

599

Press Office  
Press Release

Chemnitz, 18th October 2016

## **City of Chemnitz International Stefan Heym Prize for 2017 goes to Polish author Joanna Bator**

**The award and 20,000-euro prize will be presented in April of next year**

The City of Chemnitz International Stefan Heym Prize 2017 is awarded to the Polish writer and commentator Joanna Bator. The Award Committee's decision was announced today by Mayor Barbara Ludwig. In accordance with tradition, the literary prize, for which the winner receives 20,000 euros, will be conferred around the time of Stefan Heym's birthday in April of next year.

Born in 1968, Joanna Bator is one of the outstanding voices in contemporary European literature. Her idiosyncratic, artistic and subtle narratives engage quietly but determinedly with current social issues and phenomena, exploring all their historical dimensions. Her latest novel, *Ciemno, prawie noc* (*Dark, Almost Night*), shows how hate can destroy a community and how quickly the surface of human morality can rupture when people are confronted with change. This novel earned Joanna Bator Poland's most prestigious literary prize, the Nike Award, in 2013. This year she was shortlisted for the same novel for the 2016 House of World Cultures Award for Translated Contemporary Literatures. Her previous publications include the novels *Piaskowa Góra* (*Sandy Mountain*, 2011) and *Chmurdalia* (*Cloudalia*, 2013), along with numerous essays and articles.

Joanna Bator is also the recipient of the Spycher: Leuk Literary Award 2014. She held the post of Friedrich Dürrenmatt Visiting Professor of World Literature in Bern for the winter semester of 2014/15. In 2015 Joanna Bator lived and worked for twelve months in Berlin as a guest of the DAAD Berlin Artists-In-Residence programme. She has a degree in philosophy and is an author and university lecturer. She has taught in Warsaw, New York, London and Tokyo, and spent four years in Japan. Her home is in Poland.

---

Tel +49 (0)371 488-1531

Fax +49 (0)371 488-1595

Email [pressestelle@stadt-chemnitz.de](mailto:pressestelle@stadt-chemnitz.de)

URL [www.chemnitz.de](http://www.chemnitz.de)

**Mayor Barbara Ludwig:** “The Committee greatly admired the literary quality of her work. I am also personally looking forward very much to meeting with her because the questions that Joanna Bator addresses relate to the social issues that we encounter every day on a fundamental level. She deals with the interpretation of the past and present, with fractures in the lives of individuals and in whole societies, with identity, belonging and marginalisation.”

**Professor Bernadette Malinowski, member of the Award Committee of the International Stefan Heym Prize and Chair of Modern German and Comparative Literature at Chemnitz University of Technology:** “In Joanna Bator we are recognising a writer whose criticism of our times and our society links her work closely with the spirit of Stefan Heym. She has set all of her novels to date in the provincial Silesia mining town of Wałbrzych, a small Polish city where important human themes and issues – identity, homeland, strangers, flight, displacement – unfold within a narrative of social connections and collective cause and effect. The protagonists of her novels are not one-dimensional beings but are susceptible to good and evil, to myths and demons, to the fantastical and the absurd, to remembering and suppressing, in short, to everything that makes human existence both a blessing and a curse. As she narrates the fates of individuals and small communities, she sketches the historic entanglements of a whole society. We have here works of literature whose clear position consists precisely in their refusal to silence any voices (even the voices of hate), never unequivocally positioning any one voice as right or wrong. Instead their immense empathy brings the reader closer to the narrative whilst its subtle irony and gentle humour simultaneously keep us at a distance. These are works that ultimately entrust the reader with the task of engaging critically with the narrative’s phenomena and discourses, which are always closely related to real life. Bator does not explain crises and conflicts; she presents them in the psychological and socio-historical genesis of her narrative; instead of moralising, she strives for understanding in literature. The award of the Stefan Heym Prize to Joanna Bator honours an author whose sharp eye and artistic perspective on the world continues a major tradition of Stefan Heym’s writing.”

**Joanna Bator:** “There’s actually no such thing as ‘the writer’. Different authors want to achieve different things, and it is quite natural that not everyone who is writing a book will have the same goals. Some of us, like Nabokov, believe that aesthetic freedom is the only principle worth adhering to. Others, like Orwell, insist that direct political engagement is the vital issue. I tend towards the former view. But times like these force everyone, including writers, to rethink the tensions between their private life, their doubts and questions, and the public sphere, which

requires a completely different language and approach. A few weeks ago, as I was taking part in the Black Monday demonstrations in Warsaw, where women were defending their rights, I was certain that I was in the right place. It was important to put my personal projects to one side in order to take a stand against something that threatens society as a whole. I firmly believe that, as an author, I can actually influence people's lives, the lives of my contemporaries, only if I write the right books at precisely the right time.”

### **City of Chemnitz International Stefan Heym Prize**

The City of Chemnitz International Stefan Heym Prize is awarded in memory of the life, work and legacy of Stefan Heym, son and honorary citizen of our city, to individuals with the courage to criticise our times and who like Stefan Heym have produced outstanding literary and/or journalistic work that will stand the test of time. The award was first given to Amos Oz in 2008. Bora Ćosić was recognised in 2011, and, to commemorate Stefan Heym's 100th birthday, the prize was awarded in 2013 to Christoph Hein.

The committee that awards the prize consists of the Mayor of the City of Chemnitz, the President of the German PEN Centre, the President of the Goethe-Institut, the Director of the publishing house C. Bertelsmann Verlag, the Chair of the German Section of the International Society for Human Rights (ISHR), the Chair of the International Stefan Heym Society, Professor Malinowski as the incumbent Chair of Modern and Comparative Literature at Chemnitz University of Technology and two representatives of the Chemnitz City Council Culture Committee.

### **Stefan Heym Sponsorships**

The first Stefan Heym Sponsorships will be awarded in 2017. A total of 20,000 euros is being made available in the form of grants to school and university-level projects and initiatives with a particular focus on research on the life and work of Stefan Heym, and on continuing his legacy. More information on this can be found in Press Release 598.

### **Further information**

Information on the City of Chemnitz International Stefan Heym Prize, Stefan Heym Sponsorships and prizewinners to date can be found at:

[www.stefan-heyms-preis.de](http://www.stefan-heyms-preis.de).