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2010

Fantazja o Polskiej Fantastyce: A Fantasy about Polish Fantasy

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Recommended Citation

Hyrc, Michal, "Fantazja o Polskiej Fantastyce: A Fantasy about Polish Fantasy" (2010). *Neureuther Book Collection Essay Competition*. 6.
<https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/nbcec/6>

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From time to time, I encounter the question of what language I'm a 'native speaker' of. I have a lot of difficulty answering this question- I'm fluent in both English and Polish, and speak both without an accent. I spent my childhood in Poland and continue to visit my extended family there annually, and speak Polish with my parents at home. At the same time, I learned English quite early in my life and use it in my day to day interactions living in the United States. Nothing distinguishes me from a typical speaker of either language. Perhaps a better question for surveys and questionnaires to ask is the language I'm a native reader of. To this I have a definitive answer: Polish. I learned to read and discovered the magic of reading in Polish, and Polish books of all shapes, sizes, lengths and genres have fascinated me since.

In both English and Polish, there is one specific type of literature that I enjoy the most- fantasy. My enjoyment of fantasy started with the first books my parents read to me, fairytales, and continued throughout my youth. I've been a fan of imaginary worlds, monsters and magic ever since. Polish fantasy holds a special, unique place in my heart- hence the Polish part of the title of this essay, *Fantazja o Polskiej Fantastyce*, which translates to something along the lines of *A Fantasy about Polish Fantasy Novels*. While it is primarily meant to be about my collection of Polish fantasy books, it also includes hope for my dream of making such a collection accessible to English readers. The four works described in this essay are the gems of my collection, chosen because primarily because I so thoroughly enjoyed them and heartily recommend them.

The first serious (that is, containing chapters) Polish fantasy novel I read on my own was *Pan Kleks*, (Mr. Inkblot¹) a Polish childhood classic written by one of Poland's most famous poets, Jan Brzechwa. It describes the adventures of the twelve year old Adam Niezgódka (Adam Unagreeable) as he attends Ambroży Kleks' (Ambrose Inkblot) academy. It's a very peculiar place- to begin with, only boys whose names start with the letter A are admitted. The day to day

¹ All translations are by the author from Polish to English unless otherwise noted.

happenings of the academy are run by Kleks' parrot, Mateusz (Matthew) who always omits the first syllables of every word he says. One of the mysteries of the academy is the many gates found in the wall surrounding the academy. One day, Kleks gives Adam the key to one of these gates. Upon passing through it, he finds himself in one of Hans Christian Andersen's fairytales - that of the Little-Match Seller, where, at Klek's behest, Adam trades a blanket for a matchbox and returns to the academy. The book continues with many excursions into different fairytales and later travels into worlds of Brzechwa's own imagination.

My all time favorite book in Polish fantasy is Andrzej Sapkowski's *Narrenturm* (Latin - The Tower of Fools²) the first book of three in a trilogy that is part fantasy, part historical fiction set in early 15th century Bohemia. The time period witnessed an exceptionally brutal and violent repression of religious reform inspired by Jan Hus in Bohemia. He was burned at the stake, but his followers, the Hussites, rose up in rebellion as a result of his execution. Decades of intra-European crusades eventually defeated the Hussite uprising. It is into this backdrop that Sapkowski places his hero, Reynmar von Beilau, a petty noble who happens to be a minor magician. Unfortunately for him, he resides in Catholic Poland and his thaumaturgical studies took place in Prague, the heartland of the Hussite rebellion.

Any summary of Polish fantasy, no matter how short, would be remiss to not mention Sapkowski's other work, the *Wiedźmin* (The Witcher) series, the first volume of which is *Krew Elfów* (Blood of the Elves). It follows Geralt, a wiedźmin (witcher³) who is a mercenary that is hired to kill monsters. Geralt's fortunes are forever changed when he is entrusted with the protection of Ciri, a child with a destiny to become the first female witcher. Even though the

² The name of the first psychiatric hospital, built in Austria in the 18th century. The book's title is an ironic reference to when the characters are captured by the Inquisition and placed into a tower as prisoners, and it turns out most of the prisoners are not in any way heretics but simply psychologically ill.

³ The word wiedźmin is difficult to translate; it's the male form of the word witch - wiedźma - that would not normally be used. Warlock might also be a good translation

novel was spectacular success in Poland, American audiences are unlikely to ever have heard of it- and if they have, probably as a result of the videogame that was based on the books.

The final book of note in my collection is Stanisław Lem's *Dzienniki Gwiazdowe* (Star Journals) which is a diary of Ijon Tichy, a space traveler. Each chapter of the book is a journal entry, and can be read as a standalone short story, though the stories all relate in curious ways as well. Lem's fiction is much more serious in nature than the works previously described. Much less about plot or story, *Dzienniki Gwiazdowe* is philosophy clever disguised as science fiction, through which Lem explores serious philosophical questions.

All the works described above probably seem to have little in common, though you have no doubt have noticed at least one similarity: You've never heard of most, if any, of these books! Lamentably, Polish literature is largely unknown and unexplored outside the borders of Poland. Despite producing two Nobel Prize winning poets in recent times, Czesław Miłosz & Wisława Szymborska, and in the 19th century renowned writers Henryk Sienkiewicz and Bolesław Prus or the poets Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz Słowacki and Ignacy Krasiński, all these names mean little outside of Poland. Now, these are the most famous, classic Polish authors- the Mark Twains and Ernest Hemingways of Poland. More obscure and unknown writers of fantasy are even less known and virtually untranslated. The sole exception to that is Stanisław Lem, who had several works translated into English. The most famous, *Solaris*, was made into a film starring George Clooney in 2002. Apart from this exception to the rule, Polish fantasy resides in obscurity.

It is this status quo that I fantasize might one day change. Polish fantasy is every bit as good as its American counterpart, if not better. Most importantly, Polish fantasy is alive and well today, with its writers creating and publishing this very moment. Andrzej Sapkowski published a new book only last year, *Żmija* (Viper), which is a magic-infused retelling of the Soviet

occupation of Afghanistan. It's both a very entertaining read as well as a relevant commentary to the American occupation of Afghanistan today. Stanisław Lem died only 4 years ago and continued to write and publish late into his life. On the other side of the Atlantic (or at least English Channel) the picture is quite dismal. The fathers of English-language fantasy, J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis are distant memories in the literacy scene. American readers would much rather pick up an installment of *Harry Potter* or the *Twilight* series than read quality fantasy. While the best selling adventures of Harry Potter and Bella Swan might have engaging plots, they hardly classify as well written literature that deals with philosophy and problems of the human condition, which is what fantasy originated as. *Narnia* or *The Lord of the Rings* have engendered myriad books of literary criticism that try to untangle what exactly it was that Lewis and Tolkien were getting at, while the message of the two previously mentioned series can be summarized in a few words: unconditional love conquers all (even evil magic) and the true love of your life will be a vampire (or werewolf).

The amazing thing about Polish fantasy is that the mainstream fantasy is also fantasy of literary merit- well written and raising real, complex issues with the readers, not just distracting them from reality. It is my fantasy that one day some entrepreneurial publisher will take the risk of translating obscure, unheard of Polish fantasy novels into English for English-speaking readers to enjoy. Perhaps this essay is one small step towards spreading the appeal of Polish fantasy and making this dream a stop closer to coming true. You may have noticed that my descriptions of novels were somewhat short and stilted, and didn't reveal the endings of any of the books. This is because I live in the hope that one day my 'fantazja o polskej fantastyce' will come true, and you will be able to enjoy the books I described yourself.

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