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# Book Club

Reviews and recommendations from critic Ron Charles.



By [Ron Charles](#)

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Ukrainian children receive new books. (Photo courtesy of Maria Deskur/Universal Reading Foundation)

**With Russia determined to bomb, starve and freeze the Ukrainian people, their physical needs have grown so extreme that it's easy to discount the importance of books.** But a Polish group called the Universal Reading Foundation recognized early in the war

that preserving Ukraine's culture would require safeguarding its publishing industry and its children's literacy.

I've written about URF a few times, but as the year winds down, I wanted to check in again with the director, Maria Deskur.

"We are getting a lot of books," Deskur tells me. URF has delivered nearly 160,000 books to thousands of Ukrainian children who have been forced to flee to Poland. Another 40,000 books will be distributed by the end of January. "Publishers and organizations see us as an effective organization and have started to trust that we can manage the distribution."

Despite Russia's ongoing assault on infrastructure, URF has also managed to buy thousands of children's books from Ukrainian publishers. Deskur notes that the chaos of war demands extraordinary flexibility. Someone she describes as a friend of URF in the construction industry has been transporting books around Western Ukraine.

What still stuns Deskur is how routine the threat of death has become under Vladimir Putin's savage campaign. During a recent phone call with the Ukrainian Book Institute, sirens suddenly went off, and the representative told Deskur she had to retreat to the basement until incoming missiles were destroyed. "She said it like she was saying she had to open the door for someone," Deskur recalls. "Their lives are now so massively different, and they actually got used to it."

That resilience in Kyiv, though, threatens to become complacency in the West. Earlier this month, URF leaders issued a statement saying, "The world has become accustomed to the war in Ukraine, but the needs remain great. The Russians have already bombed and burned more than 200

libraries in Ukraine. Not by accident. They know that the future of Ukrainian democracy will depend on the quality of the intellectual formation of today's youth.”

If you want to support the work of URF, [donate here](#). (I’ve used that link several times with no problems. Note that 100 Polish Zloty equals about \$23. Depending on your credit card, foreign transaction fees may apply.)

“We would really love to push forward the idea of a substantial help to nurture and raise literacy as a means to strengthen the future of Ukrainian democracy,” Deskur says. “I don’t know if we will be able to ... but we are trying.”