


The Washington Post

Book Club

Reviews and recommendations from critic Ron Charles.



By **Ron Charles**

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A woman reads a book while holding a child after the arrival of a train with 350 refugees from Kyiv, Ukraine at the Warsaw East train station in Poland on March, 4, 2022. (Photo by STR/NurPhoto via Getty Images)

The plight of hundreds of thousands of children displaced by Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine is beyond comprehension. It's tempting to feel paralyzed with despair about the escalating humanitarian crisis, but giving money to experienced aid organizations really does help ([start here](#)).

In such horrific conditions, periods of imaginative escape are essential for children — and books are the perfect vehicle. With lightning speed, a group of Polish publishers called the Universal Reading Foundation has sprung into action to buy and distribute Ukrainian children's books for the youngest refugees taking shelter in Poland.

Maria Deskur, CEO of the Universal Reading Foundation, says her group has reached out to about 40 Ukrainian publishers. Given the deadly circumstances, only about a dozen have been able to respond. "Some have fled," Deskur tells me. "Some are fighting."

But the Universal Reading Foundation managed to find a warehouse in Lviv, Ukraine, that could help. In the next few days, children's publishers in the besieged country will send the first batch of about 25,000 books. The journey to Poland is not long, but with pained understatement Deskur acknowledges, "We might have issues."

If and when the books arrive, they will be distributed to orphanages, social care institutions, kindergartens, schools and libraries. "We will do as many rounds as needed and possible," she says. "This is to help Ukrainian children and Ukrainian publishers at the same time. The survival of the book industry is crucial for the future."

"The emotional level of the situation is truly unimaginable," Deskur says. Three days ago, a hotel near Warsaw welcomed more than 1,600 orphans, ages 3 to 18. "I am too tired to even try to imagine what that means — psychologically, emotionally, logistically."

Deskur knows of a cloister in Warsaw that has agreed to accept the displaced residents of an entire Ukrainian orphanage, almost 100 children, "all under 2 years old — with no clothes, diapers, nothing."

Books are uniquely designed to offer comfort. "A joyful moment of book sharing and talking with a close person is the definitive moment of safety, which builds the fundamentals of our social competence, self-esteem and psychological well-being," Deskur says. "No toy, no movie, no game can give all that to a child. This is true for every child, but for these young Ukrainians who have just lived through a trauma, I would be ready to argue that their future psychological stability depends on it."

Older children will benefit from these donated books, too. "Teenage Ukrainians who have just come to Poland have to redefine themselves, process what they have seen, find strength to move forward," she says. "Whenever you take a book in your hand, it is an act of openness to someone else's thoughts and emotions; an opening to listen to other points of view; an

entering through the door to dialogue and mutual understanding. Building fundamentals for that state of mind is crucial for the future.”

Asked how Americans can help, she says, “Here you are, straight: We need a lot of money to save literacy, the psychological stability of the next generation of Ukrainians and – as a result – democracy in Ukraine.” A little abashed at her own directness, she adds, “Sorry for my totally straightforward answer. You Americans taught me that.” ([Donate here.](#))

Signing off, Deskur says, “Read to your kids. Take care of each other and your beautiful and democratic country.”