

City of Chemnitz International Stefan Heym Prize

Speech

by Joanna Bator

As delivered.

Dear Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am truly happy and honored to be awarded Stefan Heym International Literary Prize.

The prize is a joy and a great responsibility.

My success wouldn't happen without my German publisher Suhrkamp and my wonderful translators: Esther Kinsky and Lisa Palmes. Thanks to their talent and devotion my books could travel abroad. Translation from language to language is also the translation between cultures but we are neighbors and know each other well.

I hope that my novels help us to know each other even better as they have grown in the Lower Silesian soil where German and Polish bones and stories are mixed.

A couple of years ago I was on the other side as member of a jury of the International Ryszard Kapuściński Award for Literary Reportage. Our winner was an amazing Chinese writer Liao Yiwu. His very long acceptance speech included playing music and reciting poetry. I am going to do neither but, please, allow me to share with you some of my thought on writing.

For me writing is a gift. Unexpected, aberrant, mysterious. Even if I experience this gift as a burden or even a curse sometimes I appreciate that I am blessed with the ability to create.

I am a storyteller. We, the writers, "conquer the world with the language" – as a Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuściński said – but we win the hearts of our readers with the stories we tell.

While asked what is the purpose of this lonely profession I answer that I write to understand and communicate. The understanding is more inwards directed process while communication requires the audience. For me the most precious part of this sudden gift of writing is the readership.

The fact, that my novels have the capability to engage so many people, that they cross the borders of social differences and languages, is my anchor and an instant cure against misanthropy.

I have just finished a long book tour in Lower Silesia. The beautiful land reach in history where the majority of my stories is born, even though I spent a big part of my life in foreign countries and eventually came back to build my house in a different part of Poland.

During this Silesian book tour when I met hundreds of readers every day. I have realized for the first time with such clarity what responsibility the gift of writing entails in the times of political turmoil.

I have always believed that good writers are already inside the most vital public debates, because they provide the readers with the new ways of seeing and understanding. Sadly, sometimes it is not enough. Even if a pen is mightier than a sword when the values we believe in are in danger - as they are in Poland now – we shall engage the way Stefan Heym did.

Although I lack his talent for direct political involvement I share his deep disagreement with social injustice, religious hypocrisy, cowardice and hate.

When I walked the streets of Warsaw with thousands of Polish women united in the Black Protest I knew I was in the right place, even though the place I cherish most as a writer is the calming solitude of my house.

When I share this experience at the meetings in the provincial Polish libraries I know I give the readers - whose majority in Poland are women – the assurance and encouragement they need.

The women in my country, whose rights are endangered, are the victims of the growing misogyny which always accompanies the fear of the Other. However, the war against women is global, ongoing and cruel.

They are countries where not only women are deprived of the most basic democratic rights, but also physically abused and their bodies mutilated in the name of barbaric tradition.

Countless women are enslaved and sexually abused every day as the victims of military conflicts.

For me as a writer the cruelty is the biggest challenge and the most dangerous enemy.

In one of the small Silesian towns I was provocatively asked what I believed in since I do not believe in gods. I answered I believed we should put cruelty first as Judith Shklar wrote in her famous essay. It means to put cruelty before religion and any ideology. We must react just because we find cruelty unacceptable. Just because it causes pain.

There is no other justification of the revulsion we feel – cruelty causes suffering, so we cannot allow it. We do need a metaphysical reason to do it. Cruelty – as I said – goes together with hypocrisy and fear.

On the other hand, putting cruelty first may lead to a heroic self-destruction according to Montaigne. There is no use for a writer who has self-destructed herself. Hence I rather believe that putting cruelty first gives me the courage to speak up in my books for those who have no voice, but also to follow my inner demon who is unpredictable and autonomous.

According to American philosopher Richard Rorty good books can be divided into two types: these that help us become more autonomous and those that make us more aware and sensitive to cruelty inflicted on us and by us. He compares Nabokov as the one searching for autonomy and -cruelty fighting Orwell. Nabokov shows how the search for autonomy and self-creation, the quest for aesthetic pleasure may produce cruelty. Orwell speaks from a victim point of view and takes a stand against cruelty.

Both writers provide the reader with the powerful vocabularies and in that sense both are involved and relevant in our search for self-improvement as a new self-description.

I cannot decide which writer is closer to my heart, so I will just continue to write my strange and dense Polish-German stories that have grown in Lower Silesian towns and forests, stories you have decided to award today.

Thank you for this great honor.