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‘I WANTED THOSE FEELINGS PRINTED ON THE PAGE TO BE AS RAW AS POSSIBLE’

IMOGEN DAVIES IN CONVERSATION WITH NICOL HOCHHOLCZEROVÁ
ABOUT *THIS ROOM IS IMPOSSIBLE TO EAT*

NICOL HOCHHOLCZEROVÁ IS A YOUNG WRITER AND ILLUSTRATOR who grew up in Rimavská Sobota, Slovakia. Originally published in 2021, her book-length debut, *Táto izba sa nedá zjesť* (*This Room Is Impossible to Eat*, forthcoming from Parthian in spring 2025 in a translation by Peter and Julia Sherwood, and extracted in these pages) was shortlisted for Slovakia’s most prestigious literary prize, the Anasoft Litera Award, and has since been translated into Bulgarian, Czech, Hungarian, Serbian, Polish and Ukrainian, with German, Macedonian, and French translations underway.

Hochholczerová was named Young Artist of the Year by the Tatra Banka Foundation in 2022, and the following year saw a theatre adaptation of her debut novella at the City Theatre in Žilina. A stage version and a film adaptation are currently being revised in Czech.

In 2024, Hochholczerová completed her Master’s in graphic design at the Academy of Art in Banská Bystrica, as well as becoming one of the most talked-about Slovak writers on the European literary scene, due to the controversial nature of her work.

This Room Is Impossible to Eat captures the disturbing progression of a relationship between a twelve-year-old girl (Tereza) and her fifty-year-old

art schoolteacher (Ivan). Narrated alternately from the points of view of Tereza and Ivan, we witness how the teacher worms his way into Tereza's consciousness, and the distortions of Ivan's mind that make him succeed in controlling and abusing her. The bitesize chapters are unapologetically raw yet poetic snapshots of a relationship that develops from their first meeting right up to when Tereza becomes an adult at eighteen, and Ivan is well into middle age at fifty-seven years old. Each page leaves a bitter and unforgettable taste in your mouth.

NWR: What literary influences shaped the writing of *This Room is Impossible to Eat*?

NH: By the time I started writing this story, I remember becoming less and less interested in what was happening to characters in the books I was reading. Instead, I wanted to know how they feel when something is happening to them, and I wanted those feelings printed on the pages to be as raw as possible. I remember finding exactly that in the writings of Elfriede Jelinek or Ágota Kristóf, but mostly in Aglaja Veteranyi's *Why the Child is Cooking in the Polenta*. I also recall being captivated by texts in which the emotion was less raw, and it all felt like a hazy dream – those books likely had some kind of a plot, but that specific peculiar feeling is what I remember vividly, years after reading them. The works of Mircea Cărtărescu or Italo Calvino come to mind when I think of this kind of literature. And then there is one particular essay from that time that had a huge influence on me: Rebecca Tamás' *The Songs of Hecate: Poetry and the Language of the Occult*, published in the *White Review*.

NWR: Hungarian fairy tales seem to have made a significant impression on the protagonist. Did any fairytales from your childhood make a lasting impression on you?

NH: Some of my most vivid memories from childhood are connected to Hungarian fairytales. I remember standing on a chair in my grandparents'

living room, singing, to their guests, the theme tune of the animated series about King Matthias I [the historical medieval king of Hungary and Croatia, around whom folk-tales circulated]. One time, I even taught myself to walk and move my arms exactly like Mattie the Goose Boy from the 1977 animated version ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mattie_the_Goose-boy_\(1977_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mattie_the_Goose-boy_(1977_film))) of the Hungarian poem by Mihály Fazekas. I was told I would spend hours watching animated movies until I could recite the dialogue word for word. I believe this played a huge part in my love for writing – often my ‘writing’ as a child consisted mainly of drawing characters or the world they lived in, an approach akin to concept art for animation. However, I did not, as a nine-year-old, have the skills or resources to create an entire movie, so I stuck to writing and illustration.

So, of course, these fairytales hold a sentimental value for me, but they are also fascinating to watch as an adult, since you notice completely new things. There is this particular fairytale in which a princess asks a swineherd for his three piglets because they can dance and sing. The boy agrees to give them away in exchange for her pulling up her dress, and so she does. Later on, the king announces that the princess will be wed to a man who can tell what symbols are on her body. Only the swineherd knows she has a moon on her thighs and stars on her breasts, and so they marry and live happily ever after. The man who gets the princess is the one who has seen her naked, who knows her body, and she is not punished for showing him. What a beautiful, refreshing ‘moral of the story’ in a sea of fairytales that teach us girls to be chaste and proper!

NWR: There is a lot that goes unsaid in between the lines and in the blank spaces of this book, giving readers room to reflect and come to their own conclusions. What conclusions do you suppose people will arrive at?

NH: Any form of art is essentially communication with its recipient, and anyone's perception of any work is going to be strongly influenced by their own

unique set of experiences and opinions, so I believe it is impossible to guess this correctly. What I could describe instead is some sort of ideal reader, a person who I would like to speak to, with confidence that we will understand each other. This person would enjoy the flow of words and sentences, they would appreciate how the book is written and composed. They would want to read hungrily, intrigued, but not surprised by what they are reading; perhaps they are a woman or a girl, and they find certain situations familiar. They are aware that what happens in my book is not the unique case we all wish for it to be, but rather something terrifyingly common in our patriarchal society. Yet, they would still be disgusted – and rightly so. They would have to put the book down and take a break from it, and they would understand that my depicting this story as disgusting is purposeful and indicative of my opinion on the matter, even if I did not explicitly state my opinion in the text. Occasionally, they would laugh, because I intended some parts to be funny, to help them let their guard down before the next punch in the gut. That is what I wish my readers would think and feel after reading my book, but I can only hope.

NWR: How do you feel about this book being translated into different languages? Have these translations captured the essence of the original text? Especially given that the work comes across as poetic and abstract, do you think a translation can have the same impact?

NH: From experience, I would even say it can make it better! After reading the Hungarian translation, for example, I concluded that I should have written the book in Hungarian from the start; that it is the language in which the words sound exactly how I wanted them to. I am also very excited about the English translation – I trust Julia Sherwood completely: that she understands my vision, and reading her translation absolutely confirmed it for me.

NWR: How do you feel about the upcoming adaptations of your work into film and theatre, considering the closeness of literary translation and adaptation into a different artform?

NH: To be completely honest, I am always very nervous about any adaptation. I am what you would call a control freak – after all, that is the reason I chose writing over other forms of art, because it gives me complete control over the final form of my work. There is minimal teamwork in being a writer, and I like it that way. So, regarding the theatre adaptations, I actually gave the directors complete creative freedom, otherwise they would start to absolutely despise me and regret they ever started working on my book at some point in the process.

Film is a completely different case, though, and I try to be as involved as possible. We even discussed a few scenes that did not make it into the book, because they would be painfully boring to read, but could be captivating in an audiovisual form. I am yet to read the script, and I try to be curious and optimistic.

NWR: How does your artistic background play out in your writing, particularly bearing in mind how abstract some of your descriptions are, challenging the reader's imagination to the extent that some may seem as surreal as a Dalí painting?

NH: I do not think it was an entirely conscious decision on my part, to write abstract descriptions and evoke surrealist paintings. I believe it's more connected simply to the way I think every day – my brain throws all these associations at me all the time, everything reminds me of something else, and then it eventually becomes this snowball of thoughts and images, and then, next to each other, they often change into something entirely new. Perhaps that could be called surrealist in essence, sure, but it all happens naturally, not as a part of some creative concept – I think the same way when I cook or talk to my partner about his day.

I also resist the word 'surreal' for a different reason, and that is because my goal was actually to write something very real, maybe even more true than everyday life, in a sense. During an average day, we usually do not have enough time to stop and think deeply about what we saw and how we feel

about it, we do not talk to each other about our deepest fears and regrets when we meet in a café. Not because that would be shallow or ignorant, but maybe we do not like going that deep in public, where anyone could hear us, or we suddenly feel embarrassed, face to face with another human being who could judge or misunderstand us. Perhaps we are afraid we won't be able to find the right words to express ourselves. And that's completely fine. What art or literature gives us is a space to process all of that – we read a book alone, safely, with enough time on our hands to stop and think, without anyone impatiently waiting for our response. I write slowly, with enough time to choose my words. To circle back to surrealism: for me, it's not about using randomness to create something surprising or to evoke the absurd nature of a dream, rather, it's the other way around: it's meticulous sorting and making sense of life. For the reader to understand what I want to convey on an emotional level, I then sometimes use descriptions that may feel surreal, but are still very familiar. Take metaphors about the body, for example – I use them often, because we all have bodies and can therefore easily decipher the hidden meaning behind the metaphor. We all had a hair in our mouth at least once, so we understand it means 'gross', even when the author pushes that image to its limits.

For me, my artistic background [in graphic design and illustration] is most evident in the structure of the book. The short paragraphs were not inspired by poetry, but rather based on design principles, such as the use of white space. I also considered how a book works as an object: if I hide the 'punchline' on a completely different page, your eyes cannot skip the paragraphs in which I build the tension, you are forced to read them. You are also forced to turn the pages quite often, since there aren't many words printed on them, and subconsciously you are going to think: wow, what a page-turner! Those are the aspects of reading and writing that I enjoy exploring, and which arose directly from my education in arts and design.

NWR: Why did you choose to write a novella, to use words, as your art form for this piece? As an artist you could have illustrated this concept,

especially considering how visual the descriptions are; do you think that a novella is the most appropriate form for this story and why?

NH: It would be hilarious if I said no to this, wouldn't it? But I guess I did not think about it that way at all: I simply knew I wanted to write a good book, and to do that, this was the story I needed to focus on. In retrospect, there were undoubtedly other things that influenced my decision, like having a much bigger and more supportive community in the literary world than in the visual arts. I also had no idea how I would get any artwork to a bigger audience, but I did know what to do to get my text published. Currently, as I am working on what will hopefully be my second book, I thought about choosing the art form to express myself much more deliberately, as I had a concept for a series of paintings on the topic I also want to write about. Do you know what made me finally decide? The size of my flat. It would simply be madness to make and then store the paintings in the size I wanted them to be. So, I decided on a book, which can be done on a small refurbished laptop, in an open license text editor. Or maybe these are all excuses, and I am simply naturally more of a writer than a visual artist, who knows?

NWR: Given that this novella has become a controversial bestseller, as it were almost packaged as 'an uncomfortable and disturbing read', do you think that one of art's purposes is to unsettle our emotions in this way?

NH: I feel like I already touched on this a little bit in my previous answers without you even directly asking about it. So, very obviously, yes. We tend to think about art in such a cold manner – we analyse it, we try to be objective when reviewing it, we consume it too quickly, because there are just so many artworks to see and books to read! And we do this, of course, because we are taught to do so, to find the one right answer to why the curtains are blue; we are told we will not understand art without knowing history or the entire biography of the artist. And while those things are indeed important, they are by far not everything there is to art. It's interesting how music is the one

exception – we do not feel the need to analyse the notes and know the historical background to be able to dance to Abba. I wish we would all learn to experience other forms of art as we do music. Ideally, we would let ourselves adore a painting simply because we are captivated by a particularly beautiful shade of colour, or connect to a character from a book only because they remind us of a childhood friend. We would find comfort even in artworks labelled 'disturbing', because it would assure us that at one point, someone else felt the same grief or anger we do. All kinds of art could provide us with a platform for feeling understood, and help us learn to understand others. It could be a space for us to feel less alone in this big world, and I find that more important now than ever.

Imogen Davies was educated in Wales and at Durham University but is currently based in Edinburgh, where she is completing post-graduate studies.

This Room Is Impossible to Eat *is out in hardback (£11) this spring from Parthian.*