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interview

The Reputation of Fantastic Literature is up to Those of Us Involved in it

Martin Šust is an editor and a journalist concentrating especially at foreign fantastic literature. He has put together a successful series of anthologies called *Trochu divné kusy*, or individual anthologies *Plameny hvězd* and *Plnou parou*. In 2006–2011 he worked as a chief editor of a Czech edition of prestigious *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*. He collaborated with magazines *Ikarie* and *Pevnost*, and today he is an editor of foreign stories in a magazine *XB-1*, and he cooperates with publishers, such as Argo or Laser-books.

How is fantastic literature currently perceived in the Czech Republic?

Each of us associates with a different circle of friends and acquaintances, and therefore reacts to similar questions in different ways. I personally also try to have a good knowledge of various attitudes to the fantastic outside the community of the genre fans. In general, it seems that the perception of the fantastic is slightly improving, and I am really glad that fantastic literature finds its place at Czech universities. In spite of that, however, the broad public still see it rather as a collection of low genre clichés and its fans as freaks who make crop circles at night.

Such similar idea about the genre is also shared by the readers and, in many cases, also the authors of mainstream literature; on the other hand, publishers perceive it more and more as a potential “gold mine”, and also as an interesting addition to the editorial plan – this I find to be the most significant shift upwards so far. This helps to publish not only commercial projects, but also some more demanding texts with the corresponding emphasis on the quality of the published book. It is up to those who engage in fantastic literature to improve its reputation.

You focus quite a lot on foreign literature translated to Czech. What is its position in the world? Is it in any way different from its position in the Czech Republic?

As I suggested in my previous answer, the position of the fantastic is very often ambiguous even within one country, let alone the whole world. The term “world fantastic” was in the past equal to the “Anglo-American fantastic”, which has been hopefully changing a little in the past few years. Today, young authors from all around the world have no problem to write in English, and establish themselves also outside their own country. Some of them write only in English, and are more popular abroad.

In some countries, the fantastic goes through a turbulent rise, which can be demonstrated e.g. on the cases of China or India. In our country we have nothing to complain about, our country is almost a promised land for the fantastic. For example, we are the only country in Europe with two monthly issued printed magazines of the genre, both being published without the state aid. My personal wish is for the Czech fantastic to be more open, which is an appeal not only to its fandom. We need a more strict comparison with general literature, a larger number of professional objective literary critics, and authors who are not afraid to go against the tide of contemporary genre trends.

What type of the fantastic is most attractive for current readers?

In general it is the fantastic which is in some way connected to any media phenomenon, such as a book on which a film, a TV series or a computer game is based, and also stories that develop a similar universe, primarily created for a different medium. An important role is also credited to inventive advertising thanks to which especially those average works, easily accessible to the public, become bestsellers. We are talking here mainly about the undemanding and readable fantastic full of action. On the other hand, every year there are also published enough books which are attractive even for a more demanding reader.

What is the popularity rate of the traditional subgenres of the fantastic: science fiction and fantasy? And can we determine the causes of this situation?

Modern fantastic permanently goes through different genres, since the beginning of the new millennium it was, e.g. New Weird (a wave of steampunk related to the popularity of this lifestyle), or the incredible increase of popular-

ity of paranormal romance... The situation on the market very often changes every few years. Currently we can observe a significant drop in popularity in paranormal romance once so widespread. Science fiction on the other hand, has been lately the only genre within the fantastic whose number of titles published on the dominant American market is slightly increasing.

Fantasy obviously leads the market, but this is also connected to the fact that it is a genre with very loose limits; it is not only the epic fantasy, meaning those stories continuing in the tradition of authors, such as J. R. R. Tolkien, R. E. Howard etc. Thanks to its openness, fantasy is also more comprehensible to any reader, whereas, science fiction is often considered as more difficult for readers, with using scientific terminology and hypotheses, which does not suit everyone.

The rebirth of science fiction is among others also connected to the fact that the publishers and authors have realized the power of the fantastic for children and young audiences, and they have aimed at the “education of future readers”. We can also observe it in connection to the media space where there appear a growing number of film blockbusters, TV series and computer games related to science fiction, which can be seen as an indicator of an established trend for the future. In my view, it is an ever-changing development that I consider neither negatively nor positively, I just objectively watch it. As a reader, I then choose especially interesting or inspiring books without being interested in their genre; and as an editor of a genre literary magazine, I try, by means of foreign stories, to provide the reader with not only readable stories, but also stories that respect the current development.

You have worked in the field since the beginning of the new millennium, have you observed any significant development in the genre?

Of course, I do not even know here to start. I was starting at the Czech market in the time when we were trying to catch up what we could, and published especially older, time-honoured, works. At that time, I was personally interested not only in the classics, but I also tried to bring something new to the genre in terms of new authors, and I hope I have contributed to this trend.

I am even sorry a bit in retrospection that we did not manage to publish a large number of books for which there is almost no space nowadays. It is interesting that, in case of the classics, those books which had already been published in Czech before sell better than unknown works, even by the same authors; but it makes sense in a way.

Thanks to modern technologies, we today keep up with the world, and we choose titles from the current offer, very often long before they are published. But even after all those years, I am never completely certain how each of the book will be doing, because the interest and taste of the readers is fickle, and it is difficult to attract their attention.

What interests you the most about the fantastic?

Above all the endless variability of possible approaches and styles that the general literature can only envy. I am a keen reader, and even after so many years, it is still interesting for me to observe how extensive and many-sided the fantastic can be. It is no coincidence that it attracts even the well-established authors of the mainstream.

If someone tells you that he does not read the fantastic and is not interested in it, it is regrettably a very limited view worth enlightening, if there is any space for it. None of us should be guided by prejudice, both in life and literature.

What has recently caught your interest?

Frankly, it is not the new books any more, but the developments around the fantastic. Lately, the social changes are also reflected in the fandom; it is enough to mention the controversy outcry about this year's Hugo awards, and the following disputes about the change of appearance of the World Fantasy Award.

It is interesting to watch the increasing numbers of foreign authors being published in English language, the importance of electronic publishing and crowdfunding at the book market, the decrease in popularity of the not long ago sharply increasing e-books, the varying influence of media versions of literary works on the marketability, regardless their quality etc.

Professionally I divide my attention between a search for interesting new names and re-editions of older classics. Currently, I enjoy my work on the publishing of books by an English writer Robert Holdstock, and some other well-known titles are awaiting me. It is loads of effort and opportunities; fortunately, my work is still quite diverse, and it still is not only my work but also my passion.