



**Exploring Baltic Books  
Interview with Edward Nawotka**

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**KENNEALLY:** With combined populations of 6 million in an area roughly equal to Illinois, the trio of Baltic states can be easily overlooked. Yet the unusual historic and cultural relationships of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania to the West and the East make for fascination, not insignificance.

Welcome to Copyright Clearance Center's podcast series. I'm Christopher Kenneally for Beyond the Book. A century after Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania declared independence from the newborn Soviet Union, the successor state of Tsarist Russia, the organizers of the London Book Fair celebrated Baltic literature and publishing as part of the 2018 Market Focus program at the recently concluded trade show. Author appearances and panel discussions highlighted achievements across many genres. The rarity of the languages and the remoteness of the region make for exotic reading, even though all three Baltic states are members of the European Union and NATO and can boast some of the very highest levels of digital infrastructure anywhere.

Journalist Edward Nawotka traveled across the Baltic states earlier this year, and for *Publishers Weekly*, he wrote and edited a sweeping survey of regional literature that we will link to on [beyondthebook.com](http://beyondthebook.com). Ed Nawotka joins me now from Houston. Welcome back to Beyond the Book, Ed.

**NAWOTKA:** Thank you so much, Christopher. It's a real pleasure to be here.

**KENNEALLY:** Well, it was a pleasure to read the survey that you wrote and edited for PW about the Baltic states, and it was a sort of return for you to that region. You were there first almost 20 years ago – a little more than 20 years ago – as a journalist. Tell us what you thought as you returned here in 2018.

**NAWOTKA:** It was just shocking how different it was. I was there initially in 1997 as a reporter for a European-based news service, and very different – it was a much quieter place back then. Now, Estonia, and Tallinn in particular, is covered with LED lighting and known for its technological prowess. It's fascinating.



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KENNEALLY: Indeed, digital infrastructure there is the envy of the world, and as you discovered, a publishing program across the three countries that would equally turn many other, much larger countries, with much more prominent languages, green with envy, too. We'll have a look at some of the highlights of that report. I think it's important, though, to make the point, Edward, that we speak collectively of the Baltic states, but you really emphasize that there is no such thing as Baltic literature, just because each of the three countries – Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – are so different when it comes to their literary traditions and even their languages.

NAWOTKA: Very much so. It's a bit of a misnomer. It's a convenience, certainly, that people outside the region like to use. I think each of the countries aligns itself politically and culturally somewhat differently, though they have a relationship. The Estonians often think of themselves as much more closely aligned with the Nordic countries. They would consider themselves closer in relations, for example, to the Finns. The Latvians, they actually often had a collegial relationship with their neighbors, Germany and Russia certainly. And the Lithuanians shared an empire at one point in history with Poland, so that's where their loyalties and their cultural affinities lie. Though they all are in bed together, so to speak, just west of the border of the old Soviet Union, and they were part of the Soviet Union.

KENNEALLY: It's quite a remarkable story – all those combining of influences. And even a century ago, Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, would have been a remarkably cosmopolitan place.

NAWOTKA: Absolutely. I think we overlook the fact that these are very, very old cultures. Lithuanian, for example, the language is one of the few languages that's almost unchanged from hundreds of years ago. It's closer to ancient Greek in some ways than many, many other languages that are actually closer to Greece, if you will. It's got a very, very long history, for example. So these are just fascinating places that because of their relative obscurity to us culturally just get overlooked. But to have the chance to go there, to talk to people, and to let them take the opportunity to explain to someone like myself, a foreigner, what makes them interesting made for a really edifying – and not only edifying, but just entertaining experience, because they're also beautiful countries, as well.

KENNEALLY: We are jealous here at Beyond the Book, Ed Nawotka. And we should point out to listeners that the affinity that the Estonians have with the Finns isn't only a matter of cultural or social common points, but they have in common as well their languages, which both are so-called Finno-Ugric languages. That is a very small family of languages that is apart from Indo-European. It includes Estonian, includes Finnish, and Hungarian.



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NAWOTKA: Exactly. Estonian is a notoriously difficult language to learn, as is Finnish, as is Hungarian. The relationship between the three is quite interesting, actually. In fact, in the report I did, there's a profile of a translator named Adam Cullen, who has become the go-to literary translator in Estonian. But he initially went to Russia. He's from Minnesota. He went to Russia to study Russian and then set out as a personal challenge to move to Tallinn and to become fluent in Estonian without necessarily going to school, without necessarily tackling it in some formal way, but literally just by immersing himself in the language. Now, he is the one who has become the intermediary between the Estonian language and the rest of the world for many readers. It's a pretty interesting story.

KENNEALLY: Fascinating. I found it a really wonderful story to read about. The idea that somebody would want to learn Estonian for fun is a bit like saying, well, I'm going to run a marathon for fun, and I've done it without any training, and it's happening this afternoon. Just sort of hit the starting line and off you go.

NAWOTKA: Well, if you've met any literary translators, you know that it's a bit of a quirky profession, so it does attract autodidacts, as well.

KENNEALLY: As I mentioned earlier, we will link to the PW supplement on our website at [beyondthebook.com](http://beyondthebook.com), Ed, so all the listeners can read for themselves your various reports and the contributions that were made to that supplement, but I want to touch on a couple of the writers that you highlighted that really fascinated me. There's Mihkel Mutt, who is someone who has sort of come to us today in 2018 from the Soviet times and has an interesting perspective about that.

NAWOTKA: He does. He is considered a difficult personality, but he is an utterly charming individual. Not necessarily what you'd expect from somebody who was a rather famous writer during the Soviet period.

He himself will say that unlike many of his colleagues from that era, he was able to transition to contemporary literary life, where many of the others got very frustrated after the liberation of Estonia, after the fall of the Soviet Union, because under the Soviets, there was no pop culture. This was pre-internet. But there was no music necessarily. There wasn't a lot of movies. So writers were really the form of entertainment, and they were very much revered under the Soviets, and you see this throughout the former Soviet Union. Literature – because everything had to be coded. Any criticism of the authorities, any critique of society, could not be as plain-spoken as we are used to today, and it very much had to be coded, which ultimately led to some interesting creative experiments in the writing. So often we think of Soviet writers, and we might think of dull writers who are sort of toeing the party line, but often that's not the case.



KENNEALLY: Absolutely. When I think of Soviet writers, I think of Andrei Voznesensky and Bella Akhmadulina and Yevgeny Yevtushenko, who are all three poets, and poetry was something that really thrived in the old Soviet Union, and it thrives today in the Baltic region. You point out that Latvia – really, poetry’s at the center of the literary culture. In 2016, there were as many poetry books published as fiction titles in Latvian. This seems remarkable to us, where poetry is just almost visible.

NAWOTKA: It’s true. Each of these countries is very proud of their poetry, and each of them in fact will claim to outdo the other in publishing poetry books. Again, it goes back to the Soviet era. Poetry was used as both a form of, again, coded critique, but it was also used as a form of propaganda. So people were inundated with poetry, and you see this again everywhere from Romania to the Ukraine to the Baltic countries. They have amazing poetry festivals in Latvia, for example. And again, each of the countries will claim to outdo the other in having the largest poetry festival. So it’s quite dear to people’s hearts.

KENNEALLY: As much as poetry has remained so important to the literature and the publishing world in the three Baltic states, fiction of course thrives, too. There is a book which has been described as the Latvian *Catcher in the Rye – Jelgava ’94* by Jānis Jonevs. It’s a novel set in the 1990s. It takes place in the heavy metal scene in the city of Jelgava. And it’s in the form of a teenager’s diary. Recently translated into English, and it really seems to have a hard edge to it, which I think may make it a work that will travel well.

NAWOTKA: It should. Again, it’s the type of book that could really put Riga and Latvia on the map, even though the book is not set there. It’s a coming-of-age story – again, yeah, set in the rock and roll scene. The translated English-language title is *Doom ’94*. So you’ve got a kind of cool aspect to it.

I compared it to, for example, *Catcher in the Rye*. Another book you might compare it to is *Reykjavík 101* (sic) by Hallgrímer Helgason, which was a book that many people credit with having put Reykjavík on the map. I think those aspirations would probably make the author blush and go hide somewhere behind the bar, but I think those are the hopes the publishers have for the book.

KENNEALLY: Finally, let’s touch on an aspect of publishing that is, again, a very common thing in our world, but perhaps maybe not so common in the Baltic states, which is self-publishing. So many of the writers and authors and publishers that you highlight in this supplement really come from traditional publishing houses,



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small though they may be. But the Estonian writer Maarja Kangro is a feminist and a novelist and very much somebody who is proud to be a self-published author, too.

NAWOTKA: She is. She was a very successful poet, and she transitioned into writing novels. Her book is *The Glass Child*. What's interesting about it is it's a very intense feminist tract about a woman's inability to sustain a pregnancy set in the backdrop of the war in the Ukraine. So it's not easy reading. She opted to self-publish the book in Estonia. But this is increasingly not unusual, in part because the Estonian government has a very, very well-funded tranche of money that it does make available to all the writers in the country. In fact, I believe a dozen writers are even given salaries for three years at a time to give them the ability to write, and four transition out every year. In the case of this book, *The Glass Child*, she was given several thousand euros which supported the printing and distribution of the book and really made it a viable concern – a going concern.

KENNEALLY: Again, Edward Nawotka, journalist writing for *Publishers Weekly* here and preparing and editing a supplement called Publishing in the Baltic Region that was coinciding with the recent London Book Fair Market Focus, taking a look at the publishing world of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – Ed Nawotka, thanks for telling us about it here on Beyond the Book.

NAWOTKA: My pleasure. Thank you for having me, Chris.

KENNEALLY: Beyond the Book is produced by Copyright Clearance Center, a global leader in content management, discovery, and document delivery solutions. Through its relationships with those who use and create content, CCC and its subsidiaries RightsDirect and Ixxus drive market-based solutions that accelerate knowledge, power publishing, and advance copyright.

Beyond the Book co-producer and recording engineer is Jeremy Brieske of Burst Marketing. I'm Christopher Kenneally. Join us again soon on Beyond the Book.

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