

Interview with Bogi Takács



Vera Benczik and Beata Gubacsi

Bogi Takács (e/em/eir/emself or they pronouns) is a Hungarian Jewish agender intersex author, critic, and scholar. Bogi lives in Kansas with eir spouse RB Lemberg and their kid Mati. Bogi has won the Lambda and Hugo awards, and has been a finalist for other SFF awards, including the Hexa award for advocates of Hungarian SFF. Bogi has academic book chapters forthcoming about Hungarian SFF in *Lingua Cosmica II* and in an anthology on SF in translation edited by Ian Campbell. Bogi's debut short story collection, *The Trans Space Octopus Congregation*, was published by Lethe.

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

Guest Editors Vera Benczik and Beata Gubacsi: You won the Hugo Award for Best Fan Writer category in 2020, and have been nominated several times. Your reviews, essays, and critical work are undoubtedly contributing to shaping the reception of the fantastic within and across borders. How do you see the development of Hungarian fantastic over the past ten years? What aspects do you consider the strengths of the fantastic in Hungarian literature and culture?

Bogi Takács: I've seen a lot of growth in Hungarian SFF in the past decade, across all aspects of community development. There are more publications, more conversations; speculative short stories are having a revival too... I think part of it is that social media has both allowed fans to organize better, and publishers to get the word out about their offerings—not just current and upcoming titles, but also opportunities like calls for submissions. SFF is also becoming more integrated into general discourse about literature.

I think SFF allows a unique way of commenting on, and engaging with, Hungarian culture. This was true before the fall of the Iron Curtain, when speculative works were less likely to be censored and/or banned due to the strong Communist Party connections of Péter Kuczka, chief editor of multiple SFF venues; and I think it remains true now, in other ways. The speculative readership in Hungary appreciates and rewards an engagement with current issues, and at the same time, there are probably different expectations placed upon SFF writers compared to non-genre writers; the entire structure of genre publishing is different from non-genre. I'm not saying one is better than the other, just pointing out that these aspects lead to varying outcomes.

Guest Editors: How does the Hungarian fantastic incorporate and/or subvert the themes and tropes of Anglo-American fantastic tradition? How does uniquely Hungarian storytelling appear in the Hungarian fantastic, and how does the fantastic as a mode itself aid and amplify

the Hungarian perspective? How does writing in both English and Hungarian and for different audiences affect your own writing and take on the fantastic?

Bogi Takács: I think Hungary is in a unique situation where Hungarian literature has both been affected by Euro-Western (more than Anglo-Western) traditions and Russian-Slavic ones, while being conducted in a language that is not Slavic or indeed Indo-European at all. So, there is this tension between being exposed to multiple different traditions and yet being in a somewhat insular position, having fewer opportunities to influence other literatures. Further, Hungarian has no mutual intelligibility with any other language, even with languages related to it. None of this is specific to SFF, but these aspects of Hungarian literature definitely affect SFF, too.

As for the second set of questions, I actually haven't written any original speculative work in Hungarian for over a decade; I translated some of my English-language stories (one of them I also lightly revised), and Csilla Kleinheincz also translated one. I really enjoy her writing—I think her recently concluded fantasy trilogy *Ólomerdő* [Leaden Forest] was spectacular—and it's been an honor to be translated by her. I also translated one of her stories from Hungarian to English this year, and it's forthcoming in *mermaids monthly* edited by Julia Rios. Back to Hungarian: I wrote a non-speculative flash piece commissioned by a newspaper last year, but I wouldn't say I write a lot in Hungarian these days. I do try to read widely both in Hungarian and in English.

I generally write for marginalized people even if audience specifics differ in each and every case. This means I also write for myself!

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. How do you think fantastic genres appear in Hungarian fantastic literature and culture? How do you think this might affect your own writing?

Bogi Takács: I think this is also true of Hungarian SFF, and one trend that's even more marked compared to Anglo SFF is the newfound popularity of weird fiction. There's also been a similar tendency in Finnish SFF, and quite a few of those works are in fact available in Hungarian translation, but mostly published in non-SFF contexts; Hungarian and Finnish weird have developed in parallel and haven't interacted all that much (yet?).

Genre-bending has always been near to my heart, but that's because I've long been a fan of offbeat, mind-bending science fantasy with space magic; it's not something I'd classify as particularly new. In my own writing I like to put a bit of a twist on it and combine it with strictly science-based elements; there's no rule that science fantasy can't be heavy on the science! Except our various unstated assumptions about how science must look like, what "hard science fiction" must look like, what are acceptable and unacceptable elements in such a story, and so on...

Cosmic horror is enjoying a newfound popularity in Hungary, intertwined with the new weird; as a reader I especially appreciate the work of Balázs Farkas and Attila Veres.

Guest Editors: Anglo-American SFF has become the site and source of exploring the lived experiences of gender fluidity and neurodiversity—themes your own writing engages with sensitively and imaginatively. These conversations seem to have been lacking or entirely missing in the context of Hungarian SFF. How do you think different gendered and disabled identities appear in more recent Hungarian fantastic literature and culture, and how the fantastic can facilitate inclusive representation?

Bogi Takács: I don't think these themes are missing from Hungarian SFF; there is a discovery problem, but not an existence problem. There are fewer conversations because people find it harder to locate these titles, and also there are just fewer conversations overall because there aren't that many Hungarian speakers out there. (Though the percentage of Hungarian speakers who read SFF is proportionately probably higher than among English speakers; due at least in part to the above-mentioned historical context that in the Communist regime, SFF was more likely to contain politically subversive elements.)

Just a few recent examples I enjoyed reading: Anita Moskát's novel *Irha és bőr* [Hide and Skin] deals with intersex themes among others, a rarity even in English-language SFF, especially when it comes to thoughtful portrayals; Tamás Rojik's ongoing YA postapocalyptic/climate fiction series *Szárazság* [Drought] has a protagonist with developmental language disorder, again a topic I haven't seen all that much in English either. The long-running *Csodaidők* [Times of Wonder] far-future science fiction series by Etelka Görgey, writing as Raana Raas (with four volumes, and so far three volumes in a followup series *Időcsodák*, [Wonders of Time] has been the first time many Hungarian readers saw queer themes and heterosexist discrimination appear in fiction *altogether*, at least if the online reviews are any indication! This same series also deals with themes of physical and mental illness, especially as a consequence of military conflict, in depth. I'm just scraping the surface here and mentioning some of my favorites, but I could go on for a while.

I've been jurying for the Zsoldos award and I think most current SFF novels in Hungary attempt to say at least *something* about gender, and also often LGBTQIA+ aspects, if only tangentially. I can't say I always like what these works end up saying—I've certainly seen my share of ham-fisted attempts at inclusion that backfired, similarly to English-language SFF. I don't think I need to name works here, I'm sure everyone can recognize the phenomenon. What I'm getting at here is that this is a topic that's definitely part of writers' thematic awareness and repertoire. In fact, probably more so than in the current mainstream of Hungarian non-genre literature. Many people have noticed and discussed this phenomenon with respect to migration as a theme, when SFF seemed to react overall faster to current events than Hungarian literature as a whole; but I think it also applies to gender and/or queerness. (I'm not sure whether I would highlight gender fluidity in particular, that's a very specific form of gender expression I myself also don't share.)

This relative responsiveness doesn't necessarily mean increased inclusion, both on the level of narratives and on the level of actual people; I'd discuss the two separately. It seems to me that

people are often allowed and even expected to explore LGBTQIA+ topics as something of political interest, but queer *writers* are not necessarily welcome in the field.

I do need to note something else as well. I think that themes related to ethnic and/or racial minority groups are in fact much less common in current Hungarian SFF than either gender or disability themes; with the possible exception of migration. I often get the impression that majority, ethnic Hungarian authors deliberately avoid saying anything about these groups; this is not specific to SFF. Something that endlessly frustrates me is when a writer sets a work in inner-city Budapest, but there are somehow no Romani or Jewish characters. Autochthonous minority groups are especially avoided, doubly so if racialized; it is probably easier to come across *American* racialized characters in Hungarian narratives than *Hungarian* racialized characters. (While noting that racialized autochthonous minorities do not even tend to appear in a ‘safely foreign’ context in Hungarian stories. I’d also note here that the *targets* of racialization are sometimes different in Hungary than in Anglo-Western settings, though the mechanisms are remarkably similar.) I get an impression that authors often make these choices out of a desire to avoid causing offense locally, while still projecting some form of inclusion; but erasure is also a choice. These kinds of obvious lacunae also create an impression of an unspoken genocide—where did the people go in this and that particular fictional continuity? I’m going to be extremely blunt: these works always make me think, did my former neighborhood end up gentrifying in this setting, or were the people straight-up murdered; it clearly wouldn’t be the first time in living memory. These scars carry across generations, and SFF tends to shy away from tackling them. To be honest, English-language SFF does too; when I wrote a story in English about third-generation Jewish Holocaust survivors in Budapest, it was the hardest sale of my entire writing career.

The flipside of the coin of these *themes* that are relatively—though not entirely—absent from Hungarian SFF is that ethnic and/or racial minority *authors* are not exactly welcomed in Hungarian SFF either, though there are some (I mentioned Csilla Kleinheincz above, who is Vietnamese Hungarian), and a new generation of second-generation immigrant authors like Omar Sayfo or Kitty Bich Thuy Ta have also begun to publish SFF in the past few years.

I don’t know of any first-generation immigrant authors who published SFF; Palestinian SFF author Anwar Hamed had a novel in Hungarian, the excellent historical-autobiographic *A fájdalom kövei* [The Rocks of Pain] about life in Palestine and anti-occupation activism, but this book was not speculative at all. He currently lives in the UK and writes in English; his speculative writing can be found in the anthology *Palestine+100* among others.

I discussed in various interviews that I personally knew of several minority authors in my generation who had negative, exclusionary experiences in Hungarian SFF communities—e.g., in an [interview](#) in *Lightspeed* with Arley Sorg I mentioned queer authors in particular, but this also applies to Romani and Jewish authors, and all sorts of marginalized groups. Many people have left SFF altogether, in my generation several of them also left the country. Every time I mention this in an interview, more young writers message me on social media, telling me of similar experiences;

so, this phenomenon is sadly still ongoing and there is still plenty of work to do, despite improvements. Of course, the state of SFF is only a reflection of the state of the country. I'm not claiming that people leave because of SFF, I don't think that happens? But rather that this is one facet of larger patterns of systemic discrimination. (All the more painful because SFF has an *image* of inclusivity and progressiveness, at least.)

Guest Editors: How do you see the development of fan communities in and out of Hungary? How do they shape and reflect changes the fantastic is going through?

Bogi Takács: I'm not *in* Hungary, so I'm not the best person to answer the first half of the question! But I can comment on what I see online.

A lot of Hungarian SFF fandom discussions currently happen on Facebook; I'd especially highlight F.I.O.K. moderated by Zoltán Szujó and Szabolcs Waldmann. I'm not a heavy Facebook user, but I do try to keep my eye on goings-on and participate as much as I can. I also feel there have been an increasing number of events in the past few years, COVID notwithstanding. Something that I think is especially great to see is the ever-increasing openness toward discussing speculative work in non-genre literary spaces, also including book events. For example, *Élet és Irodalom* [Life and Literature], the major Hungarian literary weekly, regularly organizes roundtables where four critics discuss a recent work and then the discussion is printed in the journal; the next event upcoming this October will feature Katalin Baráth's novel *Afázia* [Aphasia], a far-future science fiction novel engaging with core genre themes and released by a genre publisher.

While the usual stereotypes about SFF exist in Hungarian literary circles similarly to English-language ones, it was my impression growing up that both Hungarian readers and writers of "realistic" fiction were relatively more open toward the speculative compared to many other countries. This was possibly at least in part due to the fact that I mentioned above that SFF was less censored during the Communist era than non-genre fiction, and a certain amount of translated magical-realist classics could only be printed as SFF. (SF studies scholar Anikó Sohár has plenty of work on this topic in English, and I also have some forthcoming articles.) But in the turbulent 1990s after the regime change, I feel speculative and realistic fiction grew away from each other; the gap is now closing again. There has also been a possibly unprecedented amount of academic speculative fiction studies activity from research groups at multiple Hungarian universities; there are so many people involved with these efforts that I can't even begin to list them. Margit S. Sárdi was one of the scholars who started these efforts decades ago, and by now they've borne not only fruit, but multiple other trees, if I can extend the metaphor. Many of these scholars also increasingly reach out to the general public to share their findings; literary publisher Athenaeum has published several volumes of essays on SFF Studies topics for a general readership, most recently an anthology edited by Ildikó Limpár focusing on monsters in popular culture. This publisher also has an ongoing series where scholars of various disciplines engage with SFF media—from political science to education research.

Something very different that hopefully illustrates the sheer range of new approaches within Hungarian SFF: fan communities now have their own investigative journalism, brought to us by Bence Pintér, who is a political journalist also active in SFF and not one to back down from heated topics, including financial misconduct and rights violations by publishers. His work is sometimes decried as something that stirs up controversy for its own sake, but I think that's deeply unfair. Bence has also done a lot for the visibility of Hungarian SFF both within Hungary and abroad, and the webzine and newsletter [Spekulatív Zóna](#) [Speculative Zone] he's running together with Péter Hetei have been consistently one of my must-reads. I would like to ask people to not only notice the occasional controversy, but also the immense amount of labor that goes into these projects day after day.

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

Bogi Takács: I think the best moments happen when I'm surprised, and actively guessing at future trends would counteract the potential surprise! For example, and to pick something that came from non-genre publishing: the poetry collection *Lomboldal* [roughly 'Foliageside'] by Mátyás Sirokai was recommended to me in an SFF context—I'm no longer certain who recommended it; possibly Anita Moskát in F.I.O.K.?—and I found it both unexpected and fascinating, with its approach to identifying with plant life and merging with plant consciousness.

I don't think anything is impossible that would be impossible in other SFF traditions either; I don't consider Hungarian SFF a lesser-than. There are many works with layers of meaning that have only been possible to express in Hungarian SFF; for example, I don't think the recently passed András Gáspár's *Kiálts farkast* [Cry Wolf] and its sequel *Két életem, egy halálom* [My Two Lives, My One Death] could have been possible without the milieu of post-Communist Hungarian society in the 1990s.

One other development I'd like to note is that the field of publishers is also widening, and both independent and self-publishing are also becoming stronger. For an example of the former, I just read the Celtic historical fantasy novel *Druidaösvény* [Druids' Path] by Bíborka Farkas, the first release by startup woman-owned publisher Pergamen Libro, and I'm looking forward to its upcoming sequel. This book was completely unexpected to me and highly intriguing in its approach to religion and sacrifice. The publisher reached out and sent me a copy—which is a lot less common in Hungary than in Western countries—and I'm glad I had the opportunity to read it. I was happy to see the publisher awarded an EU grant for small business development, and I hope this means many more books to come, and I'm also glad that small presses can and do also avail themselves of these resources.

I didn't talk much about the latest developments in Hungarian awards, but I'm glad to see that there are now at least three different awards I'm aware of, and I'm honored to have the opportunity to jury for the Zsoldos award, for the third year now.

I'd also like to mention that in great measure I'm able to keep up with new developments in Hungarian SFF, and to do historical research related to the same, thanks to my mom and my brother—both avid readers of SFF themselves—who've gone to considerable lengths to send me the print books I am interested in from Hungary. I'm grateful to them too.