

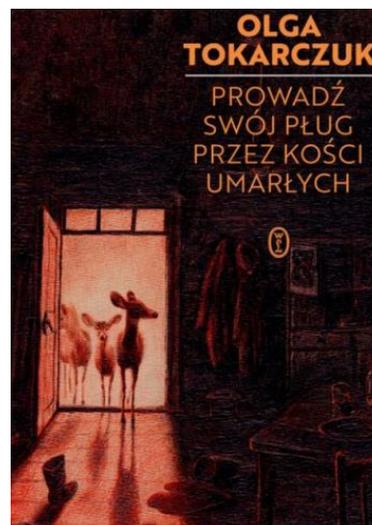
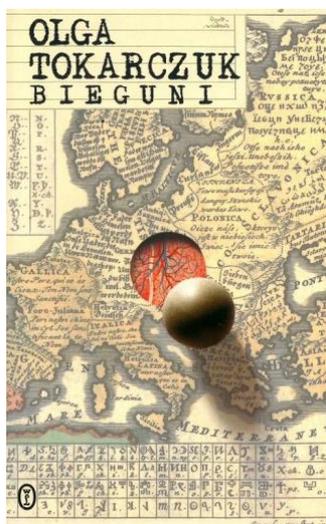
Episode 7, 'Looking East, Looking West: Should we change how we talk about Eastern Europe?'

Host: Conor Brennan

In her essay 'Does Central European literature exist?' (currently only available [in Polish](#)), the Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk recounts an improbable anecdote about how her own region of Kłodzko Land ended up in southwest Poland after the Second World War. The story goes that at the Yalta conference where the Allied leaders divided up Europe, Stalin was leaning over the map and supporting himself on it with his thumb. His secretary, not daring to ask for the thumb to be moved, outlined it instead, accidentally seizing the territory for Poland. For Tokarczuk, this story hits on a deeper truth about Central Europe. She writes:

It will probably be difficult for an islander to understand this permanent state of transience and indeterminacy. Natural boundaries such as the seashore or great mountains are arbitrary, but with us boundaries are set at conference tables.

In a series of vivid images, she pictures Central Europe as a mycelium or mushroom that grows from the decay of the pre-war world, as a fertile volcano crater that occasionally erupts, or as the ovaries of the world, steadily producing talent that comes to fruition elsewhere.



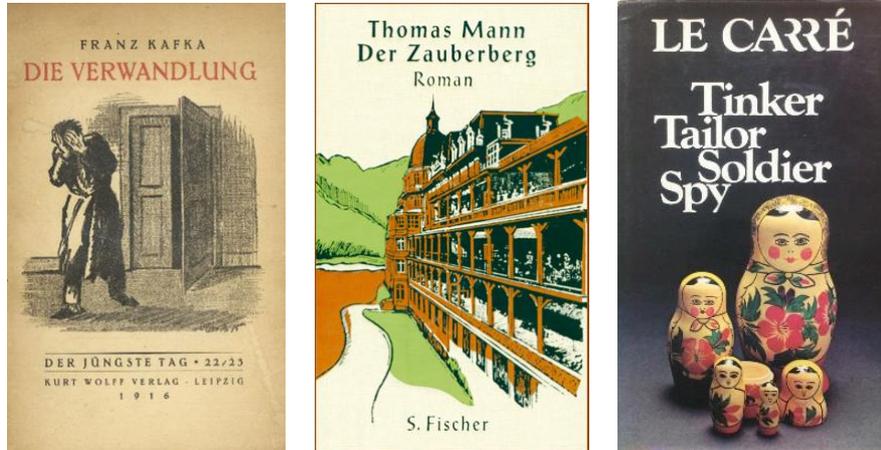
Olga Tokarczuk (centre) and two of her books, published in English as Flights (trans. Jennifer Croft, 2017) and Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead (trans. Antonia Lloyd-Jones, 2018)

Until recently, the story of Stalin's thumb may have felt like a mostly 20th-century story. Amid the horrors of the war in Ukraine, however, all eyes are now once again on maps and on historical and linguistic borders. In this episode, I discuss these borders and the connections between Eastern and Western Europe that form across them with two guests: [Dr Karolina Watroba](#), a Research Fellow in German at All Souls' College, Oxford, where she works on Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka and global literature, and [Dr Kasia Szymanska](#), assistant professor in the School of Languages, Literatures and Cultural Studies at TCD, whose research includes book projects on multiple translation, Tokarczuk and Western fantasies about Eastern Europe during the Cold War.

We talk first on a personal level about the invasion of Ukraine and the response of Polish citizens, many of whom are hosting Ukrainian refugees in their homes.

We then discuss the differences between the concepts of Eastern and Central Europe, as well as the drawbacks of Tokarczuk's vision, which seems to suggest a fundamental difference between the inhabitants of Central Europe and those of Western Europe.

Karolina explains her research on Thomas Mann and Franz Kafka, which studies reader response to their works around the world. This serves to highlight the relationship between the specifically Central European features of writers like Kafka and the ways in which their work takes on different meanings in new historical and cultural contexts. The projects in question are *Mann's Magic Mountain: World Literature and Closer Reading* (forthcoming 2022) and *Metamorphoses: In Search of Franz Kafka* (in preparation).



The writers mentioned in the episode include Thomas Mann, Franz Kafka and John le Carré

Kasia outlines the types of questions she often gets asked when her Polish nationality is mentioned in the UK, and how these gave rise to her project *The Other Europe: Literature That Divided the Continent* (in progress). She notes the ways in which 'Eastern Europe' is often both exoticised and homogenised in Western discourse, and links this pattern to the literature of the Cold War era.

We discuss the differences in multilingualism between Poland and the UK/Ireland. Karolina points out the hierarchical treatment of second languages in the UK and Ireland, where popular school and university subjects such as French or German are privileged over common 'home languages' like Polish. She describes the shame which many bilingual children and teenagers experience when speaking Polish outside the home. Kasia points out that Polish is the second most widely spoken language in Ireland and the UK, challenging the notion that English-speaking countries are monolingual and noting that the Poland of today is much less multilingual and multi-ethnic that it once was.

We discuss whether the invasion of Ukraine might lead to a renewed engagement with and more complex understanding of Central and Eastern Europe. Kasia notes that many people are travelling to the Ukrainian border to offer help, and Karolina highlights how the growing fame of writers like Tokarczuk can help to spark an international interest in less recognised voices and works.

For more from Karolina on Poland's role in German literature, see this [blog post](#).

You can watch Kasia's excellent introduction to Polish literature [here](#).

For more on the idea of Central Europe, check out [this seminal essay on the subject](#) by the Czech writer Milan Kundera.

To learn more about Tokarczuk, watch her [Nobel Prize interview here](#) or read [this interview](#) in the *Irish Times*, which also notes parallels between Central Europe and Ireland.