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Interview: Lithuanian Writer Undine Radzeviciute on China, Teutonic Knights and Absurdist Humor



By [Olivia Snaije](#)
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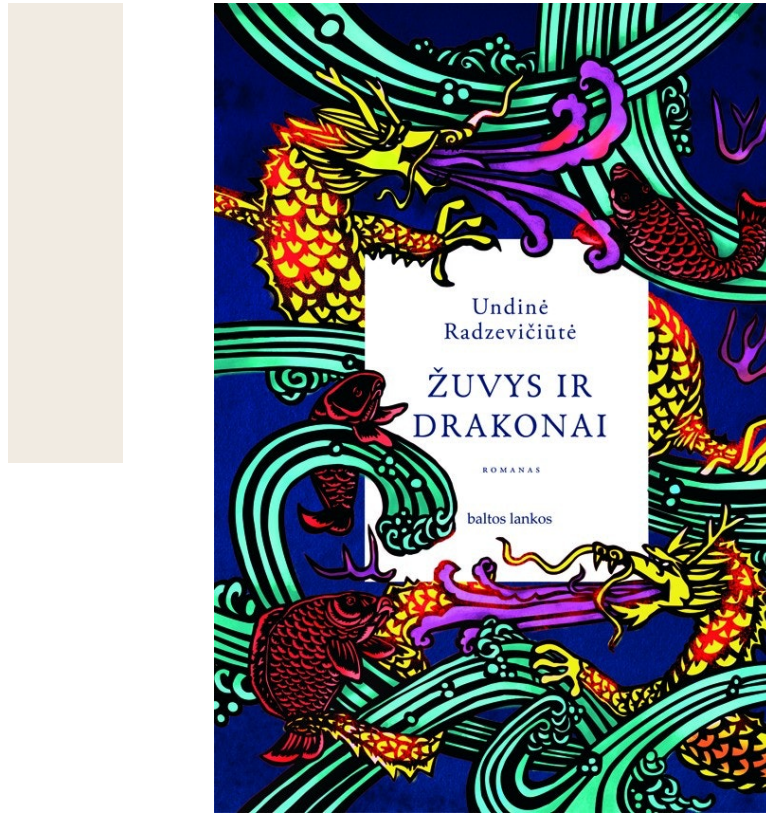
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This article was updated on April 13, 2018

Lithuanian author Undinė Radzevičiūtė's interest in Chinese art and culture is such, that over the years it has nearly become part of her DNA. It was fitting, then, that one of her books, which won a [European Union Prize for fiction in 2015](#), was also about China.



Radzevičiūtė says her title; *Fishes and Dragons*, gives the reader a good indication about the story to come: the fish is an ancient Christian symbol for Christ, and the dragon is the symbol for the emperor of China. Hers is a story within a story. A young woman who lives with her sister, mother and grandmother in Vilnius' Chinatown (yes, there is one!), recounts the story, based on real events, of how, during the 18th century, monks from Europe attempted to convert three Chinese emperors to Christianity.

Radzevičiūtė is the author of five novels and a collection of short stories, and she is known for her humor—cynical, wicked and absurdist—and for her particular, and some say peculiar, use of the Lithuanian language, which she explains is due to three factors: the first is that she is multilingual and multicultural, the second because she is interested in Zen Buddhism and “I don’t need a lot of words to say what I need to say,” and the third is that she worked in advertising for ten years, and got used to “saying everything in two or three sentences.”

Of Radzevičiūtė’s many languages and cultures one might say she embodies the region, which was a historical crossroads for both. She says her Lithuanian “doesn’t sound so Lithuanian. I have a strange accent.”

As a child at home she spoke Lithuanian and Polish but because she grew up during the Soviet occupation, much of her reading was in Russian.

Radzevičiūtė seems to relish irritating certain Lithuanians by stating fairly often that she thinks in Russian and writes in Lithuanian. “Some people don’t like to hear this, but they like to read my work...it’s not a big sin to think in Polish or German or Russian.”

On the delicate subject of Soviet occupation in Lithuania and the influence of Russian culture Radzevičiūtė commented, “for some nationalistic political forces nothing Russian is good. But the cultural tradition of Russia was very strong and it can’t be erased; some of the greatest examples of culture are Russian. I was 20 years old when the Soviet Union collapsed. People are right not to agree with the occupation and communist ideology—but if you take away the ideological and political factors, you can say that Russian science, culture, and music was very developed. It had a big impact on our education.”

Her roots are German and Polish but more specifically, her ancestors came from [Courland](#), now part of western Latvia. She looked into her family’s history by conducting intensive research in electronic archives in Russian and German for her latest book, called *The Blue Blood*, which is a historical novel about German crusaders in the Livonian order during the 15th century.



“After a battle with the Lithuanians, the Teutonic crusaders came to an end. Part of the order stayed in Latvia and Estonia. When I looked into the history of my ancestors, I was shocked at how dangerous they were and what they had done. The idea I explored is how sometimes, when people want to keep everything, when things are on the point of collapse, everything can collapse even more quickly.”

Doubtless Radzevičiūtė’s Teutonic ancestors might have benefitted from ancient Chinese war stratagems that she mentions in her novel, *Fishes and Dragons*. *Fishes and Dragons*, which is being translated into nine languages, is also about how perceptions shift according to which culture you hail from. Radzevičiūtė took inspiration from the Swiss Sinologist [Harro von Senger](#), and his *Book of Stratagems: Tactics for Triumph and Survival*. Von Senger did extensive research on ancient stratagems used in war, politics and society, and how they still relate to negotiations and many business practices in modern-day China.

“In Christian culture being honest is a virtue,” noted Radzevičiūtė. “In China, to be smart and to cheat a little is not such a bad thing. So I wrote about these differences in a light and funny way.”

Funny comes easily to Radzevičiūtė, and it’s not just one kind of humor. “Our humor is European, Russian, Jewish humor. It’s absurdist, surrealist humor, like Boris Vian’s...”

“By the way,” she adds as we part, “My ancestors assassinated the archbishop of Riga with Italian poison...”

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are the Market Focus countries at this year’s London Book Fair, 10-14 April 2018. Public author events around the UK are organised by the [British Council Literature](#).

Tags

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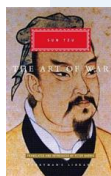


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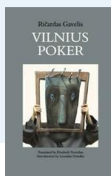
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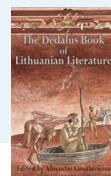
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