

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A STORY FROM ANOTHER TIME; it's a story from another world. At the turn of the 1980s, Eastern Europe was a radically different place than it is now—in cultural terms as well as political ones. Decades under the effective control of the Soviet Union had translated into a de facto separation from the broadly understood Western world and its culture. So while readers in the United States and other parts of the West enjoyed broad access to all things fantasy, books and comic books in the genre reached our part of Europe rarely and in very limited numbers. At the time, Poland lay squarely in the middle of this culturally isolated region.

All the more surprising, then, that it was under these conditions that Poland proved the source of something that grew into a cultural phenomenon—one of the best fantasy literature series in history, a game series loved by fans and critics alike, and a notably popular streaming series: *The Witcher*.

There was little to suggest something like this could happen. In the 1980s in Poland even *The Lord of the Rings* was nothing close to a bestseller, while readers knew of Conan's assorted adventures from so-called *klubówki* (clubbies—i.e., fan-translated excerpts and stories printed up using amateur means, then distributed to small groups of book club members). Local writers were so far behind in terms of fantasy that the first-ever literary work that could be classified as such did not appear in print until 1982.

The state of sci-fi as a genre was slightly better, fronted as it was by Stanisław Lem, author of *Solaris*. Lem's fame was international, extending even as far as the US, where Ursula K. Le Guin professed herself a fan, while Philip K. Dick grew so anxious about Lem's talents

that he considered informing the FBI that the author was, in fact, a Communist plot designed to at least obscure, if not destroy, American science fiction.

This was the setting in which Andrzej Sapkowski made his first foray into literature, debuting in 1986. So great was the general social prejudice against the fantasy genre that his short story titled "The Witcher" only placed third in a writing contest organized by *Fantastyka* magazine. Years later it was revealed that the jury believed only science fiction could triumph in the contest. Luckily, readers expressed enthusiasm about Geralt of Rivia, which inspired Sapkowski to write additional stories featuring this witcher, though he had had no plans originally to do so. Suddenly, bolstered by "The Witcher," the fantasy genre could emerge from the long shadow cast by science fiction. Poland now had a fantasy (anti)hero who could venture out to conquer other media.

The comic books came first.

When in 1992 Maciej Parowski and Bogusław Polch convinced Sapkowski to let them adapt his stories about the witcher into a series of comic books, fantasy comics in Poland were in their infancy. Readers were familiar with the *Doman* series, with art by Andrzej O. Nowakowski and writing by Janusz Florkiewicz. There was also *Thorgal*, written by Jean Van Hamme, a Belgian, with art by Grzegorz Rosiński, a Pole. This made Parowski and Polch pioneers just as Sapkowski had been several years earlier.

Virtually every character, every place, weapon, or beast, that Polch drew was virgin territory. Today, artists can draw from vast sources of inspiration in the genre. In 1992, Bogusław Polch had nothing apart from the letters, words, and sentences printed in Andrzej Sapkowski's books.

The production of comics based on his books was also an unusual experience for Sapkowski. It was, after all, the first time he ever saw renderings of things he insists he had never imagined. It was the first he saw of any physical embodiments of Geralt or Yennefer, for in writing these characters and describing the events that consumed them, he claims they could never be anything more than black letters on the page. Initially active in work on the comics, in time the author and originator of *The Witcher* withdrew, leaving things to Parowski and Polch.

At the time, Bogusław Polch was an established, even recognized, comic book artist, having drawn the best-selling Erich von Däniken-inspired series *The Gods from Outer Space*, as well as the groundbreaking (at least in Polish comic book terms) comic book series about space detective Funky Koval, conceived and created by the artist and the writers Parowski and Jacek Rodek. He was also the natural choice for drawing Geralt, as only he had had any experience in the matter. In 1991 his illustrations appeared alongside the story “The Bounds of Reason” when it was printed in the pages of *Fantastyka* magazine, then again when it appeared in the first Polish edition of the story collection *Sword of Destiny*.

We might comfortably call Sapkowski Geralt of Rivia’s originator and father. On the other hand, it’s in the person of Maciej Parowski, longtime editor in chief of the magazines *Fantastyka* and *Nowa Fantastyka*, that we find the White Wolf’s godfather. Parowski was head of the Polish Prose department at *Fantastyka* when “The Witcher” took third place in the magazine’s short story contest. He then published Sapkowski’s subsequent stories about the witcher in the pages of the magazine before getting Sapkowski his first book deal (unsuccessful, mind you, as the title gained no traction). Parowski followed this with a second book deal, with SuperNowa publishers, to which Andrzej Sapkowski remains linked and loyal to this very day. Maciej Parowski is also the sole individual Sapkowski names as

having influenced the stories themselves. Parowski advised and Sapkowski listened, at least at times. It was Parowski who suggested that Pavetta and Duny’s child be a girl. He also insisted that Visenna and Korin from the story “The Road of No Return” be Geralt’s parents (a narrative turn even more strongly emphasized in the comic book adaptation). “Betrayal,” another story that appears in this collection, is also the sole example of Sapkowski handing a story idea of his own to someone else to be fleshed out into an important series of narrative events in the life of the witcher.

When the books in the *Witcher* series appeared in Poland in the early 1990s, they essentially extended a lifeline to the country’s writers in the fantasy genre. After 1989, Polish publishers plunged into making up for lost time, inundating the local market with translations of fantasy novels from the Anglophone world. Readers quickly lost interest in anything written in the genre by Polish authors. Andrzej Sapkowski’s success shifted readers’ attention back to local authors, paving the way to publication for many.

And so it was with these *Witcher* comics, preceded by Polch and Parowski’s *Funky Koval*, which proved a foundation upon which comic book readership in general could flourish in Poland. Maciej Parowski in particular should be seen as one who contributed immensely to the growth in the popularity of this medium in the country.

Maciej Parowski passed away in 2019. Bogusław Polch followed him in 2020.

Both gentlemen, it can safely be said, would have been delighted to see their comics land in the hands of new readers.

Marcin Zwierchowski

THE ROAD OF NO RETURN



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