

Anna Shevchenko

AROUND THE WAR IN TWENTY STORIES

Ukrainian Tales of Hope, Humanity and Humour





Anna Shevchenko is a British-Ukrainian writer and a compulsive storyteller. One of her stories, 'Bequest', made it to a novel, which was nominated for a George Orwell Prize in the UK, selected in the top forty summer reads list in the Independent and shortlisted for two prizes at the European Literature Salon in France.

Her novel 'The Game' was a Book of the Month in France, the choice of Belgian booksellers as a Book of the Year and was one of the top five Foreign Books of the Year in Ukraine. Anna is also the author of *Culture Smart! Ukraine*, a guide to Ukrainian culture, currently on its second edition. Her articles have appeared in various publications, including *The Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph*.

She collected the stories for this book working across Europe and in Ukraine in 2022-23.

How do ordinary people get on with their daily lives when war is all around them? What do they laugh about, and where do they find the strength to work, love and carry on? Ranging from profoundly moving to darkly funny and downright surreal, these true tales of Ukrainian life in the time of war will leave no one indifferent.

'These stories are beautifully written and give a stunning and poignant sense of the state of play'

— Alec Russell,
Foreign Editor, *Financial Times*

'Anna projects her stories into the reader's imagination with rare vividity'

— Robert McKee,
Hollywood screenwriting maestro, author of the 'Story'

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The Book

January 2023

Kherson

I love working in the library. We are a specialised one for children and teenagers, and everybody who comes here wants to learn something.

My favourite time is when I'm in a circle with the kids. They are spread out on chairs and beanbags around me,

and I'm on our comfortable blue armchair, discussing, answering questions. Then, when the session is over, I return to my friends on shelf number two.

They all treat me with respect. I'm not just a book, I'm a keeper of time. *Chronology of Courage* is my title, you see. I am dedicated to the fallen heroes from Kherson who perished protecting Ukraine in 2014-2015. I make sure that every name, every story in me will be remembered.

I wish I could say to our librarians, 'If only you were here at night! You would hear the whispers, the rustle of pages; we all have stories to share among ourselves, not just with the readers!'

That day starts like many others. It is supposed to be a session with sixteen-year-olds, the whole class from school number 7. I already have several bookmarks in me, at pages ready to be opened.

But the library remains closed, and though the librarians are subdued and quiet, I can still hear snippets of conversations. '... Armoured vehicles in the streets ... Ukrainian flags and signs being removed ...' One word is repeated again and again: 'Occupation'.

We know what it means. Shelf number three about the Second World War told us everything about books being pulled out, piled in the courtyards and burned. But that was in the last century — it can't happen now, surely? The poetry shelf across the aisle is very worried — they are all Ukrainian classics; they will be targeted for sure. But we, the books from shelf number two, should stay firm and show the example of courage and strength. We are about modern Ukrainian heroes, after all.

Next day Victoria and Tetyana, our librarians, are having a discussion by our shelf.

‘They’re already making arrests ... they have the lists of former servicemen, of police and the mayor’s office staff. They are searching their flats, breaking down their doors.’

‘I know. It’s only a matter of time before they come here. We can’t remove all 100,000 books, but we need to hide the ones from shelf number two immediately, starting with this one.’

She picks me off the shelf. ‘They will target the families of the fallen heroes as nationalists, for sure.’

‘But how, where, who will take it out and hide it? If they stop and search and find it, they’ll confiscate the book and a librarian will be arrested and taken *na pidval!*’

I know this phrase, *na pidval*; it’s in several books on our shelf. It means ‘a basement torture chamber where Ukrainian activists are thrown after arrests.’

I am firm, and can’t show it, but it sends shivers down my spine.

‘I’m going to hide it!’ Victoria, our chief librarian, holds me close to her chest. ‘I’ll find a way.’

She puts me in the safe in her office, and locks it with the key ... but, despite the reassuring word, I don’t feel safe here.

I understand Victoria’s plan when she takes me out in the afternoon. She is wearing a wide bandage around her waist — a medical one that supports the back. Our book on veteran rehabilitation has a picture of a similar one.

‘I borrowed it from my neighbour,’ she explains to Tetyana. ‘Please help me to do up the straps; I’ll hide the book underneath.’

‘The bulge at the back shows,’ says Tetyana, after adjusting the bandage. ‘It’s a thick book. Try to put it at the front ... Now you just look overweight. Can you walk all right with it?’

I hear them both laughing, but I can also feel Victoria's heart beating really fast. I'm just underneath it.

'I'll avoid the main road,' Victoria explains her plan. 'I'll wait for another hour and then mix with the 6 p.m. crowd. Moving in the dark, closer to the curfew, would be more dangerous.'

An hour later, it's a hard walk for both of us. I'm heavy for her, and she makes a lot of twists and turns, using back roads to get home. She finally stops and says: 'Thirteen for me.' I guess that she's in a lift and that she lives on the top floor of a multistorey house. Later that night she climbs up the ladder to the communal attic and finds her storage box full of scarves, old pillows and blankets. I end up being hidden in a frayed pillowcase, thin from years of washing, under a moth-eaten red throw. I don't know how long I spend there. It's a very dark existence, with no sense of time, and I guess that's how everybody feels under the occupation. But I wait and I hope, until one day ...

Victoria takes me out of the box and carries me along the street under her arm — with no fear! Ukrainian flags are everywhere, a girl is hugging a Ukrainian soldier, crying, and there's a group of readers outside the library — those who missed the books as much as they missed freedom.

The library looks bare: no computers, no tables, no blue armchair. The occupiers stole everything during their hasty retreat. Here's our shelf number two. Not all the books about the heroes have made it back...

Slowly life returns to our library. We are a community hub, open to all ages now: a children's book group, an art therapy class for women, reading session with a local writer and even tea with biscuits during our 'Ukrainian stories' club session. They huddle in a circle on rickety chairs, but they are together! And I can hear them talking — about the

Ukrainian flag flying over the library for months during the occupation, and how people from the houses around were making detours, passing by just to see it there, how the occupiers came and found many shelves empty, and how our Director refused to collaborate, even though she knew that they could arrest her and take her to the *pidval*.

Several new books have now arrived on shelf number two, dedicated to modern Ukrainian heroes — about the courage of those who did not surrender, and about the role of volunteers in this war.

But there's a space for one more book on our shelf — about those who risked their lives by selflessly saving books, documents, paintings and museum exhibits. I hope it will soon be written.

