
FROM OBSCURITY TO A PLACE ON THE MAP OF WORLD LITERATURE

JULIA SHERWOOD ON SLOVAK LITERATURE IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION

SLOVAK LITERATURE LONG REMAINED VIRTUALLY UNKNOWN OUTSIDE its homeland. The editors of the late Victorian-era compilation of world literature, *The Universal Anthology* (1899) gave the following assessment:

In the short time of its existence, their literature has produced some remarkable productions, that compare favourably with those of more fortunate and larger nations. Having no national existence, and suffering from the oppression of the Hungarians, much of their literature is a lament and a dirge. But of late they are taking a broader aspect of life, though they prefer mainly to use national themes for literary purposes.

Although things changed for the better after 1918, when Slovakia became (the smaller) part of the newly formed country of Czechoslovakia, the work of Slovak writers remained in the shadow of their neighbours, particularly their Czech compatriots throughout most of the twentieth century. It was not until 1987 that the first-ever conference devoted specifically to Slovak literature in the second half of the last century was organised by Robert Pynsent, one of its few champions in the UK, who noted in his introduction to the collection of conference papers, *Modern Slovak Prose* (1990), that it was 'the Slovak language that has hitherto kept most scholars and readers in the West ignorant of Slovak literature. Slovak writers are translated into other socialist-bloc languages, but

even that does not mean that they are widely read [...] Slovak literature has not grown in isolation, but a certain isolation has been imposed on Slovak literature.’

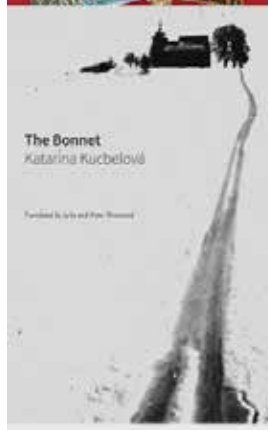
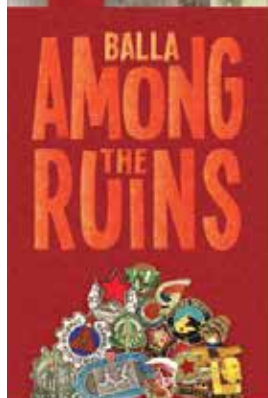
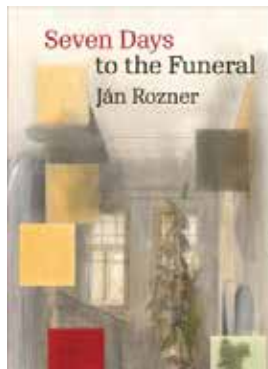
That isolation was most acute in terms of reaching English-language readers, but in the new millennium we have seen quite a dramatic change of fortune. Many works of Slovak literature are now available in English, despite the anglophone market’s notorious resistance to translation, compounded by the decline in language teaching in UK primary and secondary schools and the closure or decimation of language and literature departments at British universities.

Fifteen years ago, when I started out as a translator, few publishers were willing to take on unknown authors from a small Central European country. But since then, largely thanks to translation grants provided by funding bodies in Slovakia – the SLOLIA grant scheme and Slovak Arts Council (FPU) grants deserve special praise – several publishers in the UK have been able to take the leap and give hitherto unknown writers from this relatively little-known country a chance, and my husband Peter Sherwood and I have been among those fortunate to act as conduits on this journey.

Slovak literature has also enjoyed the support of the European Literature Network, and works by Slovak writers have been published in such acclaimed journals as *Two Lines*, *Words Without Borders* and *Asymptote*.

Overall, in the thirty years from 1989 to 2019, no less than 62 books by Slovak writers (prose, poetry and anthologies) have appeared in English. While some years were better than others, the average was two books per year. By comparison, between 2020 and 2024 the yearly average more than doubled to 4.8, with twenty-four books by Slovak writers published in English over these five years. 2024 was one of the best, with six publications, and 2025 is shaping up to be a bumper year, with at least ten books by Slovak writers in the offing.

Most of these books were published by smaller, independent houses that are not primarily profit-oriented: trailblazing work was done by Garnett Press, who published four books by Slovak writers, followed by Jantar Publishing and Parthian Books, who have consistently championed Slovak



• 2024: Slovak books in English

• 7 authors

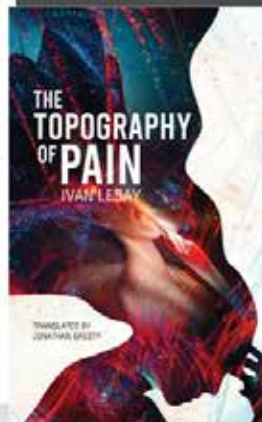
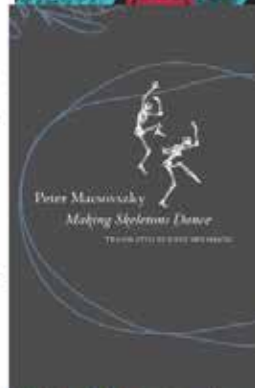
Balla, Katarína Kucbelová, Ivan Lesay, Peter Macsovszky, Dušan Mitana, Peter Milčák, Ján Rozner

• 6 translators

Jonathan Gresty, John Minahane, Magdalena Mullek, Júlia and Peter Sherwood, David Short

• 5 publishers

Guernica Press, Jantar Publishing, Karolinum Press, Modrý Peter/Fooliar Press, Seagull Books



Slovak books in English translation published during 2024.

literature, with eight and six books respectively by Slovak writers under their belt. And more recently, two new players have emerged: firstly, the Calcutta-based Seagull Books, whose Slovak list, launched in 2022, has clocked up nine books by Slovak authors to date, while in 2023, Karolinum Press in Prague launched their Modern Slovak Classics series, which has seen two books published, with four more in the works.

This positive trend is reflected in a new collection of essays on Slovak literature, *Home and the World in Slovak Writing. A Small Nation's Literature in Context* (McGill–Queen's University Press, March 2025), edited by Katarína Gephardt, Ivana Taranenková and Charles Sabatos, with contributions from nine highly respected Slovak literature specialists. In his foreword to the collection, McGill University literature scholar, Daniel W Pratt, writes:

Slovak literature has transformed from a hidden gem to a rich and stable tradition in the centre of Europe. Perhaps most remarkably, Slovak literature is hitting a high mark domestically at the same time as a group of talented and dedicated translators are exposing the rest of the world to it. Slovak literature is being translated primarily into the languages of their neighbours, ie German, Czech, Hungarian, and Polish, but the new English-language versions show a burgeoning wider reach. The English-speaking world can access some of the latest Slovak literature almost simultaneously with its new developments, a true rarity for Central European cultures.

The volume aims to map the key milestones and themes in the development of Slovak literature, focusing on the period from 1989 to the present, and covering pivotal historical moments and literary themes, while highlighting books that have been translated into English.

These include works by Peter Krištúfek and Uršula Kovalyk, authors that, notably, Cardigan-based Parthian Books have championed in the English-speaking world over the past ten years. Parthian's latest – Nicol Hochholzerová's ground- and taboo-breaking debut, *This Room Is Impossible To Eat* (to be published in April) – is a major literary achievement that is bound to cement Slovak literature's growing international reputation.



Slovak books in translation published by Parthian.

Julia Sherwood is an award-winning translator and literary organiser. She was born and grew up in Bratislava, and after studying English and Slavonic languages and literature in Cologne, London and Munich she settled in the UK. She is editor-at-large representing Slovakia for the online literary journal, *Asymptote*. Julia lives in London with her husband, Peter Sherwood, a linguist and translator, with whom she has published many translations, including *This Room Is Impossible To Eat*.

We interview Nicol Hochholczerová in these pages about her novella, This Room Is Impossible To Eat.