Interview with Theodora Goss

Vera Benczik and Beata Gubacsi

The interview was conducted in writing in the summer of 2021.

Guest Editors Vera Benczik and Beata Gubacsi: Could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Theodora Goss: I was born in Budapest to Hungarian parents, but my mother left the country when I was still a child, taking me with her. First, we lived in Brussels, and then we immigrated to the United States, where I became an American citizen as a teenager. Unfortunately, I lost my Hungarian language—at that time, people believed that bilingual children would not become fully fluent in their second language, and my mother wanted us to be as American as possible. So, I have been relearning Hungarian as an adult. I expect that I will probably be studying it for the rest of my life! My father remained in Hungary and remarried—he is still a professor at the University of Debrecen. My two sisters from his second marriage grew up in Hungary but now live and work in London.

I grew up in Maryland and Virginia, and got a B.A. in English literature at the University of Virginia. I moved to Massachusetts to attend law school at Harvard. I practiced law for a few years, then went back to graduate school for a PhD in English and American Literature at Boston University, where I still teach. While I was in graduate school, I attended the Clarion Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers' Workshop, where I sold my first short story. I have been publishing steadily since. I write novels, short stories, essays, poetry—everything, really. After I graduated, I turned the research from my doctoral dissertation into the Athena Club trilogy, about a group of young women who also happen to be female monsters (Mary Jekyll, Diana Hyde, Beatrice Rappaccini, Catherine Moreau, and Justine Frankenstein). They meet in late nineteenth-century London and help Sherlock Holmes solve a series of gruesome murders. The second book in the series takes them to the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and eventually to Budapest, to battle the villainous Professor Van Helsing. Most recently, I wrote a collection of fairy tale-inspired short stories and poems called *Snow White Learns Witchcraft* and edited an anthology titled *Medusa's Daughters: Magic and Monstrosity from Women Writers of the Fin-de-Siècle*. I teach literature and writing in the Boston University Writing Program, but in the spring of 2022 I will be teaching at Pázmány Péter Catholic University in Budapest on a Fulbright Fellowship.

Guest Editors: How do you see the development of the fantastic in the past ten years? What do you think are the most important shifts in terms of how the fantastic is perceived and conceptualised?

Theodora Goss: I think there have been three significant shifts in our cultural perception of the fantastic. I would say these have taken place over the last twenty years—the past decade has seen an acceleration of these shifts, but they started some time before that. I saw them taking place while I was still in graduate school. The first is that genres of the fantastic have become wildly popular. This has had quite a lot to do with the success of the Harry Potter franchise, but there are so many examples of popular books and films that draw on fantasy elements—*Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell* by Susanna Clarke, *A Discovery of Witches* by Deborah Harkness, *The Night Circus* by Erin Morgenstern, etc. The success of these books allows other books to be written that may not capture the public imagination and rise up the bestseller lists in quite the same way, but that can be published and find their audience. So, we have a proliferation of fantastical fiction. The second is that genres of the fantastic have become much more respected as literature. They are taught in university classes, and scholars treat them with serious critical attention. This is partly because fantasy is being written by wonderful, thoughtful writers like Aimee Bender, Michael Cunningham, Elizabeth Hand, Nalo Hopkinson, Jeffrey Ford, Kelly Link, Ken Liu, Helen Oyeyemi, Karen Russell, Sofia Samatar—these are just a few examples that come to mind from my own syllabi, but there are so many more. And the dividing line between fantasy writers and writers of realistic fiction is not as rigid as it used to be, although "Literature" and "Science Fiction and Fantasy" are often still separated in the bookstores. Margaret Atwood goes on the Literature shelf and Ursula K. Le Guin goes on the Science Fiction and Fantasy shelf, even though they were doing similar things in *The Penelopiad* and *Lavinia*. But writers cross over more than they used to. The third shift is that fantasy is once more an important component of children's literature. When I was growing up, the children's fantasy I read was quite old—the Narnia books, the Oz books, E. Nesbit. There was a cultural assumption that children should be reading about the real world. But now we seem to be in another golden age of children's fantasy. So really, the entire landscape has changed. That change started at least twenty years ago, but it has certainly reshaped how fantasy is published and perceived in the last ten years. I haven't mentioned a fourth shift that I think is just beginning, which is that fantasy is becoming much more international. We see this in the popularity of the Hayao Miyazaki movies and the Witcher books, games, and television series. But I think that shift will accelerate significantly in the next ten years.

Guest Editors: As a Hungarian-American SFF writer, how do you incorporate and subvert the Hungarian fantastic into the themes and tropes of Anglo-American fantastic tradition? Do you find that engaging with elements of the Hungarian fantastic influences your writing or national identity?

Theodora Goss: I honestly don't know because I think the elements of Hungarian fantasy are so deeply buried in my head that I'm not even sure what they are. What I mean is that I read and was told Hungarian fairy tales as a child, and then after my mother left Hungary and we moved to the United States, I read Kate Seredy's *The White Stag* and Hungarian and other central European fairy tales in English. I still have an old copy of *Magyar Fairy Tales* by Nándor Pogány, as well as Hungarian classics like Sándor Petőfi's *János vitéz* and Elek Benedek's *Ezüst mesekönyv*. When

I started relearning Hungarian as an adult, I read fairy tales again because I could more or less understand them. My mind was formed by these tales so long ago, and in such a fundamental way, that I can't separate them from anything else I do. For the most part, I don't consciously incorporate them—they're just there. It's like my use of English. I think I write standard American English, but once a reviewer said that my stories sounded as though they were in translation, and I think my writing is still inflected by having first spoken Hungarian and then French. I still cross my 7's and z's because that's what I was taught in first grade, which I attended in Brussels, and my sentence structure is, in a sense, haunted by the Hungarian language. It's not completely standard English. A Hungarian editor once told me that my stories were easier to translate—perhaps because of that buried memory. The one place where it's conscious, perhaps, is in my stories about the imaginary country of Sylvania, which is located somewhere in Central Europe—but that's also deeply influenced by Le Guin's Orsinia stories. So many things have gone into how I write that I don't know how to untangle them. What I do incorporate deliberately is Hungary itself—the reality of it. I did quite a lot of historical research on late nineteen-century Budapest for the second Athena Club novel, and I've written a number of stories set in Budapest or that feature Hungarian protagonists. As for my national identity, it's complicated. I am both American and Hungarian, and I don't think I can untangle those identities any more than I can untangle the influences on my writing. But my Americanness only goes back to when I first arrived in New York as a seven-year-old. My Hungarianness goes back much longer, as far back as I can trace the history of my family. When I am in Hungary, I feel that I am somehow at home, even as I recognize that I am traveling with two passports.

When I was young, Hungary itself was fantastical to me. It was a distant land that I could not get back to, with magical food and a half-remembered language. In a sense, it was not that different from Narnia—there were even lions (on the Lánchíd in Budapest)! I'm certain that's one reason I write fantasy.

Guest Editors: In the field of Anglo-American SFF, generic boundaries have become increasingly porous and experimenting with different genre-bending practices has been encouraged and celebrated. You have edited and written for slipstream and interstitial anthologies, and your work has been associated with the New Weird as well. How do you think fantastic genres appear in Hungarian fantastic literature and culture? How do you think this might affect your own writing?

Theodora Goss: My interest in interstitial fiction came in part from reading European and Latin American literature in English translation as a teenager and at university. In high school, I read Franz Kafka and Jorge Luis Borges. At university, I read and studied writers such as Milan Kundera, Gabriel García Márquez, and Isabel Allende. Later, in graduate school, I read and taught Angela Carter. She was a wonderful surprise, because I was not used to that sort of boundary-crossing in English. When Delia Sherman and I edited the first volume of *Interfictions* in 2006, it felt as though we were doing something quite new and subversive. We were very pleased to include a Hungarian story in translation, "A Drop of Raspberry" by Csilla Kleinheincz. My impression is

that the interest in interstitial, slipstream fiction developed around the same time in Hungary as in the United States. For example, Kelly Link was influential for fantasy writers like Kleinheincz, just as she was influential for American writers. That sort of boundary-crossing fiction is still the exception in the United States, and I believe the same thing is true in Hungary—what sells are books and films that rely on and often reinforce genre tropes. Readers still take a great deal of pleasure in wizards and vampires and spaceships. But you're right that there is a greater market for experimentation, and many places where the boundaries can become porous. Alice Hoffman's *Practical Magic* and its sequels are a good example in the United States. In Hungary, the annual anthology *Az év science fiction és fantasynovellái* (The Science Fiction and Fantasy Stories of the Year), published by Gabo Kiadó, gives writers a place to submit boundary-crossing, experimental fiction.

I think my own tendency to write in that interstitial space comes in part from being an immigrant, living between two national identities. Compared to my American friends, who were born and had grown up in the United States, my life seemed fantastical. Now that I regularly travel between Boston and Budapest, I feel as though I am always looking at the world from a double perspective. I often feel a sense of displacement, which I suppose one might link to the New Weird. But we are all living in the New Weird nowadays, aren't we? Particularly now, in 2021, when so much of what we have been through recently feels disconnected from the lives we lived before. We are all suddenly living on a planet we thought we knew, but that has become strange to us—where we might be invaded by an alien life form.

But there is also something interstitial about Hungary itself, positioned as it has historically been between East and West, with fluctuating borders. It has been described that way in Hungarian literature, and of course in the Western cultural imagination as far back as *Dracula*. The Count is described as a Székely, a guardian of the border; however, like all vampires, he is an inveterate border-crosser. So perhaps that interstitial space is a natural fit for Hungarian fantasy.

Guest Editors: Anglo-American SFF has become the site and source of exploring women's experiences and role in socio-political and economic systems, which appears in your own writing as well. How does the fantastic itself negotiate women's experiences and social discussions around gender roles? How do you see the position of women's SFF and YA in the field of the Hungarian fantastic?

Theodora Goss: I think the fantastic is about our world, just as much as realism is about our world. They are simply two ways of talking about our current reality. Realism reflects it, fantasy interrogates it and dreams up other possibilities. Realism asks "What is?" and fantasy asks, "What could be?" The fantastic has negotiated women's experiences and roles as long as society itself has—in the late nineteenth century, with the rise of the New Women and the suffrage movement, we had fantastical representations of powerful female figures, such as Carmilla the vampire and Ayesha in H. Rider Haggard's *She*. They were not all negative representations—we have good and bad and complicated female characters, like George MacDonald's North Wind, Frank L. Baum's

Glinda, and C.S. Lewis's White Witch. The concept of gender has itself been interrogated since at least Le Guin's The Left Hand of Darkness, but we could go back farther to Ozma of Oz, who spent a significant part of her life magically changed into the boy Tip. I think fantasy is continually in conversation with what is going on in the real world—it is always talking back to the culture, both affecting and affected by it. In terms of literature, we see this in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willows*, in the writing of Joanna Russ and James Tiptree Jr., in the ways Le Guin's Earthsea evolved over time. All of these writers responded to the social roles available for, and the cultural construction of, women. Perhaps the difference between realism and the fantastic, in this respect, is that fantasy literature and film have greater latitude in discussing and envisioning what could be, in both dystopian and utopian directions. On the one hand we have Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, on the other a story like Seanan Maguire's "Each to Each" in which women transformed into genetically modified "mermaids" by wealthy capitalist and the U.S. military create an underwater alternative to life on solid ground. They choose freedom over their programming. One important element of modern fantasy fiction, particularly for children, is the way it casually gives us heroines who are smart and capable, without making much of a deal about gender. Lyra Belacqua in the Dark Materials series by Phillip Pullman and September in Catherynne M. Valente's Fairyland series are two examples.

What I see in Hungary is women writers like Kleinheincz, Ágnes Gaura, Anita Moskát, and Mónika Rusvai, to give just a few examples, doing important, interesting work in the fantasy field. They often write from a feminist perspective, redefining both the fantastic and the role of women for our new century. The storyteller Csenge Zalka, who completed her PhD in the United States, collects Hungarian folk and fairy tales that often feature active, ambitious female protagonists. There is significant pushback against redefinition of gender roles in contemporary Hungarian politics, but one function of fantasy in society is to imagine new possibilities and futures—I think it's doing that on both sides of the Atlantic.

Guest Editors: Considering current trends in the production and consumption of fantastic literature and media, how is the Hungarian fantastic likely to change in the future? What new directions do you think are possible?

Theodora Goss: I think writers of the fantastic in Hungary are in a significantly more difficult situation than American writers. Most obviously, the market is much smaller—it's almost impossible to make a living as a fantasy or science fiction writer in Hungary. Of course, books can make more in translation, but writers usually can't afford to pay for translations themselves, so they have to rely on foreign publishers. Usually, only the best-known or most popular Hungarian writers are translated. There are three other structural constraints on Hungarian writers. First, the market for fantasy short stories is much smaller than in the United States. Short stories are often where writers experiment, because they are low-stakes: if something does not work, you can easily move on to the next story. Short stories are also an easier way to get your name out to readers—if they like your story, they might buy your novel. Second, there is no easy way to market your writing online, like Kindle Direct Publishing in the United States, where you can create a book

and make it available through Amazon. This means one way of marketing your work to readers is not available in Hungary. Finally, the publishing system is structured around the publisher. The publisher may also function as editor, distributor, and bookstore. Most Hungarian writers do not need to go through the American system of getting an agent and publicizing not only their books, but also themselves, simply to get space on a bookstore shelf. This takes significant stress off Hungarian writers, but it also offers writers fewer ways to reach readers directly or make a business out of writing. Overall, I think the Hungarian publishing system makes it more difficult for fantasy writers, who are often in a marketing niche by nature of their genre.

There are two things I would like to see happen. The first is more publishing opportunities, particularly online, for Hungarian fantasy writers. The online environment means that we are living in one world—it should be possible for me to purchase Hungarian-language e-books on Amazon as easily as I can buy ebooks published in German. I also hope there will be more opportunities for translation in the future. Here I see hope in the final shift I identified above: fantasy is becoming much more international. If *The Witcher* can become an international sensation in translation, why not a work of Hungarian fantasy? There is certainly as rich a Hungarian tradition of folk and fairy tales to draw on. In terms of its place in the culture, my hope is that Hungarian fantasy will continue to gain popularity and respect in Hungary. It still does not have the respect given to realistic fiction. The second thing I would like to see is greater access to boundary-breaking, experimental English-language fantasy in Hungary. For example, Elizabeth Hand is one of the best American fantasy writers working today, but the only books of hers available in Hungarian are tie-in novels (for example, for the *Star Wars* franchise). Hungarian readers are missing out on her exquisite short stories or novels like *Mortal Love*. The English-language books available in Hungary tend to be bestsellers, so smaller but important literary works don't make it across the linguistic border—I would love to see that change. If we can bring more English-language fantasy to Hungarian readers, and more Hungarian fantasy to English and American readers—well, that would be a wonderful cultural exchange.

I think none of us knows what the future will hold, and the last two years have certainly made me doubt my ability to prognosticate. But I can at least tell you what I would like to happen. I would like to see the Hungarian fantastic continue to draw on a rich Central European tradition, while growing bolder and more experimental in expressing the strangeness of the world we live in. I would like to see it engage contemporary issues while remaining its wonderful, fantastical self. As a genre, the fantastic expresses what it feels like to live in our world today—often more accurately than literary realism. It should be valued for what it can show us of contemporary society and the futures it can dream up. I would like to see more respect for fantasy as a genre within Hungary, and more attention to the Hungarian fantastic outside of Hungary. I suppose in the end it's up to us, as writers and scholars, to make that happen.