

City of Chemnitz International Stefan Heym Prize 2017
Congratulatory speech in honour of Joanna Bator
by Marta Kijowska

As delivered.

Ms Mayor,
Members of the Award Committee,
Ladies and gentlemen,

I would imagine that the name of Wałbrzych is unfamiliar to most of you. At most, you are aware that it is a city in Silesia with a rather tongue-twisting Polish name. In all honesty, I am unfamiliar with it too, but in my mind it is not a particularly nice place. This is probably true of anyone who has read Joanna Bator's novels. And yet one would almost be disappointed if her books one day had a setting by another name. For the Wałbrzych that appears in her prose is a place that we as readers wish to return to again and again. Joanna herself evidently feels the same; indeed she even admits she cannot help revisiting the city of Wałbrzych, as it is now called, where she was born and spent eighteen years of her life. In her youth, she hated it. She left as soon as she could. Yet years later, now living in Japan, she found from that distant perspective, that completely foreign environment, that it had suddenly taken on quite a different guise – it was no longer the dreary industrial city in Silesia whose German past had by turns alienated her and led her to dream big, but a dark place of sorcery whose secrets were simply waiting to be discovered and told. When Joanna returned, it was only a matter of time before she captured its magic in words; before she left behind the language of science she had dealt in until that point, and became a storyteller.

It is along these lines that we must introduce the early writings of Joanna Bator and the history of her first work, *Sandy Mountain*¹, a novel that caused quite a stir upon its publication in Poland and soon afterwards further afield too. Much in this novel is invented, but its setting – a hill on the edge of Wałbrzych – is real. The Germans christened it *Der Sandberg* (Sandy Mountain), and the Polish call it the same thing (only in Polish). The one group never developed it, instead using the sand that made up the mountain to supply the glass-making industry. The other group, however, built a pre-fabricated housing development there, which in the 1970s was synonymous with a better life. Those who moved here were considered privileged, and widely envied. This was the time of the so-called “Socialism with a human face”, the era of party leader Edward

¹ “Piaskowa Góra”, Polish title

Gierek, who gave his fellow countrymen a little bit of freedom and a touch of luxury.

It is precisely this period that Joanna Bator describes in her debut novel, at the heart of which stand three women: Zofia, her daughter Jadwiga, and her granddaughter Dominika. The latter is most certainly a child of her time, yet she is also one of its strongest critics. Even at school she is seen as an outsider and a rebel. Her closest friends are a Greek immigrant and a lesbian, and the life they lead seems to Dominika anything but appealing. She sees the ugliness of the settlement and the provincial mindset of its inhabitants. Their narrow-mindedness and xenophobia. Their flagrant anti-Semitism. And also that particular brand of conservative Catholicism, which takes the form of a fanatical worship of the Virgin Mary by the women in particular.

Somewhere down the line, Dominika will rebel against this piousness and embark on a love affair with a priest – much to the disgust of her mother, who is by nature very different: outwardly, Jadwiga fits in well with her environment; inwardly, she is a dreamer. When she and her husband move into a flat on Sandy Mountain, it is a dream come true for him. She, however, dreams of a different life. Of the luxury that is only available in the West; of true love. Jadwiga owes her happiest hours to the Brazilian telenovela “*Escrava Isaura*” (Isaura the Slave Girl), which sweeps her into an exotic yet very attractive world. She suffers along with Isaura, the beautiful slave, owned by a man who ardently desires her but expresses his feelings in a brutal manner – and yet Jadwiga secretly dreams of experiencing such passion one day. (Many women in Poland at this time evidently shared these dreams, as the TV series became a resounding hit in the late Seventies.)

It is astonishing how many small mosaic tiles Joanna Bator gathers together in this book, how skilfully she arranges them to capture the climate of the age. She often reaches back to her own experiences – as mentioned, this is the city where she grew up – but above all, it is her storytelling skill that makes *Sandy Mountain* such a remarkable social novel. Joanna’s sharp eye, her exquisite feel for language, her ability to give this industrial microcosm in Lower Silesia a universal dimension. She achieves the latter not least by plunging repeatedly into the past of her oldest protagonist. In this way she is able to present the novel as a family saga, which in turn allows her to ensure that Dominika, the main character, one day uncovers the long-buried secret of her origins.

That day comes when an American historian turns up at her grandmother Zofia’s house. He is writing a book about Holocaust survivors, including Ignaz Goldblum, a refugee from the Warsaw ghetto. Zofia had hidden him for months during the war, and developed a relationship with him.

He now lives in California, where he cherishes the memory of his old homeland. When his son David one day sets off for Poland, however, he is unable to find any redeeming qualities in the country or in his new-found relatives. David simply cannot imagine having anything in common with this country.

So what does the loss of identity mean for a person? This is one of the novel's most important themes. Once one recognizes this, all these socialist realities begin to crumble and Sandy Mountain takes on an archetypal character. For it is home to many who were once displaced and resettled and were then forced to redefine themselves. They came from the former Polish eastern territories, which are now situated in Belarus or Ukraine, and they did not exactly treat the legacy of the former German inhabitants gently. From the outset, they were the dispossessed and they had every reason to bemoan their fate and dislike, or indeed even hate, their new home – but they knew exactly where their roots lay. For her grandson, however, there is, in Joanna Bator's mind, only one way to reconstruct one's own origin: one must invent the missing elements, give new meaning to old traces, interpret the connections within them. And the best way to do that is to write it all down.

Thus we have Joanna Bator's first novel, *Sandy Mountain* – well structured, multi-layered, fast-paced, linguistically brilliant. It was clear early on that her main character would soon break free from these narrow confines. Perhaps this is because in *Dominika* one can rightly sense the author's alter-ego, who, like her protagonist, was also known as a restless individualist even before starting her literary career. Holding a doctorate in Cultural Studies and Philosophy, and having worked at universities in Warsaw, New York, London and Tokyo, having published theses and essays in American magazines and spent two years in Japan, Joanna did not exactly meet the conventional notion of an average university career in post-Communist, fast-moving Poland.

Now, Joanna Bator was suddenly one of the most expressive voices in modern Polish literature – and she did not leave her readers waiting long to continue *Dominika's* story. Just one year later, she had completed her novel *Cloudalia*, in which her protagonist returns to *Sandy Mountain* and embarks on the life of a nomad. This is triggered by a serious car accident in Germany, for which she is treated at a clinic near Munich. When she awakens from her coma, *Dominika* refuses to go home and declares that travel, being constantly on the move, will be her new way of life.

“Movement and change,” writes Joanna Bator, “the knowledge that you can go back at any time; that was what *Dominika* needed, and she understood ever more clearly that this need was just as much a part of her as the scar on her face and the memory of the accident and the stench of burned flesh.”

The literary result of Dominika's decision is a fast-paced odyssey through very different places – from Bavaria and Hesse to London and New York to the Greek island of Karpathos. At last, she is no longer an outsider, for the people she meets are just like her: individual, unconventional, unadjusted. A family friend, who, married to a Bavarian pig farmer, lives out her longing for higher values on lonely forest walks. A photographer who is scared of being photographed, because he can see death in the images. A hairdresser who was allowed to satisfy his sadistic inclinations at a concentration camp, shaving off female pubic hair. Or the two “tea ladies”, two unmarried sisters whose weakness for home-brewed spirits inspires them to concoct a moth-poison-laced liquor to help the hairdresser cross over into the Great Beyond. These characters entrust Dominika with their stories, and she in turn becomes a kind of projection screen for each of them. Because – quote – “Each person that Dominica met claimed that she reminded them of someone they had lost; a grandparent, an adult of either gender, or even a child that had died as an infant. It was as if the person of Dominika combined all those possible similarities and kindled a yearning for what had been lost.”

Dominika's transformation is something that Joanna Bator understands well from her own experience. She can vividly remember that feeling of constriction and lack of opportunity in her youth. The impulse to flee, triggered within her by the suffocating solicitude of her mother. And, later, the need to be on the move; to mix amongst foreign stories. In her heroine, Joanna has created an image in her own likeness to demonstrate “what it means to be on the move, how the identity of a traveller is forged. Dominika builds and tells her own story by encountering other stories.” The most important encounters in this book do not take place so much between characters but between individual stories – interactions that are sometimes positive, sometimes negative. Joanna Bator also demonstrates “how stories that come from two different ends of the earth can still be very similar and how being on the move can help to fashion something new.”

The individual characters are often completely unaware of how closely their stories intermingle, especially since the author's far-reaching imagination spans great distances to link not only diverse places but also diverse periods of time on this journey into the utopian Chmurdalia, as the novel is called in Polish (from the word “chmura”, meaning “cloud”). Her talent for telling stories seems to serve one purpose above all: to take her readers on a turbulent journey through time and space. A journey which reaches its great, absurd conclusion with a flood sweeping through Wałbrzych, the starting point of this utopian journey, which destroys or carries away everything in its wake.

And lest anyone doubt that this is merely a literary game containing many not-so-serious historical and mythological references, the author uses as a leit motif one very memorable object: a chamber pot employed by Napoleon at a Polish manor house on his return from Russia. Readers and critics alike found the idea amusing; the latter even provided some highly sophisticated interpretations for it. Joanna Bator, however, had a very simple explanation: when asked about Napoleon's chamber pot, she is immediately struck by what the Japanese author Haruki Murakami said when he was asked about the sheep in his novel "A Wild Sheep Chase". Namely, that he didn't have the foggiest idea where it came from. And the same is true of Joanna: she has no clue how this chamber pot found its way into her book. It is a completely ridiculous object that means everything and nothing, and which is intended to hint at the pathos of the Polish Napoleon legend. – A very happy inspiration, in my view, as this allusion could hardly have come across as more ironic.

Let me interject here a short anecdote about the namesake of tonight's award: Do you know what Stefan Heym once said about irony and women? I quote: "Women have hardly any sense of irony; they think that if they take something seriously, others do too." Well, in this case, Stefan Heym would have to take back his claim on both counts!

And finally, Joanna Bator's third novel, *Dark, Almost Night*, is a bleak, grotesque family drama and a crime novel in one, for which she was awarded the prestigious Polish NIKE Award.

The character travelling to Wałbrzych this time is Alicja Tabor and she is a successful journalist in Warsaw. Having spent her youth in this Silesian city, she returns there to solve the mystery of a triple abduction and to write a report about it. However, when she arrives in Wałbrzych, she can barely suppress the urge to flee. The place rouses within her a deep aversion and "that grim satisfaction that is felt when one rediscovers the landscape of an unhappy childhood after so many years." The fact that Alicja is able to stay at her old house does not help matters either. It has stood empty since her father's death, and as soon as Alicja moves in, all the old demons come creeping out of the corners – images and people that fascinated and appalled her in equal measure in her childhood: Fürstenstein Castle, with its underground tunnels where her father hunted in vain for the treasures belonging to Princess Daisy, the last owner. The gloomy garden where she sought refuge countless times from her mentally ill mother. Or the forest where her beloved sister committed suicide: the capricious, fanciful Ewa, who affectionately called her Kamelin and turned every day into an adventure.

But Alicja's return is painful not only because of these traumatic memories – in the present-day too, there is something strange and menacing afoot in the city. Two children have disappeared, and people are searching for them – albeit feebly, half-heartedly. The inhabitants seem to have fallen into a collective trance: some are seeing a saint in a miner who has suffered an accident, while others have begun to worship a self-appointed prophet.

It is only the abduction of a third child that breaks the dam of pent-up emotion. This is one of the points at which Joanna Bator once again proves her mastery as a writer: a writer who appreciates how to record those moments when the mood shifts and repressed trauma tips over into an uncontrollable outbreak of collective madness. When the demons or, as Alicja's sister called them, "cat eaters" slither out from the darkest corners and ply their destructive trade. "They take a different shape every time, Kamelin," she claimed. "They're tougher than camels, stronger than rhinos. More ravenous than man-eating sharks. They just sit there and feed. They come through the walls, they get into your body, and when they're in there, they turn everything to rot."

In the end, when the case of the missing children has been solved, it is clear that human stupidity has been just as much to blame as greed and cruelty. Alicja is an energetic player in this mission, but she is also interested in the fate of other inhabitants – particularly her next-door neighbour, "a sad, lonely man with an aviator's cap, who only smiled when he played the violin." And every time you think the action is slowly wrapping up, Joanna Bator lies in wait with a new character and a new story to introduce. She believes this is the only way she can spin the story; this is how she lives in this world. She brings herself to heel with these small stories, these micro-tales.

But sometimes she says something different: during her own journey through life, she has recognised that her narrative style is somehow connected to Poland. That it is only in this country that her own personal micro-story and the micro-stories of other people will intertwine, something she would never find anywhere else.

To this I should probably add something about the magic of the language, but somehow it does not suit *Dark, Almost Night*. For this book is also, if not completely, about the ubiquitous misuse of language. About the primitiveness and idiocy of the verbal battles fought today on the streets, in the media and on the internet, which Joanna Bator both introduces into her narration and mimics in the form of three intermezzi each transcribed in a "torrent" of language. They are mostly completely nonsensical tirades against dissenters or weaker members of society read by Alicja, because in them she is seeking leads that could take her investigation further. Yet they make this

outstanding part-crime, part-grotesque novel even more readable when they superbly reflect the reality in today's Poland, governed by Jaroslaw Kaczynski and his PiS party.

This time, Joanna Bator has given her main character a name that is easy to decipher as an anagram of her own. Despite this, one hardly dares suppose that her alter-ego is in Alicja Tabor. In any case, she does not deny that she shares much with this protagonist too, especially as she views Alicja as the grown-up version of Dominika from *Sandy Mountain* and *Cloudalia*. And Alicja does exactly what Joanna herself did: she removes herself from her home town and travels the world, if only to muster the strength to go back. In essence, Joanna Bator is constantly writing the story of one and the same woman, a woman who develops and transforms alongside her.

And finally she says – in reference to her working method – that when she starts writing a novel, she has to have everything ready in her head first: the story and the form in which it should be told. She doesn't have to construct her language first – it is already there and will flow along so that she herself derives an almost sensual pleasure from writing. One immediately believes Joanna, yet remains consistently astonished by her literary skill. By the many details she interweaves, by how stylishly she juggles them. By her mastery of language, which also shines through in the German translations by Esther Kinsky and Lisa Palmes. By her sophisticated narrative perspective, in which the power of observation mingles with distance, empathy with irony, making every step taken by her characters, every twist in the action, readily plausible. And last but not least, her skill at transforming her own experiences, however unpleasant or even painful they may be, into a superb piece of literature.

I hope, dear Joanna, that you continue to do so, and I congratulate you most warmly on your award.