovered the scent of a woman. It was sweet and bitter and bittersweet. You banish the memory to the place it belongs, deep in the earth of your body, and turn to find your sister outside on your ground-floor balcony, about to climb over the metal railing with its red paint peeling off. You push your face and the palms of your hands up against the glass doors and knock twice to let her know you are there, and you watch with wide, animal eyes.

\*

Your father runs through the main street of a sunburnt village, laughing, kicking up the dust and stones, drunk as a skunk. Earlier, one of the boys had stolen a bottle of toddy from an uncle, and they'd shared it between them in the half-darkness of a cowshed, the lumbering beasts chased out. As the drink worked its way through his blood, he thought of the women who came here to give birth, of his own beginnings among the straw and of the girl his mother was then.

He runs now, between his friends, with his sixteen-year-old heart in his mouth – a mouth the shape of a bow, a mouth Lord Shiva would have envied – when he stops dead in his tracks. In the distance, he sees his father, Chidambaram Pillai, crossing to worship at their local shrine. He wonders why the chilli merchant is going to pray at this hour, with the sun still beating down on them. Your grandfather wears his pride upon his shoulders and a belt of pure gold around his dhoti, and carries a brass tray heaped with flowers and fruit. He disappears through the gate of the temple courtyard to the sound of a calling bell, somewhere high on a cloud. When your young father approaches, to search for his old man, all he can see within is a flickering flame.

She burns, the goddess, before the stone form of the great god, worshipped here as the pillar, the post – as Sthanu. Once, Shiva sank deep into the waters of contemplation, becoming the Lord of Yoga.

\*

You cling to your sister's hand as you skirt the edge of the monsoon drain, which overflows with kangkong, and you both crouch down beside the tulasi bush that grows happily in its pot beneath the full glare of the sun. Your father had planted it as a sapling and stationed the holy basil outside the bedroom window as a talisman for protection and luck.



Your sister presses a finger to her lips, glaring at you. Taking the cue, you listen too with every fibre of your small being. Not a sound emanates from that dark chamber within, except the mechanical whirring of the standing fan, and perhaps the whispering breath of the waves. Satisfied he still sleeps, the beautiful monster, she rises, your sister, leading you on behind her. You cross a gangplank that acts as a makeshift bridge, and over a hillock of sand and dust and stones into another estate of apartment blocks. You have promised you won't complain. That you will come quickly, and do as you are told, because today, you will finally see the sea. *We must be back before he wakes*, is the mantra that falls against the walls of both your anxious hearts.

\*

Inside that dark chamber, in the centre of a square stone structure, stands a plinth. The flame that burns upon it is fed by an oil-filled vessel the shape of a yoni. The symbol of the goddess represents one of the countless shaktis that Umasahita released into the world when she stepped out from Shiva's left side, darkly glittering. Behind the goddess, within a wall recess, Shiva's lingam rises in its black stone form between the shadows of the incense-laden air.

The scattered heads of the blossoms lie at the foot of the central plinth, and the fruits sit on their tray awaiting distribution. Your father watches the priest-boy leading ablutions at the inner shrine. Several small vessels have been lined up in a row on the red-tiled floor. The boy takes one, pouring milk over the lingam, painting the shape of a doorway upon a dark canvas, and then washing it clean with water. He tips ghee over the shaft, then sweet ambrosia rice, its sticky grains falling in clumps, and lastly, a golden turmeric paste. A final bath of water cleanses the lingam in this lengthy ritual of love. The offerings do not drain away into a temple well. Instead, they spill onto the floor, mixing and swirling together across the blood-red tiles and over the priest's feet. The tray of fruit is borne up on the tide of Shiva's food bath, and so are the flowerheads.

\*

You have promised to keep quiet and not complain; the idea of seeing the sea fills you – like a vessel to its brim – with a golden, liquid longing. Your sister grips your hand as you approach a two-lane motorway where the cars thunder past without a pause in both directions, and it seems impossible you'll ever make it across. You wait on a pavement of rubble like two impatient vagrants, one in dusty bell-bottoms with a frown across her brow, the other in Bata flip-flops, wearing a dress, with hair as short as a boy's. Every minute counts as your father sleeps on, as the sun bears down on the crown of your sorry head. You wonder

if you should perhaps turn back, and return another day with permission from Appa, but you don't say a word; you don't dare. *The sea lies below me, far down below, and I'm balancing on the edge – the brown cliff edge. The waves, they whisper, and they crash, just like your breath, but I am not, not going to fall.*

\*

As dusk begins to fall, your father walks through the village alone, silently burping up the toddy he drank earlier, his belly empty, but not desiring food to fill it. All the other boys have gone their separate ways, back home to receive a stinging slap from their fathers. He passes dark doorways with symbols of protection drawn upon thresholds, refreshed since their morning conception. Kolams with circular, intricate, maze-like designs to trick Yama, servant of the goddess Death, who owed her unfortunate existence to Brahma and his mind-born son, Shiva. Patterns for an unwanted envoy to lose his way inside. He wonders, as he picks up his pace, your father, turning corner after corner, if that is what happened before his birth, because the chilli merchant had no wife to squat down on her haunches first thing in the morning and draw the symbol of protection outside their front door.

Your father sees Yama jumping lightly off his black buffalo and stepping forward with his midnight feet through the sky-blue door, smiling like a long-lost uncle. Sees him taking Kamatchi's hand, the half-sister he never knew, the one entombed in your grandfather's past. He leads her out, Yama, with his songs rather than his noose. Takes her along dusty lanes into the green and gold of the paddy where children swim in the cooling well that waters the fields. He wonders, your young father, why the Lord did not act, as he did in the myth of Markandeya. When Yama came for him, the priest-boy refused to submit, throwing himself up against the stone lingam. Yama threw his noose around the boy's body, which circled the lingam too. Yielding to the plea of his young devotee, Shiva Kala pushed up through the top of the stone column, in his four-armed form. With a trident in one hand, and an axe in the other, he brought his left foot up to kick Yama away. The servant of Death fell from his mount, the black buffalo, and the god of Time saved Markandeya, his child, keeping him sixteen forever.

\*

You look at the ocean for the first time as one might look at a bowl of dirty rainwater. The sea is grey, and a huge disappointment to you. In your TV, sapphire-blue waves arched and rose over the words *Hawaii Five-O* and on your bed, you pored over its lavender-blue form in the book of fairy tales belonging



to your brother, a birthday present from an auntie who lived in the flat upstairs. You wished the book was yours, but since your brother didn't mind, you took it from his room and lost yourself within its pages while he traversed your concrete playground at dusk.

The ocean was meant to be blue, all the shades of blue, with crystal-white foam cresting its waves. That was what the book had shown you, the image of the swan princess staring longingly from her fisherman husband's doorway. On the shores of that painted ocean, she had lain, the swan girl, naked as a newborn when he found her, her moon-white legs tangled up in his dark netting.

You gaze at the carpet of sand before you, littered, not with shells or naked swan princesses, but driftwood, discarded sweet wrappers, empty Coca-Cola cans and cigarette ends. Your sister does not seem to mind and perches on a log a few metres away, gossiping with a school friend she has arranged to meet here. They compare their bell-bottoms, their teachers at school – including your father – and the new film from America, which is playing in the town's only cinema. You walk to the water's edge, an imp in flip-flops, and gaze out towards the horizon. A thin white surf separates the slate-grey water from a sky which has turned the colour of bone. You did not know then that your future lay across that expanse, over a shifting boundary line, beyond oceans – oceans away from your father.

\*


Your young father stands before his own appa. He has returned home, not from one of his drunken escapades, but from a brief sojourn in Madras and told his chilli merchant father he does not want to live at the matam in Tiruvottiyur to learn the hymns of the saints and follow the path of a temple singer. He wants to go to university, to become an English teacher. His father's dark irises glitter black with rage. He remembers his mother's hand, extending out towards him, the intricate mandala drawn in forever ink across the top of it like a talisman. His mother, Mariyayee Ammal, who was still young. On the cusp of thirty. She silenced her husband with a sharp look. She knew the lengths he'd gone to, Chidambaram Pillai, to arrange a tutelage with that esteemed guru in the town the Lord himself had once traversed, to assist that devil of a saint Sundarar with his second marriage to a temple dancer. A thousand years ago.

She died nine months after you turned two, your grandmother. Your sister was ten, and your brother, one. He'd refused to go back during those last days of her life, your father, to that dusty village steeped in the past. He'd buried it like a precious object at the bottom of a jewellery box. He cited the excuse about it being exam time and had encouraged your mother to go, to take all of you with her, and when you were gone, he drank every night, alone, sitting on the cool

tilled floor, the curtains drawn, avoiding the company of his usual friends. There was no one to get angry with during those drunken binges, only himself, but he always rose at the appointed hour, at dawn, and readied himself for work. He half-boiled two eggs and put them on his pan-fried bread, as your mother would have done, and made himself a strong cup of Nescafé to banish his hangover. He would walk the length of the exam hall with his hands clasped behind his back, fixing his gaze on the bowed heads of his students. He'd chosen this path, one that would hurt him in the long run, rather than look upon the face of a woman who'd lost her mind.

A lotus flower returned to the mud.

The guilt of his decision would haunt him for the rest of his days. He would never be able to say he carried his mother's ashes in the cupped palms of his hands, even the bones and gristle of her, from the cold pyre to the urn. Would never be able to say he walked from the burning ground into the sacred waters of the Kaveri, to upend her remains from its clay chamber, then watch the current take her. Take your grandmother past the villages of your origin, past the city of the cosmic dancer, to Poompuhar where the mouth of the river lies, where it rushes into the Bay of Bengal, merging finally with the great ocean beyond.



**Devika Ponnambalam** is the author of *I Am Not Your Eve*, which was shortlisted for the Saltire Society's First Book Award, the Royal Society of Literature's Christopher Bland Prize and the Walter Scott Prize for Historical Fiction in 2023. She trained in Directing at the National Film and Television School and holds an MA in Creative Writing from the University of East Anglia. She has made numerous short films and worked with Film Four and the British Film Institute, as well in mainstream TV. She was writer-in-residence with Edinburgh UNESCO City of Literature in 2024. *A Dream to the Sleeping Soul* is a prelude to her second novel-in-progress.



# CONNECTIONS



# TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT RESIDENCY PROGRAMMES

Q&A with Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson, Judith Rossell  
and Miodrag Kojadinović

Rachel Bulman and Du Lei

The residency programme is a creative scheme participated in by UNESCO Cities of Literature all over the world. It champions interconnectivity and communication, offering writers opportunities for cultural and literary collaboration. Many Cities of Literature run independent schemes, like the Exeter x Barcelona Residency Exchange, the International Granada Writers in Residence, and International Residency Program Reykjavík, with durations varying from two weeks to eight months.

We interviewed three previous writers in residence, to find out more about their experiences.

**Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson** is the Sunday Times Bestselling author of *The Order of Legends* trilogy, and inaugural winner of the Future Worlds Prize in 2020. Her debut novel, *The Principle of Moments*, was published in January 2024. She was awarded a writing residency in Barcelona, Spain, which she completed in 2024.



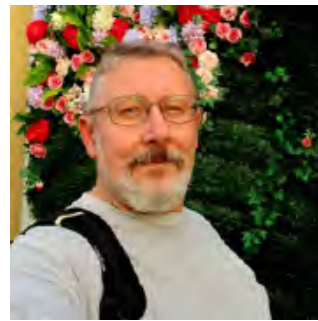
Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson



Judith Rossell  
*'On Jackson Street'*

**Judith Rossell** is an author and illustrator of children's books. She has written sixteen books and illustrated more than eighty, and her books have been translated into twenty languages. She was awarded a writing residency in Heidelberg, Germany, which she completed in 2020 and 2022.

**Miodrag Kojadinović** (廓·妙·讷) is an award-winning Canadian author, published in seventeen languages across twenty-eight countries. He was a university lecturer in Asia, professional translator in Serbia, and journalist in Canada and the Netherlands. He was awarded a writing residency in Nanjing, China, which he completed in 2023.



Miodrag Kojadinović  
'Self-Portrait'

### What did you find the most interesting about your time on the residency?

**Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson:** The most interesting aspect of my time at the residency was the feeling of being simultaneously very immersed in a different culture, but also quite isolated. As someone who requires a fair bit of isolation to get meaningful writing done, I was in heaven. So I was not isolated in a bad sense but essentially given a room of my own to just write, without any of the usual social expectations and pressures of life. I was also able to venture into the city whenever I liked, which was hugely inspirational. I was surprised and delighted by just how much of the city and its monuments bled into the work I was doing at the time.

**Judith Rossell:** Heidelberg is a really beautiful, interesting old city, and I was staying in a little village not far from Heidelberg called Dilsburg, which has got a ruined castle and a medieval wall around it on top of a hill which is all forest, and there's a big river around the bottom. The house I was staying in is part of the castle, and so it's built onto the city walls. It's just like being in a Grimms' fairy tale. I was so taken with how beautiful and atmospheric it was. The first time I was there it was winter, and so it would snow sometimes, bringing this mist up from the river through the forest. There was supposed to be a wolf in the forest. I didn't see it, but people talked about it. And the next village on the other side of the river had four castles in it, and then you could catch the bus to Heidelberg or the train, and that's a bigger town, and so beautiful. So, I think I hadn't really expected it to be so interesting and so beautiful. And it's interesting to stay in another country, and to stay in the same place for a bit, so you start to get to know the neighbourhood and some of the people. All that was great. I really enjoyed it. I was very sad to go home because I was meant to be there for three months in 2020 but COVID-19 arrived sort of halfway through, so I had to go home.

**Miodrag Kojadinović:** Since I had previously lived and worked in southern China and spent a lot of time in the ex-colony of Hong Kong, seeking Western mores and customs at times, the interesting part was discovering specifically Nanjing, not China as such. Despite its name 'nan' meaning 'south' and 'jing' a 'capital', this city was not like where I had lived in the true south, where it never snowed or froze outside. It seemed much more northern, kind of similar to Changsha, to its neighbour Shanghai or even to Beijing. There were things that vaguely reminded me of 'my' China, south of the Tropic of Cancer, but most of what I saw and experienced and how people behaved was decidedly northern, a steadily anchored part of the Chinese state as an organized, hierarchical concept.

### What were your greatest challenges?

**Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson:** The greatest challenge I faced whilst on the residency was feeling like I had 'made the most of it'. Obviously, it is totally impossible to quantify or prove if I did or not. But in the end, I think I can say I did. I wrote many works. I explored the city, and the surrounding areas – which I would not have been able to do if not for the generosity of Dolores, the kind woman who looks after the villa, and her daughter. I tried new food, went on long walks, visited parks, churches and cafés... Honestly, the residency was not challenging for me, but one of the best months I have spent in years!

**'I am most grateful for the time it gave me, uninterrupted weeks of silence and solitude that allowed my work and capacity for work to compound.'**

**Judith Rossell:** The language. When I first went, I didn't speak any German, really. So that was an interesting challenge.

In addition, I was staying in the ruined castle. At nighttime in the winter, I was the only person there. So, it was a bit creepy, but not in a bad way. On the other side of the river you could see the little lights of the village. I didn't feel like I was completely alone but there was a weathervane on top of the castle, and it would spin and make these creaking noises. And it took me a little while to figure out where the sound was from. And then another time, I heard a breathing sound. The castle is about five storeys tall, and I was on the top storey, and then it's one room per floor; it's quite a narrow, tall tower. And the bottom few floors were very old, they were from the thirteenth century or something. One night I heard this breathing sound, so I went down to the basement of this tower where they had these stone arches, and I found out that the sound was the heater! Even when I stood next to it and watched it making this noise, I could



see that it was a machine and nothing to be scared of on a dark, dim evening in the cold ancient basement. It still was quite creepy, even though I could tell it wasn't a monster. But it was good. It was quite fun.

**Miodrag Kojadinović:** Sticking with my pescatarianism. And I failed. When I lived in China 2005-2015 (with a brief break away from it in the middle), I cooked for myself and/or went to restaurants I chose, so it was easy. Even though I do occasionally eat meat when travelling to try exotic, once in a lifetime flavours, here I had to accommodate others. Strict avoidance was not doable when almost every day we were taken to dinners as a group, where you eat Chinese style. For example, everybody takes a bit from every course/serving on a round table, so I did take a few chow-size pieces of meat maybe four or five times while in Nanjing.

Another challenge was communication with the world outside. Many Western internet sites are blocked in China unless you use proxies (which technically is permitted). The programme for bypassing that limitation that I had had in the 2000s and 2010s simply did not work any longer and it was not worth it getting new ones for just two weeks in China. So, I did not know of an important traumatic family event until I returned. Although this was probably for the best because I could not help in any way or leave early, so, in my ignorance of the developments back home, I enjoyed my stay.

### What surprised you the most about the city you were a resident in?

**Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson:** I had thought I would be staying in central Barcelona, so to be in the rural area that surrounds it was a lovely surprise. I hadn't expected to go for a hike through the hills just to get my weekly shopping, and it was a really welcome break from my busy city routine in London. But the city itself was only a twenty-minute train ride away, so I could get there very quickly.

**'I was surprised by how friendly and kind the people were. I made some genuine friends.'**

**Judith Rossell:** To be honest, I was surprised by how friendly and kind the people were. I made some genuine friends who are coming to visit me in Australia next year. I wasn't expecting people to be unpleasant, I suppose, but I guess I didn't necessarily expect to make genuine friends. And like I said before, it was much prettier than I thought. I mean, I didn't think it was going to be hideous, but I found it very charming. The bit of Germany where Heidelberg is, is gorgeous. It's got these curling rivers, all these little villages with beautiful

old castles and churches and forest all around. And the second time I went back, it was spring, and there were just little flowers everywhere and baby deer in the forest. It was like being in a fairy tale, really beautiful.

**Miodrag Kojadinović:** The extent to which digitalization has happened between 2015, when I taught in Guangzhou last, and 2023 when I visited Nanjing. It has become normal in that interlude for virtually everyone to use mobile phones to pay not only for air tickets and such but for trivial things like lunch and paper tissue.

I was intrigued by the digital payment to a person in a Monkey King mask who stands at the embankment to a tourist boat dock and allows for pictures of the mythical creature with passers-by to be taken for cash, and they did it with me and asked to be paid which my hosts duly did by touching their phone to the street artist's one. The hosts explained to me that even beggars would receive donations from people passing by through their mobile phones. I was flabbergasted.

### What was something you learned during your residency? And what are you most grateful for now that your residency has ended?

**Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson:** I am most grateful for the time it gave me, uninterrupted weeks of silence and solitude that allowed my work and capacity for work to compound – in the sense that I can get exponentially more work done in two uninterrupted weeks of writing than in two hours, or two days. I learned to be unapologetic about taking time to write, to not feel guilty for switching off my emails. It's all right if my admin is imperfect as long as my writing practice is top notch. I had to make decisions about what I prioritized, and it forced me to confront many problems. For example, what I wanted my days to look like when I returned home, the discipline I would have to learn if that was to be possible, and also the money I would have to make.

**Judith Rossell:** I did learn a bit of German and I can get by speaking it now. Before the residency, I couldn't speak German at all. The grammar is a real killer, and I wasn't expecting to be any good, but my German teacher said that we've got to the stage where people will understand me – and understand that I can't speak German! I think the language was a big thing for me.

I did get a bit obsessed with German history. I think at school we just learnt the war history. So, I did get very interested in older history. There are some really famous cathedrals around that part of Germany, and I loved visiting these massive old cathedrals.



I think it's been really life expanding for me in a way. There's a part of Germany which I now feel I know quite well. I've got friends there, and I've visited a lot of places around there. When I see anything online about that part of Germany, I feel a connection to that little bit of the country now, which is really cool for me.

Before I went, I wouldn't have had any particular thoughts about it. Now I feel like I know it quite well.

**Miodrag Kojadinović:** I was very happy to visit the Taiping Museum on the last day, after the official programme was over. For the last two days we could choose new sites to visit that our hosts would accompany us on. While visiting the Taiping Museum, I learned new, strange details about the Taiping Rebellion: a wonderful but missed opportunity for modernizing China more than half a century before Sun Yat-sen, that sadly failed because the Westerners were afraid of losing their interests and influence they had established earlier, so they helped the ruling Qing dynasty to win over Taiping.

**One of the purposes of this project is cultural exchange, not only between writers, but also for many readers to learn about diverse cultures and cities through your works. When you create based on this city, will you only consider your own creative inspiration and emotional expression, or will you consider whether your content and expression can be understood by readers from other cultures? How will you balance the two?**

**Esmie Jikiemi-Pearson:** As someone whose only language is English and who must contend with the demands of the UK publishing industry, this is difficult. Whilst in Barcelona, I was put in touch with fantasy publishers there, and I have decided to reach out to them when the book is ready to be published, explaining the genesis and inspiration of the story as being intimately connected to Barcelona, and the surrounding cultural sites. My hope is that they will agree to publish the book in Spanish, so that it can be stocked in Spanish bookshops, and reach readers from a culture that I am not part of but was only a very grateful guest of for a short time.

**Judith Rossell:** I've always done quite well in Germany with my books. My books have all been translated into German in the past, which is why I think I got the residency, and this new one is going to go into German as well, next year. I love writing for children. My stories are not necessarily set in the actual world. It's a sort of a fictionalized version of the world. But it makes me very happy that the books are translated for kids around the world. They obviously get something out of it. The next book I'm writing, I'm thinking of setting it in some sort of

version of Germany, just because I found it quite interesting. That'd be quite fun.

My previous books went into German, Russian, Japanese, lots of countries, and, you know, it's a great thing, isn't it? Those kids in what we think of as very different cultures can still follow one character in an adventure. And I know that the translators make various decisions when they're translating to make it work for the different cultures. But on the whole, I think a story is a story. And my stories have that sort of classic feel, which is a small child in a big world, lots of dangers. It's nice to think that kids can sympathize with the child in the story, whatever part of the world they're in. During my residency, I wrote a novel for children called *The Midwatch*. It's published in Australia now. I'm very proud of it, very happy it's in the world.

**'I think the whole programme should be generally open to writers from the whole world, regardless of their connection to specific cities.'**

**Miodrag Kojadinović:** I have published a book of short stories about China and then had some stories, both from that collection and other, newer ones, appear in multi-author collections and journals.

Let me mention in closing that my connection with a City of Literature, in fact two of them, is somewhat vague.

One is a school year in Quebec City as a kid almost half a century ago, and the other is a year in Utrecht on a scholarship in the 1990s (I was the only Canadian selected for scholarship that year). I was still chosen for Nanjing, as a representative of Quebec, what with my Canadian passport. While I appreciate it, I must emphasize that I think the whole programme should be generally open to writers from the whole world, regardless of their connection to specific cities. Because why not? Go ahead and show the world your UNESCO City of Literature status but also acknowledge that it therefore enables you to be generous to everyone.

As we conclude our conversation with the three writers, it's clear that different cities and cultural environments – from the mountain roads of Barcelona to the castles of Heidelberg and the fusion of modernity and tradition in Nanjing – offer unique sources of inspiration. These new settings provide writers with fresh creativity and a broader perspective on their craft.

In these environments, the writers have also formed deep connections with local people and fellow creators, which is a key goal of the residency programme: to foster cross-cultural networks. These exchanges can help writers find common ground in the global literary context, enriching their work. Additionally, each



residency offers a unique experience. Barcelona provided Esmie with a rural area that is different from the city centre, allowing her to escape from the busy city life of London and focus on writing. Esmie benefited from several weeks of uninterrupted writing time, boosting her productivity and helping her prioritize writing in her future life.

Judith fell in love with Heidelberg while exploring the forest and castle. The charming natural scenery and historic castles sparked Judith's interest in German culture. She learned German and made friends with the locals. The residency programme provided Judith with a valuable opportunity to explore other literary cities and learn about world cultures.

Miodrag's experience in Nanjing also perfectly illustrates this point. Nanjing has a long history and culture, with many historical sites and museums. Miodrag's experience at the Taiping Museum is an important part of exploring Chinese history and culture, and it is also one of the goals of UNESCO's writers-in-residence programme: to help writers explore and experience other cultures in the world, and to promote the exchange of world cultures through literary exchange.

Ultimately, the UNESCO residency programme not only strengthens writers' understanding of global cultures but also promotes cultural exchange. As Miodrag suggests, perhaps one day the programme will open its doors to all literature lovers around the world.

## 'INDIE PUBLISHING IS AN INTERLINKED ECOSYSTEM'

Q&A with Mia Nie, Comic Artist and Creative Director at Express Media

Chloe Hatch and Liana Patrick

At 9 p.m. we sit down at our computers to call Mia Nie, who has generously agreed to call us at 7 a.m. her time. As a self-described 'Chinese-Australian comic artist, essayist, illustrator, zine-maker (short for 'magazine', zines are small, self-published works) and award-nominated ex-poet' (Nie), Mia is a well-known and active figure in both Melbourne's literary and queer scenes. In March 2023, she was appointed as Creative Producer at Express Media, an organization focused on promoting young creatives across Australia. Her creative work includes long-form essays and zines that span years of creativity (Nie). We spoke about her experiences in Melbourne's independent creative industry and networks, alongside the connection between her queerness and creativity.

**Chloe Hatch:** Can you tell us a bit about yourself and your current projects?

**Mia Nie:** My name is Mia Nie and I am a comic artist and an occasional essayist. Creatively, I was working on my 'magnum opus' – *SAMSARA DREAMIN'* – for a couple of years.



Mia Nie





From 'Lone Shadow'  
by Mia Nie

I had one chapter out of roughly fifteen published online and then I got a job [at Express Media], so I didn't have time to do that anymore! I have been on a bit of a creative hiatus for the last year because I've been focused on making a living. However, I recently made a comic that was published in a book by Fremantle Press. My main job is as creative producer for Express Media, which is a youth literary organization. As creative producer I am in charge of running events, programmes, and administering grants and prizes; that's a part-time job, and I typically juggle at least one other gig at any given time. Right now, I am also doing disability support work on the side; I have one client who is on Australia's National Disability Insurance Scheme. I initially met him because that scheme also offers an arts access programme. I was doing a mentorship with him because he is also a trans comic artist and, through that, I became more of a general support worker. I also just wrapped up another editing contract for the University of Melbourne. It was for a really big, years-long research project called Folio, which is essentially an industry survey of the Australian comics scene. It's a very multi-faceted project. A lot of it is also about industry communication: making resources about what comic artists do professionally and how they make their money, because there's not a lot of money in comics – big surprise! Especially in Australia, which has a quite small and negligible publishing scene when it comes to comics specifically.

**Chloe Hatch:** This year, you were published in *Avast!: Pirate Stories from Transgender Authors*, and you also designed the cover illustration. We would love you to talk us through this experience of getting published: what was this process like for you?

**Mia Nie:** Alison Evans – one of the editors, who I've known for many years – reached out to me near the start of 2023 and asked if I would like to be part of a pirate-themed anthology.

I was essentially brought on based on industry connections, and through general friendship and participation in the self-publishing scene. Melbourne's social scene feels very small, so I think if you are a socially outgoing person, you quickly feel like you know everyone! I finished my piece around October last year. It's the most recent comic that I've made, and it was published relatively recently – I think June or July [2024]. In terms of my emotional experience of making the work... At the time I agreed to do it, I was not yet employed with Express Media.

I was living off my savings but it was a creatively fruitful time for me. My output was really high – I was making over one hundred pages of comics a year – and the quality of my work became really good really quickly because I was working so much. I agreed to this comic for *AVAST!* about three weeks before



I landed my current job at Express Media. Back then, I thought I could bash it out in three weeks and call it a day, but inevitably ended up stretching to the final October deadline! I was sneaking an hour or two of working time during my lunch break or after work.

I was also working on *SAMSARA DREAMIN’* before I signed on to this anthology. *SAMSARA DREAMIN’* is extremely detail-orientated and quite thematically dark; by the time I finished that first chapter I was ready to take a break from it, but I still wanted to keep up my creative output. So, I signed onto *AVAST!* for Fremantle Press, and the comic that I made uses an alternate universe version of the same characters from *SAMSARA*. I conceived it as a ‘filler episode’ – it was meant to be light-hearted fun! But inevitably, because of the nature of comics, I found it quite gruelling.

**‘Because Melbourne has quite a small indie publishing industry, many small presses have close relationships with the relatively robust self-publishing scene.’**

Also, it was difficult not to feel frustrated about the financial proposition because the advance was quite low. Australian advances tend to be very low in any kind of publishing, but when I added up how much time it took to complete the comic, versus how much I got for it, I think I was working for about four bucks an hour. That’s why I stopped being a full-time artist – it doesn’t pay the bills!

In terms of how I got the cover gig: I think the editors felt bad about how little I was paid versus the amount of work that I ended up doing for the comic. They asked me whether I would want to do the cover for almost double my advance, and I agreed to it! But because I based the cover on the comic, and I had reached the point of being quite creatively frustrated, I’m not necessarily happy with how the cover turned out. But that’s the nature of the work.

However, it felt good to be published in a book. I have been self-publishing for thirteen years but it’s nice to be in something with an ISBN. I’m quite grateful, now that I’ve had some distance to process!

**Chloe Hatch: Is the experience of self-publishing online versus being published digitally different, and how does this compare to physical literary networks?**

**Mia Nie:** There wasn’t a big transition between self-publishing and digital publishing for me. Most of my work is created digitally, so there was no change with my actual workflow. The digital ecosystem in Australia – of independent

publishing – is closely interlinked with the physical zine space as well.

Because Melbourne has quite a small indie publishing industry, many small presses have close relationships with the relatively robust self-publishing scene. I’ve been volunteering in this space for thirteen or fourteen years now; that’s how I began drawing. It was also my entry into the creative scene, into self-publishing and more formal publishing. I initially met Leah Jing McIntosh, who is the founder and primary editor of *Liminal Magazine*, through a zine-anthology that Leah made with Rachel Ang – who is another Asian comic artist – about seven years ago. That’s how I formed that contact. I think a lot of the editors for *Liminal* are in the zine space as well. The creative scene was also my primary social space for many years.

**‘It’s really cool that they just “invented” The Wheeler Centre for the City of Literature bid. I think it has had a really significant impact on a lot of people’s careers.’**

In Melbourne, indie publishing is an interlinked ecosystem. It’s the same networks; the people who do self-publishing end up in formal publishing, that’s how everyone gets their start in Melbourne. In the comic space, there’s an independent publishing press called Glom Press that’s run by four friends of mine out of their house! Glom Press acts as a bridge between self-publishing and larger publishing houses.

**Liana Patrick: In what way do you feel your role as Creative Producer at Express Media allows you to champion the voices of marginalized writers and smaller DIY communities?**

**Mia Nie:** One of the main things that I do in my job is organize programmes for young writers. When I’m organizing those programmes alone, I get to choose who facilitates them. I try to choose people who I think will benefit from this opportunity – early-career artists, artists from more marginal identities and intersections. Participants’ identities are a big factor in who we consider.

Express Media is a very future-facing organization. It’s a four-person organization and three of us are transgender. I think Express Media, more than any other organization I have encountered in my time in the arts, really embodies my values. A lot of larger arts organizations do PR speak and then they just hire white women! Express Media is very progressive with its hiring and publishing practices.



**Liana Patrick:** You have been working with the Emerging Writers’ Festival since 2020. Could you tell us about your experience leading the Queer Zine workshop for this year’s programme?

**Mia Nie:** It was great! I’m very close to the Emerging Writers’ Festival (EWF) because their office space is adjacent to Express Media’s, and often I’ll go to the EWF office and hang out with them! We have a very close personal and working relationship.

Even before I got the Express Media job, I was known to the Emerging Writers’ Festival because a lot of the people who work for EWF are also involved in the zine space, self-publishing space, and independent arts space. I’ve been friends with one of the CEOs, Ruby-Rose Pivet-Marsh, for many years. This was the first workshop I’ve done for the EWF that wasn’t cancelled

for low attendance, which happens with comics a lot of the time, unfortunately. But this one stuck; I think we had a really good turnout, and everyone was very enthusiastic!

This particular workshop was organized in collaboration with the Port Phillip Library Service and the Australian Queer Archives. I co-ran that workshop primarily with Clare O’Hanlon, one of the volunteers at the Queer Archives. Clare pulled a lot of zines from the archive; when we had our pre-workshop strategy discussion, we were talking about our first experiences with zines. For both of us, discovering zines was also discovering the queer world and our identity. Clare managed to find both our first zines, which was very cool!

I liked that workshop because I am interested in the history of publishing, self-publishing and zines. It was nice working closely with the Australian Queer Archives because Clare explored the historical side of zine history in Australia, and in Melbourne in particular. That’s something I get really nerdy about, and we got to talk about it for half the session!



Mia Nie and Selina Moir-Wilson  
pictured at the Emerging Writers’ Festival  
Photo by Kat Stevens (Instagram @katptureit)

**Chloe Hatch:** You were a recipient of The Wheeler Centre’s ‘The Next Chapter’ award in 2020. The Wheeler Centre, a literary and publishing hub, was created as part of Melbourne’s bid to become a UNESCO City of Literature sixteen years ago, and the success of this endeavour led to its designation in 2008. How has Melbourne’s status as a City of Literature impacted you personally, alongside the city’s wider creative scene?

**Mia Nie:** It has had a massive impact on me. Express Media is based in The Wheeler Centre, alongside the Emerging Writers’ Festival and the City of Literature organization. As a physical office space, The Wheeler Centre is a real hub for the Melbourne arts scene, and I think it’s had a very tangible influence. I would say I owe my entire creative career to The Wheeler Centre. The funding from that ‘Next Chapter’ fellowship allowed me to stay unemployed whilst writing my thesis for my master’s degree in Creative Writing, Publishing and Editing, and when I was working full-time as an artist. I’ve only got as far in my career as I have because of that grant.

I think it’s really cool that they just ‘invented’ The Wheeler Centre for the City of Literature bid. I think it has had a really significant impact on a lot of people’s careers, which is awesome. Personally, the centre helped me become known in the wider publishing space. I’ve been a known artist in the zine circle for a long time, but this was my ‘foot in the door’ in terms of getting more work with the EWF and then becoming known to the organizations inside The Wheeler Centre, which is how I landed my job with Express Media. That has been the trajectory of my career: going from self-publishing and indie arts to working within The Wheeler Centre.

**Liana Patrick:** Could you tell us about any upcoming projects that excite you, both professionally at Express Media and in your own creative life?

**Mia Nie:** The main thing that Express Media does is publish a magazine called *Voiceworks*. The current editor of *Voiceworks* is Selina Moir-Wilson, who is a brilliant comic artist and writer, and a very good friend. I think Selina is the best editor *Voiceworks* has had in about a decade; I think that they are absolutely killing it. We both got our respective jobs within two weeks of each other, and we were both really inspired by the history of Express Media and *Voiceworks* magazine. *Voiceworks* started out as a zine back in 1985 and when you look at their issues from the 90s, they have a very countercultural, ‘zine-y’ quality to them. We were both inspired by championing a return to this DIY attitude, and I think Selina has done a very good job at that within their tenure as editor. With the last two issues, I’m excited to see Selina go all out! I think that every



issue they make gets better and better.

In terms of my own creative output, I’m excited to start making work again. I just wrapped up this eight-month-long editing project for the University of Melbourne, and it’s very exciting to have it finished so that I can work on my own creative work again. I don’t know whether I have a specific project in mind; I’m just excited to start drawing and writing again in general! I’m excited for this long break to be over.

**Chloe Hatch:** And finally, throughout many of your creative pieces and interviews, you speak strongly about the importance of community building. How do you envisage the literary future of Melbourne and is there anything about its current state that you would wish to change?

**Mia Nie:** This is an interesting one – we are getting utopian fantasy in this interview! I’ve always emphasized the importance of community building for several reasons. Firstly, I think so much of how you get work and get published is through networking, which is very apparent through my answers in this interview. I essentially have a career because I am good at making friends! A lot of the opportunities you end up getting in the arts are through meeting people, talking to people, working with people, sitting with people on their lunch breaks...

**‘So much non-profit work is at the whims of government funding, which is constantly getting slashed.’**

I think that social aspect is a large part of what sustains me and keeps me invested in the arts. It’s not good money; for comics, especially. It’s not a pleasant medium to work in: it’s physically taxing, it’s very time-consuming, and there’s no money in it. So, you do it out of a sense of compulsion, at least that’s what I feel! But the social element gives me animus to continue engaging with the creative arts. Australian cities are often not geographically laid out for high-density open population centres. I don’t think Melbourne’s creative scene will get much bigger than it already is and as a result, I don’t think there will be much more money than there already is. When you are working in the arts, so much non-profit work is at the whims of government funding, which is constantly getting slashed by successive administrations, which in turn are increasingly right wing and reactionary. This is the case all over the world.

Therefore, in terms of what I envision as the future of Australian publishing: because of funding problems I think that the relationship between self-publishing and other modes of publishing will continue to deepen over time. A lot of it

comes back to economics. People who self-publish are used to producing physical media on the lowest possible budget, and a lot of the skillset that companies in the arts look for when they are hiring is experience, initiative and being able to think strategically about budgeting.

What would I like to see in Melbourne’s arts scene...? A billion more dollars every year would be nice! However, if we are talking true utopian vision I think a universal basic income, so that people don’t have to worry about hustling constantly to survive. It is the greatest thing that any government can do for an arts scene. Financial worries prevent people from pursuing the arts, which they want to do...

As we close Zoom, the clock is nearing 10 p.m. Mia’s closing thoughts on Melbourne’s creative industry contain some uncomfortable truths: the creative arts are not treated like the immensely skill-based works that they are. In order for the arts to grow and flourish, these outputs need championing, both locally in Melbourne and internationally. Though artists in Australia receive funding and international promotion (Australian Arts go Global), literary support remains disconnected and underappreciated. As a UNESCO City of Literature, Melbourne should continue to fund and support independent publishers and writers. The Wheeler Centre’s success as a cultural hub is largely due to the strong bonds that have been forged within the community. This method of connection-making in independent publishing should extend beyond this sphere to Australia and the UNESCO network globally.

Mia Nie’s creative work, essays and social media pages can be found at:  
[www.girlwithhorn.wordpress.com](http://www.girlwithhorn.wordpress.com)

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## ALL NECKLACES SHIELDING THE GODDESS

Natalia Matolinets

Translated from Ukrainian by Hanna Leliv

### *Steftsia*

Steftsia arranged the necklaces on her chest as if preparing for a church holiday: fine pearls, slightly curved like river pebbles, a string of garnet beads, dark as blood and rows of koralis with a smattering of silver and brass beads. She added a glimmering glass necklace on top, along with a beaded herdan fastened to a red ribbon around her neck. The red string was essential – no shield was too strong when practising witchcraft. Steftsia had beaded plenty of herdans herself and received just as many in payment. The colourful ones, like a flower garden beneath the windows, with dense, star-shaped patterns, were the dearest to her heart. She crowned the coral necklaces with zgardas, a string of darkened brass crosses. Altogether, this tinkling, colourful luxury – worthy of a wealthy young lady, no less! – cost so much that Steftsia could have a new house built, should she be willing to sell it all, that is. But such an idea would never cross anyone's mind. The jewellery was cherished and passed down as inheritance – a young woman's amulet preserving memory. As power, too, that witches passed down to their successors.

### *Niia*

Grandma Steftsia had sold her last necklace back when she was living under occupation, three decades before Niia was born. At that time, genuine coral beads the colour of a grapefruit core were as rare as grapefruits or oranges themselves. Niia invented the name for this shade herself years later when she bought her first koralis and ran her fingers along the barrel beads threaded onto the string, interspersed with silver cylinders that resembled seeds. As she touched the beads, she recalled her grandmother's story: how she had sold her koralis for the equivalent of two months' salary and never regretted it, as it was a small fortune by the standards of those days. Perhaps her only regret was not preserving anything for Niia. But such were those times: people had nothing to call their own; family inheritances and stories were scattered; names were forgotten or silenced and if someone expressed too much sentiment for the past, they could have found themselves in harm's way. Niia never had the chance to ask all her questions while her grandmother was still alive. Now, these questions



pinched and pricked at her, resurfacing in her dreams.

She often dreamed of a small house on a hill. At night, a woman would emerge from the door, slowly descend the steps, and walk around the house, circle by circle, in hypnotic slowness. Sometimes, Niia thought it was Grandma Steftsia; other times, an unfamiliar young lady. Beads would slip from her fingers, falling to the ground – hot coral, shiny glass, amber, garnet and pearl as fine as raindrops in a sun shower. Niia's heart would twist with anxiety: *she had to run to the young lady, she had to gather the beads! A torn necklace* – the thought pulsed in her mind – *meant trouble*. But the moment she took a step, the ground would sink beneath her feet and the dream would dissolve.

### Steftsia

That autumn, Steftsia threaded a silver bead on to the bottom row of her korali. Anka had given it to her as a token of gratitude for aiding with an ailment, bringing it straight from the goldsmiths. She promised to bring more once she gave birth, provided Steftsia helped with that as well. Anka was very anxious: in her family, babies had always been born frail. Even her own mother had struggled to nurture her. And with the times so uncertain – with this war raging on – you never knew what could happen tomorrow, let alone think about having a baby.

At first, Steftsia brushed her off, grumbling about how no one had ever heard of her refusing to assist a young, pretty girl with her troubles or ailments.

'Anka, dear, for the love of God, take it away, take this silver away.'

But it was nothing more than a familiar ritual: to decline twice before agreeing the third time. After all, witches always charged a fee for their help, whether large or small. Always. And what was meant to happen tomorrow was inevitable.

With the new bead adding weight, Steftsia's korali augmented her power. When she began to prophesy, she found it easier to dive into the tangle of fortunes and misfortunes; when she approached the sick, she was quicker to perceive where the pain had nestled and determine if she could chase it away. At times, the red ribbon of her herdan would almost scorch her neck when someone cast an envious eye her way. Yet, none of Steftsia's necklaces ever tore, which meant that no malevolent gaze was strong enough to breach such a shield. After all, she was the only witch for all the villages around.

### Niia

Niia bought her first coral necklace at a craft fair. She overpaid for it, but as soon as she held it in her hand, she could not bear to put it down. She had only

planned to attend the fair to keep a friend company, sipping espresso tonic and listening to the barista spinning stories. Splurging on jewellery was not part of that plan. But when she saw those korali, her heart skipped a beat and all thoughts of the folly of spontaneous shopping vanished.

That night, Niia dreamed of beads transforming into dragon's teeth, as in the Greek myths, while Medea – the first witch and the princess of Colchis – wandered around the shadowy house on the hill, sowing the teeth into the garden beds so they would sprout into warriors, just as the myths described. The scene felt bittersweet: *here I am, sinking my teeth into this soil, claiming it as mine, and warriors, both men and women, shall rise from it*. Meanwhile, the moon high above watched the ghostly Medea, shimmering with silver, before descending onto her chest and nestling there, a crescent turned upside down.

In the morning, Niia was scrolling through her Instagram feed when she came across a lunnytsia, a crescent-shaped medallion that looked exactly like the piece of jewellery from her dream. Without hesitation, she ordered it along with a bunch of lavender, as lavender – how could she have forgotten? – was a well-known remedy for anxiety.

### Steftsia

When the occupiers entered the village and herded everyone to witness their arrival, Steftsia doubled over with nausea. She had known their arrival was inevitable: the frontline had shifted, coiling like a viper. Anka had kept bringing disturbing news and she had already been dreaming of the barbaric violence and the wall of fire. Yet, the reality was even worse than her nightmares, with no chance to wake up or escape.

Before Steftsia's eyes, a convoy of drenched, mud-spattered occupiers transformed into a many-legged centipede dragging its belly along the ground, bringing with it misery and death. The stench of death assaulted her nostrils. Nausea surged, even though Steftsia remained motionless, breathing as quietly as possible, only her fingers reaching for her korali. If only they could shield her...

Suddenly, a barbarian's hand shot out and yanked the korali from her neck. The chapped skin, the dirt beneath the nails, the thick black hair on the knuckles – these details seared into Steftsia's memory. The lifeless eyes of a lifeless beast. As the beads scattered with a dull patter on the ground, she knew all too well that this would end badly. It had always been like this – a torn necklace meant trouble. She was stung by the harsh words splashed onto her like pig swill.

'You all are living too well here.'

As if living well were a sin. Perhaps in the eyes of these strangers, it was. How wretched their own lives must have been if they took such delight in



stripping it away from others! Relishing in small cruelties, ripping a young woman's necklace just to scatter the beads into the mud – *take this!* Much later, Steftsia realized that this was the very nature of the barbarians: to inflict grief through petty acts, in whatever way they could. Shattering windows in the mayor's house. Breaking doors in the school building. Destroying books in the library. Everything beautiful, everything precious – it all inevitably vanished. It was as if a black abyss yawned in the village, ever lurking just behind you, ready to swallow you as soon as you turned around. That was why Steftsia began to look back so frequently in the streets: she had to ensure that the darkness had not yet caught up with her.

Smiles and lively conversations soon slipped away too, along with those who refused to bow to the new authorities. Even the tinkling of the last warm days seemed to fade away.

### Niia

After her first coral necklace – an antique bought at the craft fair – and the brass lunnytsia – suggested by her Instagram feed – Niia came across a beaded herdan she'd always longed for, adorned with star-shaped patterns. She sewed a red ribbon onto the back of the herdan for protection, although she could not remember for the life of her where she had heard about this practice. Her hands moved as if they knew exactly which stitches to make, and this certainty somehow brought her a sense of reassurance. *As if this had all happened before.*

A few days later, Niia dreamed of stars falling from the sky above the very same house on the hill. Upon waking, she knew exactly where she was supposed to go. Seized with a burning urge, she snatched the last train ticket available online. Then she clasped the herdan around her neck, slipped on a windbreaker, tossed her korali into her pocket and a pair of warm socks into her backpack and dashed outside before she could second-guess herself or question the frantic hurry: *what the hell is happening, why are you in such a mad rush?*

### Steftsia

Anka wept on Steftsia's porch. Clutching Steftsia's hands, pleading for her to turn back time to rectify it all, promising to pay her – to give her everything, down to her last shirt, because, after all, she was a witch, wasn't she? She was supposed to know how to fix this. But there was no fix. Steftsia could only offer something entirely different.

Who did it and how – these details came to Steftsia through others.

It was him. That man. An intruder. A barbarian officer.

'A monster,' as Anka said.

Since his arrival, he had settled in their house. During lunch, he would put his boots on the table, like an oaf, and threaten to burn the entire village if something was not to his liking. And things were never to his liking, because he was always furious, impatient to leave.

On a Monday night, he downed young wine and then lunged at Anka. She managed to pull away just in time and, what's more, scratched his ugly face so fiercely that blood flowed.

He battered her. That devil's spawn kicked her with his boots, aiming at her stomach. What happened next was all too clear.

The baby was gone.

Later, Anka's grandfather told her that had she been wiser, she would have submitted. 'All women submit,' he said. 'Some with genuine pleasure, others pretending. They all want to stay safe, to survive, and it's worth swallowing a bit of pride for that. Women's destiny has always been this way – who do you think you are, Anka, to defy your fate?'

Steftsia told Anka that her grandfather was a fool and had always been one. What did he even know about pride or fate? It took no wisdom to belittle women. Then Steftsia nodded, acknowledging her friend's story, wiped her tears away with the embroidered flowered sleeve of her dress, and said, 'You will have another baby. I can see it clearly, as clearly as I can see you now.'

Truth be told, Steftsia saw nothing. She did not even try to peek beyond the veil of the future, fearing only darkness and blood. But Anka did not need the truth, she only needed someone to offer her comfort.

Shortly afterward, Steftsia donned her finest attire. Wary of the intruders, she no longer wore elegant garments on ordinary days and felt weakened. But that day, she needed to summon all her strength, so she protected herself with the clinking of her necklaces, using them as a shield. She then made her way to Anka's house – to take a look at Anka's tormentor.

He was clearly of higher rank: wearing good boots, drinking real coffee in the morning. One of those who, upon arriving in the village, looked around with disdain, wrinkling their nose, eager to be sent elsewhere. She noted the thin scratches left by Anka's nails, stretching across his cheek.

Steftsia did not hesitate. She boldly invited him over. The pretext was irrelevant. She summoned her power, igniting a spark of attraction and fanning it into a blaze, sending out a billow of fog – it was as simple as that. When she spoke like this, leaning on her other-worldly power, anyone would obey. Time seemed to gather speed, pushing towards the inevitable because it was easier to endure what was to come, just like that.

So, when Anka's tormentor crossed her threshold, ensnared by enchantment, Steftsia swiftly raised a poker in one sweeping motion with both hands and struck him on the back of his head.



He staggered but did not collapse. *That swine is strong*, Steftsia thought. *Fat and squat like a boar, and probably grunts like one, too.*

'Mama. Grandma, my dears,' Steftsia prayed to the triune force and raised the poker again.

But the invader – *he's nimble, too!* – spun around and seized her by the neck, pressing her against the door. She could barely breathe. His lifeless eyes – all of them had lifeless eyes – stared into her face. It was as if his spirit had withered, and the body was commandeered by a violent force bent on destroying and crushing.

'Mama. Grandma. My dear soil.'

There she was, so close, the darkness looming behind her. Impenetrable darkness. Only fire could save her from it.

*Burn!* Steftsia ordered silently, unable to speak, and she felt the flames begin to rise.

The invader jerked his hand away from her neck, growling in pain. Burns sprawled across his palms and fingers, spread wide open, as the skin started to peel. Where he had touched Steftsia's necklaces, wounds yawned and cuts deepened. His scream was so piercing that it would have reached her neighbours – if she had any besides the pitch-black night and the dark forest.

He clawed desperately at her koral and pulled them, but they did not budge, transformed into pure fire, pure enchantment. The long strings of blood-red garnet beads, fine pearls and brass zgardas – all of them protected Steftsia. Just like the flowers embroidered on the sleeves of her shirt and the red ribbon of her herdan. The invader knew none of this, yet he felt it so acutely on his own skin.

The silver beads of her necklace leaped into burning flames like molten lava. The man covered his face with his hands as if even this glow was searing him, pulling at his very soul. Frantically, he reached for Steftsia, ready to snap her like a twig if he could. His hands were scorched, his eyes bloodshot. Threats erupted from his throat, cut short by the bubbling of blood.

'It happens so to you, enemy, as the witch says,' Steftsia chanted in a taut whisper.

She struck him with the poker a second, a third and final time.

## Niia

It took Niia some time to find the house. A woman she met at the station gave her directions. The woman was waiting for her grandchildren, who were on the same train.

'Steftsia, what took you so long? Don't you recognize your Anka?' she asked Niia, her voice so lively, so energetic, as if concealing a secret.

Niia glanced over the woman's face, almost recognizing her for a moment,

but her legs forced her onwards. She shrugged and continued up the path, which grew narrower and more overgrown with vines and weeds as she progressed. She reached the top after a gruelling half-hour climb, the backpack heavy on her shoulders and her new sneakers having rubbed her heels raw. But all discomfort faded as soon as she spotted the house.

The soil surrounding the house was black and appeared devoid of life. She could draw a precise line where the grass had begun to wither. The windows, small and dulled with grime, stood dark. The shadows of dusk crept across the porch, reaching towards the unexpected visitor. Niia felt a sharp pang in her chest – this house existed, it was real, it had always been there, just as it had appeared in the dreams that tormented her. Yet Grandma Steftsia had never spoken of it, nor did she answer Niia's questions. Her mother was silent too. They rarely spoke of the past, and when they did, they only mentioned how nothing good came from living under occupation. The past seemed to bind their lips – lips as thin as Niia's – while the veil of silence became their salvation. Still, Niia recalled how often Grandma Steftsia glanced over her shoulder, as if expecting the relentless darkness to swallow her whole should she fail to remain vigilant.

An unexpected wave of resentment swept over Niia, as though this house had been stolen from her personally – as though she had been denied the pleasure of wiling away summer nights on its porch or wandering knee-deep through the grass. It was as if, under different circumstances, in a different, better world, she would possess a chest brimming with family heirlooms: embroidered shirts and ancient necklaces, treasures passed down by her own ancestors rather than acquired by chance. A chest filled with postcards, letters and stories beginning with: 'Oh, this is what my great-grandfather gave my great-grandmother when they became engaged!' As if there had been no war, no occupation, no need to hide or sell things off. If only...

Niia quickly brushed aside her bitter thoughts and dropped her backpack onto the steps. She knew exactly what she was looking for – the young woman from her dreams had given her a clue. The young woman, Steftsia, Medea, Hecate, goddess of the moon or the earth – or perhaps all of them at once. The force that had summoned her here reassured Niia with the promise of a discovery, just around the corner. *We have been waiting for you. And now, you are here.*

When she scraped away the top layer of dirt, she could easily make out miniature beads of pearl and coral in the black, naked soil. The garnet beads, slightly darker, were harder to distinguish. As she sifted through the earth with her bare hands, Niia uncovered brass crosses strung together on a single thread. She tried to recall their name. It astonished her that all of this had remained undisturbed for so many years as if it was enchanted. Or perhaps it really was.



Setting aside her discoveries, she continued to scrape, scrape and scrape.

### Steftsia

‘When they find out, Steftsia, no spells or herbs will save us. These devils’ spawns will slaughter the entire village – every one of us!’ Anka cried, staring at the corpse with more terror than when the man had been alive and capable of violence.

‘They will kill us all, Steftsia!’

‘They won’t. And they won’t find out, either.’

Steftsia wrapped her bleeding fingers around the first row of her korali. She tugged at the necklace and the thread cut into her fingers, sending sharp pain through her skin. The beads scattered to the floor like hailstones, each strike pulling the invisible forces from within her as the power she had gathered slowly trickled out. The torn necklace felt like a terrible loss. She longed to fall to her knees, clutching herself, howling in grief until the pain finally left her through her scream, and then gather each bead, wiping off the dust, and string them onto a new, stronger thread.

But Steftsia could not do that. Because she was the only witch for all the villages around. Because in her house lay an enemy officer who would never again threaten to kill anyone, who would soon return to the earth, never to be found, never to be searched for. Steftsia would see to that herself with her own hands and the power hidden within them, and she would give as much of her strength and tear apart as many necklaces as it took.

### Niia

Niia had never dirtied her hands with soil – she was even squeamish about repotting houseplants. Yet as she picked through the beads by Steftsia’s house, something seemed to take hold of her, guiding her as if with the hands of someone more experienced. It reminded her of the time with the red ribbon. Or when she had followed the narrow, overgrown path without once checking the map on her phone.

Later, she washed the beads to remove the soil and dust, threading them anew. She had brought a ball of string with her. Though she wished it was nicer and sturdier, it was better to string the beads to keep them from scattering in her backpack. The garnet beads caused no trouble; there were just enough for one string. The coral beads, however, varied in shape, shade and size. Niia had to sort them first, and as she sifted through the pile, she felt them grow warmer under her touch, glowing brighter – as though an unknown fire nested within them, obeying her alone.

Threading the pearl beads drained her. Her phone battery had died, leaving her without a flashlight, so she worked in darkness, illuminated by the moon.

She carefully threaded the fine pearls, and once five rows were completed, she braided the ties into thin strands to make the necklace easier to wear. She arranged the rows so that the bottom was the longest and the top the shortest, ensuring the necklace would sit perfectly on her chest. All that remained was to clean the brass zgardas. Miraculously, the glass beads had not shattered and sparkled beautifully when Niia placed the necklace around her neck.

### Steftsia

Steftsia sowed the entire flower garden with coral beads, scattering them all around the house. Each bead had been earned – given to her in exchange for her work, her help, her service or advice. Every bead was well-deserved, and thus, filled with power. Cutting through each thread was like cutting through living flesh. At times, she would pause, take a deep breath, and sink her bare toes into the soil until she could hear: *Here it is. This soil is yours, yours, and the force within it is also yours, and the moon’s crescent in the sky and the fire in your blood – they will never take it away, they will never destroy it.*

Then she would take up another string and cut it, scattering the beads. Her movements were unconscious, as if something guided her hand, something deep and hidden in this dark hour. She felt as though the hands of her foremothers were directing her. All the women who had gathered herbs and saved lives, who had praised the goddess and themselves, for each of them was an embodiment of the goddess. The soil, the moon’s crescent, the fire in her blood – it was all hers.

When she finished, she could barely stand. So much of her power had been given away, spent. But now, no one would ever find her house on the hill. No one would open the door. No one would stumble upon the corpse in the cellar. He would remain there, alone, in her soil, in her house – just him and the worms. No one would recall that he had come here. No one would ever find him. And Steftsia – Steftsia herself would be forgotten, too. Not even Anka would remember. Not until the time was right.

She kept only one string of coral beads, along with the new silver one Anka had given her. She also kept the herdan on the red ribbon. Steftsia knew that soon, women would stop wearing such jewellery – it was too precious, too beautiful, too close to their hearts. The occupiers would soon settle in their land and begin erasing what was theirs, replacing it with unfamiliar, faceless things. And soon, even greater troubles would come. Steftsia did not need to read coffee grounds to know this. She had seen it countless times – heirloom necklaces sold off because no necklace, however costly, could satisfy hunger. Instead, these necklaces became salvation, a safe passage across rivers or eyes turned away at just the right moment. *So be it.* Every necklace provided protection. One did not



need to be born a witch to understand that. She would collect a new inheritance, just as she would come back home one day.

Steftsia slipped the last few beads into her pocket, cast one final glance at her house and walked away without looking back.

### *Stefaniia*

The zgardas were the final piece that Niia fastened around her neck, atop rows of necklaces of varying shapes and colours. Two of her fingernails were broken after all that digging in the dirt, and she felt as though her head was being squeezed by either the summer heat or the impending thunderstorm. The sky hung low, its deep blue hue darkening to an almost-black shade as it descended upon the swaying tops of young spruces.

Niia tilted her head upwards and pulled a small, round mirror from her pocket, peering into it as one might look into a well.

From the mirror, Steftsia gazed back at her. So very young – Niia had never seen her this way before.

‘Look at you. So, you remembered after all. And you gathered it all anew,’ Steftsia remarked, pursing lips thin as her granddaughter’s, her eyes – just as grey and stormy.

‘And I gathered it all anew,’ Niia repeated, her gaze fixed on the fiery iridescence of the corals, pearl beads and blood-red garnet drops. Everything seemed to fall into place, tracing its true origins. All the circles were closing here and now, and this realization enveloped Niia with a sense of warmth and calm. Suddenly, the first drops of torrential rain began to patter onto her face.

‘Did we survive the occupation, Stefaniia?’ Steftsia asked, using Niia’s full name – a name no one else used.

‘We survived the occupation, Stefaniia,’ Niia replied, using Steftsia’s full name – a name no one else used. ‘We reclaimed everything,’ she whispered to the reflection in the mirror, then drew it closer until their faces nearly merged into one.

‘Come back,’ Niia said softly. ‘I’ve been waiting for you for too long.’

Steftsia merely brushed her off. But this was nothing more than a familiar ritual: to decline twice before agreeing the third time. It was a full circle, as the time had come. Steftsia smiled and took a step forward. After all, the maiden, the mother and the crone were one and the same. A three-faced, triune goddess adorned with fiery, glittering, precious korali, clad in herdans and pearls, with flowery sleeves and coiffured braids, dressed in her Sunday best for everyday wear. For jewellery was memory and amulet, beauty and protection, and – for a witch especially – power.

## A note on the traditional Ukrainian jewellery featured in this story

**Korali** is a necklace made of coral beads. It is one of the most popular kinds of folk jewellery. Korali come in various colours, shapes and sizes. Women often wear them in rows, sometimes more than twenty at once.

**Herdan** is a type of jewellery shaped like a narrow ribbon made of beads. The beads are threaded in various colourful patterns, differing by region. Women wear herdans around their necks or on their heads, and it is considered a powerful amulet.

**Zgarda** is a type of jewellery especially popular in Hutsulshchyna and Bukovyna regions. It has the shape of a necklace with little molten crosses and sometimes features coins or other metal elements.



**Natalia Matolinets** is a Ukrainian writer from Lviv, who loves travelling, coffee, Belle Epoque and art nouveau. She incorporates the myths, magic and the cultural heritage of Central and Eastern Europe into her stories. Matolinets is the author of eight novels (so far): the urban fantasy trilogy *Varta in the Game*; *All My Keys and Gaia* duology; *Ceramic Hearts*, a historical fantasy; and in the mythological fantasy subgenre, *Hessie* and *Amaterasu Academy*. Among her accolades are the Eurocon 2023 Chrysalis Award from ESFS, ‘Best Debut’ and ‘Best Series’ distinctions from BaraBooka, the BBC’s Children’s Book shortlist and many others. Her novels and short stories have been translated into Czech, Polish, English and Bulgarian. Matolinets was a literary resident of Prague UNESCO City of Literature and has taken part in projects in Poland, Latvia, Croatia and Bulgaria. She joined PEN Sweden in 2024.

**Hanna Leliv** is a literary translator working between Ukrainian and English. Originally from Lviv, Ukraine, she was a Fulbright fellow at the University of Iowa’s Literary Translation MFA program and mentee at the Emerging Translators Mentorship Programme run by the UK National Centre for Writing. Leliv collaborates with a range of Ukrainian and international publishers, and in 2023-24, she was a translator-in-residence at Princeton University. She currently works at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute.



## THE IMPORTANCE OF TRANSLATION

### Bridging Cultures and Perspectives

Patrick Shutt, Du Lei, Anna-Lena Konder, Nirali Sharma and Aarya Shetty

Warum würdest du überhaupt jemals Übersetzung brauchen?

उन भाषाओं का मेरे जीवन पर कोई प्रभाव नहीं है।

这些语言与我的生活无关

Language is undoubtedly one of the most exceptional skills humans have developed, but it is also the most complex. As countries become more interconnected due to globalization, translation has never been so important. From folktales to peace treaties, translation has served a wide variety of purposes throughout history. Translation facilitates global communication, leading to the development of strong economic, cultural and political relationships. As Professor Helen Vassallo, author and translator, explains:

Literature in translation has the potential to transform not only our understanding of other cultures, but also the way in which we view our own culture. If we only read books that were written in the language[s] and context[s] that are familiar to us, we can create an echo chamber in which everything we already think and experience is reflected back at us, leading us to believe in it as some kind of universal truth.

But translation is also incredibly difficult and comes with a myriad of challenges. Issues of retaining meaning, preserving authorial voice, internalized censorship and the complexity of cross-cultural interactions all must be contended with. We will look at these struggles while questioning how translation influences the literary world and where UNESCO uses translation in the development of global connections through Residency Exchanges and broader programmes.

### Struggles Within Cultural Translation

The act of literary translation is not merely a linguistic conversion but a cultural bridge. A dozen translators may tackle the same poem, producing a dozen different versions. Yet, somewhere among these versions, there will be what translation theorist Susan Bassnett calls an 'invariant core'. This common feature refers to the 'stable, basic, and constant semantic elements in the translated work' (92).

**'In a time when isolationist narratives and ideologies abound, reading literature in translation encourages openness, curiosity and dialogue.'**

This 'invariant core' is that which exists in every existing translation of a single work. It is this intangible quality that skilled translators aspire to capture. When executed effectively, translation can facilitate the comprehension and appreciation of literature by a broader international readership. This, in turn, enables readers to engage with the emotional nuances, thematic elements and cultural contexts of these works, thereby fostering cross-cultural communication. UNESCO's mission to foster intercultural exchange and mutual understanding aligns with the need to dismantle barriers that inhibit open communication between cultures. This mission is echoed in former British Prime Minister Clement Attlee's welcoming address at the Conference for the Establishment of UNESCO in 1945. He emphasized that a key evil fought against in the war was the 'totalitarian practice of drawing a curtain around the minds of the people to prevent them from knowing what others thought' (quoted in Intrator 107). Intellectual, cultural and linguistic isolation were among the barriers solidified by World War II, preventing open communication and understanding between nations. Translation, within this logic, became a crucial tool in dismantling these barriers, fostering cross-cultural connections and improving international relations.





However, to reframe translation in this way, one must unravel layers of meanings and cultural nuances that go beyond mere linguistic translation. It is the careful treatment of these layers that ultimately determines the accessibility and resonance of the text with a global audience, fulfilling UNESCO's vision of a more connected and empathetic world. This idea remains as relevant now as it did when UNESCO was founded in 1945 since we live 'in a time when isolationist narratives and ideologies abound, reading literature in translation [therefore] encourages openness, curiosity and dialogue' (Vassallo).

Far from a straightforward linguistic transfer, translation is a socially embedded process where translators must act as mediators within a network influenced by their social standing, personal connections and available financial resources. The social context in which a translator operates determines how they navigate cultural nuances in their work. As Szu-Wen Kung notes, translation agents do not operate in isolation but as part of a broader social framework, where their individual roles, such as that of translators, editors and publishers shape the outcome (6, 18). This interconnectedness produces a translation that caters to its new target audience, while potentially compromising the original culture's understanding of a piece.

To achieve more accurate translations, traditional frameworks often need to be reconsidered, focusing on strategies that consider both meaning and impact. The traditional binary framework of translation, where the process is seen as an exchange between two distinct cultures, oversimplifies the complexity of cross-cultural interactions.

UNESCO's efforts in promoting Chinese literature provide a compelling example of rethinking these frameworks. UNESCO has long supported the translation and global dissemination of Chinese literature, making significant contributions to Chinese cultural outreach. From 1948 to 2005, UNESCO's Catalogue of Representative Works (sometimes also referred to as Collection of Representative Works) showcased masterpieces from world literature. By 2005, the catalogue included 1,060 works, among them many Chinese classics such as *Chuang Tzu: Basic Writings*, *Mencius*, *Records of the Grand Historian of China* and *The Romance of the Western Chamber* ('UNESCO Collection'). In 1969, sinologist and translator Burton Watson contributed an influential translation of *Records of the Grand Historian of China*, later included in UNESCO's *Masterpieces of the Nations* series (Lin). This collection played a pivotal role in introducing Sima Qian's classic historical text to international audiences and highlights UNESCO's dedication to preserving and sharing China's literary heritage. As scholar Nicolas Froeliger notes, 'translation is a tool for promoting languages, a discreet part in the economy, and a vehicle for ideas [...] Above all, it is a means through which civilizations gain access to "the other"'(4). In this light, UNESCO's work to promote translation has not only advanced

the exchange of Chinese and other cultures with the world, but continues to facilitate the global transmission of literature and ideas that enriches all cultures.

This dynamic interplay between translation and cultural exchange aligns with the concept of 'histoire croisée', or cross-cultural histories, introduced by Roig-Sanz and Meylaerts (6). They describe translation as a multi-layered and reciprocal process of cultural interaction, rather than a simple, one-way transfer. Translation serves as a bridge for mutual influence, enabling both source and target cultures to shape and enrich one another. For instance, when a work from a peripheral culture is translated, it can introduce fresh perspectives to a dominant target culture and simultaneously shape the source culture's understanding of its own literary tradition. This reciprocity requires translators to consider how their work impacts both cultures, balancing the need to stay true to the original while fostering a meaningful cultural dialogue. Translation is a change, but one that does not modify the 'invariant core' and influences only the expressive form.

## How Does UNESCO Use Translation?

In 1948, post-World War II, UNESCO launched two projects centring around translation and the affordable circulation thereof: the periodical *Index Translationum: International Bibliography of Translations* and the Catalogue of Representative Works (CRW), which mostly focused on the translation of 'classic' fiction (Intrator 107, 113). The central idea behind these projects was to use translation to improve intercultural understanding and, subsequently, international relations, thus eroding the 'intellectual, cultural and linguistic isolation [that] were all aspects of the barriers erected and solidified by the war' (Intrator 107). Within this framework, UNESCO acted as an intermediary, agent or producer by supporting quality translations (predominantly into English, French and Spanish, followed by Arabic and German and therefore linguistically limited) through networking with publishers as well as collecting and providing data on translated works through the *Index* (Intrator 114, 120, 123). Both projects were concluded in the 2000s, but translation still remains at the heart of UNESCO's mission to 'facilitate internationalism via cross-cultural and cross-border communication' as evidenced by the UNESCO Creative Cities Network initiative today (Intrator 107).

Translation is an integral part of the UNESCO Creative Cities Network initiative as it nurtures an environment of diverse thoughts and voices that are 'crucial to leverage creativity for urban development and conceive new solutions to common challenges at the local level around the globe' (UNESCO, 'Creativity and Cities'). The practice of translation is a central vehicle through





Closing event of the Expedition Poetry project run in Jakarta, October 2024  
 Provided by City of Heidelberg

which the different Cities of Literature collaborate with each other, which is evident in the production of the *World Goedam Collection*. The collection is a collaboration between Bucheon and ten other Cities of Literature and contains horror and ghost stories from around the world (Yong-ik quoted in Kim 10). (For more information about the *World Goedam Collection* see p. 43.) The translation of texts into English and Korean emphasizes UNESCO's belief that culture is a 'global public good' and therefore furthers UNESCO's mission of internationalism (UNESCO, 'Creativity and Cities').

The Creative Cities network's engagement with translation goes even further than enabling cooperation, as there are designated UNESCO Cities of Literature characterized by their involvement with translation. For example, the city of Heidelberg initiated a project called 'Expedition Poesie' in 2016. As part of the project, poets from Heidelberg and another UNESCO City of Literature – Prague in 2016, Granada in 2018, Melbourne in 2022 and Jakarta in 2024 – translated each other's poems into their respective languages with the final versions of these poems being published as an eBook.

It should be noted that the project participants do not necessarily speak the language of the other participants and may not be able to unpack all the layers of meaning contained in certain words and phrases which may impact

the poets' ability to translate or assimilate the piece into their own culture. Additionally, no professional translators are involved in the final textual production, leaving the poets to approach the process of translation on their own terms.

**'Translation is not limited to words – it shares ideas, voices and culture on a global scale.'**

To ease the poets into this process, they are provided with interlinear, or word-for-word, translations. Subsequently, each participant develops their own approach to translating the poems, i.e. by having in-depth conversations with the poets who wrote them to understand their poetic, stylistic and narrative intentions ('Expedition Poetry' 03:10-03:20, 04:11-05:11, 07:46-08:25). Through this approach, the project participants can develop their own methodologies that emphasize different aspects of translation, such as style, semantics and form, which encourage engagement with the source material and culture.

This form of engagement is also encouraged by the scope of the project which goes beyond mere translations of the poems: 'It was also a translation of our different approaches to language, literature and life' (Heller quoted in 'City of Literature'). As such, the project participants left their own unique mark on the translated poems, a notion which is echoed by poet Bel Schenk. When she talks about translating Miriam Tag's poetry for the 2022 run of the project, she describes the poem as 'still your poem but it was [...] somehow a lot mine as well' ('Expedition Poetry' 08:25-08:32).

Translation, in this context, allows for cultural absorption, making culture a global good, which is further highlighted by Germany including the project as best practice in its 2021 state report on the implementation of the 'UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions' ('UNESCO City').

This idea of diversity also shapes the cultural landscape of Norwich in the UK. While Heidelberg has a strong focus on poetry and translation,



Expedition Poetry workshop with poets from Heidelberg and Jakarta in 2024  
 Provided by City of Heidelberg



Norwich's identity is heavily influenced by translation. Norwich is home to the National Centre for Writing (NCW) which aims to reduce barriers for underrepresented people in the UK to access the literary translation profession. Such an initiative is of vital importance; as Will Forrester, Head of English PEN's Writers in Translation project explains:

[...] all languages, forms, genres, regions and voices are underrepresented in translated literature in the UK. But there are levels of underrepresentation, and we know that, because of the fragility of literary translators' careers [...] That's why efforts towards diversifying the literary landscape and the voices that shape it must go hand in glove with efforts towards better pay and conditions.

The NCW aims to achieve their ambition of widening access to translation careers by offering professional development opportunities in partnership with the British Centre for Literary Translation. Additionally, the NCW offers mentorships and residencies, such as the residency based at Dragon Hall Cottage. This residency has been running since 2018, giving UK and international writers and translators the time to research, write, translate and explore Norwich ('Residencies at NCW'; 'Residencies and Retreats'). Additionally, Norwich has taken part in virtual and in-person residency exchanges with other Cities of Literature like Quebec, Jakarta, Tartu and Vilnius.

These residency exchanges are part of the 'Imagining the City' project that aims to foster connections, collaborations and the sharing of ideas and inspiration between writers and translators from around the world and is not limited to designated Cities of Literature within the network ('Imagining the City'). The programme allows participants to 'learn more about the literary history and ecosystem of each city' ('Residencies at NCW'), thus forming the basis for a cultural exchange made possible through the medium of translation.

This role of translation can be seen with the Quebec–Norwich residency exchange. In 2022, Quebec and Norwich ran a virtual residency exchange for which one writer from each city was selected to participate. The writers explored their respective Cities of Literature, writing to each other and being the gateway through which the other writer could experience the city, making the writers look 'at the familiar in new ways' ('Imagining the City'). The writers wrote in their respective languages and their work was published online with professional French and English translations ('Résidence Virtuelle').

While this virtual residency involves translation, the focus of the programme is on experiencing different cultures, which does influence one's writing, making it a form of cross-cultural and linguistic translation. Naturally, it is not

only western Cities of Literature that have a focus on translation. As the first UNESCO City of Literature in China, Nanjing has embraced translation as a strategic element of its cultural exchange. Today, Nanjing produces close to 1,000 translations annually for a global audience.

In addition, Nanjing has honoured the legacy of the late translator Yang Yi by transforming her former residence into the *Yang Yi Book House*, a cultural space under the UNESCO City of Literature project. This venue hosts events such as 'Translating Literature: Connecting Nanjing' and the World Salon, bringing together writers, translators and students to explore ways to introduce Chinese literature to a global audience. Through such initiatives, Nanjing exemplifies how UNESCO's support for translation fosters mutual understanding and connects diverse literary cultures.

Translation plays a crucial role in navigating the complexities of a multicultural and multilingual environment. This is evident in the different projects that UNESCO Cities of Literature like Heidelberg, Norwich and Quebec run. Translation is not limited to words – it shares ideas, voices and culture on a global scale. In a world that risks growing smaller and smaller each day, a world suffering from a tragic resurgence in ethnic nationalisms and border violence, translation is a hopeful method to enable mutual understanding between cultures. Translators, therefore, bear the additional responsibility of bridging cultural divides, helping to shape and mediate the evolving cultural narratives within and beyond UNESCO's organizational walls. As such, they are key to fostering and maintaining international relationships.

Why would you ever need translation?

It's not like I'll ever need to understand that language.

Those languages have no bearing on my life.



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**COMMUNITY**

## BIBLIOBUSES

### The Community Found Within Literature

Cameron Hayward, Penelope Mackett and Scarlett Bromelow

UNESCO Cities of Literature are home to different types of literary activity, from writers-in-residence programmes, publishers and festivals, to therapeutic, outreach and literacy initiatives. Our review focuses on a project that combines all these elements: Bibliobuses.

Bibliobuses, or mobile libraries, are not new. The first mobile library was apparently founded in Warrington, England, in 1859. As we establish in this review, Bibliobuses have specific applications and meanings for their respective communities. So come with us as we take you on a journey to Lyon, Vilnius and Lahore to understand a bit more about Bibliobuses and the contribution they make to readers in these cities.

Essentially, these travelling libraries help to address issues surrounding literature accessibility, education and social inclusion (Bikos and Papadimitriou 39). For example, the Bibliobus in Vilnius, Lithuania celebrates the potential of mobile libraries to have an impact on readers ('Our Services'). The bus interior is a mixture of computer workstations and bookshelves, emphasizing the presence of technology in our lives, particularly when it comes to these technological advances pervading our reading spaces. Their events, such as film screenings, digital literacy training for seniors and city celebrations, aid Vilnius in their mission to keep their residents well versed in the digital literary scene.

Vilnius is one of the most recent cities to have adopted one of these buses, setting out on its first journey on 9 April 2024. The fact that in the first six months they have had approximately 12,500 visits, delivered over 4,000 books to homes and gained 609 official Bibliobus readers demonstrates just how quickly these mobile libraries can establish themselves within their cities ('Our Services').

The Rickshaw Mobile Library in Lahore, Pakistan, run by the Alif Laila Book Bus Society, focuses on the importance of early childhood education and children's libraries. Here, the library aims to 'evolve solutions to Pakistan's educational problems' through their navigation of socio-economic constraints to find a path to a modern education system with all children reaching a 100%



literacy ('About Us').

Meanwhile, the mobile library in Lyon, France has a wide selection of books for both adults and youth; they even have a specific Bibliobus dedicated to young children. Having the opportunity to develop literacy and reading skills is essential throughout your life. After all, literacy is a human right and those who do not meet the minimum for proficient literacy skills may end up being excluded from a host of opportunities ('Promoting Literacy for More Peaceful, Just and Sustainable Societies'). As the United Nations states: 'Not fulfilling the right to literacy undermines progress in economic and social development, environmental sustainability, and enduring peace and stability' ('Promoting Literacy for More Peaceful, Just and Sustainable Societies'). Furthering this idea of literacy as a human right, the Lyon Declaration details the city's method for universal literacy in conjunction with close relationships between libraries and institutions ('Lyon Declaration on Access to Information and Development'), holding great consideration for the overwhelming global need for access to information.

**'From the moment a person is born, literacy helps them develop their communication skills and interactions with the world.'**

Libraries, in this context, are valuable intermediaries. From the moment a person is born, literacy helps them develop their communication skills and interactions with the world ('What is Literacy'). Due to their mobility, Bibliobuses are an effective means to widen access to books, literacy and reading for a broader audience.

## How Do These Buses Run?

Lyon's Bibliobus aims to be of use to all communities within the city, catering to all ages by hosting a variety of events. The Bibliobus visits locations such as the Lyon-Corbas Prison, the Lyon Hospitals Library Association and La Bibliothèque à Domicile [Bib' à Dom']. The Lyon-Corbas Prison specializes in inmates who are yet to be sentenced or have already received a short sentence (Sahajian et al. 361). L'association Bib' à Dom' highlights the increasing inclusivity and accessibility the Bibliobus brings to Lyon. The association has one hundred volunteers who borrow books from Lyon's local libraries and deliver them to people who may have difficulty visiting these facilities themselves. They also offer reading services in the home ('Accessibilité: Portage à domicile').



Lyon's Bibliobus  
©Bibliothèque municipale de Lyon

In terms of the stock, the Lyon Bibliobus has two main sections of books, for adults and for youth, tailored to suit the communities that they travel through. Materials are offered on a long-time loan basis so that every visitor feels as though they have sufficient time to enjoy their books outside of the mobile library.

The Bibliobus in Vilnius is described as 'not your average library' – their aim is to foster a sense of community for their residents to enjoy getting to know each other by providing the Vilnius area with more 'cultural and educational buzz' and book-related events ('Our Services'). This library is similar to the Bibliobus in Lyon, taking on a more holistic approach to broaden access to literature. Vilnius does this by making the Bibliobus accessible for all communities, including disabled readers, by introducing a lift on to the bus for those with reduced mobility. For example, in Vilnius, they have seen that the inclusion of books published in Lithuanian, English and Polish has been largely successful in terms of their uptake from users of the bus ('Our Services'). This indicates that these buses not only improve literacy within their areas, but also cross-cultural awareness.

Inside, Vilnius's Bibliobus functions just like any other regular library. Visitors can use any Lithuanian municipal library card to take out books, which can also be ordered online to collect from the bus. Similar to Lyon, books can be borrowed and taken outside of the bus, with loans available for up to thirty-one days ('Our Services'). This Vilnian bus includes a cosy inside seating area for its

visitors, as well as its ten computer workstations for its digital literary education, along with free Wi-Fi and multiple sockets for charging devices ('Our Services').

The Vilnius Bibliobus also organizes and hosts a variety of events and educational activities catered to all ages, such as film screenings, book clubs, beginners' computer literacy training and robotics classes ('Our Services'). The Bibliobus also travels to other literary Lithuanian city fairs and festivals for their readers to engage with even more content that the bus cannot provide directly. Specific events include the Sostinės Dienos (Capital Days), a large cultural event within Vilnius dedicated to its residents, celebrating their city's art and culture. These art forms are presented in a modern, comprehensible and enjoyable way for the audiences; this includes both concerts and immersive experiences (Vilnius City Municipality). The Bibliobus also travels to the Vilnius Book Fair and other fairs in surrounding areas, broadening access to literary culture to people residing outside Vilnius ('Our Services').

### **'Libraries are conspicuous by their absence in Pakistan, creating a crucial void in our lives.'**

Lahore's Bibliobus differs slightly from those in Vilnius and Lyon as its primary focus is to help the children of Pakistan through their educational objectives and is run in conjunction with the Alif Laila Book Bus Society ('About Us'). Whilst the other buses cater to everyone in their communities, Lahore is concerned with tackling issues surrounding children's education. Through 'Interactive Learning Aids for Early Childhood Education', such as puzzles and interactive books, the bus has developed many beneficial resources for all its users free of charge ('About Us'). As future careers in 'Electronics, Photography, Arts, Crafts and Computers' are often geared towards boys within the education system, the Rickshaw Mobile Library also offers hobby clubs in these fields with the primary aim of engaging young girls ('About Us').

Lahore is a large city, with a population of approximately 14.4 million people, but with limited library provision. So, when the Alif Laila Book Bus Society introduced its fleet of twenty Bibliobuses, it was of great significance to this community. These buses have completely revolutionized education for Lahore's young people and their access to books. In line with this theme of improving children's education in Lahore, their buses mostly consist of books for the younger generations and have educational content. This Bibliobus also conducts literacy and reading capability tests, which have been proven to improve the literary skills of children ('About Us').

Despite these mobile libraries in Vilnius, Lahore and Lyon all being an iteration of a Bibliobus, their differences are evident in how they cater to their local communities; yet, it is their variation in object goals that make them so brilliantly

unique to their locations. While each bus relies on the general format of a Bibliobus, individually they respond to their local context, and cater to what their readers need.

## **Social & Cultural Repercussions**

Choosing to believe that these buses are simply about the books inside would be an overly simplistic view. Broadly speaking, the aim of these buses is to unite their communities. Through this they become vehicles for communal change. Bearing this in mind, let's take a closer look at the impact these buses have on their own communities.

The heartbreaking reality is that, as much as people view books as doors into other worlds, these doors are often kept under lock and key. Books are not as accessible as many people perceive them to be:

You fall over a library every few miles in an educated society, but the people of Pakistan, grappling with their own crippling problems, do not miss what they never had. Libraries are conspicuous by their absence in Pakistan, creating a crucial void in our lives. (Rabia Ahmed)

Regardless of power and socio-economic background, reading is empowering to all. Ultimately, the main mission of the Alif Laila Bus Society in Lahore is to ensure that every child in Pakistan experiences a childhood that is rich with the imagination and joy that can be found in between the pages of a good book ('About Us').

As seen in Lahore, educational objectives are an integral part of the Bibliobus. Within Pakistan, it is estimated that 44% of children between the ages of 5 to 16 (about 22.8 million children) are not enrolled in an educational institution ('Education: Giving Every Child the Right to Education'). Instead, these children depend on the material offered by the Bibliobus to improve their learning ('About Us').

This sense of educational purpose is not just confined to Lahore. Vilnius conducts digital literacy training for seniors ('Our Services'). Lyon characterizes its educational ambitions through their Blue Week, which revolves around readings or lectures that have been organized for the elderly. Another example of this ambition is the Spring of Young Readers, an annual event for the youth of Lyon, which includes a performance based on a specific picture book to round out the event ('Cultural Program').

Literacy is for all as these Bibliobuses, in their different ways, pioneer inclusivity within their reading communities. For example, all events in Vilnius





that have been organized by the Bibliobus are free of charge. This removes the socio-economic barrier that can prevent access to books and reading. Lahore and Lyon also abide by the belief that to bring communities together we should try to find solutions to these socio-economic constraints. Lyon strives to transform its library into a place for its literary world to exist outdoors, breaking through the confines of the Bibliobus vehicle. The Bibliobus provides the citizens of Lyon with a hands-on cultural programme through its endeavours in storytelling, readings and workshops. These projects are primarily done through existing connections with artistic and educational individuals who reside in Lyon as well as the Bibliobus mediators ('Cultural Program').

In this context, the Bibliobuses in Lyon, Vilnius and Lahore provide a social and educational space for people to interact not only with each other, but also the material mobile libraries have made available to them. They provide their cities with education, entertainment and a great sense of community.

## Public Reception

Whilst these buses have evidently made an impact on the communities they serve, it is essential to assess how the residents of these areas have received their new cultural amenities. Shifting our focus back to Pakistan, the Rickshaw Mobile Library is a unique manifestation of the Bibliobus. Their primary aim is to enlighten children through the magic of books and literature whilst also supporting them in their foundational years. This library has proven to be incredibly popular amongst the children in Lahore, as expressed by children who have used the service:

My parents do not take me to any recreational place as my father returns late from work and has no time and money to take us out. But this Rickshaw Library coming to our house is my favorite fun activity, and we don't have to pay for reading the books and doing fun activities around them. (Rickshaw Mobile Library)

I wait for this Rickshaw to come every day all week as this just comes outside my house, and I can easily come to it, learn to read new books, and do fun activities with the stories like role-play and prop making. If it wasn't coming to my house, I would have never gotten the permission to visit it and get the chance to see such interesting books with so many stories and colors in it. This

is my favorite thing to do, and I get very sad when it rains and the visit is delayed. (Rickshaw Mobile Library)

Without these buses a hole would be left in their communities and equally their education.

As well as spreading literacy, the Bibliobus in Vilnius is spreading joy, as Rytis Pajaujis, a member of the Pavilni Community Council, details:

After learning that a Bibliobus will visit Pavilni once a week, the residents accepted it with great joy. A Bibliobus can become a community gathering place, where people can not only read, but also meet, communicate and participate in various events and educations. [It] helps to bring the community together, to get to know each other even more.

This is especially felt in the Pavilni area after their local library closed down. The loss of such a valued communal space would likely leave a hole in the community. In this case, the Bibliobus has succeeded in bringing the literary spark back to the Pavilni area in Vilnius.

Ultimately, these buses have become an integral part of their cities. From providing valuable education and a recreational space, to providing a treasured place for gatherings and celebration, these Bibliobuses solidify the message that holding a book in your hand provides you with boundless opportunities.

## Appreciating Bibliobuses and Looking to the Future

You can see just how much Bibliobuses are valued by the communities they operate in. Lyon caters to its community's literary needs. Through its Bibliobus, Lyon demonstrates its wish for inclusivity on a large scale, through all age ranges, as well as ensuring local institutions, such as the prison and hospital, do not feel forgotten. Vilnius's Bibliobus similarly improves the city's sense of community through the bus's modern outlook in providing books for all ages and the installation of computer workstations and Wi-Fi. Lahore has been successful in having a direct impact on children's education through providing children's books and engaging in educational activities.

Whilst these travelling libraries are bursting with pride over their achievements, inviting their residents to enjoy their local service, there will always be ways in which they can adapt and improve. As Bibliobuses develop services for their communities, they continue to innovate. For example, Vilnius's



inclusion of books in a variety of languages in its Bibliobus service ('Our Services') showcases the city's desire to promote literacy as well as cross-cultural awareness.

Currently, the Bibliobuses in Vilnius, Lyon and Lahore do not engage with sustainable energy sources to power the vehicles. However, in the future, the use of sustainable energy sources would be hugely beneficial to their respective communities. The Bertolt Brecht Bibliobus in Nicaragua, for example, uses a solar-powered battery for all its electricity and technological activities on-board ('Bibliobús Bertolt Brecht and the German-Nicaraguan Library, Nicaragua'). This small adjustment demonstrates how beneficial these changes would be if they were to be implemented in other Bibliobuses around the globe.

### **'Cities of Literature who want to tackle underprivileged communities would benefit the most from investing in a Bibliobus.'**

As you can see, Bibliobuses are generally a great success in their cities. But which other UNESCO Cities of Literature would benefit from implementing a bus of their own? This is a great opportunity to expand the system outside of Europe. For example, as a UNESCO City of Literature in Japan, Okayama has initiatives that focus on children's books and education, hosting morning reading activities in schools and picture book workshops ('Initiatives'). This City of Literature could benefit from the use of a Bibliobus, drawing inspiration from the way Lahore's mobile libraries cater for younger readers. Rio de Janeiro in Brazil may also benefit from adopting a Bibliobus due to its literacy initiatives that target underprivileged communities ('Rio de Janeiro').

These are just a couple of examples, but overall, Cities of Literature who want to tackle underprivileged communities would benefit the most from investing in a Bibliobus as they are extremely valuable due to the host of opportunities they offer to their communities. As established, they prioritize a mix of education and entertainment to engage their communities, whilst simultaneously spearheading an inclusive range of events and objectives.

Ultimately, the use of Bibliobuses throughout UNESCO Cities of Literature provides endless amounts of joy – and opportunities – for their readers. We can't wait to see where they visit next.

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## THE KISS

Amanthi Harris

1

On the bus to Granada, Drew slept, straight-backed and tall. His head thrown back, the smooth, heavy hair gleamed red-brown in rays of the setting sun. Indira followed the line of his cheek, the jaw and nose; the curve of brows that made a perfect whole. She had been drawn to his face from the first time she had seen him at the bar of their halls of residence at university. She had felt at home as they talked of their past lives lived abroad: she in Colombo, he in Johannesburg. There was a new recognition in her, a sudden ease, the thrill of wild laughter, being with him. They had been together ever since – two years and ten months; only three weeks to be deducted from the tally.

He shifted, freeing his knees from the seat in front. His head dropped to one side. He sat up with a jolt. He frowned, still sleeping. He was always moody when he returned from visiting his family. None of them were happy about him being with Indira. His father disagreed with most of her views. When they came to visit her in her halls he had sneered at her bookshelves, declaring them too full of storybooks for a serious Chemistry student. At awkward lunches in elegant restaurants, he had lectured them all on the corrupt ways of Black politicians in South Africa, declaring himself relieved to have returned to England with Drew and Drew's younger sister, Briony. He told Indira how well the British had organized Sri Lanka and India, praising the great railways built for hapless natives. Drew scowled, pretending not to hear, and Indira sat trapped in her chair. In any lull, Briony offered Drew news of his ex-girlfriend, with whom Briony was still very much in touch.

Drew's mother, who had stayed on in South Africa with a new husband, wrote regularly, reminding Drew: 'Try other girls! You don't have to stay with Indira! You're too young to settle down!' on postcards of muddy elephants, dramatic plumed birds with startled eyes and deer fleeing in herds.

Drew sighed, the secret heavy inside him that he had carried everywhere the past days, all around Andalusia. It was something unspeakable, all his to bear. Indira understood; something had happened at Briony's party.

Briony's birthday always fell in the first week of the Easter holidays when Indira, Drew and all their friends were ejected from halls; their rooms stripped and surrendered for conferences. Everyone returned to parental homes, she and



Drew divided by 200 miles of England: he going North, she to the South. She hadn't realized until meeting his family that such a divide really existed – and other divides, of course. In England there were as many divides as in Sri Lanka, but the divisions there had worked in her family's favour: the luck of birth. She and Drew had wandered away from the groups and boundaries, climbing up towards wilderness; a freeing remoteness. From a certain height, divides were mere features to be observed, they did not divide at all; everything was potentially yours, everywhere and nowhere. Drew too understood the vagueness of nowhere; he too knew the discomfort of belonging in-between and in all places. They talked often of finding a place of solid ground. As they travelled through Europe and Asia on holidays, even as they stood gazing at monuments and artefacts and great works of art, Indira searched the people around her, looking for clues to their lives. One day she would know where she could live the right life; where it felt right to stay, to put down roots and build her shelter.

## 2

In her first year of university, Indira's parents had not allowed her to go to Briony's sixteenth birthday party and stay the night at Drew's father's house.

'How do we know what his family is like? You can't go staying there alone.'

She had been summoned back urgently to a family gathering that she suspected had been invented for the occasion.

'Shame you can't come,' Drew's father had said, unusually teasing and playful when he came to collect Drew. 'Briony will have to fix him up with one of her friends.'

'Good idea!' Indira had smiled to show that he hadn't unnerved her.

Drew's father carried Drew's suitcase to the car. Drew followed, Indira walking beside him.

'Ignore him. He loves to wind people up,' Drew muttered in Indira's ear as they kissed goodbye.

In their second year, Indira had accepted the invitation to Briony's party without consulting her parents. She had lied about the dates of the holidays and taken the train up north with Drew. They arrived as the party was just beginning, the house full of rough boys from the local sixth-form college, all vying for Briony's attention. Young women with vivid make-up and nightclub clothes glanced over sourly from where they were huddled by the stereo. Briony tossed the jewellery and chocolates Indira had bought for her on to a pile of gift bags in the hallway.

Briony told them to help themselves to drinks and dived back in among her friends. Later, in the kitchen, an ex-boyfriend of Briony's proclaimed Indira 'exotic-looking' and an infuriated Briony spilled a glass of red wine across the breakfast bar in Indira's direction, only just missing her. Briony kept phoning someone, begging them to come to the party. A little later a young woman arrived, small and pale with short light-brown hair, wearing a huge leather biker's jacket. She stood at the edge of the darkened sitting room, looking over at Indira and Drew. A nose ring glinted. The woman came over and stood close to Drew. Too close.

'I didn't know you'd be here,' she said to him. Only him.

Drew stepped back from her. 'This is Indira. Indy, this is Fiona. She's a friend of Briony's.'

'Fi,' Fiona corrected him.

'Yes, Fi.'

'And yours – I'm your friend too, aren't I?' She came closer again to Drew. 'Remember when we used to go to the pub on Fridays?'

'It was all of Briony's friends from her college,' Drew explained to Indira.

'And you always came along!' Fiona laughed. 'We used to do that stupid dance, all of us together, remember? Let's do it again! Come on!' She grabbed his arm with both hands and pulled, like someone drowning.

Drew smiled but took his arm away and Fiona sauntered off into the shadowy hallway and disappeared in the direction of the kitchen. Later, Indira saw her leave, slinking out past the front door.

There wasn't a third invitation to Briony's party because that year, Indira and Drew broke up two weeks before the holidays – a relief it had seemed at the time; a necessary shedding, as they tensed for battle. Now Indira could return home, just as she had left it; alone. Without Drew there was no evidence of her having left, or having a new place in the world. Drew, too, felt released perhaps, for he had agreed without protest. He would no longer need to shield her from his father or Briony, or the postcards from his mother. He had taken the train to the party alone.

## 3

No new approval came Indira's way for giving up Drew. While her parents were at work, she paced around their silent house in the suburbs with nowhere to go. One afternoon Drew phoned, and they talked as they always had, she laughing and alive again, glad of him as she sat huddled under her bedroom window, the



radiator warm at her back. The bedroom door was held shut by her desk chair, pushed up under the doorknob so her mother couldn't burst in. No locks were allowed in their house, no secrets. She kept her voice down, listening out for her mother's car or the front door opening, or the sudden creak of floorboards on the landing.

They called each other every day from then on and talked for hours, all logic of their break-up forgotten as they planned travels abroad once more. Drew wanted to visit the Alhambra Palace in southern Spain. Indira googled it on her laptop and saw the ancient red walls and turrets spread over the ridges of purple mountains, under a clear empty sky.

'Let's do it,' she said, and he had messaged her later to say that he had booked them a time to enter the palaces. From this a journey had grown. First a flight to Seville, then a train to Cordoba, and now the bus to Granada.

Drew muttered in his sleep. He rubbed his cheek and opened his eyes.

'Are we nearly there?' Drew looked around.

'Another hour I think.'

He yawned and stretched his legs.

'I meant to ask you,' Indira said. 'How did it go at Briony's party?'

'What?'

'Briony's party – how was it?'

'As crap as ever.' His jaw pulsed. He glanced out at the olive groves passing outside the window, his gaze dark and angry. She too watched the lines of low crouched trees gripping the red stony soil, a sprawl of a town with the darkening rise of mountains beyond, seemingly unmoving.

## 4

The apartment they had rented was off one of the Albaicín's steep stairways. Seen from the narrow, cobbled streets, the Alhambra Palace complex seemed fantastical yet it loomed rosy and vast above them as they approached. They passed through the great gates. Even the tourist groups were hushed as they walked around the ramparts and fortress. Indira and Drew joined the queue to see the palaces and waited for their allotted entry time.

They were let in by guards and passed into marble courtyards with pools of green glassy water. Fountains rippled, water trickled past in stone ducts. Inside the palace chambers they were surrounded by walls adorned with intricate geometric designs of green, blue, black, white and yellow-ochre tiles. There was coloured glass and panels of lace-patterned plaster; fine sculpted columns, marble lions and calligraphy carved over stone arches. From the windows

of the throne room were views out to distant mountains, a cloudless blue. A stillness spread over the city, over figures below strolling along the ramparts. The Moorish kings had built their paradise of the simplest materials: earth, wood, stone, plaster – modest, tasteful, refined. With the finest craftsmanship they had built beauty around themselves, a place of pleasure and pride. As great Moorish kingdoms fell elsewhere, here was a last proud home facing down defeat. Yet Boabdil, the last Moorish King of Granada, was weakened by feuds with his brother and father who had plotted to grasp power. Family could undermine even the firmest resolve to live a life of beauty. And all the while, the Catholic King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella watched from afar, waiting for a moment of weakness to prise their way in and conquer the last great Moorish kingdom.

Indira and Drew went on to the gardens of the Generalife, the summer retreat of the court. At the Patio de la Acequia, a long narrow pool was a rippling band of emerald waters. They passed through arches to a solitary room where Indira sat on a low sill, looking out to the distant curve of the red walls risen high around the gardens.

'You look like an ancient princess,' Drew said.

'I wonder what a Sultana might have thought sitting here?' Indira mused.

'Politics and palace intrigues, visitors from afar, fabulous feasts...'

'And secret infidelities,' Indira added.

His gaze met hers. There was no protest, no denial there. They had just read of the Sultana Morayma, wife of Boabdil, who had secretly met her lover, a knight of the Abencerrajes' clan, by an ancient cypress tree in the gardens. A courtier had reported them to Boabdil who then invited thirty knights of the Abencerrajes to a magnificent dinner in the room now called the hall. Once they were seated, he had ordered his own knights to lock the doors and behead every guest.

'Is revenge the only antidote to a betrayal?' Indira pondered.

The white-marble basin of the fountain in the hall was spattered red-brown, said to be bloodstains, it was claimed, from the massacre.

'Bloodletting,' Indira murmured.

Drew was silent. He was a dark glistening lake. Something simmered deep below the surface, caught in slow swirling icy waters.

'So, what happened at Briony's party?' Indira asked.

'What do you mean?'

He was trapped. She had him cornered. She had gleaned the truth herself. She tasted its steely metallic coldness.

'I realize technically we had broken up, but it was just weeks,' she accused him.

'It meant nothing,' he said.

She would have hated him more if he had tried to explain.



## 5

'Who was it?' she asked

'No one that mattered. I was an idiot.'

'Fiona?'

His silence confirmed it.

'So Briony finally set you up with one of her friends!'

He stared at her.

'Like your dad said they would.'

He gave a bitter, scornful laugh. 'Yeah, that's true, it's what they all wanted. I felt them all wanting it, and then I wanted it. They like to help you, to fuck things up – that's when they like you best.'

'They must be thrilled.'

'Fuck them.'

'You did – one of them, anyway—'

'No – not that – we didn't—'

'But you wanted to?'

He didn't answer. She would never know where exactly in the darkened throbbing house they had reached for each other with her forgotten. Why had they stopped? Had they even stopped?

'So, you just kissed?'

'I'm so sorry, Indy. It will never happen again. I can promise you that.'

'You don't know it won't happen again.'

'I do.' He was earnest, insistent.

But the possibility would always be there – as it always had been, of course. How could they ever return to not knowing it could happen?

They left the paradise gardens of the Generalife, the jasmine bushes and oleander, the towering cypresses high above them. They took a wrong turn and a path took them to a sheltered corner hidden behind myrtle hedges. There was a sunken square pond, a single spout of a fountain rupturing the stillness.

'Are you okay?' Drew asked.

'Sure.'

'I really am sorry. I never wanted to hurt you. I let myself get dragged down. I kept thinking it was okay because we'd broken up, but I know we hadn't really.'

'Haven't we?'

They were spoiled, their seamless perfect unity had ended. He had squandered the pristine marble edifice they had presented to the world, impenetrable against invasions and attack. There would be a fissure forever between them now, where treachery and ugliness had found their way in – a presence between them, a strange growth. It needed to be slashed away, a fierce cruel redness flowing through to cleanse the gash.

They found a bookshop in an alley of the Albaicín. At the centre of the room, walled in by shelves and a counter laden with books, sat an elderly man with a long white ponytail, wearing a black beret and olive-green silk jacket.

'Welcome!' He smiled at them from behind the till.

They passed around the crowded shelves, rifling through boxes and unsteady piles of books stacked on chairs. Indira found a volume of poems and drawings by Lorca. Drew chose *The Spanish Labyrinth* by Gerald Brenan. Indira passed slowly along the shelves and added *South from Granada* by Gerald Brenan.

Drew paid for the books.

'Excellent choices!' the old man exclaimed and placed them in a paper bag. 'Would you care to join us for a tea party and poetry reading? It's upstairs, in the garret.'

'Oh, no thank you.' Drew moved to leave.

'I'd love to,' Indira said.

'Splendid! Just go through the yellow door at the back and follow the stairs up – we're eleven this afternoon, one big family! There are a great many pretty girls,' the man said to Drew and glanced at Indira for a reaction.

'How fantastic!' she said, not hiding her derision.

The bookseller smiled uncertainly.

A caustic swell of pleasure washed through her, seeing his discomfort.

'You really want to go?' Drew whispered. 'I thought we could go out for a beer?'

Indira went on towards the back of the shop.

'It's good to meet new people, don't you think?' she declared and he glanced warily at her.

The door was painted an uneasy cadmium yellow. It gave on to a stairwell. Indira climbed up a curving wooden staircase and Drew came up behind her. They passed a doorway on the first floor, which opened on to a small, cluttered kitchen where a woman wearing an apron was frying onions. On the second floor, they entered a low-ceilinged attic room, with windows looking out to the Alhambra spread across the mountains, grown improbable and distant once more. The poets were gathered around a pine table. A red-cheeked young man in a tweed jacket paused in conversation to bring chairs for Indira and Drew.

'Hello! I'm George, I'm the Writer-in-Residence! Can I offer you some tisane?'

He held out a tray of terracotta beakers, the kind that yoghurt came in, as Indira had discovered on her travels. George poured in a golden scented tea from a scuffed blue enamel teapot.

'Mmm, lemon verbena,' Indira said.



‘Exactly! From my dear friend Sofia’s garden in the mountains!’ George beamed at a rumped old woman sitting in a cane chair next to Drew.

Drew ran a finger around the rim of the clay cup as if to clean it. ‘How did you know what tea it was?’ he muttered to Indira.

‘I love lemon verbena.’

She leaned past him to the woman, Sofia. ‘Do you live in the mountains all year?’ Indira asked.

‘Oh yes.’

‘The Alpujarras?’

‘That’s right.’

Sofia smelled of alcohol, sharp and acidic, an insistent scent of bruised damaged fruit. Drew moved his stool back but Indira stayed, eager to talk with the woman who had friends in a bookshop in Granada and grew herbs in a garden in the mountains.

‘I was just reading about Gerald Brenan going to live in the Alpujarras. I’m so inspired,’ Indira said to Sofia.

‘He didn’t live there for long, a few years on and off, that’s all.’ Sofia didn’t seem to be impressed at all.

‘But I thought—’

‘I should know, my mother was a friend of his!’ Sofia smiled proudly at Drew, but he sat staring ahead.

‘Your mother came from the village in the mountains?’ Indira asked.

‘Of course not! She was English! So am I, but I was born here.’

‘And she just decided one day to move from England to Spain? Did she travel on her own? Did she go straight up into the mountains?’

‘Oh, she was the restless type! Didn’t want the usual life!’

How did a woman set off for somewhere new and unknown and keep on walking through the doubts and fears, with no assurances that her life will not have been squandered? Indira had tried to want what others did, the careers her friends aspired to, the lives they envisioned in great cities of the world.

‘And Virginia Woolf came to visit,’ Sofia bragged to Drew.

‘No, she didn’t!’ Drew laughed.

‘Yes, she did! Brenan wrote a whole chapter about it – read it for yourself!’

Indira thought of a photograph of Gerald Brenan she had seen as she looked through *South from Granada* – of him seated reading by a window of the stone house he had rented. He had ordered a table and chairs from a carpenter, and bookshelves for his 1000 books, arriving carried by mules; a world he had built around himself, a life envisioned.

‘My tutor at Cambridge told me to leave my studies and go out into the world and write,’ George told three young women at the far end of the table. ‘So, I did!’

Indira longed for someone she could trust to tell her what she really needed to do. University for her was a room, an armchair by a window and shelves for the books she could buy now without needing permission. She had bought plays and poems with money sent by her father for textbooks, feeling no guilt as she passed into the wrong sections of the bookshop and reached for the wrong books. But soon university would end and she would have nowhere to go. Her room, despite all that she had done to line it, was a fragile nest, never a true home. Her studies offered no shelter, she toiled in laboratories and the Chemistry library all week, swimming upstream against the current, yet nothing yielded, nothing broke through; no sudden mysterious gems rose to the surface and offered themselves to her.

## 6

The poetry readings began. People read from notebooks, or scrolled through lines on their phones, reading aloud in monotones. The others around the table appeared to be listening.

Sofia slurped her tea. ‘You’re a writer?’ She peered up at Drew. ‘Me too,’ she added, not waiting for an answer.

‘Can we go now?’ Drew whispered to Indira, but Indira turned to Sofia.

‘Did your mother ever meet Virginia Woolf?’ Indira asked.

‘Sadly no, my mother came along much later. Now she really was a writer!’

‘Your mother?’ Indira leaned closer.

‘No! Virginia Woolf! The only good writer to come out of England!’

‘Er... I think Shakespeare might disagree,’ Drew said.

‘I’m sure he would! He’s a man after all!’ Sofia snapped back. ‘All Woolf’s works were inspired by Spain,’ she added. ‘She made three visits and she was completely transformed.’

‘And yet, there isn’t a single book of hers about Spain,’ Drew said.

‘Spain opened her! Her first lesbian kiss was here in Granada – did you know that? A Spanish opera singer just grabbed her and gave her a great big snog and it was so momentous she gave it to Mrs Dalloway!’

‘Does Mrs Dalloway go to Spain? I thought it was all set in London,’ Indira murmured. She had begun to wonder a little at all the tall tales being told.

‘Wait there!’ Sofia jumped up and ran out of the room.

The writers glanced over at her, then turned back to the reading.

‘Please can we get out of here?’ Drew begged.

‘Fine, let’s go.’

Drew picked up his jacket and went out. Indira followed him. She didn’t





mind leaving. Without Sofia, the group was all clever American kids playing at being adventurous abroad, being Hemingway and Washington Irving. Indira wanted only to be herself abroad, as she really was, to free the self that gnawed inside her.

‘That woman was a nut,’ Drew said.

‘I liked her.’

‘Seriously?’

‘I wanted to ask where she lives.’

‘Good idea, that’s one mountain village to avoid!’

They passed the kitchen on the first floor, in darkness now. There was a smell of fried meat and the sound of cutlery on plates, and voices talking in a room beyond where a warm yellow light glowed from within the house.

‘She was absolutely mad!’ Drew went on. ‘All that nonsense about Virginia Woolf hooking up with opera singers.’

‘Maybe she did.’

Anyone could feel like kissing another person at any moment, after all. She saw Fiona draw close to Drew, smiling her knowing smile and Drew reaching for her, moving closer. Indira would never know for certain what had followed. He had chosen to spare her – and himself, of course. They were both paused at the kiss. Could a kiss mean nothing? Could it ever truly be forgotten?

‘We could go to the mountains next time we come to Spain,’ Drew offered. ‘I’d like to see the villages too. There’s a bus from Granada. Or we could hire a car and explore. Hopefully we won’t bump into our new friend.’

The villages were where the Moors had retreated as their kingdom fell: leaving the great city to live in squat stone houses built into rock. Gerald Brenan had formed a rich pure life from simple ingredients: books, a bed, a table, four chairs. It was important to know what was needed and what to leave behind. Most things could be let go of; most things she would never regret losing. But where would it lead, this solitary path? Would she one day be the crazed old woman at the edge of a table while others talked?

## 7

They reached the bottom of the staircase and passed through the yellow door and back into the shop. The man behind the counter was reading an *El País* newspaper. Sofia came running out from behind a bookshelf.

‘Oh God, she’s still here!’ Drew muttered.

‘Here it is! I found it!’ Sofia waved a paperback at them. ‘Here’s your proof!’

It was a copy of *Mrs Dalloway*. Sofia opened it and searched for a certain page.

‘Listen!’ she ordered and started to read:

‘She stood by the fireplace talking, in that beautiful voice which made everything she said sound like a caress...’

‘You see?’ Sofia exclaimed.

‘No!’ Drew retorted.

‘Then they all went out on to the terrace... She and Sally fell a little behind. Then came the most exquisite moment of her whole life... Sally stopped; picked a flower; kissed her on the lips. The whole world might have turned upside down! The others disappeared; there she was alone with Sally. And she felt that she had been given a present, wrapped up, and told just to keep it, not to look at it – a diamond, something infinitely precious.’

‘Now do you see?’ Sofia challenged Drew.

‘It doesn’t prove she was in Spain,’ he said.

‘Well, she was.’ Sofia snapped the book shut and put it on the counter.

‘Ah, wonderful choice!’ The bookseller slid it into a paper bag.

‘Lovely to meet you, but we really must be going,’ Drew told Sofia and headed for the door.

‘How formal!’ she cried, running after him. ‘You stupid, beautiful boy – that’s not how we say goodbye in Spain!’ She reached up with both hands, pulled his face down to hers and kissed him hard and long on the lips. Drew stumbled back, wiping his mouth, and ran out of the shop.

The bookseller chuckled.

‘Goodbye! Bon voyage!’ Sofia waved to Drew from the doorway, grinning, gleeful and malevolent.

Indira eased past Sofia.

‘Here! This is for you!’ Sofia pushed *Mrs Dalloway* into Indira’s hand.

‘But it’s yours!’ Indira protested.

‘I have two first editions at home. Come and visit me there sometime!’ She went back to the counter, snatched up a pen and scribbled inside the back cover of the book.

‘Here’s my number. Call me.’

‘Maybe I will.’ Indira accepted her gift.

Drew was waiting on the other side of the road, spitting into a tissue.

‘That bloody woman!’ He rubbed at his mouth.

Indira started to laugh.

‘It’s not funny! It’s disgusting! She was completely drunk, couldn’t you smell her?’

The sun was beginning to set, the Alhambra walls glowed redder, the mountains turned to pink and shadow under red-gold skies.

The gash between them wasn’t bleeding anymore, it was sealed, grown smooth and hard. Nothing leaked. It was simply a scar, something painless,



just there. Or it could all be discarded before setting off.

People drifted to the bars along the Paseo de los Tristes, its strings of lights burning, looped across the darkness. Indira and Drew headed down the steps, past the silent houses risen up on either side, going towards the lights and music below and the safety of bodies and voices: somewhere to pause the night's descent before the next day's journey began.

**Amanthi Harris** grew up in Colombo, Sri Lanka and in London, UK. She studied Fine Art at Central St Martins and has degrees in Law and Chemistry from Bristol University. Her novel *BEAUTIFUL PLACE* was published by Salt Publishing (UK) and Pan Macmillan India. *LANTERN EVENING*, a novella, won the Gatehouse Press New Fictions Prize 2016 and was published by Gatehouse Press. Her short stories have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4 and published in magazines and anthologies including Best British Short Stories 2020. She currently lives in the mountains of southern Spain. [www.amanthiharris.com](http://www.amanthiharris.com)

## 'THE EVENT IS A PARTY. THE PEOPLE, THE BOOKSELLERS, THE PUBLIC'

Q&A with Elena Parentini and Sebastián Angiolini  
on *La Noche de las Librerías*

Yoshi Ortiz Leal and Saloni Gupta

In 2017, Centro Cultural de España [CCE] initiated the Noche de las Librerías [The Night of the Bookstores]. Inspired by similar events around the world, the event has grown to be one of Uruguay's most anticipated literary celebrations taking place in the capital, Montevideo. It is a fiesta that is held during the night, extending opening hours for bookstores until 1 a.m.

It is a project that aims to 'give visibility to Uruguayan bookstores as part of the country's heritage and identity and to highlight the role of the bookseller as a mediator between publications and the public, as well as to conceive books as a cultural right of citizens' ('Night of the Bookstores 2023'). Over the years, the event has seen an immense response from the city. In 2023, seventy-seven libraries in the country participated, fifty-four of which are in Montevideo. The Faculty of Architecture, Design and Urbanism of the University of the Uruguayan Republic also sell books at discounted prices and hold events themed around architecture, design and urbanism.



Noche de las Librerías, Uruguay  
Photo by CCE in Montevideo



To delve deeper into the origins of the event, Elena Parentini, head of the CCE Media Library, and Sebastián Angiolini, from the Media and Communications department of the CCE, graciously accepted our invitation for an interview and shared some fascinating insights about the event.

**This interview originally took place in Spanish and has been translated for the reader’s convenience and edited for length and clarity.**

**Yoshi Ortiz: Before we start talking about the Night of the Bookstores, we wanted to know a little more about the CCE. What is the focus of the CCE in Uruguay and what is its role in the country?**

**Sebastián Angiolini:** The role of the CCEs, which stands for Centro Cultural de España [Cultural Centre of Spain], depends on the country and the city. In the case of Montevideo, we belong to a network of eighteen cultural centres in Latin America, the Caribbean and Africa. This network of cultural centres depends on the AECID [Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation], which in turn depends on the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The mission of the CCE is to strengthen dialogue and cultural exchange in each country through cooperation, promotion and education, always having culture as the main focus.

**Yoshi Ortiz: How was the event first conceived, and how much time did it take to implement it?**

**Elena Parentini:** The Cultural Action team and the multimedia library of the cultural centre promote and run activities or projects that showcase certain cultural sectors of the country. One day, while chatting with Xurxo Ponce, who was, at the time, responsible for cultural action, we realized that a country so wealthy in terms of good writers, poets and bookstores did not have events like the Night of the Bookstores that were happening in other countries. At the beginning of 2017, we began planning to make bookstores and booksellers in the country visible. We called a meeting with the Cámara del Libro [a Uruguayan institution that seeks to promote the production and dissemination of books through events] and booksellers that could attend at the CCE to begin planning for this. That was the beginning of the idea of the Night of the Bookstores; we called it that as a test, to see what would happen in Uruguay with the announcement.

**Yoshi Ortiz: What was your original vision for the event, and do you think that vision was achieved?**

**Elena Parentini:** It was widely achieved. We accomplished more than we had hoped for. In fact, at first, we were only thinking of bookstores. Then we added academic establishments and libraries. For example, the National Library, which has an editorial division that oversaw selling its publications, that is currently done through a consignment with a distributor. After asking the National Library, the publishing division of the University of the Republic, we added to the event the publishing division of the Faculty of Architecture and a very important centre of photography that exists in Montevideo, which has its own publishing division. As such, the distinguishing feature of the Night of the Bookstores in Uruguay was the inclusion of all the big and small libraries, and the academic publishers.

**‘Everyone here has their own bookseller, as if they were a doctor or a physician.’**

Also, in those runs of the event, and I think it has been kept that way until now, we did not include the large bookshop chains that are found in shopping centres or malls. We never invited the international chains, and they were also not interested in joining us. What we promoted was the figure of the bookseller, connoisseur of its users’ collection, and to make old bookshops fundamentally visible.



Noche de las Librerías, Uruguay  
Photo by CCE in Montevideo

**Sebastián Angiolini:** In addition to what Elena is saying, here in Uruguay and in Montevideo specifically, there are many bookstores. It is something that attracts a lot of interest and everyone here has their own bookseller, as if they were a doctor or a physician. We have that bookseller that you go to ask about books; they already know what you like, what type of literature you read and consume. It is a very nice thing, which is why the focus is on that figure. Another curious thing that happens in Latin America, and Montevideo specifically, is that luckily there has not been the progress of Amazon. Very few people buy books through the internet. You do get that distribution service, but the common thing to do is go to the bookstore, whether in Montevideo, or the rest of the country. That is why the focus, apart from being on the bookstore and everything Elena tells you, is on that figure. That person that knows you, who is a mediator and can introduce you to your favourite literature, so to speak.

**Yoshi Ortiz:** **Have bookstores played an important role in the consolidation of the event?**

**Elena Parentini:** Fundamentally, yes. Nowadays, a lot of consideration is given to the Night of the Bookstores, it is like the bookstores are waiting for it; they sell a lot of books during the night. We also took a lot of care on what date to choose for the Night of the Bookstores, trying not to step on the toes of the Cámara del Libro with the distinct fairs that Montevideo has – there are two, one for children that takes place in March/April and one for adults that happens towards the end of September/October. So, we said that the ideal date would be in November, since December has the Night of the Museums and October has Heritage Day, which is a very important celebration that’s been established here.

**‘We discovered a country with unequal access to culture [...] now, nearly ninety per cent of the departamentos have a bookstore.’**

Another important thing we considered at the time was a national Night of the Bookstores. Out of the few bookstores that we managed to get in contact with and discover in the country, we managed to add them up and plan different activities, like street closures. In that first edition, only six out of the nineteen departamentos of Uruguay [territorial divisions of Uruguay], excluding Montevideo, participated. Sometimes, it was because we couldn’t get to the bookstores or because it was a departamento that didn’t have bookstores. So, we discovered a country with unequal access to culture. I think that now, nearly ninety per cent of the departamentos have a bookstore. It was like the Night of the Bookstores motivated a lot of readers at a departmental level.

**Sebastián Angiolini:** At the beginning there were just a few bookstores and then, year after year, that number grew, and grew, and grew in number. Not just in Montevideo, but in the rest of Uruguay.

**Yoshi Ortiz:** **How would you describe the atmosphere of the event and the reactions to it in Montevideo? What kinds of audiences has it engaged and how?**

**Elena Parentini:** I think it attracted two kinds of audiences. One audience that knew their bookstores and libraries well, because in some years we had libraries taking part in the event. But fundamentally there was an audience that wasn’t bookish. So, there was a very important economic movement generated by the event. It has become, since 2017, the day where more books are sold. Bookstores have sold more books during the event than during the Book Fair, which lasts two weeks, and more than the run-up to Christmas and New Year, which used to be the date when most books were sold.

In recent runs of the event, as more bookstores get involved, they take charge to close the streets and sort the paperwork themselves.

**Sebastián Angiolini:** The streets are pedestrianized. There are streets in Montevideo that are used by cars, and bookstores make the request for the street to be closed. Additionally, it is not that the bookstores only have extended hours. Nearly all, or most of them, run different activities, for example, a book launch with the author. There is music, there is food. Every year it develops further. So, it is a party that has as a main focus the book and the bookseller, but that also gives you the opportunity to attend so that your favourite author can sign your book and talk to you about the creative process. To listen to poetry and music. It is an event which, in these past few years, has had a lot of weight. It is something that the people both in Montevideo and in the rest of the country wait for and know that it will happen in November.

**Yoshi Ortiz:** **How was your personal experience with the event?**

**Elena Parentini:** In the first edition with Xurxo, the booksellers that knew Xurxo and I were delighted to have us visit them on the Night of the Bookstores. In that first year, before Sebastián [Angiolini] joined us, there were only four of us who managed the event. No one wanted to oversee the media surrounding the Night of the Bookstores. That first year it was Xurxo, and although he didn’t like it, he did it so well and was so loved that he was condemned to keep that role. The good thing is that we created a work protocol. The protocol allows you to do a job that if you meet the deadlines, is very easy to do. We had a form





Noche de las Librerías, Uruguay  
Photo by CCE in Montevideo

we sent to the bookstores and from the replies we got, we'd generate a map on Google. From there, we did the different graphics.

**Sebastián Angiolini:** It's a very standardized protocol. Today, the Intendencia of Montevideo [the executive and administrative branch of Montevideo] has the work kit to be able to carry out what was done here. The event is a party; the people, the booksellers, the public. Besides, in November it's warm here and that makes the event enjoyable in every sense. If you search on YouTube 'Night of the Bookstores in Montevideo', you're going to find a multitude of videos that give you an idea of how it happened. You will see a lot of people in the bookstores, you will see music and a little bit on how it's lived.

**Elena Parentini:** We took care that the interviews prior to the Night of the Bookstores were never held at the cultural centre. Instead, Xurxo went to different bookstores, and we told them: 'Now it's your turn'. Each bookseller would promote their bookshop within the framework that was the Night of the Bookstores.

**Sebastián Angiolini:** It was chosen on purpose. We invited the media to very popular bookstores, to newer ones, smaller ones to give some visibility to the ecosystem of the bookstores – from the newest to the oldest and vice versa.

**Yoshi Ortiz:** Were there any obstacles you had to overcome when initially planning the event?

**Elena Parentini:** No, the initiative of the CCE was received with great joy. We had a lot of support from booksellers and a lot of support from the media. It is the highest peak that the centre has ever had in terms of media presence. For four years we oversaw the Night of the Bookstores, then we handed it over to the Intendencia Municipal de Montevideo [Montevideo City Council].

**Sebastián Angiolini:** As Elena says, 2020 was the last year the cultural centre carried out the initiative. Since then, the Night of the Bookstores has been run by the administration of Montevideo, which is the government of Montevideo. The previous director Pilar Sánchez understood that this plan, which became established in a really positive way in the city, is an event that is relatively young and rooted, not just in Montevideo but in the rest of the country. We understood that it was a project that needed a little more institutional weight and that it was a party that, if run by the government of Montevideo, would be able to have more resources than here with the cultural centre. It would also be able to be a part of public policy, which was our wish – for it to be installed at a governmental level and have relationships with other institutions in the political and public sphere of Uruguay.

**Elena Parentini:** It had a lot to do with the politics of Spanish cooperation, which is to support the programmes and projects, but once that programme, that project that leaves the centre, that is strengthened through cooperation with national public institutions, takes off and begins to move on its own. The centre is still a space of Spain in Uruguay, so we understood that the Night of the Bookstores in Uruguay had to be managed by the Uruguayan government.

**Sebastián Angiolini:** Yes. The cultural centre ran the event for five years and to avoid an abrupt change, we maintain the visual identity. The cultural centre collaborates with graphic design. We don't only make posters for the public, we make maps. It is a foldable map with Montevideo and some other parts of the country for the public to traverse. There are a lot of routes. People go out and don't just go to one library – they go to as many as they can; they go out, walk and explore the city with the map that is designed at the centre.

The Night of the Bookstores is now run by the Intendencia. Their involvement has brought about new changes to the event including *Matiné de las Librerías* [Bookstore Matinee]. This was proposed to allow the younger generation to attend the event easily. The stores for children can now remain open until 8 p.m.

Furthermore, the Intendencia provides the resources to help close the streets for vehicular traffic and keep it open just for the pedestrians, allowing the public to enjoy the event to the full extent.

The 8th edition of The Night of the Bookstores has been wrapped up on the night of 8 November 2024 with about eighty stores in participation. The event has taken its spot in Uruguay's cultural calendar and has evolved into a party that celebrates books, establishments that are about books, and Uruguay's cultural heritage.

Further information about the event can be found in the following links:

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Centro Cultural de España. 2018, [www.cce.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NP-Noche-de-las-librer%C3%ADas-Uruguay-2018.pdf](http://www.cce.org.uy/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/NP-Noche-de-las-librer%C3%ADas-Uruguay-2018.pdf).

Conclusión TV Diario Digital. 'Montevideo también tiene su Noche de las Librerías'. *YouTube*, 17 November 2017, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jyu8RIrut70](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jyu8RIrut70). 

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## AN INTROVERT'S PARADISE

### Experiencing Exeter's Silent Book Club

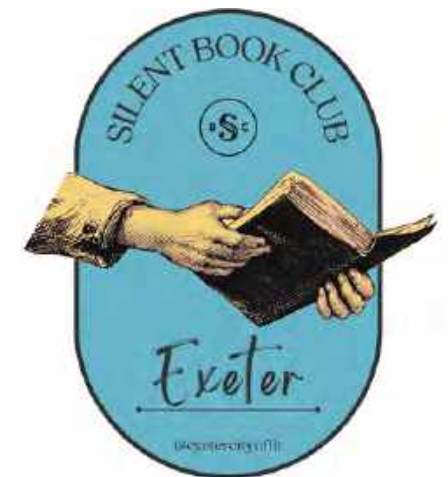
Viktorija Zekaite, Amy Floyd and Emily Pink

The Silent Book Club started from humble beginnings. Two friends, Guinevere de la Mare and Laura Gluhanich, met in a small bar in San Francisco in 2012 ('About Us'). The friends had a simple task on their minds – to visit a venue together and read in silence. Fast forward twelve years and the exercise has now blossomed into a global community of 'readers and introverts' (Silent Book Club Exeter (UK)). Each group that engages with the Silent Book Club is affectionately named a 'chapter' of the movement, grounding the movement as a collective endeavour. There are now over 1000 'chapters' across fifty countries, all sharing a mutual love of consuming literature. Readers are encouraged to bring a book – whatever form the book takes. As stated by the Silent Book Club, the event is Bring-Your-Own-Book! However, funding is available at some chapters to support attendance through a book voucher. Designed to reframe the traditional book club model, the Silent Book Club banishes homework and, crucially, conversation. Furthermore, the events are free of charge and support local businesses, reflecting the importance of accessibility when fostering new, intersectional communities. A collection of University of Exeter's MA Publishing students wanted to see for themselves what makes the Silent Book Club so special, attending their October gathering to bask in a silent reading session.

### The Exeter Silent Book Club

Exeter's chapter of the Silent Book Club started in April 2024, as just one of the brilliant initiatives facilitated by

*Provided by Exeter City of Literature*



Exeter City of Literature. On the third Tuesday of each month, readers across the city meet in The Hour Glass Inn from 6–8 p.m. The event consists of one hour of silent reading, followed by an optional chat with fellow participants over snacks and drinks. Across Devon, there are Silent Book Clubs in Crediton, Plymouth and Torquay. Exeter's chapter remains unique in comparison to similar communities in its dedication to wellbeing. Curious, we wanted to explore why reading in silence amidst other introverts is so soothing, and if this feeling had any lasting effect on our wellbeing.

## The Appeal

Exeter's focus on wellbeing and reading is not a new phenomenon yet remains a relatively inconspicuous concept. The Silent Book Club model could be likened to a form of 'bibliotherapy', defined as 'any form of psychotherapy in which the reading of prescribed texts forms an important part of the therapeutic process' (Colman). The term 'bibliotherapy' was coined in 1916, to first denote a 'system of metaphors and body of practices associated with using books for health' (Miller 21). Before this definition, however, links were being forged between health and reading, where veterans were treated with prescribed readings alongside medication and rehabilitation. Elizabeth Pomeroy, director of the Veterans Administration Service, likened the role of bibliotherapists, who so often were hospital librarians at that time, to 'dieticians' who used reading as 'mental food' (20). We can carry forward this notion of bibliotherapists being 'dieticians' to the current moment, where bibliotherapy continues to exist as a practitioner-to-patient service. As part of a professional bibliotherapy session, participants are questioned on their reading choices and alternatives are suggested to improve wellbeing. In the *Guardian* article 'A Dose of Prose', published in November 2011, one bibliotherapy participant reflected that 'I recognize now that I am a work in progress. There is much to be done'



Awaiting the attendees  
Provided by Exeter City of Literature

(McCrum). The Silent Book Club model offers a refreshing deviation from traditional bibliotherapy methods, allowing readers to choose any literature they prefer and engaging them in low-pressure, silent communal reading that prioritizes self-care. By removing the sense of being surveyed or directed by an external 'dietician', the Silent Book Club fosters feelings of community and belonging through shared reading experiences. Intrigued by the principles of bibliotherapy, we explored how the Silent Book Club both embraces and challenges the traditional model of reading for therapy. While traditional bibliotherapy seeks to dissect literary preferences as a means of psychological treatment, the Silent Book Club takes a less intrusive approach, focusing instead on the communal joys of reading. This prompted us to reflect on how reading can both compound and challenge emotions, and how sharing this typically solitary hobby with others might alter our perspectives and feelings.

**'The Silent Book Club model offers [...] low-pressure, silent communal reading that prioritizes self-care.'**

## The Experience

After a long day at university, we ventured to the Silent Book Club hosted at The Hour Glass Inn in Exeter. For most of us, it was the first time we had attended the event and we did not know what to expect aside from silent reading. Upon arrival, we were met by a cosy independent pub filled to the brim with people of all ages and genders. After ordering glasses of wine, we squeezed in and thankfully found some chairs. We noticed that almost all participants had a glass in hand, snacking on chips whilst socializing. The event organizer, Anna Cohn Orchard, the Executive Director of Exeter UNESCO City of Literature, caught our attention and began discussing the night's events, grateful for us 'squeezing in like sardines'. As expected, she highlighted the book club's remarkable rise in popularity and requested recommendations to better accommodate the surge in attendance. Before our hour of silent reading began, a 'wellbeing survey' and a sheet of coloured stickers were provided to us, allowing experiences to be shared honestly and anonymously. This approach was considered beneficial, as it encouraged open feedback in a safe environment, helping organizers understand and respond to members' needs and enhance the book club experience. Once the survey was complete, Anna began a timer and noted that a gong would sound once the timer had finished. And so, we began our reading. Later, an attendee mentioned that they had 'noticed the immediate silence in



Attendees of the Silent Book Club  
 Provided by Exeter City of Literature

the pub [as they] looked around and everyone was engrossed in their books.’

Though the pub was mainly filled with attendees of the book club, there were still a few regulars of the pub itself. They spoke amongst themselves and their voices, paired with the occasional pottering of the bar staff, provided a small amount of ambient background noise. The atmosphere could almost be likened to the Lo-Fi café music one would find on streaming services – often used with the intention of relaxing.

While looking around the pub, a variety of reading formats could be seen, including e-readers, paperbacks, audiobooks, laptops and library books. A range of genres was also being read, such as romance, adult fiction, non-fiction, academic works, sci-fi and historical fiction.

We were all deeply engrossed in our books, only to be suddenly pulled out of our trances by the sound of the gong – or, as the organizers aptly named it, the ‘meditation gong’. The gentle but grounding sound brought us back to the present moment, marking the end of our silent reading hour. Once more, we were handed the ‘wellbeing survey’ and a sheet of coloured stickers to note how we felt after the session. Glancing at the growing array of colours filling the page, it became clear that everyone’s mood had lifted over the past hour. The survey sheet became a visual testament to the calm and happiness that now filled the room, turning our reading session into a shared moment of collective wellbeing.

Then came the hour of socializing: some people stayed, and some people left. There was no obligation to socialize; if an attendee just wanted to come for the silent reading, and then go home, this was totally fine to do. It is worth mentioning that the option to leave after the reading hour removed any sense of social pressure. Whilst we felt comfortable enough to chat with some of the other attendees that evening, there was nothing awkward about the decision of some others to leave before the social hour had commenced. It is reassuring to know that this option remains for the future if there were to come a day when we were feeling less sociable! At this point, we decided to ask questions to those who had participated.

We spoke to a primary school teacher, who was originally from Kent. She noted that she generally doesn’t get much time to read in her line of work. But through UNESCO Cities of Literature, she discovered the concept of the Silent Book Club and with family in Exeter, she decided to join. She stated that she would mainly travel to Exeter for the club itself and has now started one in her hometown, yet she still likes to visit the Exeter-specific Silent Book Club.

We also spoke to Rachel Burns, a first-time attendee of the club. Rachel is a recent graduate from the University of Exeter, now working in a full-time office job. The first thing she noticed was ‘an array of people’ upon entering the pub; a range of ages, genders and groups of friends, but also people coming on their own. She felt welcomed and loved the sense of community immediately. We also discussed bibliotherapy with her. She stated that she had never heard of the treatment before but thought her wellbeing had increased over the past hour of silent reading.

**‘There’s no set reading, no set discussion; it was nice.’**

Another attendee, named Sieske, shared that she typically doesn’t enjoy going to the pub and often wishes she could be at home reading a book instead. Initially, she planned to stay home, but she appreciated the idea of meeting a friend while also having the chance to read. A university student we spoke to mentioned, ‘There’s no set reading, no set discussion; it was nice’. As university students ourselves, we found this relatable. Each week, we’re assigned core readings that take priority over personal reading, and indulging in a book for pleasure often comes with a sense of guilt. Having the chance to sit down for an hour, surrounded by friends or strangers, to simply read over a glass of wine and some chips brought a much-needed sense of calm.



## The Outcome

It seemed that attendees had various reasons for wanting to attend the book club. Out of our group, most of us were drawn by curiosity. When we first heard about Exeter's Silent Book Club from Anna Cohn Orchard, we were immediately interested. We had never heard of a book club that offered such a flexible agenda. Not expecting attendees to have read a certain piece of literature in preparation made the experience feel less daunting than a traditional book club. It also provided a sense of accessibility; no one was being judged for how much or how little they read, and anyone could turn up without feeling intimidated by the prospect of having to offer something insightful to a conversation. In a world where everyone already has so many stresses to juggle, a book club should be a place to relax and enjoy some self-care amongst others.

The Silent Book Club allowed us to chat to new people without feeling socially drained. If anything, we left that evening refreshed and relaxed. We felt that it was beneficial to our sense of belonging within Exeter to be able to speak with people of all ages and backgrounds, knowing that we had all been brought together with the common aim of improving our wellbeing through reading.

This brings us to our final observation, which was that we would not have had the opportunity to mix with the variety of people that we met if we kept on going to the same old student hangouts. Not that there's anything wrong with what you know and love as a student, but it sometimes feels nice to break out of the university bubble. The end of the evening left us with a sense of perspective, and we returned to our various homes happy that we had broadened our experiences of Exeter as a city, rather than just a university.

## Concluding Thoughts

Our experience at the Silent Book Club was a wholly positive and soothing one. Of our student group, we all agreed that we would be interested in attending again, and it will be especially interesting to see where the search for a larger capacity venue leads us to next time. Despite reading being a solitary activity, to feel a sense of community whilst doing so was reassuring and created a sense of being 'all in it together'.

We would highly recommend the Silent Book Club as a non-intimidating opportunity to read whatever you like and speak as much as you feel comfortable; we are so excited to be told that the Exeter Silent Book Club will be continuing to run every third Tuesday of the month. Not only this, the Exeter chapter is expanding and will also run sessions on the first Wednesday of every month at

Topsham Brewery. We look forward to returning and hopefully seeing some new faces in attendance.



To find out about future scheduling of sessions, be sure to follow [@exetercityoflit](https://www.instagram.com/exetercityoflit) on Instagram.



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# AFTERWORD

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**Davina Quinlivan**

From time to time, I walked around the city. I went to the museum and saw an ammonite, an elephant and a tiger. I climbed up a hill and looked out to the quayside which led to a place where there was an orchard, canal boats and a pub with the smoke of a wood burner coming out of its chimney. I crossed an iron bridge and I walked past a row of Victorian cottages with different coloured doors and pots of tulips outside. I travelled past another avenue of houses and then I walked back towards the city and up another hill near the ruins of a castle.

(from *Possessions: A Memoir*, September Publishing, 2026)

Just a few months before I had commissioned Ira Sukrungruang, a visiting Professor from Kenyon College in Ohio, to write his excellent story for this anthology, we took a walk through Exeter with his students and we stood in the ruins of Rougemont Castle, thinking about the last four witches in England who were trialled 300 years ago in that very spot. We talked about how places hold their residual matter, histories, memories – shadows and spectres. We thought about how stories do this too; how they weave a particular feeling through their narratives of the living world. My feelings for the city, for Exeter, as a writer, are deep and complex. I suspect I will never be able to fully unravel these feelings, but I look forward to seeing what happens and where that thought takes me.

I arrived in Devon knowing very little about its Roman history and the strange, bewitching eco-systems which intertwine cultural notions of time with a particular spirit of place. This includes Devon's surrounding farmland, its moors and the phenomenal work of various writers with Devonian connections (Celia Fiennes, Jean Rhys, Doris Lessing, Elizabeth-Jane Burnett, Ted Hughes and Sylvia Plath). As the years went on (almost seven, unbelievably, so far), I sought out stories first, not histories. As I walked with a child or two in tow, we built a home, and then out came my first memoir (*Shalimar: A Story of Place and Migration*, Little Toller, 2022), tracking all the moves we have made as a family, set against the story of migration sitting at the heart of my own personal heritage as the youngest child of a family of (post-colonial) exiles from India and Burma.

While I don't believe in labels or genre categories, it is fair to say that I am interested in place writing, and by that I mean drawing from the well of experience that comes from knowing, or at least thinking properly about a particular place, working out how you feel about it. I'm often interested in real places, but the writing comes from accessing their multiple realities, their present and their past, the 'unlived' as much as the 'lived', the psychogeography of it all. I know I have a particular habit of opening out realms inspired by the natural world, especially fields (because I live on a farm), which become increasingly abstract, surrealist, or magical realist, depending on the story.

It was a great honour to be asked to commission writers representing their respective UNESCO Cities of Literature for this collection. It is a wonderful gesture, an inspirational act, to see these writers together in solidarity, celebrating the power of stories. Thinking back to my walk with Sukrungruang and his students, I immediately had a sense of what this anthology could become. Ira is every bit an Exeter-based writer, as well as an Ohio-based one; he loved visiting our city, and he lived here for the best part of a year. I wanted the anthology to foster the power of imagination and transformation, for the stories to weave their magic through the writing of place, lived experience and passionate engagements with histories of belonging. I commissioned these writers because I knew no one was going to write what might be generally expected of them – interesting yet most likely somewhat conventional stories about Edinburgh, Exeter, Grenada or Lviv. I did not want that, though I will admit it might have been a fair way to start the process off. While we each live, or have lived, in these Cities of Literature, we share the common goal of wanting our readers to care for the world and all that might be lost if we cannot learn from history, from the crises we are currently experiencing as a global community. In the words of Amitav Ghosh:

Wisdom exists in the context of stories, in the context of storytelling, in the context of songs. And all of that is what we've lost and what we have to try and bring back. (from 'Beings Seen and Unseen: An Interview with Amitav Ghosh.' *Emergence Magazine*, 31 Aug. 2022)

My role of editor here has also been one of forging a new network. It is a great pleasure to unite the work of Sukrungruang, Amanthi Harris, Devika Ponnambalam, Hanna Leliv and Natalia Matolinets, all of whom have never met, yet their works sing together and feel absolutely right here. In addition to my relationship with Sukrungruang, I have also known Harris's work for many years and greatly admire how brilliantly she writes about place. Ponnambalam is a writer I just had to reach out to after reading her extraordinary book about

Paul Gauguin's child bride and her life in Tahiti, *I Am Not Your Eve* (Bluemoose Books, 2022). As with Harris, who studied Fine Art at Central St Martins, Ponnambalam has a background in filmmaking. As someone who also trained as a filmmaker, I am always drawn to how storytelling works across different mediums and their alchemical entanglement. Finally, Matolinet's lovely work was recommended by a friend, a fellow Ukrainian working in the field of publishing. These stories offer up new ways to understand mythologies or oral storytelling, as explored in the remaining chapters impressively brought together by our MA Publishing students.


The four themes of this anthology perfectly serve the ideas behind the UNESCO Cities of Literature network – heritage, survival, connection, community. Clearly, we can gather a deep sense of meaning and contextual understanding of how important places and people are to the network, and the specific strands of storytelling which emerge as a result of this endeavour. The pieces on 'heritage' beautifully reflect on the fundamental role of folklore and culture in Okayama, Wrocław and Bremen. In particular, it is of such importance to remind us of Baba Yaga in Poland and its debt to the 'geographic landscape of Lower Silesia'. As part of this section, Sukrungruang's story is a uniquely gothic tale, shifting from the ghostly presence of ants to questions of home and post-colonial identity.

The next section on 'survival' reflects on the history of conflict and war in the UNESCO cities of Ukraine, with such a powerful focus on poetry, activism and projects such as Reading for Odesa; the coverage of Poetry Africa also brings to light the central role of literature as a force for good, for the cultivation of hope. Ponnambalam's story gently brings together these threads, embodying the question of what it might mean to survive as a post-colonial child.

Following on from 'survival', the section on 'connection' explores, brilliantly, the role of residencies and interconnectivity; Matolinet's story opens up this theme, in such a lovely way, through her mythical meditation on intergenerational narratives – in many ways, inspiring us to think more about the nurturing of stories across lived histories.

The final section on 'community' spotlights the Bibliobus, which itself reminds us of the importance of movement, travel and how stories are located within these processes. The bus reminds me of my own journey on the 55 Stagecoach to Exeter and the reality of the fact that I've composed, at least in my head, hundreds of stories, as I've stared out the window towards the often-flooded plains of the Exe Valley in Devon. Harris's story fits so well here because it begins with a bus journey, far away in Grenada; it moves me to think of Harris writing her stories of travel as I embark on my own and how important those micro and macro lines of flight are to our work on the theme of migration.

A sense of community, above all, is the thing I most value as an author. Through an active response to our communities and their specific strengths, we can also share our individual values. If we are to develop future networks across our cities, which I hope we can, then the most important thing of all is to imagine how our sharing of values and care for each other can help us not to see beyond our own specificity of place, but to create a new 'home' from this precious endeavour.



## AUTHORS AND EDITORS

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From article pitches to the final rounds of editing, the 2024-25 MA Publishing cohort at the University of Exeter have poured their hearts and souls into this publication. Every single student has played such an integral role in the creation and production of this publication. Hopefully you've had as much fun reading it, as they've had creating it.

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