YURI VYNNYCHUK

THE FANTASTIC WORLDS OF YURI VYNNYCHUK

GLAGOSLAV

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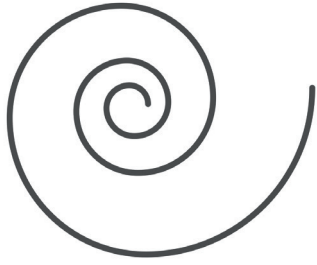

GLAGOSLAV PUBLICATIONS

THE FANTASTIC WORLDS OF YURI VYNNYCHUK

by Yuri Vynnychuk

Translated from Ukrainian by Michael M. Naydan

(with one translation by Askold Melnyczuk

and two translations by Mark Andryczyk)

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The story *An Embroidered World* first appeared in the summer 1996 issue of *Kenyon Review* and the story *Max and Me* has been published previously in the journal *Glas* as well as in the Zephyr Press anthology *From Three Worlds: New Ukrainian Writing* (1996, 2nd ed. 1997). Many thanks to Ed Hogan and Elizabeth Searle for their editorial comments on the translation of "Max and Me" that appeared in the Zephyr Press anthology. Askold Melnyczuk's translation of "The Island of Ziz" was published first in the journal *Index on Censorship*. Excerpts of *Tango of Death* appeared in issue #7 of Trafika Europe. The stories "Pea Soup" and "The Flowerbed in the Kilim" appeared in *The Contemporary Ukrainian Literature Series: An Anthology*, Vol. I with Academic Studies Press.

I want to express my gratitude to Susan Blanset Harkavy for inputting many of the texts of my translations for that volume onto disk and for repairing my English prose on the way. Thanks also to Irena Makaryk for her editorial suggestions that served to improve my introduction to the earlier paperback edition of translations of Vynnychuk under the title *The Windows of Time Frozen and Other Stories* (Klasyka Publishers, 2000). I am especially grateful for Fulbright Fellowships to Lviv, Ukraine in the spring of 1999 and the spring of 2007 that allowed me to hone my colloquial Ukrainian and to interact considerably with Yuri Vynnychuk on his home territory. I have the greatest debt of thanks to Oksana Tatsyak of the University of Toronto for doing such a meticulous job in checking the translations against the originals of the original edition. Thanks also to Svitlana Bednazh for her very helpful suggestions on the more recent translations that I made for this expanded edition. And special thanks to Olha Tytarenko for editing my translations of *Tango of Death*. I, of course, accept any responsibility for any errors or omissions.

INTRODUCTION: THE ARTFUL WIZARD OF VYNNYKY

Ukrainian writer Yuri Vynnychuk was born in 1952 in Stanislav, Ukraine. The city is now called Ivano-Frankivsk (affectionately known as "Frankivsk" by the locals) and has been an epicenter of literary and artistic activity. A bevy of exciting new post-modernist writers have emerged there including Vynnychuk's postmodernist contemporaries Yuri Andrukhovych, Yuri Izdryk and Taras Prokhasko as well as extremely talented younger writers such as Tanya Malyarchuk. Ukrainian literati have dubbed this concentration of prominent writers from this provincial city "The Stanislav Phenomenon." While Vynnychuk does not belong anymore geographically to The Stanislav Phenomenon nor to Post-Modernism, his roots still lie there — a little less that three hours away by dingy, dusty, sluggish train. The charming city of Lviv with its cobblestone streets and endless cafes on every corner has been his physical and spiritual home for a considerable amount of time.

Vynnychuk's father was a doctor for the anti-Stalinist and anti-Nazi Ukrainian partisans during World War II, and his uncle on his mother's side Yuri Sapiha was killed by the Soviet secret police (the Cheka) in 1941.Vynnychuk was named in memory of his murdered uncle. In 1973 Vynnychuk completed the Stanislav Pedagogical Institute where he developed the reputation of a prankster. At that time he became involved in student publications as well as in the literary underground. In 1974 the KGB conducted a search of his house but found no materials that would have incriminated him in the eyes of the Soviet regime. In order to avoid inevitable arrest, he moved to the larger city of Lviv, where he hid at apartments of several friends, constantly covering his tracks from the all-seeing eye of the KGB.

Until 1980 Vynnychuk was blacklisted and not allowed to publish in official sources. Till then he published works under the names of various other writers and ghost wrote books on occasion. He eked

out a living from the honoraria from his various pseudonymous publications, a practice which, by habit and by design, he continues to this day. During the 1980s he held readings of his works in the apartments of friends and became well-known for his satiric poetry and stories about a mythical country called Arcanumia – a land where the streets and, in fact, everything, are paved with fecal matter. Any association of Arcanumia with the Soviet Union or Soviet Ukraine, of course, would have been purely coincidental. "The Island of Ziz" ("Ostriv Ziz") is the best-known story from this cycle. From 1980 on, Vynnychuk was allowed to publish his articles and translations in the Ukrainian periodical press. He made a number of enemies among the Soviet literary establishment for his merciless attacks against hack writers. In 1987 Vynnychuk was instrumental in the creation of a stage singing and performance group "Ne zhurys'!" (Don't Worry!), which rose to swift popularity in Ukraine. After a tour to Canada and the United States in 1989, Vynnychuk decided to leave the group and devote his time exclusively to literature. Off and on he has continued to participate in concerts with the group. Under Mikhail Gorbachev's *perestroika-perebudova* and subsequent Ukrainian independence, Vynnychuk emerged from the underground (always keeping one foot there even to this very day) to occupy an eminent place in the new Ukrainian literature. His collection of fantastic stories *The Flashing Beacon* (Spalakh; 1990) sold out almost immediately. He also published a collection of poetry *Reflections (*Vidobrazhennia; 1990) and compiled and edited two anthologies of Ukrainian fantastic stories from the 19th century. His pulp fiction novellas *Maidens of the Night* (Divy nochi, 1992) and *Harem Life* (Zhytiie haremnoie, 1996) enjoyed extraordinary popularity. His love of storytelling and of his adopted hometown is combined in several volumes – *Legends of Lviv* (Lehendy Lvova, 1999), *Pubs of Lviv* (Knaipy Lvova, 2000), and *Mysteries of Lviv Coffee* (Taiemytsi lvivskoi kavy, 2001). His fantasy novel *Malva Landa* (the heroine's name) appeared in 2000 and a collection of fantastic tales *Windows of Time Frozen* (Vikna zastyhloho chasu) in 2001. And his novel *Spring Games in Autumn Gardens* (Vesniani ihry v osinnikh sadakh, 2005) won the 2005 BBC Ukrainian Book of the Year Award. His collection of autobiographical works, *Pears a la Crepe* (Hrushi v

tisti, 2010) also was nominated for the BBC Prize. His book *Tango of Death* won the 2012 BBC Book of the Year Award for Ukraine and has been garnering an extraordinary amount of attention both in Ukraine and in European circles, particularly in German and Czech translations. His most recent novel *The Apothecary* appeared in 2015. Its plot harkens back to seventeenth-century Venice and Lviv.

Vynnychuk currently resides on the periphery of the Ukrainian literary establishment, appropriately just outside the city limits of Lviv in the village of Vynnyky (yes, the name of his home bears a close resemblance to his last name). He worked as a columnist and culture commentator for the anti-establishment newspaper *Postup* and *Post-Postup* for much of the 1990s, inviting the rancor and lawsuits of crusty scions of both neo-Soviet fascism and neo-nationalistic excesses and falsehoods, the warmed over leftovers from Soviet times. He became editor-in-chief of the new *Postup* newspaper in 1996, which he continues to edit. Just as virtually every satirist, Vynnychuk is a seeker of justice and truth with no holds barred. When I published my first book of translations of his works, the elusive Vynnychuk used to be difficult to locate in Lviv, but you could find him on occasion at the Femida Cafe on Sichovi Striltsi Street, devouring the exquisite potato pancakes (*deruny*) and sipping home-grown Ukrainian beer in a room that the local Kulturtragers in Lviv called "The Vynnychuk Room." Alas, that café closed down several years ago to become a store, and you're more likely now to find him at the café in the Dziga Art Gallery in the oldest part of the city at the end of Armenian Street.

Vynnychuk is an astoundingly versatile writer and an accomplished storyteller. He is a chameleon who can adapt his narrative voice in a variety of ways. He is also, perhaps, the most politically incorrect writer writing in Ukraine today. He often intends to shock with his prose. He has the uncanny ability to take his reader to the very edge of decorum (in the story "Max and Me" and in his novel *Malva Landa* in particular), but not go beyond it. He creates anticipation, and then artfully frustrates it (largely to the reader's relief). I have divided his writings in this edition into eight categories, which, under no circumstances, comprise all of his narrative voices. I added four of those categories in this expanded edition of translations of his works:

excerpts from his more recent novels. His lyrical and philosophical stories such as "An Embroidered World" and "The Windows of Time Frozen" are exquisitely crafted pieces that capture a fecund poeticality that is both powerful and sublime. "An Embroidered World" captures the essence of the tragedies of Ukrainian history and the Ukrainian soul in the style of magical realism with bittersweet charm. Vynnychuk, the psychologist of the human condition, appears in stories like "The Clover Was So Fragrant" and "The Doorbell," in which the characters, who go to great lengths not to be their brother's keeper, either implode or explode into their own psychological hells. Vynnychuk's fantastic tales and alternate worlds function both as social commentaries and satires; they as well often provide outstanding examples of the application of the literary device defined by Viktor Shklovsky as "making strange" (*ostranenie*), of jolting the expectations presented by the status quo of the narrative by creating strikingly new perceptions of reality. We find that at work in stories such as "Pea Soup" and "The Flowerbed on the Kilim." Many of Vynnychuk's stories suggest that some extraterrestrial force that imposed its will on humankind could only have created something as vile as communism. The snails of "The Snail Chronicles," for example, take over humans by means of thought control.

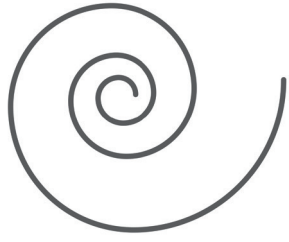
Vynnychuk is also the contemporary Ukrainian master of black humor and the grotesque — much in the tradition of his countryman Mykola Hohol (aka Nikolai Gogol). Pictures of Vynnychuk from the late 1970s and 1980s even have a marked resemblance to Hohol. This, of course, may only be pure coincidence… The story "Max and Me" (a smirking *Hy-hy-hy* in its original Ukrainian title) is a wicked satire of Ukrainian life circa 1979 through the depiction of a hillbilly-like family of demented cannibal capitalists. The mythical town of Ratburg (*Shchurohrad*) is another manifestation of an allegory of the old Soviet ways. Vynnychuk's works in the area of pulp fiction erotica are emblems of the newfound literary freedom in post-independence Ukraine, which allows for the publication of previously taboo subjects. His novel *Malva Landa* resides on the edge of taboo and black humor with an opening scene that stops short of realized pedophilia, but lyrically and artfully draws the reader into its chimerical world.

Vynnychuk and the characterization of women in his works from his unapologetically male perspective begs for extensive literary analysis, and often is the locus of his novel *Spring Games in Autumn Gardens* as well as his autobiographical novel *Pears a la Crepe*.

Vynnychuk is an incontrovertible iconoclast and satirist, who much like the Ancient Greek penner of iambiks Archilochus in ancient times, pummeled Soviet icons and demons with words that killed. Now he lambastes forces of stasis and backwardness, whatever their political or national ilk. A subtle and a sometimes less than subtle bitter irony infuses much of Vynnychuk's writing. But all writers are products of their times and experiences, and a writer must write what he sees. These stories represent some of the best short works and excerpts of novels of one of the finest prose stylists and storytellers from the first generation of Ukrainian writers able to write in complete freedom. It is my hope that these translations will provide an inkling of the author's narrative range and polyphony of voices, giving the reader glimpses into his many fantastic worlds of the imagination.

Michael M. Naydan
Woskob Family Professor of Ukrainian Studies
The Pennsylvania State University

1. THE LYRICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL IMAGINATION



AN EMBROIDERED WORLD

In as much as I remember my grandmother, she was always sewing. At first I didn't really pay attention to her embroidering, but one time I noticed that an old cherry tree that was growing near our window had disappeared after Granny had embroidered it. The cherry tree had completely dried up, and Gramps had planned on chopping it down several times, but for some reason his hands never seemed to get to it. But now it's gone.

At that time I began to try and recall whether anything else had disappeared, and suddenly I remembered that quite recently a wild dog that had settled in the wilderness had disappeared. He wailed so awfully during the night that the entire neighborhood cursed him to the depths of hell. No one could let their children out for a walk without someone keeping an eye on them, for fear that the dog was mad. It's true that several times they tried to hunt him down, but he was either too quick or just as crafty, because all those attempts at hunting him down were in vain. But no one had heard him for a week already. Of course, he could have died or moved on somewhere else. I began to look through Granny's embroideries, and on one of the pillows I saw him. Now I understood it all—everything that Granny embroiders disappears at that very moment she embroiders it. It's not for nothing that there weren't any people on a single one of her embroideries. The sun wasn't there; there wasn't anything you'd feel sorry about losing.

I couldn't restrain myself from sharing my discovery with my grandfather. Gramps just shrugged his shoulders:

"Well, what of it? I know about it."

"Then why didn't you ever tell me?"

"For some reason I always forgot. It's either this or that... I forgot."

Then he looked at me with a warm smile and added:

"Well, good. I'll tell you about what I know. Though this was right after the war... At that time they began arresting us. Every night they

were carting off people to Siberia. The prisons were packed. They threw the young guys to the front without any preparation, without any training. They threw them right at the tanks... Lord, how many of them were killed then!... You know the way they looked at the Galicians… The tiniest suspicion—and you're in the slammer. That's how they arrested me. Your grandmother couldn't find herself a place to escape from her grief. She walked back and forth, poor thing, near that prison and tried to look through everything to see if she could see me. Then once out of sorrow she was sitting down in the evening and began to embroider. She just couldn't get the prison out of her head, so she began to embroider it. She embroidered the walls around it; she embroidered the guard and the dogs. She finished her sewing late in the middle of the night... And what kind of sleep does a prisoner get? We lie there and think about everything, we just can't sleep. When once, suddenly, it was as though everything had come tumbling down. There were no walls in the room, no stone walls of the prison—we were lying in the middle of the yard. Hey, we figured this out right away, and we made our way wherever we could... Well, the prison disappeared, but those who put us in prison were left. We had to hide. The younger ones went to the woods, and the older ones—to the villages and farms. At that time we moved to the village. That's the way it was... Although, we didn't figure out things with Granny right away, that this was a result of her embroidering. We thought all different kinds of things. And the people spoke about the Mother of God, that she showed pity on us and saved us from captivity with a miracle... But after some time, I looked—and our cat was gone. 'Hannusya,' I says, 'where did our Matsko get to, why can't we see him?' When I take a look—the embroidery is lying on the table and right there is our embroidered Matsko. Then something dawned in my head. 'Well,' I says, 'Hannusya, wouldn't it be nice if you'd unstitch the embroidery?' And she answers: 'What kind of silly thoughts are these? I was going blind working so hard over it, and you want to destroy it for me?' Yoy, ya think I'm gonna listen to the old bat? I took the scissors and unstitched it. Just as I plucked out the last thread I heard a meow, meow! And it's our Matsko! And he had a hungry look, because just as he saw the milk in the dish, he threw himself at it. 'Well,' I say, 'Hannusya, now you have some real *tsores*! It

turns out if you don't embroider something, then it doesn't disappear.' And she doesn't believe it, she laughs at me. Well, good... Then I ask her to embroider the scarecrow that juts out in our garden. And what do you guess? She embroiders the scarecrow, looks, and it's gone in the blink of an eyelash! Well, now she's finally convinced of her ability. From that time on she took care not to embroider anything she'd regret losing or that might inadvertently disappear."

As it turned out later, not only Gramps and I had found out about this, but also the neighbors... umm... about my grandmother's curse. Everybody began to speculate whether they'd done anything nasty to Hannusya, what if she gets angry and embroiders it? And Dzunyo suddenly remembered that he once swiped a rooster from our chicken house. Gathering courage, he came to Granny and confessed it, and likewise brought a goose in place of that rooster. He apologized in such a manner that Granny charitably forgave him his sin. It's true that on the next day Mrs. Buslyk ran over for that goose because it was her goose, but junior's mood didn't worsen at all because of it. It was most interesting that once again that very same goose returned to us. Mrs. Buslyk brought it and said:

"Mrs. Hannusya, take the goose, but I really beg you, if you'd be so kind as to also embroider my husband. Cause that drunk will drive me to the grave."

And one has to say that Granny held that drunks were the worst and without even thinking it over much, took to embroidering Mr. Buslyk. And what do you guess? Not a week had passed and Mrs. Buslyk ran up with another goose to ask that her husband be returned.

"Why are you bugging me?" Granny gestured that she go away.

But my mother felt the goose and said:

"What kind of filling should I give it? Buckwheat groats or rice?"

"I'm not going to undo the embroidery," Granny replied harshly.

"With rice and mushrooms," Dad advised.

"Good Lord," Mrs. Buslyk began to sob. "What am I now? I'm neither a widow or a maiden!"

"It seems like you're a widow," my Gramps said.

"Well, who's going to wring its neck for me?" Momma asked, transferring her gaze from Dad to Gramps.

"And even if a goose'd kick me in the butt, I'm not going to unstitch the embroidery!" Granny vowed.

"Ehh, I'm gonna really fuss over it—I'll chop off it's head," Dad grimaced. "Here I'll take the ax—whack, whack, and it's kaput."

In the meanwhile Grandma had straightened out the cloth on the table.

"Well, take a gander—your husband turned out just like a painting. And, look, I even made his legs wobbly so it'd be obvious he's drunk. And now you want me to destroy it?"

"The ax is under the steps in the foyer," said Gramps. "I'd wanted to sharpen it, but I forgot."

"I'll sharpen it right now," Dad wiped his hands and started off toward the foyer.

"If you stuff that goose a la Chinese, it'll taste so good you'll swallow your fingers," Momma insisted.

"I don't like the Chinese," Gramps strained through his teeth.

After Gramps had been investigated and had been locked up in the slammer again, there was a certain man there in charge they called The Chinaman. He amused himself by calling in one of the political prisoners in the middle of the night and keeping him standing at attention till dawn. Because of it, Gramps, having learned something new about the Mao boys, often used to repeat:

"If there's going to be a war with the Chinese, then I'm going to be the first to volunteer. I have a special interest in them."

The Chinese, however, were unbelievably lucky, because my Gramps died before the border conflict.

"My husband wasn't so bad," Mrs. Buslyk whined. "There were times he'd go for water... to the store for milk..."

"Ehh," Granny waved her hands, "you do the job and don't get squat for it!"

And so she undid the embroidery.

On the next day Mr. Buslyk got drunk as a skunk, and he got under Mrs. Buslyk's skin for losing two geese for nothing.

My Granny stretched through the window and began to shout:

"You sweet good-for-nothing! If you don't stop, I'll embroider you again right away! And then two more geese will be gone!"

Buslyk opened his mouth to rasp out something, but, in spite of the fog in his head, he figured that it was better to keep quiet.

Then we had lunch. Momma stuffed the goose a la Chinese, and told Gramps that it was according to an old-fashioned recipe. Gramps was delighted and praised her:

"Eh, whatever you say, Ukrainian cuisine is the best in the world. And just for the fact that we thought up *kovbasa*, garlic ring sausage, we're worthy of eternal memory. But who knows about this now?.. Here, Yurko, learn so that you'll be wise and remind the world that it's in great debt to us for *kovbasa*."

Well, so I learned and now I'm reminding you.

This was the way my Granny was, may she rest in the Heavenly Kingdom, cause the last thing that she did was to embroider herself.

THE WINDOWS OF TIME FROZEN

I came here and stood amid the trickily winding streets, the multitudes of people, of trees, of buildings, to conjure her name.

I extend my hand, and proclaim three times:

"Ilayáli! Ilayáli! Ilayáli!" And people turn into woodworms, they begin to nibble trees, and the trees fall, and they don't know the reason why.

Something strange is happening to me: every morning, waking up from dreams, I feel I'm the dew. The way the dew with its beauty blinds your eyes from the flowers and grass, that's how I blind myself to all the living things and to this earth.

Weep, because when the sun stoops over your head, the dew will disappear.

I fear the sun. Sometimes I walk out at night into the garden and stare into the cold sky. The whole time it seems like it wants to remind me of something or to explain something. I listen ardently to the quiet of the night sky and catch separate words, sentences. Just recently I began to write them down. And suddenly I understood—it was telling me about me, telling me what I'd forgotten long ago.

And yesterday I stepped out into the garden, listened hard and heard nothing. I crawled up onto the tallest apple tree to hear better, but the sky was silent. I sat on the branches the entire night, without taking my eyes from the sky, and the sun rose, and its rays struck my face, and I saw that I am no longer the dew, but someone just like everyone else, and maybe even ten times worse, and when someone threw a stone at me, I picked up the stone and kissed it.

1

In the childhood of everyone there once was a garden—one's own or someone else's. We had a garden that was no-one's—no one besides us

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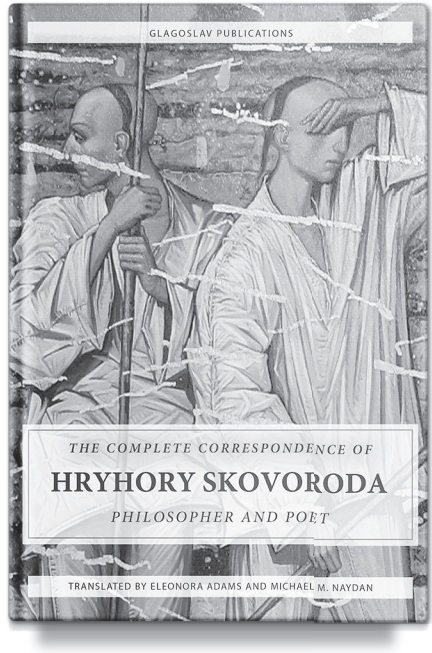
The Complete Correspondence of
HRYHORY SKOVORODA



The religious philosopher and poet Hryhory Skovoroda (1722-1794) is described by many as the Ukrainian Socrates and was one of the most learned men of his time. He was a polyglot who knew the Bible virtually by heart, as well as the writings of the Church Fathers and the literature of Greek and Roman antiquity. The eminent literary critic Ivan Dziuba considers Skovoroda the greatest Ukrainian mind ever. And Yuri Andrukhovych, one of the most prominent Ukrainian writers of today, calls him "the first Ukrainian hippie" on account of his itinerant lifestyle and rejection of worldly life. The impact of Skovoroda's life and works has been well documented on major writers in future generations, such as Leo Tolstoy, Andrei Bely and Pavlo Tychyna, to name but a few.

None of Skovoroda's works appeared during his lifetime – they were first published in 1837 in Moscow. The texts of Skovoroda's writings were preserved mostly by Skovoroda's lifelong friend Mykhailo Kovalynsky, to whom he had given the manuscripts. Skovoroda's extant writings consist of a collection of thirty poems entitled *The Garden of Divine Songs* along with other occasional poems, a collection of fables entitled *Kharkiv Fables*, which was published in 1990, and seventeen philosophical treatises. Most of the treatises were composed during the latter part of his life.

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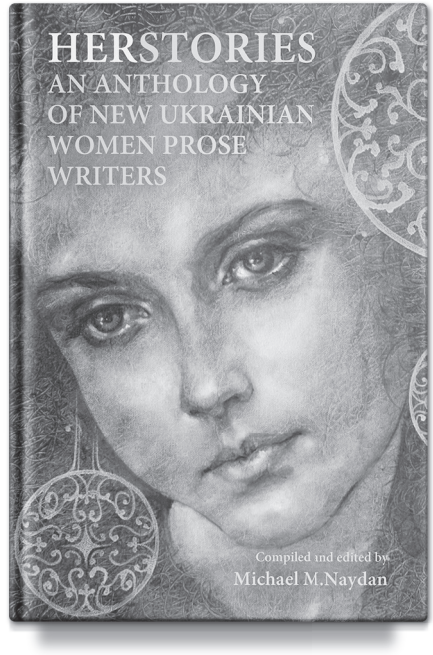
Herstories: An Anthology
Of New Ukrainian Women Prose Writers



Women's prose writing has exploded on the literary scene in Ukraine just prior to and following Ukrainian independence in 1991. Over the past two decades scores of fascinating new women authors have emerged. These authors write in a wide variety of styles and genres including short stories, novels, essays, and new journalism. In the collection you will find: realism, magical realism, surrealism, the fantastic, deeply intellectual writing, newly discovered feminist perspectives, philosophical prose, psychological mysteries, confessional prose, and much more.

You'll find an entire gamut of these Ukrainian women writers' experiences that range from deep spirituality to candid depictions of sexuality and interpersonal relations. You'll find tragedy and humor and on occasion humor in the tragedy. You'll find urban prose, edgy, caustic, and intellectual; as well as prose harkening back to village life and profound tragedies from the Soviet past that have left marks of trauma on an entire nation. This is a collection of Ukrainian women's stories, histories that serve to tell her unique stories in English translation. Substantial excerpts from novels and translations of complete shorter works of each author will give the reader deep insight into this burgeoning phenomenon of contemporary Ukrainian women's prose.

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Yuri Vynnychuk is a master storyteller and satirist, who emerged from the Western Ukrainian underground in Soviet times to become one of Ukraine's most prolific and most prominent writers of today. He is a chameleon who can adapt his narrative voice in a variety of ways and whose style at times is reminiscent of Borges. A master of the short story, he exhibits a great range from exquisite lyrical-philosophical works such as his masterpiece "An Embroidered World," written in the mode of magical realism; to intense psychological studies; to contemplative science fiction and horror tales; and to wicked black humor and satire such as his "Max and Me." Excerpts are also presented in this volume of his longer prose works, including his highly acclaimed novel of wartime Lviv *Tango of Death*, which received the 2012 BBC Ukrainian Book of the Year Award. The translations offered here allow the English-language reader to become acquainted with the many fantastic worlds and lyrical imagination of an extraordinarily versatile writer.

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