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| Telephone  interview | 0901=HK  Han Kang: Hello?  Jenny Rydén: Hello, is this Han Kang?  HK: Yes.  JR: Hi, my name is Jenny Rydén. I’m calling from the Nobel Prize.  HK: Yeah. So nice to talk with you.  JR: Very nice to talk to you too. Please let me first express my congratulations.  HK: Thank you. Thank you so much.  JR: How are you feeling right now?  HK: I’m so surprised and, and absolutely. I’m honoured.  JR: How did you find out about the prize?  HK: Someone called me and he talked to me about this news, so of course I was surprised. And I just finished dinner with my son and in Korea, it’s just eight o’clock in the evening. So yeah, it’s a very peaceful evening. I was really surprised.  JR: And you are in your home in Seoul?  HK: Yeah, I’m at home in Seoul.  JR: And what have you been doing today?  HK: Today? I didn’t work today and I just read a bit and I took a walk. It was kind of very easy day for me.  JR: So you said you’re with your son. What was his reaction to this?  HK: My son was surprised as well, but we didn’t have much time to talk about this. We were surprised, and that’s all.  JR: I imagine. What does it mean to you getting the Nobel Prize in literature?  HK: Yes, I’m honoured and I really appreciate your support, the support of the prize. I just appreciate it.  JR: You are the first literature laureate from South Korea. How does that feel?  HK: Yes. I grew up with books, you know, so since when I was a child, I grew up with books in Korean and translated as well. So I can say I grew up with Korean literature, which I feel very close to. So I hope this news is nice for Korean literature readers and my friends, writers.  JR: You said you come from a literary background. What writers have been your most important sources of inspiration?  HK: For me, since when I was a child, all writers have been collective. They are searching meanings in life. Sometimes they are lost and sometimes they are determined and all their efforts and all their strengths have been my inspiration. So it’s very difficult for me to pick some names of the inspiration. It’s very difficult for me.  JR: I read that the Swedish author, Astrid Lindgren, has been one source of inspiration for you?  HK: Yeah. When I was a child, I loved her book, Lionheart Brothers. And I love that book, but I cannot say she’s the only writer who inspired my childhood. When I read that book, Lionheart Brothers, I could relate it with my questions about humans or life and death.  JR: For someone just discovering your work, where would you suggest they start?  HK: Among my books? I think every writer likes his or her most recent book. So my most recent book is *We Do Not Part* or it is called *I Do Not Bid Farewell* or *Impossible Goodbyes*. I hope this book could be a start. And *Human Acts* is connected directly with this book *We Do Not Part*. And then *The White Book*, which is very personal book for me. Because it’s quite autobiographical. And there is *The Vegetarian*. But I feel the start could be *We Do Not Part*.  JR: For an international audience, maybe *The Vegetarian* is most well-known. What would you say that particular novel has meant for you?  HK: I wrote it for three years, and those three years were kind of difficult years for me for some reasons. So I think I was struggling to find the images of this protagonist, people who are surrounding her, and the image of trees and sunlight and everything was so vivid in those three years.  JR: I will let you go in a short while. Do you have any ideas on how you will celebrate this Nobel Prize?  HK: After this phone call I’d like to have tea – I don’t drink – I’m going to have tea with my son and I’ll celebrate it quietly tonight.  JR: Very nice. Yes. Many congratulations again. Thank you so much.  HK: Thank you.  JR: Okay. Goodbye.  HK: Take care. Bye. |
| Interview | [00:10](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Vn0WyiLS8&t=10s) What influence did your family have on your interest in writing? [01:25](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Vn0WyiLS8&t=85s) What did books mean to you as a child? [02:27](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Vn0WyiLS8&t=147s) What made you decide to become a writer? [03:27](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Vn0WyiLS8&t=207s) What are your writing days like? [04:29](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Vn0WyiLS8&t=269s) Where do your ideas and inspiration come from? [05:12](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Vn0WyiLS8&t=312s) What is your experience of having writer’s block? [07:08](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Vn0WyiLS8&t=428s) Can people work on their imagination? [07:45](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Vn0WyiLS8&t=465s) How has writing changed the way you are? [09:20](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Vn0WyiLS8&t=560s) How can we encourage and inspire children to read more? [10:36](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Vn0WyiLS8&t=636s) How do you feel about all the attention your Nobel Prize has generated? [11:18](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4Vn0WyiLS8&t=678s) How can people make a positive impact on the world? |
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| Podcast | “When I’m writing very well, then I don’t have to write. It’s just writing itself, if that’s a possible way to say it” Is the creative process different in the fields of art, literature and music? In a podcast conversation, literature laureate Jon Fosse speaks about all three fields and how they are similar in many ways. American painter Mark Rothko is mentioned as a source of inspiration as well as art in general. We also get insights into Fosse’s childhood where music was large part of his life.  Today Jon Fosse enjoys a world of silence and avoids the noise of the world if possible. He describes his writing process, how he enjoys writing by hand with fountain pens and how a reader can tell if a book is written by hand or not. He also speaks about his relationship to God and religion.  This conversation was published on 18 July, 2024. Podcast host Adam Smith is joined by Clare Brilliant.  Below you find a transcript of the podcast interview. The transcript was created using speech recognition software. While it has been reviewed by human transcribers, it may contain errors.  Jon Fosse: It’s very easy to use a lot of words and then write in a complicated way. That’s the easiest thing to do. But what’s hard to manage? It’s to write in a simple and deep way.  Adam Smith: One of the things that strikes me as most attractive about Jon Fosse is the way he wears his erudition so lightly. Despite the obvious depth of his learning and the great complexity of the ideas expressed in this huge variety of writing, he gets his points across in this conversation so straightforwardly. He left me at least with some really beautiful images, a picture of him writing alone. In this place, he calls a shelter from the wind. The vision of him writing not just with his head, but with his whole body and an image of him gazing at a single point out of the window and extracting. Pretty much extracting everything you can from that place. A bit like when you’ve seen a good movie, I found these scenes from the conversation replaying in my head for days afterwards. I truly hope that you will find this conversation with Fosse every bit as captivating as I did.  Clare Brilliant: This is Nobel Prize Conversations. Our guest is Jon Fosse, the 2023 literature laureate. He received the prize for his innovative plays and prose, which give voice to the unsayable. Your host is Adam Smith, Chief Scientific Officer at Nobel Prize Outreach. This podcast was produced in cooperation with Fundación Ramón Areces. Jon Fosse is a Norwegian poet, novelist and playwright. He’s published almost 70 works, which have been translated into over 40 languages. In this conversation, he talks about finding his Catholic faith after seeking solace in cathedrals while touring with his plays, his fascination with Mark Rothko’s paintings and how he can tell if a book is written with a pen. But first we enter Jon Fosse’s world, a world dominated by silence.  Smith: When we were corresponding about this podcast, I asked you whether you had a pair of headphones you could wear, and you said, no, I don’t listen to music. That’s quite a surprising statement. Is that true that you really don’t listen to music?  Fosse: Yes, that’s true. I only listen to music when I go to concerts, that’s the only time. When I was young, I was very much into music. When I was a teenager, I listened to music all the time. I played the guitar, both the classical guitar and small pieces by Bach and electric guitar in a boys band. Then I stopped playing and I stopped listening to music in my late teens, and I started writing. The only thing I listen to is when I’m driving longer distances; I’m listening to audio books.  Smith: I suppose the writing became the music, if you like.  Fosse: The writing became the music. No doubt.  Smith: It is unusual to live without it, and most people put it on as a sort of background. You’d find that disturbing, would you to have it?  Fosse: I always find it disturbing. When I am in a room where they play music, I try not to hear it. Yesterday I went to my dentist, and of course he had music in the background. As far as I manage I try to not listen to it.  Smith: Yes. It’s hard to avoid.  Fosse: I have some friends that are musicians and I’ve been doing readings together with them. When we take a cab, when we are going to do a job, they always dislike to hear music. They always ask the taxi driver to take away the music. I think this music, it’s disturbing for a lot of people and there’s a lot of noise pollution, to put it that way, all over the place.  Smith: Exactly. It’s harder and harder to avoid it depending on where you live, but basically it’s everywhere. It’s a particularly interesting thing to discuss with you, of course, because you are renowned for putting silence in your work, in your plays and also in your prose. Your search for silence extends to just everyday life and trying to avoid the surrounding hubbub.  Fosse: I never watch television. I never listen to the radio. I hardly ever go to see a film. I go to the theater now and then, and as I said, now and then I go to a concert with classical music. I love organ concerts where they are playing music by Bach, the great one.  Smith: You grew up in a very quiet place.  Fosse: Yes, you can say so.  Smith: Was it a landscape that, if you like, evokes quietness? It’s tempestuous, I suppose, with its weather and its dramatic scenery, the west of Norway. But at the same time, if people were looking for retreat, I suppose it’s the sort of place that they would go.  Fosse: Yes. Some places at least. We are all famous for all the bad weather. There’s a lot of rain. It rains most of the time, and it’s quite windy there. You imagine Norway, it is mountains and snow but in my coastal landscape, it isn’t like that. It’s more like Britain or Ireland.  Smith: Dark, depressing.  Fosse: Very dark, very depressing. It can be gray for months, but I like it and there are many nuances in the gray. If you start looking at it that way and suddenly it open up and you see the blue sky. It’s silent and it’s gray.  Smith: I suppose what you just said, many nuances in gray, and then suddenly it opens up and you see the blue sky is also a description of your writing.  Fosse: It’s the same if you live by the sea. It’s always changing, the colour of the sea. It’s never the same and neither are the movements. You have the basic rhythm of the waves, but it keeps on changing. It’s the same and it’s changing all the time. I grew up by the sea, by the Hardanger Fjord and now I’m living in central Oslo, but I keep two places in the western part of Norway. One is as close to the sea as you can get. The balcony is going over the sea. My cabin has a view to where the Sonne fjord goes into the North sea, the ocean. There’s an opening of that where I can see the ocean too. Both places are really great for me, but you need to like it. In my family aren’t that happy with the sea and the rain.  Smith: People acquainted with your writing will know that there often are people staring out at a single point. Asle, for instance, in ‘Aliss at the Fire‘ staring at the sea, concentrating on small changes. Obviously it’s something very important for you.  Fosse: Yes. This situation, someone looking out the window, that’s one of the reocurring situation in my writing. When it occurred the first time, I don’t exactly remember, but since then it keeps on coming back. In ‘Septology’ it’s the same with many places. He’s just looking at the fjord. I’ve written a play called the ‘A Summers Day’. The basic situation there is an elderly lady looking at the sea, that goes through the whole play, and she is remembering the day when her husband disappeared on the sea.  Smith: It’s obviously a very personal experience for you.  Fosse: I simply grew up, as I said, close to a fjord. When I had to walk to school, we walked along the fjord for a couple of kilometers and you hear this sound of the waves of the sea and the way it keeps changing all the time. The nuances, I think where you grew up, it’s very formative in many ways. You learn a language in a place and this or that social act, dialect or normalised language or whatever. You learn that in the place and you connect the word also to the place where you learnt it. Where you first learnt the word window, you connect it to the first window you saw and understood what a window is. The same goes for everything, for such basic birds as roof, floor, stone and water.  Smith: That rootedness. Tell me about your writing, the actual process of writing. Clearly it’s something that gives you great pleasure. How did you find originally that it was a pleasurable activity to write?  Fosse: I guess I was around 12 years old, as I told you. I was playing the guitar a lot and I also tried to write small tunes and I wrote about the lyrics and the melody. That was the first thing I wrote. Then I tried also to write small poems and short stories. I started very early, somehow I liked it. It gave me shelter from the wind to put it that way. I found a place where I could stay alone and do whatever I wanted in my writing. It was in a kind of opposition to the writing in the school, where you had to write almost the opposite. I found as I normally put it, a place inside myself, a secret place, and I can go to that place and start writing from that place. I found that place when I was in my early teens, and I will be 65 and the place is the same. It’s been there for 50 years.  Smith: How very satisfying to have your life!  Fosse: Yes. My way of writing, I prefer not to prepare anything, to do any research, think of the structure or whatever. I just sit down. I know if I’m going to write a play or a kind of fiction or of course a poem, and that’s the only thing I know. Then I start and at the beginning it has what is needed. It has a kind of necessity to it that forces the rest of the text in a way. I have this view on writing, don’t think, but it’s an act of listening. I’m listening to something when I’m writing to what I’m actually writing. Writing to what I’ve written and then to something that brings the story or what you call it. Keep going. When I’m writing very well, then I don’t have to write. It’s just writing itself, if that’s a possible way to say it.  Smith: It’s a lovely way to say it. You are listening to some narrator within yourself telling you what to write. It’s a very appealing image. The process though of translating what your mind is telling you to what your hand is actually writing is hard. Many writers would say that you have to go through a great apprenticeship to teach your hand to do what your mind is wanting it to do.  Fosse: You’re writing with your hands, not with your brain, as [Beckett](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1969/beckett/facts/) said. He was completely right. It’s a kind of playing to me. I started as a musician, as I told you, and I stopped playing. I turned to writing and writing is comparable to playing music for me. When doing that, you don’t think first, you’re improvising, you don’t think like that. You just do it. Martin Heidegger, he said that art happens. It’s like that for me. It just happens. When writing a novel or a play or whatever, at a certain point I get this feeling that it’s already written, not inside me, but out there somewhere. My job is to write down what is already written before it disappears.  Smith: Before it flies out the window towards the field.  Fosse: Yes, I think writing is a kind of gift. A new novel or a new play, it’s a gift I get. Because I feel it’s a gift I can’t write all the time. I need to have breaks or pauses when I don’t write. You can’t get gifts all the time.  Smith: In order to be receptive to gathering up your gift when it comes, is there a special way that you write? Does your situation for actually writing have to be a particular place or a way of writing?  Fosse: No, I’ve been a writer for so many years, and this habit is so into my way of living that I think I can write more or less all over the place, everywhere. But I have to write by hand, not on a computer. I can sit on an airplane and have a notebook and one of my fountain pens and write there, for instance. That wasn’t possible for me earlier. The ideal situation for me is that I at least have one week with no disturbances. Then I start writing very early in the morning. For many years, I woke up so that I could stop writing at eight, nine. For some years I have woken up quite early. Then I wrote my whole ‘Septology’ between five in the night and nine in the morning.  Smith: There’s something about those wee hours, you are in good company. Anthony Trollope always used to write between five and eight in the morning, didn’t they? Murakami, I think is another early writer. What is it about those early hours?  Fosse: They are the best hours for writing I’ve experienced. Earlier I liked to drink quite a lot and I drank in the evenings and I had to be completely sober to write. If I only had a glass of red wine, I lose my precision. I’ve become somehow sentimental and I can write and I can drink afterwards, but not at the same time. But then I quit drinking at all and then I didn’t know what to do in the evening. I went to bed and went to sleep and woke up very early, and then I started writing very early. That’s how I experienced that. This is the best time for writing in a way. The world is quiet. If you’re living in a town, there are very few cars. You can hear a taxi here or there. You yourself is quiet in a specific way. You aren’t that quiet in yourself at eight in the morning as four or five in the night for sure. I also prefer to wake up and start writing as fast as possible to go from the dream world in the sleep to the conscious dream world of the writing.  Smith: That’s interesting. No ritual sort of coffees and long breakfast to get you in the mood?  Fosse: Yes, always. I used to be a heavy smoker. I needed my cigarettes and coffee. In later years I’ve changed to green tea and do some nicotine and caffeine I need in the morning, but that’s the only thing I need.  Smith: You mentioned that you write with a fountain pen.  Fosse: Yes, I saw my folks writing on the typewriter. I’m that old. I remember my first computer, it was this old dos system. You perhaps can’t even remember it. Then I had my first Mac, and it was an adventure to me, an amazing thing. You could change the font and you could have a completely clean script. When I used the typewriter, I always made typos here and there and had to change. It was ugly. I think it was much more beautiful when I had my first style writer and my first Mac. I had, for instance, the first portable Mac ever produced. It’s very strange to think about. Now these portables are all over the place, but it was Steve Jobs, he was the man. The same with the iPhone. It was Steve Jobs. You have some inventors that have changed our lives more than I think people dare to think of. I was very fascinated by the Mac roughly until Steve Jobs passed away. Since then, it’s been a boring story. I’m still using the Mac, that’s what I know how to use. But my fascination was gone. Perhaps I needed to be fascinated by something. Then my fascination changed to fountain pens, in fact. I started to collect fountain pens and use them. Earlier, I only wrote using a Mac and corrected using a fountain band when I printed out the script. Fountain pens are very peaceful and the act of writing by hand in a notebook. This is a very peaceful action. I quoted [Beckett](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1969/beckett/facts/) that you’re writing up by your hand, but with your hand, you get this experience that you actually are writing with your hand. It becomes much more obvious when you are actually writing by your hand, especially to me with a fountain pen and on paper.  Smith: I like the fact that there’ve been these different phases, that there was the phases of the enjoyment of using the typewriter, which in some way is like a musical instrument, if you like.  Fosse: Yes. The keyboard. It’s like playing on a keyboard when you are typing. These movements of the right thing when you are writing by hand, it’s also get this rhythm in another way. You can write fast or slow and you never write exactly the same way. Your handwriting, it’s always changing slightly. The musical dimension or the corporal dimension, your body is into the writing either you use a keyboard or a fountain pen.  Smith: Exactly. It’s bringing a different sort of musicality to the whole work, because people of course look for that in the text itself, but that it’s there in the creation of the text also is lovely.  Fosse: It’s a strange thing. I feel that the writing process at least is quite different, or I experience it as quite different when I’m using a fountain pen, I guess that has to do that. I’ve been a writer for so many years. I’ve written an enormous lot. When I started, it was something new to me, this experience of writing by hand. It was easier not to disturb yourself by thinking, to put it that way when I wrote by hand.  Smith: There’s a more direct connection.  Fosse: Yes. I think some writers, you can almost tell that the books have been written by hand, not on a computer, not on a typewriter. I think, for instance, the book of Knut Hamsun, to me, it’s obvious it couldn’t be written on a typewriter or a computer.  Smith: What makes it obvious?  Fosse: That’s very hard to describe it. It has to do with this flow I was talking about, and the inversion that he creates. It can be felt that this is really written by hand, but it isn’t that many years ago since they wrote with a goose pen and everything was written. For instance, you had the first fountain pens, it isn’t that many years ago. There’s been an enormous development in the act of writing for over 100 years.  Smith: There’s obviously a lovely simplicity about writing by hand, the simplicity of your writing, if one could call it that. There’s a bit of a misnomer, but it’s obviously something you construct that your own reading, your own interests, you’ve already mentioned Heidegger in this conversation, are very complex and you boil it down to a simplicity of language, which is very striking. Is that purposeful? What is your thinking behind the simplicity?  Fosse: I prefer not to have a purpose at all when writing. If you have a purpose, it’s very easy to tell when you read it. The writing, it must have its own necessity and its own logic. For me, when I write, I don’t decide that I don’t want to use that word or that word. Especially in my place, I’m writing about basic human situations and in each and every language you use very simple words to describing your daily life, actions. It’s very easy to use a lot of words and to write in a complicated way. That’s the easiest thing. What’s hard to manage? It’s to write in a simple and deep way. My favourite painter, at least at the time being it’s Makarotto, there’s a huge simplicity to his paintings. At the same time, they are telling a lot and all the details, the repetitions and the variations are speaking all the time.  Smith: One thing about Rothko is that if you, at least I’ve found that if you stand at different distances from his paintings, and of course if you look at them in different light, you get very different experiences. To stand just one half a meter away from a Rothko is an utterly different experience from the experience of standing at the other end of a big gallery room. It is the levels of analysis.  Fosse: It is for sure. I guess when he was painting, he had his arms, his brushes and so on, so it couldn’t be that far away from the painting. All the details I’m talking about, you have perhaps to go rather close to see them. All the variations from a distance, you see only that colour with that colour or something like that. To me it is just a standard. Let’s say I stand one meter away from the painting and let the painting talk to me. Then it’s not this or that. It’s the wholeness of it that is speaking to me and it’s in all kind of writing to me. Same with art, it’s not the details, it’s the wholeness it is about. Wholeness has a kind of silent spirit. In a good production in the theater, it’s not the acting or the scenography. It’s the wholeness of the production that makes it great. This wholeness, it can’t speak, it’s silent. It has a silent voice, and that’s a spiritual voice. I think to me, it’s this spiritual voice that is speaking very clearly from the paintings of Rothko. In each paining this spirit is saying very different things. I don’t know how he managed, but he managed to do it. He painted those paintings. If it is easy to explain then it is no art at all, as everyone could do it then.  Smith: But then, as you say, apparent simplicity, but such complexity contained within.  Fosse: Yes. Deepness, there’s a lot underneath, there’s a lot in a Rothko painting. Each painting, speaking of the greater ones, it’s a universe you could say.  Smith: Just to draw the parallel with your work, a great deal of darkness in Rothko’s painting.  Fosse: Yes, of course. But Rothko himself denied that he was trying to paint his depression or what you call it. I think he painted more to get rid of himself than to express himself. I’m writing much more to get rid of myself than to express myself. I don’t believe in these people, oh, I want to express it. I’m not interested at all, not in what I might want to express. I don’t find it interesting at all. Rothko isn’t expressing in that way. He’s creating art, art is something else than your subjective experiences or something like that. It’s basically a transformation. You are transcending or opening up for a transcendental dimension in the process of writing or in good art at all in general, I would say. It’s all about that. Beckett, once again, said that he didn’t write about anything. If I would quote him and say, I’m not writing about anything, nothing. But of course when you’re reading a novel or a play or whatever, of course it’s something about it that attracts us. It’s a kind of plot to a certain level. They call it the universe run by a lot of very complicated rules, different for each. They’re not conscious, but then I have to know them somehow. That’s the same with Rothko. When he painted a picture, it’s a universe and the way to describe it as to say that there are rules for it. It’s a kind of language game they use with the science phrase. But these language games are so complicated that no brain, if it’s good art isn’t possible to have a conscious relation to them.  Smith: Whether you are an onlooker with a Rothko or a reader of your text, it’s very hard not to bring a search for meaning to your encounter with the work. If you are writing without searching for meaning, you are simply creating, then is the reader wrong to try and find meaning in what you’re writing?  Fosse: No, it’s in a certain way all about meaning. It’s not about communication to communicate this or that, this message to, as an advertisement or something like that. It’s about meaning and what is meaning? If you start thinking about it, what is it and why does it exist? Gardiner the philosopher, he said that meaning is a wonder. I agree that we can understand, for instance, the complexity of a Rothko painting to such a degree as it is possible or understand the level of great writing to such a degree. It’s a kind of wonder that it isn’t possible to explain neither the process of Bach composing his music or the experience I get from listening to his music. It’s a wonder. Then I opened up a kind of spiritual dimension, and I had the pleasure of provoking a lot of people by thanking God when I made my speech at the banquet and my lecture.  Smith: Let’s go there. You grew up in the Protestant traditions of western Norway.  Fosse: My father and mother, they were believers, but in a very conventional, traditional way in a society. You never go to church. Normally you go when there’s a wedding or a burial or something. But my grandfather, he was a Quaker. My grandmother on the other side, she was a kind of puritan. I knew about it and it was in my family, but the society I grew up in wasn’t ruled or defined by these ideas. The people who believed in this, they were outsiders.  Smith: There was a backdrop of Protestantism.  Fosse: As it is in Norway and Sweden normally, I guess. It’s a very secularised society. It even was when I grew up. These Protestant societies, most of them have developed into very secularised societies that started a long time ago. In a way it’s in the center somehow of Lutheranism. When I started, mostly because of my own writing, to experience this other dimension, this invisible thing, I at a certain point started to think about God, how to use the word God and something that had to do with this unknown side of life. I also started to search for a religious community. I went to the Quakers and stayed with them. I never became an organised Quaker. As a good Quaker you shouldn’t be organised. It’s against the spirit of Quakerism. I’m basically thinking and believing as a Quaker to a large degree, even now.  Smith: That’s interesting. You are a Quaker at heart, but have found your way to the Catholic church.  Fosse: Yes. You can put it like that. It was the German mystic master Eckhart who helped me. He lived in the 13th century. His writing has influenced me a lot since I first read it in the eighties. What the Quakers are thinking and practicing, it’s already described by Eckhart, the meaning of it, the point of it. George Fox did it some hundred years later, but Eckhart had already thought about it 500 years earlier. In a way, true master Eckhart got an interest for the Catholic church. He wasn’t heretic, of course. He died before he came to judgment. I’m a heretic, of course but in another time. The life of a writer is a lonely life. I needed something to stick to. In Norway there are 150 Quakers. And in the whole world there are rather few.  When I started going to the Catholic mass, I felt very much at home there, to be honest. As a playwright, I travelled all around the world to see productions. Normally if a cathedral or church was open, I walked in and if it was a Catholic church, there were always someone sitting there in deep concentration praying. To see these people sitting there in this empty church or cathedral, it impressed me a lot. What I found when I started reading about the Catholicism and going to the mass, it was that the essence of Catholicism and the essence of Quakerism is approximately the same. It is about mystery of faith. It is about God in each and every human being, the inner light as the Quakers say it or as the Catholic say it; you get it when you actually eat the spiritual body of Christ. The elements in the Catholic mass, they are the same basically as they have been for 2000 years. The texts are repeated again and again, honest of the confession of the faith, etc. In the end, the words are repeated that many times that they in a way lose their normal meaning and are filled with a kind of silence.  Smith: Absolutely. Similar to for instance, the Jesus Prayer in orthodoxy constantly repeated. It becomes something other than the words.  Fosse: I’m praying that prayer a lot myself.  Smith: Do you do it in the way of the 33 repetitions or some particular number?  Fosse: No. Just repeat and repeat. As the fathers of the desert did. I just kept on repeating it.  *MUSIC*  Brilliant: I’m not familiar with the Jesus prayer myself. Adam, would you mind telling us a bit about it?  Smith: The form of it is Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. In very few words, it contains an awful lot of concepts. It sort of encapsulates the essentials of Christianity. Lord Jesus Christ places him in sort of ascendants, and then Son of God says who he is, and then have mercy on me, a sinner is confessional. That act of confession and recognition of one’s sins is contained within that prayer. It’s sort of plenitude in little.  Brilliant: Jon Fosse talks about the fathers of the desert using it. What does that mean?  Smith: The Desert Fathers were a bunch of hermits in the third and fourth century, mainly I think in Egypt. They were early Christians who retired to the desert, living mainly alone, and dedicated themselves completely to thinking about the nature of God and vibe with each other in aestheticism. They tried to sort of be more awful to themselves than the next one in the next cave in order to heighten their sense of devotion, I suppose, and punish themselves for their sins and all the rest of it. I think the Jesus Prayer was first recorded on wall of one of those caves. There was an author called Helen Waddell who translated some of the sayings of the Desert Fathers, and it was one of the books that used to hang around at home. I used to dip into these and find them very confusing. That was my first acquaintance with the Desert Fathers.  Brilliant: It’s interesting that the prayer did sort of spread out of the desert because it sounds like it’s widely used.  Smith: Yes. Simplicity must be very appealing. Also, the fact that it is used as a repetitive prayer, I suppose it’s almost like a chant. The standard practice is to say it over and over. While I suppose you might dwell on the words and the meaning of the words, after a while, it becomes sort of mantra. It’s a way of calming down or cleansing your mind. It was very interesting to listen to Fosse talk about the fact that he likes the prayer because it ties in so well with the extensive repetition he uses as a device in his writing. We talked about that. Let’s return to the conversation.  Smith: Repetition, of course, is a huge part of your own work, and people very frequently describe your work as being sort of hymnal, or it could be in a liturgical setting. What does repetition bring to you when you are writing, when you’re actually writing the thing and you find your hand repeating the phrase or repeating the idea. Why?  Fosse: I think it’s quite simple that I moved from being obsessed by music to being obsessed by writing. I wanted to create a kind of music when writing. What’s fundamental to all kind of music is repetitions and variations. To create the literature as a kind of music, you need repetition. If you look for it in almost every good writer, you find a lot of repetitions. Go to [Hemingway](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1954/hemingway/facts/), for instance, or the one I’m translating at the time, it’s Gerald Murnane. He is a great writer and he keeps on repeating all the time, but he’s known for his repetition as I am. I use the word pause, short pause, long pause a lot. That’s to get the right flow. I need it to be like that. In my fiction, I can’t use that word or not as frequently as in my plays. My German translator, he had this theory that in my fiction, the repetitions are playing the same role as the word pause or silence in my plays. I think he got the point.  Smith: Yes. It makes you stop and reflect on what you are reading.  Fosse: Yeah. It becomes a silence and silences. Never the same, expressing quite different things.  Smith: This takes us back to where we started, the search for silence and the difficulty of finding it in today’s world. The importance of finding it.  Fosse: I think you have to manage somehow to rest in yourself and to cope with your destiny as a human being. What we see not that far away, it’s around death. You need to get some kind of science into yourself, not to get afraid of dying. I think all this music and all the mess doing things all the time, you’re trying to escape that. People are running and trying to live as healthy as possible. They never feel bad.  Smith: Yes. You’ll never win that game.  Fosse: Try to get some peace and quiet.  Fosse: My writing, if you don’t like it or it doesn’t give you anything that’s fine. There’s nothing wrong with you. It’s okay. But I’m of course really happy that quite a lot of people find quite a lot in my writing to put it that way.  Smith: That’s lovely and permissive. Take me or leave me, but it’s fine either way.  Fosse: Yes. You’re not a bad human being if you don’t understand maths on a certain level or music on a certain level. If you don’t understand my writing, you simply don’t understand it. You don’t have that kind of air.  Smith: That’s a perfect end point. I think it’s particularly nice in today’s world where everybody is pushing and pushing for the STEM subjects and maths and everything to tell people it’s okay not to understand maths.  Fosse: It’s okay not to understand a lot and not to manage a lot. We can’t manage everything, any of us. We aren’t that clever and we shouldn’t try to be it either, I think.  Smith: Thank you very much.  Fosse: Thank you.  Brilliant: You just heard Nobel Prize Conversations. If you’d like to learn more about Jon Fosse, you can go to nobelprize.org where you’ll find a wealth of information about the prizes and the people behind the discoveries.  Nobel Prize Conversations is a podcast series with Adam Smith, a co-production of Filt and Nobel Prize Outreach. The producer for this episode was Karin Svensson. The editorial team also includes Andrew Hart, Olivia Lundqvist, and me, Clare Brilliant. Music by Epidemic sound. If you’re interested in more literary conversation, check out our episodes with 2021 literature laureate [Abdulrazak Gurnah](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2021/gurnah/podcast/), or 1986 laureate [Wole Soyinka](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1986/soyinka/podcast/). You can find previous seasons and conversations on Acast or wherever you listen to podcasts. Thanks for listening. |
| Telephone  interview | 0902=JF  Manisha Lalloo: Hey, is that Jon Fosse?  Jon Fosse: Yes, it’s me, yes.  ML: It’s so nice to speak to you, my name is Manisha, we are so happy to be in touch with you, congratulations!  JF: Thank you very much!  ML: I’d love to ask you, how are you feeling today, how are you feeling about the prize?  JF: I’m really happy about it, of course, but I was, even if I’ve been a kind of candidate – or how to put it – I’ve been used to be high on the betting list and so I didn’t expect to win the tenth year I was into the speculations. So, I was honestly surprised when I learned. When I was told I would get it this year.  ML: So, it came to you as quite a shock. How did you find out about it?  JF: It was Mats Malm who phoned.  ML: I understand you were driving at the time, is that correct?  JF: Yes, I was driving, yes. You always get nervous of course before such a decision is to be taken, it could be you, it might be you, and to drive alone it’s relaxing for me. So, on country roads, on peaceful roads. I’m now in the western part of Norway, so I was driving along the fjord close to where I live by now.  ML: Oh, that sounds beautiful, what a beautiful place, a picturesque place to receive such wonderful news.  JF: Yes, it was, and of course I was, I felt really happy. My first reaction was to feel happy and then I started to be surprised and then I even started to – can this be real? Feeling of lack of reality, how to put it. Then Mats Malm told me that if I didn’t believe it, I could watch the television or watch the announcement on my Mac or something.  ML: How have you spent your first day as a laureate, how has it been for you?  JF: My Norwegian publisher has tried to organise a kind of system if it happens, so I went to meet the press and a lot turned up, I don’t know how they knew it, but somehow they knew it, so it took quite a while to do these interviews. When I came back home, I had hundreds of emails. People are very kind to me; they write beautiful stories about my writing to me. And are honestly happy for me getting the prize. So, I tried to answer each and every one about it, and it’s an enormous response I think, and it’s difficult to cope with. Of course, to answer that many emails or messages. It takes quite a lot of time.  ML: I can imagine, but are some of these messages from readers? It sounds like it must be quite wonderful to get messages from readers.  JF: Yes, from readers, and yes I had a very touching email, it was from a Greek woman who told me that my play ‘Death Variations’, that was the reason she was still alive, otherwise she would have parted. It was very touching to read.  ML: It must be really incredible to hear such words from people and feel like your work has touched people in that way, and it’s had such a powerful impact on people’s lives.  JF: Yes, it’s a play about suicide, and she, of course, she must have been very close to committing suicide.  ML: Obviously, your output is very varied, you’ve written plays and poetries and novels. For somebody who is just being introduced to your work, would you recommend a particular piece that they start with?  JF: Yes, I think that one of my favourite novels, I think is *Morning and Night*, it’s translated into Swedish and English, and many languages, and it’s rather short. So, I guess I would suggest that.  ML: Is there something that you particularly think about when you write, or is there something that writing especially means to you, that it’s very important in your life, or you find it to be a good way to express your feelings or what you’re thinking about?  JF: No, I don’t try and express anything, and I often say it’s like I don’t try and express myself, I try to get away from myself by writing. To escape from myself, like drinking or whatever you do to get away from yourself; It’s not a way to express myself. But, when writing I feel that I enter a new, another universe, another place. I change place, I change mood. It’s the same with whatever I write, and then, to manage to write well, that’s the greatest happiness in life to me, when something is writing itself and, I know that I am writing well. You forget about time, you are completely into what you are writing, so in this state of being completely into the writing and the writing is writing itself, that’s a great thing for me.  ML: That sounds wonderful, do you have a message that you would give to aspiring writers, people who look up to you or think …?  JF: Yes, that I have. You must stick to yourself, you must listen to yourself, to your inner voice and not to others. When I, my first books were published, and my first play was produced, the reviews, they were almost really, really, bad. I decided not to listen to it, but to listen to myself – to what I knew was good writing.  ML: Thank you so much, I really appreciate you taking the time to call us and speak with us.  JF: Yes of course.  ML: What are you planning to do for the rest of your day, or the rest of this week?  JF: Tomorrow I have to drive from Bergen to Oslo, and my intention is at least to answer all of the people who have written to me, there are so many.  ML: I think that’s going to keep you busy for a while now.  JF: Yes, it’s already many [unclear].  ML: Thank you so much for chatting to us.  JF: Thank you!  ML: And congratulations again!  JF: Thank you and bye bye!  ML: Bye. |
| Interview |  |
| Q1 | How did your writing career start? |
|  | I hated school, to be honest with you, really. I had very, what do you call it? Grades, in Norwegian. I couldn’t write, the teachers said, but still I wrote for my own pleasure, to put it that way, from a very early age. I think the first I wrote was lyrics to songs I wrote. Then I wrote small poems and small stories, and it gave me a kind of happiness to do that. I felt a kind of peace, I was safe, I was by myself, I could express anything. ‘Express’, that’s not the right word, but at least write something. It was bad. I read some of these texts and it’s really bad writing. They’re very poor, but still, they gave me a kind of feeling of safety or something, and I thought that they came from a place inside me somewhere. I don’t know where it is, but it’s in my body somewhere, not in my brain, nothing I invented or something, and 50 years later, I’m still writing from this same secret place inside me. Such secret places, perhaps it’s better not to know too much about them or try to figure out exactly what it is, but it is. |
| Q2 | What inspired you to start writing? |
|  | I started out quite early, playing the guitar a lot, and even the violin I tried, but I managed badly, but the guitar a bit better. I even played in a boys band, and we became that good that we played at local dances. I think I was 14 years the first time, and to enter such a place you had to be 16, so I was too young for it all, of course. But I was very, very much into music in my teens or early teens, I would say. For reasons hard to explain, I stopped writing and I even stopped listening to music, and I started writing. I think somehow what I tried, when sitting there with an old typewriter, was to create the kind of mood or atmosphere or feel that you had when you were playing music. All these repetitions I’m famous or ill-famous for, they came, I guess, from music, from playing.  I both played in this band an electrical guitar, but I also learned to play classical guitar and small pieces of Bach etc, I could play. But then – all over. You ask me why, I think partly because I never became a good musician. I rehearsed and I rehearsed, and I rehearsed, but somehow I didn’t manage to get on a good level. Although others I could compare myself to, they were much better musicians than I was. Perhaps because of that, as simple as that, it might be. Then I ended up with the writing in place of playing. |
| Q3 | How would you describe Nynorsk, the language of your writing? |
|  | To me it’s very, very simple. When I first started to learn to write the language in the first grade in school, I started to learn the right Norwegian. That continued until I was … we called it ‘gymnasium’ in my days, the last grade before university or something. All my teachers were writing Nynorsk, all of us, so it was simply my language and is simply my language. I can do a lot in my life, like I’ve been saying, but I cannot leave that language, I’m not allowed to do that. And I don’t want it for sure, it’s as I said, that’s the sound, my dialect is very, very close to written Nynorsk actually. When I, for instance, hear the voice of my grandmother, I can well hear it in Nynorsk, but it’s quite impossible to hear it in Bokmål. That sounds as a quite different person, so basic experiences are, of course, very connected both to the landscape and to the sound of the landscape, to put it that way. It turned out to be Nynorsk was supposed to be a language for the whole of Norway. It ended up being mainly a language for the western part, Vestlandet, my country, as I often say.  The reason for that is partly because it resembles the most the dialect spoken in this western part of Norway. You have basic traits of spoken Norwegian that are common in Nynorsk, not common in Bokmål, so you can broaden this a lot if you want to, and there are good reasons for that. But the way people experience it, they experience it as their own language or a language close to the way they speak, mostly in the western part, and in the eastern part, close to the western part, in Telemark, for instance, where Tarjei Vesaas came from, just to mention one place. It’s of course a minority language, it’s written by some 10% only in Norway. Because of that, you get very connected to this language, because it’s a minority language, of course, and you try to defend it the best way you can. I remember as a student, I said in an interview, If someone is attacking my language, the only thing you can do is to knock or go. You cannot argue for it, it’s like arguing for your own existence in a way. Fight or leave. |
| Q4 | Do you think your prize motivation made sense? |
|  | Yes, completely. If it’s sayable, in a simple way, you just say it in a simple way, why write a poem or a novel? There’s something that cannot be said directly, and you have to turn to literature in a way to manage to say it. I think Jacques Derrida was quite right when he said that, What you cannot say, you should write. Or something close to that. I experienced that as a simple truth. You can write, manage to write very, very complex emotions or a way of experiencing life that’s impossible to speak. I guess that’s somehow the gift of a real author to be able to write in such a way. If you only report what’s out there or what you have experienced or something, everyone can do that in a way, if you only can write a sentence in this or that way. It’s also because of this dimension, I think that literature is really needed, and art in general, it’s saying something that cannot be said in any other way, and that’s why you do it. |
| Q5 | Why are silences and pauses important in your writing? |
|  | The best way perhaps to try to describe it, is to go to my plays. I’ve written a lot of plays and quite many novels also, and poems. I guess I published seven collections of poetry or something like that. But let’s go to one of my plays. When I wrote my first play, *Somebody Is Going to Come*, or *Someone Will Come* – there are different translations – what I experienced was when you wrote these lines you could just break off and write “pause” or in the middle of a dialogue you could use the word “pause” or if it was very short, I used also “short pause”. If it was a long silence in a way, I wrote “long pause” and to get the right rhythm, it’s all about rhythm, writing to me, basically. To get a rhythm right, you need these pauses, of course. With a change in the tempo, for instance, or when an emotion isn’t outspoken you will not say it directly, but you break off and there’s a pause, but everyone knows exactly what you’re trying, or going to say. I remember [Harold Pinter](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2005/pinter/facts/) was asked about his bosses, they always talk about lack of communication, and he said that, No, there’s not lack of communications in my plays, there’s too much communication.  To a large degree, I agree with Pinter, it isn’t needed to say, it’s already understood, quite often. But there are several subtle reasons for using a pause in a play, and in the end, if you sum it all up, what you hear is in a way silence. Yes, I would say. In my novels I guess I somehow tried to get to this kind of silence, by all the repetitions. They came from music, but the way they work in my novels, it’s quite similar, I think, to the pauses in my plays. But in the end, this silence I’m talking about, I always feel that there are two languages. It’s the language in which I write, and then there’s a silent language behind it. What it’s really all about is said by this silent language, in a way that it’s very hard to. You cannot say it in a few words, exactly what it’s saying, but you can still hear it, I would say. It’s just like a great painting. All the paintings I like of the same Mark Rothko. His paintings are talking to me a lot, a lot, a lot. They’re not, they’re completely mute. They say a lot. I have kept three dogs and they are just the same, they cannot say a word, but you have the feeling, and they know, they understand, it’s true, an extremely lot. They can sense a mood before it’s there.  One of my collections of poetry is called *Dog and Angel,* and I think art has to say, to speak in a similar way as a mute dog or as a mute picture, also writing, I would say. I think the words are so rough and they say so little in themself. Let’s say, “kjærlighet” as you say in Norwegian, “kärlek” in Swedish, that’s saying at least something, “love” in English is saying almost nothing. To describe, let’s say, love, you have to use quite other words, of course, to manage to say anything of any value about it. Love is working well in many practical situations, but not when it comes to the real thing. I think every writer is a kind of skeptic, you’re skeptical of the language. You know that a simple word put in a quite normal syntax, they’re saying in fact, rather not much really but it’s needed for the daily life and daily communication and so on. But when it comes to a deeper understanding of life, if you use it in the normal way, you don’t manage to say anything of any interest more than you can say, just by talking. |
| ID | 0903 |
| Biographical |  |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0903=AE  Annie Ernaux: Hello?  Claire Paetkau: Good day, or good evening rather. Am I speaking with Annie Ernaux?  AE: Yes, it’s me. Yes, good evening.  CP: Good evening. My name is Claire Paetkau. We have a tradition here every year to do short telephone interviews with the new laureates. Would you be available for a quick conversation?  AE: Right now?  CP: Yes, right now!  AE: Yes, of course. Of course.  CP: First of all, congratulations on your Nobel Prize. I understand that you just finished a press conference?  AE: Yes.  CP: May I ask, how are you feeling? I imagine it has been a long day.  AE: Yes, half the day, since I only learned that I received the prize around one o’clock. And the press conference went very well, because I think that I answered what it means for me to receive the prize, that it’s a great responsibility and at the same time an honour. But that precisely because of this honour I have more responsibilities regarding… regarding my engagement in writing.  CP: So, then where were you when you received the news if it was only at one o’clock?  AE: Listen, I was in the kitchen, where there is a radio. And I wanted to listen to the radio because I wanted to find out who had won the Nobel Prize. Voilà!  CP: And it was you!  AE: Yes it was me!  CP: What an exciting way to receive the news!  AE: Yes, it’s obviously very surprising. All the more because I was alone. It’s like… I will give you a comparison. You are in the desert and there is a call that is coming from the sky. That was sort of the feeling I had.  CP: What a fun story, anyway! You have a long bibliography. For someone just discovering your work, where to start?  AE: You know, I think my books don’t resemble each other. From the perspective of both the topics and content, and sometimes even from a writing perspective. So it’s a little bit difficult and it would be a different recommendation for young people and older people. But the book that would possibly bring together everyone would be *The Years*. Yes.  CP: OK! You mentioned young people. Do you have a message for young writers, especially for those who are writing in their native language?  AE: I think that when we write, what is really important is that we need to read a lot. Sometimes young people say, “Oh no, I don’t read… I write!” Well, no. That’s not possible. You need to read a lot. And the second message I would give them is not to strive to write well, but rather to write honestly. It’s not the same thing.  CP: Such good advice.  AE: Voilà!  CP: Thank you very much for taking the time to speak with me, we hope to see you in Stockholm in December.  AE: Yes!  CP: Thank you again, and all my congratulations!  AE: Thank you very much.  CP: Goodbye.  AE: Goodbye. |
| Interview |  |
| Q6 | Tell us about your childhood |
|  |  |
| Q7 | What was your favourite book a child? |
|  |  |
| Q8 | Would you say that reading is essential for writers? |
|  |  |
| Q5 | Does literature have a role in exploring issues like social justice and women’s rights? |
|  |  |
| Q9 | What’s the role of memory in you writing? |
|  |  |
| Q10 | Can we trust our memories? |
|  |  |
| Q11 | Do you have a message for your readers? |
|  |  |
| Q12 | What does writing mean to you personally? |
|  |  |
| Q13 | Do you continue to read? |
|  |  |
| Q14 | Tell us about the object you are donating to the Nobel Prize Museum |
|  |  |
| ID | 0904 |
| Biographical |  |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast | **“I don’t write about heroes, I write about small people”** Abdulrazak Gurnah’s books often touch on the fate of the refugee and effects of colonialism. In this conversation, conudcted in June 2022, he speaks about his interest in how people cope with traumas or problems in their lives – and are able to retrieve something from them. Gurnah also speaks about what literature gives the writer and the reader: ”We are learning something. We are told something we didn’t know before.” He also offers insights into his writing: how he explores thoughtful silences and lifts the small struggles that play out in otherwise mundane lives and settings.  Last but not least, Gurnah talks to us about moving to the UK from Zanzibar as a teenager, and how his home country Zanzibar went through a big change during the revolution in 1964.  The host of this podcast is nobelprize.org’s Adam Smith. |
| Telephone  interview | 0904=AG  Abdulrazak Gurnah: Hi.  Adm Smith: Hello, am I speaking with Abdulrazak Gurnah?  AG: Yes, you are, yeah.  AS: Hi, my name …  AG: I was just watching the announcement on my computer here, who are you please?  AS: My name is Adam Smith, I’m calling from the website of the Nobel Prize. Would you mind speaking, or do you want to watch the announcement? I don’t want to interrupt.  AG: Alright, how do you want to do this then, because there’s no point listening to reporters, because I’m sure I’ll be listening to them soon.  AS: You will indeed. I think that’s the message isn’t it, that your life is going to change for a short time now. There’s going to be a deluge. How do you feel about that prospect?  AG: I’m still taking it in. I suppose it’s inevitable, it’s such a, it’s such a big prize, but yes, it’s inevitable. Fine, okay, I’m sure I can take it in my stride.  AS: How did the news actually reach you?  AG: He rang, I’m sorry, what’s the name of the permanent secretary?  AS: Mats Malm.  AG: Yes. He just rang me about 10 minutes, 15 minutes ago, and I thought it was a prank. I really did. Because, you know, these things are usually floated for weeks beforehand, or sometimes months beforehand, about who will the, you know, who are the runners as it were, so it’s not something that was in my mind at all. I was just thinking ‘I wonder who’ll get it’.  AS: Indeed, indeed. And okay, you took some convincing. How did he convince you?  AG: Well, he kept talking quietly, and I then he told me about the website, the Swedish Academy website, and I said well ‘I’ll go and check in a minute, but just tell me some more’. He just kept talking calmly, and I suppose in the end I was still thinking ‘I’ll wait until I see it, or hear it’, and that’s what I came up here to do.  AS: Well, there it is. It’s real.  AG: Yes, indeed. Yes, indeed it is, yes.  AS: I just … the Nobel Prize …  AG: I’m sorry, but the calls are coming in.  AS: Of course they are, that’s why I tried to get you so quickly. I hope you don’t mind. If you could just stay with me for a couple of minutes it would be lovely.  AG: Can I just say something to this person?  AS: Of course you can, of course.  AG: Hi there, can I … you’ve just heard the news I guess? This is the Swedish Academy, that I’m talking to, call me back in 5 minutes, alright bye bye. Hi, are you still there? I think that was the BBC.  AS: Yeah, of course, they will want to talk to you, and everybody will want to talk to you. But, the citation speaks about the way that you deal with the ‘fate of refugees’ and the ‘gulf between cultures and continents’. It’s obviously a particular moment now – we’re in the middle of a refugee crisis. But can you just say how do you see the divisions between cultures? There are so many ways of characterising things.  AG: I don’t see that these divisions are either, you know, permanent or somehow insurmountable or anything like that. People, of course, have been moving all over the world. I think this is this phenomenon of particularly people from Africa coming to Europe is a relatively new one, but of course the other … Europeans streaming out into the world is nothing new. Centuries of that we’ve had. So I think the reason it’s so difficult for Europe to kind of, for a lot of people in Europe, for European states, to come to terms with it is perhaps a sort of … Well, to cut a long story short, a kind of miserliness, as if there isn’t enough to go around. When many of these people who come, come out of first need, and because quite frankly they have something to give. They don’t come empty handed. A lot of them are talented, energetic people, who have something to give. So that might be another way of thinking about it. You’re not just taking people in as if they’re, you know, poverty-stricken nothings, but, yeah, think of it as you’re first providing succour to people who are in need, but also people who can contribute something.  AS: Thank you very much indeed. And one more thing – the Nobel Prize every year links scientists and artists with this week of announcements. The scientists tend to describe their work as being play, as just the joy of exploring. Is that how you feel when you write?  AG: Well, I feel joy when I’ve finished! [Laughs] But, yes, a lot of it is obviously something that is compulsive, compelling, something that, you know, writers keep going for decades – you can’t be doing that if you hate it. But it is … I suppose it’s both the, the pleasure of making things, crafting, getting it right, but it’s also the pleasure of getting something across, of giving pleasure, of making a case, of persuading, and all of those kind of things.  AS: Thank you very much indeed. I must say you’re being remarkably lucid under fire from everybody trying to reach you at this moment, so thank you.  AG: Okay. Alright, thank you. Bye.  AS: I hope we’ll have the chance to speak more another time, but for the moment, congratulations and thank you.  AG: Well, thank you, thank you very much. Thank you.  AS: Good luck with the day.  AG: Bye, bye.  AS: Bye. |
| Interview |  |
| Q1 | Could you tell us about your childhood and where your passion for reading and writing came from? |
|  | I learned to have pleasure in reading simply because I love stories. At first when you’re a child of course the stories are told to you and, in the way that we grew up, children are entirely the responsibility of the women. We lived in a kind of extended family set up. So when I say the women I mean more than one – various aunts and whatever. It was really very nice sometimes to just sit nearby while they’re telling each other these stories or indeed sometimes including us. So it started like that. Then when you learn to read there are books – not very many at the time – I remember the Aesop’s tales for example, in translation of course in Swahili, being one of the earliest books that I was able to read at school. But that’s not the same thing as the reading that comes later, that is more or less sort of reading and rereading the same thing. Children it seems – I know this from my own children – can read the same book 20 times without tiring of it. So I think familiarity is also part of that pleasure of reading, but then later on curiosity takes over and reading becomes a very fulfilling exercise because you learn as well as enjoy. |
| Q7 | Was Aesop’s tales your favourite book as a child? |
|  | I don’t think Aesop’s tales was my favourite. It was I think my earliest, but I do remember the pictures because there were, of course for a child’s book, lots of illustrations. I do remember in that the picture of the fox leaping for the grapes – that has stayed in my mind forever. |
| Q9 | Do you think books that you read when you are young can have a big impression on you? |
|  | Yes. And also just simply some of the stories that you hear. You may not remember always the experience of reading, but some of the stories remain for a long time and even for a writer they become sources of places to go to and find out some more and you actually find when you reread a story – like Camaralzaman and Princess Badoura, which is one of those that I do remember and love – you find that in fact, when you go to an adult version of that story, it’s much, much more complicated than you had understood as a child. So there are layers in those stories that you read as a child, which then become possible sources of adventure, reading adventure I mean later on. |
| Q6 | What did you want to be when you were younger? Did you want to be a writer or did you want to be something completely different? |
|  | Writing was not really a career that was possible when I was growing up. I didn’t know anybody whose career was a writer, who was a professional writer. So it wasn’t something I aspired to do. I might just as well have aspired to be an astronaut or something like that. It just wasn’t something you knew anybody to be doing. Sometimes you hear children saying, I want to be a train driver or I want to be a computer programmer – but I don’t think I had anything quite like that. I think I was still for a long time open to what might lie ahead. I just enjoyed school and enjoyed learning and enjoyed all of those things. And I just kind of assumed that I’d be doing this for quite a while. Maybe that’s what I wanted to be, just a student. |
| Q6 | How did your upbringing shape you and the writer that you have become? |
|  | I didn’t know what or how my upbringing shaped me while I was going through it. I don’t suppose many people do unless they’re extremely unhappy at the time or something like that. I also don’t think I would have reflected on it quite so intensely if it hadn’t been for the fact that I was so far away from the place where I grew up. But I think one of the things I had to do in the process of coming to understand, or to coming to terms with being a stranger here in Britain was to think back to things like my upbringing, where I lived, the things we believed. So this is what I mean when I say I’m not sure if I would’ve thought quite so intensely about it. I think being away actually forces you to examine things, in greater detail, perhaps even more critically not just of the events and so on around you, but also of your own participation in that process of living. So I would say it shaped me very much, not in a bad way, not in a way that is destructive, but in a way that forced reflection. |
| Q11 | Do you find writing to be a good avenue to explore different issues and to be able to reflect on events that have happened in your life? Or do you just see it as something that is purely pleasurable? |
|  | I don’t see writing as purely fun. I do think that there is something necessary about it. This is what I talked about in my [Nobel Prize lecture](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2021/gurnah/lecture/). There are certain imperatives that came up as I began to think about things. And that’s how I started to write. But continuing to write is because you are faced every day with things that are also necessary to be talked about, to be inquired into. And I think for me, this is the drive. It’s to speak about what I see and to do so in a way that both helps me to understand better what it is that I see and also to disseminate, to tell others about it, if they happen to be interested.  I think writing is an important way of extending and understanding our vision to others which is not to say that this is something particularly perceptive or particularly informative. It could be just what we already know. Sometimes we read things and we share in the reflections of others, of the person who’s writing, and perhaps there is some illumination in it that helps us understand, but sometimes it’s just that it endorses things that we have ourselves understood, but not perhaps trusted. So there are various, very complex things happening both in the process of writing but also in the process of the reader engaging with the writing – and I speak as both a reader of course, as well as a writer. That is the pleasure and the fun of the writing process. That you’re not just writing, talking to yourself, but you’re talking to imaginary readers, although for me the imaginary reader is not very specific. You’re not just confiding something to your journal. I know that I will be speaking to people about this and therefore I speak about events in the world. It may be in the form of a story, but a story can be a vehicle for addressing issues as well as addressing injustices as well as indeed just addressing pain and love. |
| Q15 | How important is diversity in literature? |
|  | I suppose, in order to understand how other people live and what it is that motivates and energises and makes them happy and unhappy you have to know about other people. It’s really quite as simple as that. You have to know. And the best way to know about other people is to hear what they have to say and not to be ventriliquising other people’s lives and trying to explain people away. So in this respect writing from other places, or at least from other perspectives, which might be cultural, social, gender, is one of the most direct ways in which you can hear what other people are saying. |
| Q29 | Do you think literature is an important way of hearing other people’s voices and getting access to other people’s world and cultures? |
|  | Literature performs different functions of course. Literature also engages us because we take pleasure in it, a kind of complicated pleasure. It depends what you read, of course. But I think at its best literature does that as well as it brings news, tells you things or maybe challenges simplifications that you’ve lived happily with, makes things more difficult for you in that respect. So I see all of those complicated functions. To learn, to enjoy and perhaps also to be challenged, although, that depends on the degree to which you are open to challenges. People can be very difficult in resisting challenges. |
| Q16 | Where do you get your ideas from when you write? |
|  | The ideas about what to write about just present themselves to you. You don’t have to ache about it, but it seems to me, there are only a limited number of things that really engage a certain kind of writer, that is the writer who maybe writes more reflectively. I think there are things that probably keep returning. Things that are perhaps to do with particular experience, or anxieties that you still want to understand or keep talking about.  I find that when I’ve finished one novel I often think “but I didn’t talk about such and such.” Although it may not be possible to immediately do that, it becomes something at the back of the mind that when there is time, when I can, I will return to this because there’s this aspect that I haven’t done. And maybe I might, and maybe I might not, but it’s in this way that the ideas kind of turn around and percolate, and kind of hang around for a while. And then, it may be something you see, something you read that provides a happy impulse.  So when an idea begins to emerge like this, then you follow it up by reading some more about it, thinking some more about it, making some notes. So it isn’t just an idea comes and you think, oh I think that I will write about this, but it really takes a little bit of a while for it to rumble along before it becomes specific or concrete enough. |
| Q17 | For any aspiring writers, is there a particular piece of advice that you would give to them? |
|  | The best advice you can give a writer is just write. There is no simple way. There is no way in which you can say, if you stand on your head twice a day, that this will enable you to write. You just have to write and keep writing and don’t be discouraged and just keep writing. Now it could be you’re in the wrong business in which case sooner or later you’ll discover that. But you won’t discover that by querying yourself, you’ll only discover that by the full process of doing the writing. And then if that doesn’t work – you can’t persuade anybody at all to be interested in it – then could be that you’re in the wrong business. But even then I wouldn’t give up. I would still keep pressing on. |
| Q12 | What’s your favourite thing about writing? |
|  | Oh, I don’t know – when it’s finished! Writing is best when it’s complete, when it’s finished . The process itself has its pleasures. Of course now and then at the end of the day’s work, when you can get up and say, that’s all right, I did okay today, but there also many days when you get up and you think, what a load of rubbish! I’m going to have to go through all that again tomorrow. But I think the best moment in writing is when you think, yep, I think it’s done. |
| Q18 | What type of books do you like reading and who is your favourite author? |
|  | I have favorite authors rather than an author that I can name and these vary a little bit. If I look back 10 years ago, I don’t know who I would’ve said the writers were. Maybe one or two are still with me, but you move on. Recently the things that I’ve enjoyed reading are writers from Africa, like Maaza Mengiste, Yvonne Adhiambo Owuor. These are people who are doing brilliantly well I think, and in both of those cases, they’ve just published their second novels. So very early in their writing careers. But also I admire writers like [J.M. Coetzee](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2003/coetzee/facts/), Nuruddin Farah, Michael Ondaatje, I can name several. So it isn’t a matter of favourite. I’m open to all these brilliant writers and I read as many of them as time and chance allows – chance in the sense of you don’t always hear about writers or you hear about them but you don’t have time to read all of them, but there are many favourites. |
| Q19 | And what do you enjoy doing outside of writing? |
|  | Watching cricket, I enjoy watching cricket. I enjoy gardening. I enjoy cooking. I enjoy reading, listening to music. You see just an ordinary kind of thing that everybody does. |
| Q20 | How has life changed for you after being awarded this prize? |
|  | Well, the award of the prize was a great honour. I’m very proud of that honour. Because it is such a global event it means that a lot of people want to know about me, want to know me, want to speak to me. Also as a result of the prize many publishers in many different languages who hadn’t published any of my work before are now doing so. So they want their journalists to tell their readers about me. So I’ve been talking to a lot of people since the award of the prize and that really has taken up quite a lot of my time since then. So what has changed since the award of the prize? It’s difficult to assess exactly because I’m just talking all the time to people explaining things. What I do know is that it hasn’t really possible to do any writing during this time, but that’s fine because I know it’ll be like this for a while, but then at some point it’ll be possible to return and write again. |
| Q21 | We see that the Nobel Prize often inspires people. Who or what inspires you to write? |
|  | What inspires me to write, is to be able to speak truthfully about what I see and the things that concern me. So it’s not just my eyes are open and therefore, whatever strikes my eye I want to write about it, but there are these concerns about… for example I’m very interested in the way people can retrieve something from trauma, so I’m thinking not only of asylum seekers or refugees, but also of life, of the way people in life are able to get something out of mischance, out of traumatic events.  I’ve always been interested in the way families work, particularly the way both power and kindness go along together. Of course, most families love each other, but at the same time there are, what seem like power struggles going on within families. I’m interested in writing about that and the complexity of that and how out of kindness a kind of a sort of unkindness comes as well – requiring obedience that you don’t shame us by doing this, or by doing that. Particularly, I’m thinking of the way women are treated, in our culture anyway, and in many other cultures. Those are the kinds of things that make me want to write. Things that, as I say, my sense of this needs to be spoken about. I need to say something about this. And of course also the other thing that makes me want to write is to create something which is beautiful and pleasurable. |
| ID | 0905 |
| Biographical | I was born April 22, 1943 in New York City, where my parents were then living. I was their second child, but the first to survive. Three years later, after my sister was born, we moved to Woodmere, Long Island, a prosperous Jewish suburb on the south shore, known, like Great Neck on the north shore, for its excellent schools. These were, as far as I could judge, communities of displaced New Yorkers, mainly second and third generation. There was little sense, in such places, of Europe; certainly, there was very little sense of Hungary or Russia in my house. No language was spoken other than English, aside from my mother’s Wellesley French major French in ceremonious bursts and, less frequently, Japanese phrases she acquired when she and my father lived in Japan. My father was a businessman and a dreamer; his dreams took the form of inventions. He had, I was told, more than a hundred patents at his death. Together with his brother-in-law, he founded X-Acto, a company that adapted Japanese surgical instruments (my father’s area of expertise) to a knife meant for office and domestic use – also for the use of artists and architects. Much later, my sister was robbed with one outside a New York City bank. My mother was a housewife and celebrated cook, well-educated but without any particular sense of vocation. Nevertheless, she had the temperament and stamina and force of an empire builder.  I read very early. I read the stories that were read to me even earlier, the Greek myths, the Oz books. My father’s bedtime story for his daughters was the story of Joan of Arc, with the burning deleted. He also taught us to write books. We made up stories, which he transcribed for us on squares of paper that were folded to make pages, a certain number of words on each, leaving room for us to draw pictures. Somewhat later, but not much later, I found an anthology of poetry. Reading Blake and Shakespeare, I felt intensely that these were the people I wanted to be talking to. I wanted to be what they were. Later, there were music lessons, ballet lessons, art lessons.  There was a sense in the house that art was a noble calling. There was also a sense of the unlimited power of women (not yet actually affirmed in the world, but our household was, in its way, prophetic). Both my parents were born into matriarchies. My father’s family, new immigrants, consisted of five sisters and no brothers. The sisters were, many of them, actively political, radical for the time. My mother’s family had been American for several generations; my maternal aunts and my grandparents were bourgeois, the three sisters overshadowing their somewhat thwarted brother. I grew up with my cousins, two girls in each family; each family, each duo of daughters, had its own special characteristics. My mother, as the eldest daughter, tended to be lordly. Though she privately criticized us in the manner of the perfectionist ballet master, publicly she boasted, a fact unknown to me, but alienating to the cousins.  The summer I was seven and my sister was four and a half, we went to Paris. We lived there the whole of the summer, but for a week or so in Gstaad, where I had goats’ milk every morning, a strange food which I hated but pretended to like, resulting in larger and larger glasses. In Paris, we spent some afternoons sitting for our portraits in green square-necked dresses, but for the most part, we were at the convent school, theoretically learning French.  My sister and I were being raised according to the principles of a particular class at a particular time; parents protected their children from knowledge that might trouble their light-hearted and merry childhoods. I was never light-hearted and merry; rather, anxious and twitchy. Maybe it was thought that with enough protection I might still become light-hearted and merry, or maybe my parents were reluctant to admit that their older daughter was a very tense child. Or maybe they had, that summer, more pressing concerns.  The nuns had assured my mother they would not proselytize, but obviously the nuns obeyed a higher authority than my mother. And, strictly speaking, introducing young Jewish children to Jesus was not proselytizing. We were, one afternoon, taken to the chapel, just the two of us, with the kindly nun who spoke English (since I had steadfastly refused to learn French, and my sister had followed my example.) This is Jesus, the nun said, he loves little children. Now you must kneel and say a prayer. Young as we were, we had mastered two imperatives. We knew to obey the adult in charge, and we knew Jews did not bow down before statues. So it was clear to me in that moment (as it was to my sister) that there was no possibility in this situation of not doing wrong. I did not bow down. But I did not obey. I judged the more serious sin to be the moral sin, not the social sin.  Decades later, when I was in my late thirties, my sister called me. She had just learned at dinner with my parents that a few years before our trip to Paris, my father’s second oldest sister, a woman of intellectual distinction and modest political renown, had not died of heart failure, as we were told, but had in fact killed herself, leaving behind two small children. For several years afterward my father had apparently been sinking perilously into depression. Finally my mother insisted he consult a psychiatrist who recommended analysis; this my father refused. He told the doctor he was going to take his family to Paris and come back whole.  School was my world. I loved school. Home was complicated, playing with other children was complicated. School was easy. The rules were clear. And my teachers loved me, as I passionately loved them. Starting in grade school. They were emissaries from the world of Blake and Shakespeare. It seemed wonderful to know so clearly what was wanted. Obedience, in this context, was effortless, natural. I saw it as somehow collaborative, part of my dialogue with my teachers, and by extension with the great artists I hoped to follow. This was true in grade school and more intensely true in high school, especially with English teachers, and my Latin teacher. I did it all well. What I did not do well was the social world.  There was one place, during the difficult period of my adolescence, where I was not ostracized. Starting when I was about thirteen, I spent most summers in music camps. I was not a particularly gifted musician. I majored, as it was called, in drama. And though I was not a particularly gifted actress, I was a quick study; I could be counted on to know my lines. But in that summer world of driven and ambitious students, I was at ease; real friendships were made. I loved best a camp called Deerwood (which collapsed when its director died, revealing immense debt) on Saranac Lake, which became for me the model of all things great and true. Evenings, the camp’s most gifted trumpet player would play taps by the lake. Around us, the serene protective isolating mountains.  Woodmere was a different matter, darker and darker. I spent my afternoons in the public library, concealing the absence of a social life from my mother. My ambitions remained intense and steady. By the age of sixteen, I had finished my first book, or what I thought of as my first book, and sent it along to publishers with no timidity or sense of irony. It ended up in a box, but lines I wrote at thirteen and fifteen showed up much later, reconstituted slightly, in poems that survived. I read constantly. Oddly, I knew nothing of what was being written in that period, or even in the period slightly earlier. I read Keats and Dickinson, obsessively haunted by syntax. I read novels too, mainly British. I discovered Yeats. And I became, first inconspicuously, then dangerously, anorexic.  In the middle of my senior year of high school, after I had applied early to, and been admitted to, the first rank college of my choice, I was taken out of high school. I had begun psychoanalysis a month or so earlier; in its slow way, ultimately it saved me from the narrower and narrower worlds I constructed for myself, from the arid brevities of my poems at that time. Initially, of course, I was terrified. But the seven years I spent in analysis radically changed the course of my life. They made my life possible, really.  After a year or so, when I was physically strong enough, and liberated, to some degree, from the imprisoning rituals I invented to compensate for the loss of that sense of control anorexia provided, I began taking workshops in poetry at Columbia University’s School of General Studies. Two years with Leonie Adams, and many more than two with Stanley Kunitz, in whose class I wrote the poems that became my first book.  It was also during this period, when I was nineteen or twenty, that I had my first grand mal seizure, on Fifth Avenue, opposite the Metropolitan Museum of Art, on a beautiful October day. I had been walking, I suppose to the subway, after an appointment with my analyst. Epilepsy was not immediately diagnosed (a single seizure was not felt to be sufficient evidence); when it was, it took some time to fix on a medication, and on the correct dose.  I was fortunate in my teachers. Kunitz in particular did not condescend to his students; he seemed prepared to believe great work could be done in that classroom. I believed the same, or I hoped the same, but his endorsement of high ambition was fortifying.  *Firstborn*, begun when I was eighteen and finished when I was twenty-three, was rejected twenty-eight times and finally accepted by New American Library, which intended to make it the first book in its new poetry series. The series never happened. But I did see stacks of my books in New York bookstores for a while, looking oddly fraudulent amid the legitimate books.  And then the gift, the talent, the facility died. I stayed in New York for a few years. I doggedly persisted as I thought writers needed to do. I sat at my desk, surrounded by blank paper. The longer this went on the more rigorously I banished from my life every possible diversion or distraction.  I have written about this period elsewhere. At the end of something like two and a half years I had to face the fact that it was not given me to make art. I was twenty-seven, living, by then, in Provincetown, with one of a series of romantic attachments, following my very brief first marriage. Provincetown: a bad place to be confronting this despair.  In the spring of my last year there, I was invited to participate in a colloquium at Goddard College; other guests would include John Berryman, whom I revered. It was a moment, in the U.S., of a new curiosity about women poets, and my already repudiated first book was having, it seemed, an afterlife.  I took a bus, a series of buses, to Plainfield, Vermont. When I got off the bus, the clouds shifted a little. I had a profound sense that I was meant to live in this remote, rural village, in one of the coldest parts of the country, though I had thought of myself as a person who thrived in cities and needed warmth. But I realized, gradually, that I recognized the landscape; Plainfield was like Saranac, the calm mountains surrounding the protected valley. Ponds and rivers replaced the lake. I had found my way back, it seemed.  The festival lasted four days. At one of the parties after one of the readings, all of us enjoying ourselves immensely, one of my soon to be best friends urged me to come back to teach there. In my extreme naivete, I had no notion of the fact that drunken English teachers are not empowered to offer jobs to strangers. For me, it was an epiphany. If there was one thing I was sure poets shouldn’t do, it was teach. A waste of those vital resources we should channel into our work. In my previous life as a young poet, I’d have said no. But in my new life as a wandering desolate girl, I said yes. Why not, is what I thought. Then the four days were over, and I went back to Provincetown. This was, I imagine, May. But an actual job, abbreviated, provisional, materialized at the end of the summer, four days before the start of school. So I moved my never unpacked boxes, which had followed me from New York to Provincetown, to a rooming house where my new friends, now colleagues, had found me a room, a cross between a New England farmhouse and a bordello. And my spirit rested, if elation can also be experienced as rest.  Plainfield was indeed the place I believed it to be. But teaching was a miracle. The envy I thought I’d feel toward talented younger writers, I did not feel. Nor did I viciously and jealously offer them bad advice to suppress their gifts. What I felt was the old avidity to transform the inert poem with its single luminous line into something wholly memorable and distinctive. My mind was being used again. And then, amazingly, I started to write my own work, poems utterly different from the rigid performances of my first book.  I had noticed, as I labored over the structure of that first book, that I seemed to have forgotten how to write sentences. So I set myself a task: poems that were, ideally, built out of a single sentence, but in any case, built of complex sentences with long suspended clauses draped over several lines. I think my silence, my long sleep, was teaching me a new sound able to enact that assignment.  The year that followed, my first year in Vermont, was extraordinary. I was elated to be writing again, and excited by this new, much more original work. And I loved teaching. Moreover, it seemed probable teaching was something I could do, unlike my own writing, regardless of internal factors. And my heart was (yet again) engaged. I joined a workshop of local poets, stern, discriminating readers, and some of them, electrifying writers.  I discovered that I could teach one term elsewhere, when Goddard dried up, and make enough to live in Vermont the rest of the year. I moved out of the rooming house into a series of charming dilapidated apartments. At some point, when my second book was nearly done, I went with one of my best friends to see the famous local psychic.  She had an encouraging report. Great success, she said; she saw five books in my future. A magnificent fortune; I was writing very slowly; at one book per decade, five books would take me well into old age, at which point I could probably die serenely triumphant. This prediction came to have another message sometime later.  Meanwhile, I was pregnant. Unintentionally, as had happened before. But this time, I had a second book; I had, also, a profession. And I had a home. The baby’s father was very young. That he balked suited me; in Plainfield, Vermont in the early seventies, people were making these choices.  Noah was born in June; I was just thirty. Looking at him, I felt immediately the rashness of my decision; who was I to say a child needed only one parent? Especially if that parent was me, someone deeply preoccupied and, in most matters, impatient.  When I thought about having a child, I was also aware that my poems had begun to seem to me repetitious. I wrote love poems, and naturally I also wrote poems of loss. It was clear to me that unless my life contained more experience than my native cautiousness would naturally put in my path, I would be a lyric writer of no real range. I found myself a mother, inextricably involved with another person, at a time when I was, for various reasons, more open to bold experiment, to risk.  But the poor baby! At the typewriter, while he slept, I set myself a task. In this case, to eschew the moody nouns and luminous adjectives that gave my second book its otherworldly detachment. When Noah was just shy of two, I met the man I would marry.  Years passed. We bought a house in the country; the house burned down. We bought another house, back in the village. Books were written, a few prizes won. We made a small garden, then a bigger garden. I had a new task: to use contractions and questions. And I realized that contractions and questions specify the human voice; a quotidian world began to appear. The Delphic was gone; the definite article yielded to the indefinite article. And then there was a deep fissure with Stanley Kunitz over *Ararat*. Unpublishable, he said. This was my fifth book, my last according to the clairvoyant, a book from which all figurative language had been banished. Stanley was not pleased to be disagreed with.  Long periods of silence. After the disputed *Ararat*, a brutal punitive blankness. I cooked. Two years. I read garden catalogs and listened to *Don Giovanni*. The terrible judgment of the clairvoyant merged with my teacher’s dismissal, echoed through mainly scornful reviews. And then, *The Wild Iris*, written in a summer, putting to rest the prophecy.  I had the good fortune, if indeed it is good fortune, to write poems that accorded with the tastes of the period. So there were prizes. The Pulitzer. Later the Bollingen. Later still, the Stevens Prize, the gold medal from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Later still, the National Book Award, and from President Obama, the National Humanities Medal. And I learned that though the hope was that the book so anointed was alive, it was clear the author was not. The author was a prior self, not the person receiving the statue. So the prize, the book, became taunts: Look what you could do once. What can you do now?  I taught all over America, in the proliferating MFA programs that ignored my lack of formal education. North Carolina, Virginia, Cincinnati, Iowa City, New York. The multiple California Campuses: Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, UCLA. And then a term teaching inspired undergraduates at Williams College, a job that could actually incorporate itself into my life. With these undergraduates, I felt a thrill that never abated. And the temporary job became a renewable, and renewed, position.  Twenty years. The marriage flourished, the marriage ended. I moved to Cambridge — utterly unlikely, I would have said. I changed teaching positions. I left behind Williams, my other world, for the equally brilliant Yale undergraduates. A more manageable commute, a more compact work week. Amazingly, the intensity sustained itself.  What did not change were the terrible extended periods of silence, the anxiety. And, periodically, the elation of discovery, the strange embarking, the adventure that writing is, each poem a journey into unknown territory.  I continued to rely on music. Beginning with *The Wild Iris*, it seemed each book had a score; the music usually announced itself before the poems. Purcell, Mahler, Brahms. Sam Cooke. I continued to try to push myself grammatically, each such change elaborating itself into new material. I thought finally to write poems about making art, though in the main I detested poems about art. But it was, after all, the project on which I had spent my life.  A decade or so ago, my books began to be translated into other languages; each such book made me strangely happy. There was something elemental in these poems being attached to my name, though I couldn’t read them. Like a child’s dream of seeing her name on a book, a dream I had all my life. And there was even a prize from a country not my own. The Tranströmer Prize, named for a writer from whom I learned profoundly. And then the Nobel Prize.  I changed my wall calendar, Cats in the Sun*,* for a calendar with photographs of Sweden.  Always domestic life soothed me and teaching excited me, unnerved me. Always I liked the day to end among people.  Except when it is insanely easy, writing remains elusive. Always I am someone longing to be a poet, to make something never heard before, to be taken out of myself. That it happened at all is a wonder. |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0905=LG  Louise Glück: Hello?  Adam Smith: Good morning, my name is Adam Smith, calling from Nobelprize.org, am I speaking with Louise Glück?  LG: Yes, but are we being recorded because I really can’t do this.  AS: I promise it won’t be anything onerous. Would you mind if we recorded just two or three minutes?  LG: I don’t mind, but I really have to have some coffee and something right now … two minutes.  AS: You’re very kind. Thank you very much indeed. In that two minutes could I ask you what the award of the Nobel Prize means to you?  LG: I have no idea. My first thought was ‘I won’t have any friends’ because most of my friends are writers. But then I thought ‘no, that won’t happen’. It’s too new, you know … I don’t know really what it means. And I don’t know whether … I mean it’s a great honour, and then of course there are recipients I don’t admire, but then I think of the ones that I do, and some very recent. I think, practically, I wanted to buy another house, a house in Vermont – I have a condo in Cambridge – and I thought ‘well, I can buy a house now’. But mostly I am concerned for the preservation of daily life with people I love.  AS: It can be an intrusion, all this attention.  LG: It’s disruptive, the phone ringing all the time. It’s ringing now, squeaking into my ear.  AS: I fully understand, yes. For those who are unfamiliar with your work …  LG: Many!  AS: …would you recommend a place for them to start, something that’s most characteristic perhaps?  LG: There isn’t, because the books are very different, one from another. I would suggest that they not read my first book unless they want to feel contempt, but everything after that I think [is of some] interest. I like my recent work. I would say ‘Averno’ would be a place to start, or my last book ‘Faithful and Virtuous Night’.  AS: There’s so much focus at the moment on the value of lived experience, it comes up all the time. How important do you think lived experience is to be able to talk about events?  LG: Oh heavens. That’s too big, and it’s too early here – it’s barely seven o’clock. I’m sure there are things to say, and I’m sure I would have ideas. But…  AS: But it’s so much a feature of your own writing that I wondered whether you would, but we could talk about it another time.  LG: Is the two minutes over?  AS: It is, yes, you’ve suffered enough. I’m sorry. Thank you and congratulations again.  LG: Thank you. |
| Interview |  |
|  |  |
| ID | 0906 |
| Biographical | *Peter Handke did not submit a biography.* |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0906=PH  Peter Handke: Hello.  Adam Smith: Hello, my name is Adam Smith, calling from the website of the Nobel Prize, and I wondered if you’d mind speaking for just a couple of minutes?  PH: I’m so exhausted now. I can’t explain, I can’t explain it.  AS: I heard you speaking on the press conference, speaking to some people with cameras outside your house, I think? You said that the Prize maybe gave you a sense of freedom.  PH: Yes, yes, ja.  AS: Can you explain that?  PH: Ja, I can’t explain it. It was a sensation of freedom I’d never felt before.  AS: That’s very interesting.  PH: Yes, I can’t explain it. Mystical, huh? I think it was not my freedom, it was another freedom, of outside, I don’t know. Completely … freedom in an absurd way.  AS: It sounds as if the effect will take a long time to sink in.  PH: Yes, you are right, ja. Ja.  AS: The committee in their citation talk about the fact that you explore the periphery. Is that where you feel you exist?  PH: Everything is created to be annihilated. It was periphery a long time, and I think I’m … I feel well as a kind of explorer, of the periphery. It’s continuous, but nowadays I feel in my age I have to submit to a kind of metamorphosis I guess, like every writer has to do it, has to commit … has to live it in his life. There was no ideology of periphery. I feel … I felt it my place. And I wanted to tell this to other people.  AS: I suppose that you provide a sort of counterweight to the generally held view?  PH: Ja, this is my nature. But sometimes I live in a general way too – I’m like everyday people. But I’m not … I’m not … I don’t know … I can’t define myself. And I’m really happy about this, that I’m not able to make a definition of, even of my work.  AS: But neverthless people will ask you to all the time.  PH: Sure. I’m afraid, yes.  AS: You have been so productive, and you work in so many genres, you obviously really enjoy the process of writing? What is it that you enjoy most about it? What drives you to do so much?  PH: To dream … before I start to write, the dreaming about the book, about the voyage, about the expedition. And then, then sometimes at the end of the day when I’ve finished the day what I wrote comes back to me like a strange kind of sea. This is a very good feeling. Sometimes writing comes back like, like a *vague* [French: wave] of … *vague* of happiness. Sometimes, not always!  AS: Is that what you seek to achieve?  PH: Ja, Ja. To be just … to be just … but you can’t, you can’t order yourself to be just. But after sometimes you realise it was justice, it was just, what you did. After, after you did. Not, not during the processes, not during the action.  AS: Can you say which of your works has given you that feeling to the greatest extent?  PH: Ah … No, I can’t. Sometimes it’s weaker, sometimes … I don’t read my own books, but sometimes if there is a new edition I open it and then I feel this life of a writer was not so hopeless, not so bad.  AS: Do you look at it in the past tense, the life of the writer? Surely …  PH: No, I forget a lot of my sentences. Sometimes readers are telling me about what they read of my books and I don’t remember at all. I’m very astonished sometimes when they are … they make a quotation or citation, and I tell them it’s not … it’s not a game. I tell them it’s really … I don’t remember that I wrote this. I mean in another situation, in another context when I write … but I’m very clear in my head, and quiet. Never more quiet than when I’m writing. When I’m writing I feel … when I’m in the problem, I like problems … when I’m in a rhythmical way in the problem I see before me then I become quiet, so quiet, as I am at no time in everyday life. [Laughs] Excuse me.  AS: It’s very interesting to listen to you describe the process. Thank you so much for talking to me.  PH: Have a nice evening Adam.  AS: Thank you very much, a pleasure to speak to you.  PH: Goodbye, goodbye.  AS: Thank you. |
| Interview |  |
| Q1 | How does your writing process begin? |
|  |  |
| Q2 | What do you need in order to be creative? |
|  |  |
| Q22 | How do you deal with failure or writer’s block? |
|  |  |
| Q23 | How would you describe yourself as a writer? |
|  |  |
| Q45 | Did you agree with the initial assessment of your work as avant-garde? |
|  |  |
| Q25 | Has music influenced your literary work? |
|  |  |
| Q3 | What is it about language that you find so fascinating? |
|  |  |
| Q5 | What role does literature have in society? |
|  |  |
| Q21 | Which writers have most influenced your writing style? |
|  |  |
| Q30 | How do you see the interplay between filmmaking, art and writing? |
|  |  |
| Q27 | Tell us about your collaboration with Wim Wenders on ‘Wings of Desire’. |
|  |  |
| Q17 | What advice would you give to an aspiring writer? |
|  |  |
| Q44 | A reading from ‘Die Wiederholung’ (’Repetition’) by Peter Handke |
|  |  |
| ID | 0907 |
| Biographical | I’d like to write this autobiographical sketch in a concise, chronological way, based on the reliable passage of time and its usual markers – the years. Then I would see my life as a linear process, gradually accumulating knowledge and experience, even leading towards a goal of some kind. Or at least aiming for one. An alternative version of this approach would be a CV listing the places where I was educated and the academic results achieved. But I realised that if I had to approach my 58-year-old life in that way I’d never write more than a single page.  I have always held that writers don’t really have biographies, and that the best way to find out about them is to read their books. The reason why they don’t have biographies is not because nothing interesting ever happens in their lives, or because they’re people of a special kind whose lives take a different route from everybody else’s, but because writing takes up too much of a person’s inner time, and so in many cases there isn’t enough of it left for other activities. Attention that is focused on the inside doesn’t go hand in hand with a good memory, as Nabokov pointed out. Writers don’t have biographies because their minds are used to inventing stories, making them up, fictionalising and at the same time neglecting things that are real. And, seen from the outside, their lives are bound to look boring, just sitting at a desk for hours, sometimes days on end. If I were to write my autobiography honestly, I’d have to include the life stories of characters from my books, and the life stories described in them are part of me as well.  So in this short autobiographical sketch I shall focus instead on my own development and inquiries, trusting a memory that in my case is very capricious. I don’t know why, but I can’t remember any of the “major” events, such as my first day at primary school, my sister’s birth when I was five, or moving house; I do have a foggy memory of my high-school graduation exams, but defending my master’s thesis has gone clean out of my head. I can’t remember being accepted for university or receiving my college diploma.  But I well remember a freezing winter afternoon, for instance, when dusk was already falling, I was taking off my skates under a large sky that was just switching on its stars, and when the steam coming out of my mouth formed speech bubbles, it made me feel like a character in a cosmic cartoon.  And I remember when this picture was taken.  I know what I was thinking – I wanted to express as clearly as I could that it’s better to be together than apart – an extremely important discovery at that age, when we’re desperately afraid of being separated from what we love. Later on, I made it into a general belief that has been with me throughout my creative life – that our task is to synthesise and consolidate the world, looking for connections, both overt and hidden, and building an image of the world as a complex whole full of mutual relations.  I was the first of two children born to a pair of teachers, who as a young married couple full of energy and enthusiasm came to the so-called Recovered Territories (the part of western Poland that before the Second World War belonged to the German Reich, but was assigned to Poland after it under the terms of the treaty signed at Yalta as compensation for the territory it had lost to the east, which is now part of Ukraine). My parents had a strong social commitment, and threw themselves into their work at the people’s university, which educated young people from the countryside and small towns. The school, grandly named “The People’s University”, was located in a beautiful old hunting manor adapted to suit its needs. It was on the edge of the village, behind some fish ponds, on a flood plain near the river Oder, which meant that on a fairly regular basis the river overflowed, coming all the way to the park, and throughout my life I’ve had dreams about floods. The park was large and old, and there was an oak forest and the marshes of the Old Oder, meandering channels separated from the main course of the river, as exotic and mysterious as the drainage basin of the Amazon. To this day, the fickle Oder is one of Europe’s few remaining wild rivers.Recently I read somewhere that in the first few decades of our lives our tissues, and in particular our bones and teeth, absorb from the surrounding environment a unique cocktail of chemical elements typical of the given place. For this reason, after hundreds and thousands of years, archaeologists can tell where a person was from, where he grew up. I’m sure that in my case they’ll be able to recognise the unique mixture exclusive to that place – of a big, flat space by a river, poor, sandy soil and the large oak woods and pine forests of the Oder drainage basin, all of which, transformed into chemistry, have recorded themselves in my body. I think that should be an important inducement for reflection on one’s own identity. Maybe in a topsy-turvy world we should take this into consideration too – we live in the drainage basins of rivers, and as creatures who consist of water to a very large degree, we belong to those rivers. So my first identity is as a “daughter of the Oder”.  From today’s perspective, many people might see the 1960s as ancient history. It really was another world. In Poland there was no public television yet. I remember watching a television programme for the first time at the age of six. So I can say that I belong to a generation of people who were not shaped by television from early childhood. Telephones were rare, and were operated by turning a crank handle. You placed a call to the number you wanted via the exchange, and waited for your connection. There were hardly any private cars, which meant that every single journey, even a trip to the nearest town, was a major expedition. We lived on a rather unvaried diet of locally produced food. I had no idea what a banana tasted like. Lemons were a luxury.  I was an untroublesome child who looked after herself. For a short time I went to the village kindergarten, but I didn’t feel too good there. My strongest memory of the place is of being made to have a lie-down in the middle of the day and of sitting in a tree when I didn’t want to play with the other children. But I did have a lot of freedom, which these days would be unimaginable. I used to spend a lot of time at the University with my parents, the teachers and pupils. I used to go to the lessons my parents taught, and I took part in everything that went on at the school – choir practice and dance group rehearsals, stage shows, outings, evening assemblies, both the entertainments and the work. Now I think the freedom I had as a child was a great gift that made me into someone who’s curious about everything, constantly in search of something. That said, I also love being on my own, and have always felt all right in my own company.  I think the only word I can use to describe my fondness for exploring is vagrancy. Before I ever went to school I used to spend a great deal of time on walks, investigating the enormous park, its ponds, paths, hidden nooks and passages; I also used to go to the nearby village to observe the people, their way of life, the objects they had and their animals. I used to head off to the banks of the Oder too; instinctively aware of its power and danger, I always kept my distance from its unpredictable current. This childhood vagrancy has stayed with me all my life, and whenever I find myself in a new place, I like to have a reconnoitre, to get to know the short-cuts, the relative location of the buildings and the major landmarks. I also think the best way to explore a city is to set off on an unplanned walk, letting pure whim and fancy be your guide as you wander the streets. As an adult traveller I have spent days at a time touring great cities in this way – London, Moscow and New York – in comfortable shoes and with a thermos in my backpack, walking the length and breadth of the place, and only using the subway as a last resort.  I taught myself to read, I’m not sure exactly when, as if it were something as natural as walking. I have often wondered whether the ability to read is built into our brains as a potential skill, or whether perhaps we inherit it from our ancestors who learned to read during their lives, in which instance I suspect it would only go a few generations back. In my case this ability was definitely to do with the fact that I was brought up among books – my dad ran the school library, and I dug around in them from early childhood. They weren’t books for children at all. One of my favourite early books was a collection of partisan songs. I knew how to sing them, so reading with understanding came to me naturally and easily. Among the hundreds of volumes eagerly borrowed by the pupils there were also art books and encyclopaedias. I can boldly say that encyclopaedias were my favourite literary genre throughout my childhood – my first “constellation” reading matter.  I remember discovering fiction. In about the ninth year of my life I read a popular edition of Greek mythology and it occupied my thoughts for the next two or three years, during which I explored the topic as thoroughly as I possibly could in a world where the enthusiastic reader was confined to the books they had at home or to what they could get at the local school or public libraries. I knew everything about Greek mythology, I knew all the characters and the complicated relationships between them in several versions, depending on who was telling them.  It even became a sort of obsession – later on I learned to exploit this particular state of being mentally possessed by an idea in my writing. Once I had discovered the Greeks, the time came for mythology from other cultures. I was especially fascinated by any kind of cosmogony, and by stories about the creation of the world, every narrative about how the cosmos was founded. I started to notice that some of the stories had similarities and overlapped, while others were extravagant and individual.  Apparently, an interest in mythology is part of a child’s psychological development, acting as a sort of warp thread, a scaffolding for the world, onto which individual knowledge and experience is then attached. It is a metaphorical representation of the forces in action, and it illustrates the dependencies and connections that exist between them. Nowadays myths still have an effect on children, but we find them in a slightly different place – in games and fantasy literature in comics and serials.  There has to be a paragraph in this sketch about the public library, an institution to which I owe a great deal. One of the positive aspects of Poland’s post-war political system was the nationwide availability of libraries. Sometimes that gets forgotten amid the scathing criticism of communism, and yet every village had its own, quite well-stocked library. At these modest institutions, usually run by elderly ladies, you could always sit down and read on the spot, and at some of them you were treated to tea or coffee. There were also mobile libraries, vehicles that regularly supplied books for people living at a distance from the town centre.  The books we had at home soon stopped being enough for me (especially as I was just as compulsive a reader as Kien in [Canetti](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1981/canetti/facts/)’s *Auto-da-Fé* – a whole bookcase at a time, from left to right), and the habit of looking for the local library wherever I happened to be remained with me until the days of the Internet, since when I carry books about with me in my phone and my laptop.  I was very fond of fairy tales and fables. What I loved best of all were anthologies of fairy tales from various cultures, which were readily published at the time, because the socialist regime believed implicitly in internationalism and the community of all nations. These meticulously published, beautifully illustrated volumes often had a truly artistic, unpretentious graphic design, to which today’s Disney-style kitsch cannot hold a candle. These folk tales fascinated me – generally not just invented for children, they described their worlds with tenderness, and at the same time with all the unpredictability of a free, unrestricted imagination. I had two favourite volumes – one was a collection of Andersen’s fairy tales with fabulous illustrations by Marcin Szancer, and the other contained legends and tales from the Western Lands. Now I am aware of the strength of the second of these books as propaganda, forcibly polonising the history of this part of the country, but at the time I wasn’t at all concerned about its political undertones, and I was thrilled by the stories, which were about a geography that was familiar to me and that I regarded as my own.  This mind-forming phase of my early childhood ended when our whole family moved to a small town in the south of Poland, where my parents had new jobs as teachers at a regular school. Here I developed an interest in science. I was drawn to astronomy, cosmology, physics, everything that went beyond the ordinary, everyday world and crossed the borders of the here and now. What was the origin of the cosmos? Does time flow in the same way everywhere? Are the stars eternal? How large is the cosmos? Is time travel possible? That was when I discovered science fiction, starting with some bright but intriguing stories by Sergei Snegov and some other Russian authors, who in those days were readily published in Poland, right up to Stanisław Lem, and later Philip K. Dick. I can say that I read sci-fi for the next ten years.  I started writing my first novel (which I never finished) at the age of twelve. It was about a family of wizards with lots of children, who kept moving from place to place and could never put down roots anywhere. Not a bad idea, is it? I think this was when I discovered what great satisfaction there is to be had from writing and making up stories. I drew maps of the places and portraits of the characters. I created a world.  From then on I regularly wrote short pieces of fiction, mini-stories, little images and insights. I had the occasional brush with poetry, but it never really attracted me. There was only one poet whose work I read obsessively, and who really did a lot to make me learn English – [T.S. Eliot](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1948/eliot/facts/). For a long time I carried a bilingual volume of his poetry about with me, pasting every possible translation into it. I sent my bits of fiction to a young people’s literary magazine, where they were published under a pseudonym. I remember the extraordinary sense of power I felt at seeing my words in print.  By my final years at primary school I had realised that literature was more than just an ordinary pleasure. I could tell that reading opened entirely different worlds before me, allowing me to know and experience the lives of people whom I would never have the chance to meet or see with my own eyes. They became just as real to me as the people I met in my own environment. By reading I was changing my habits, acting out other existences and endlessly experimenting with my own identity. My mum can remember the time I read a novel about Eskimos and then insisted on having dried meat. Travelling in time and space was astonishingly easy – I just had to lie down on the rug or the sofa in the living room and then set off down the paths of the printed pages, to come upon another me in there, a different version of my own self.  Every year my younger sister and I were sent to my mother’s parents for a holiday in the countryside. Our grandparents lived in central Poland, where they had a lovely wooden house, part of which was rented out to holidaymakers, because there was a riverside bathing beach nearby and some huge pine forests. Here I discovered the stocks of the village library, where all the books were beautifully covered with grey paper, and thanks to some pre-determined distribution list, here you could borrow all the classics of American literature. For me those annual holidays were synonymous with a sweet and happy life entirely absorbed by reading, swimming and picking mushrooms, which to this day is my idea of paradise. What more could you want?  My grandparents, and especially my grandmother, let me in on the past, by telling me, their oldest grandchild, what had happened in the area in the past, when she was a little girl, and earlier than that as well, before she was born. Both my grandparents’ house and my aunt’s were full of knick-knacks, old photographs and souvenirs. There were some huge lime trees growing along a road known as the highway that had a longer memory of the local history than the people did. Every spot, every crossroads had its own story here. Soon, like a medium, I had soaked up all these stories, and I carried them inside me for ages, until I finally managed to get them out and turn them into a book – that was *Primeval and Other Times.* Perhaps at this point I should explain why the fact that this place was marked by memory and signs had such a profound effect on me. It’s because I was brought up in an area where the local cultural continuity had been cut off after the Second World War. Forced to leave, the Germans took their meanings, associations, mythology and stories with them. We were left with a blank space to fill in. As a child I was extremely surprised the first time I saw Polish gravestones in my grandparents’ village, because I had always thought the German language, especially inscribed in Gothic letters, was the special language of the dead, only used in graveyards the world over.  By the time I was at high school I was regularly reading literary magazines, and had become interested in psychology, other cultures and religions. At the same time I suddenly became fascinated by biology – on the scale of both evolution and the structure of cells, on a macro and a micro level. I came close to choosing biology for my university studies, and perhaps if I had my life would have turned out differently. But then who knows? Writing was always there, hiding behind every one of my various fascinations and hobbies. I would study the phenomenon of mitochondria, and then have no trouble returning to [Faulkner](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1949/faulkner/facts/) or Cortázar. This was the time of my greatest literary discoveries and my most intensive literary endeavours. Never since have I read as much as I did in my four years at high school. But when the time came to choose my university studies, I felt that I should take a different path, rather than opt for literature.  My college days coincided with a rather gloomy period in my country’s history. I moved to Warsaw to go to university in the memorable August of 1980, when all Poland was on strike against the corrupt communist authorities, who were powerless to deal with the crisis. After more than a year of social unrest and major food shortages, the communists declared martial law, interned the opposition, closed the universities and fired at the striking miners. It was a difficult time for all of us. It was hard for a young woman from the provinces to find her mental equilibrium in a city that was being patrolled by the militia and the army non-stop, with a curfew in place and extreme shortages of everything necessary for life. By then I was working with patients as a volunteer, and I could see how badly the situation was affecting them, the weakest element in society, people who were lost and unwell, who couldn’t cope with the tough, ruthless demands of life at a time of crisis and lawlessness. I thought these people needed my help more than I needed to write. I saw it all as a vast sea of blameless misfortune, a cosmos of psychiatric hospitals entirely detached from the rest of the world. But it was also a time of great political activity. During the university strike I read the whole of Cortázar. During martial law it was Philip K. Dick’s *Ubik* that kept me company, and perhaps no other reading matter could have been better suited to the cruel, absurd reality in which I was living. All this had a major influence on me, and for some time I dropped the whole idea of writing.  My work with the patients changed me entirely, and for a while I moved away from thinking about literature and writing. By then I was already fascinated by Freud and by psychoanalysis in general; it was really thanks to his book, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* that I chose psychology as a topic for my studies, without entirely realising that in a communist country we wouldn’t be able to take up psychoanalysis.  Now I think that a key factor for my intellectual formation was the discovery of what in psychoanalysis is called the “as if” mode. Psychoanalytical theories offer us a particular way of interpreting the world, they create a language for describing it and build an internally cohesive vision. At the same time, we cannot expect them to provide experimental confirmation of the existence of e.g. the ego, the id and the superego. These are constructs that exist “as if” they were real. And here we are in the domain of myths, legends and fairy-tales. It is the same kingdom as the one occupied by mythological and literary characters, who are apparently not real, but who last for a much longer time than people, and their strange existence continues to exert a real influence on the living. This is where ideas and narratives, concepts and theories are located.  Today I can say that studying psychology and coming into contact with psychotherapy supplied me with the belief that we live in a world where many points of view co-exist. This sort of relativism shows the world as a complex, multi-layered story that, seen from various viewpoints, seems infinitely rich and is a challenge for our intellect and our psyche. If there is such a thing as an initiation into writing, I think that in my case it was to do with a minor, but essential insight – the reality in which we live as biological and psychological creatures can be constantly re-interpreted in new ways. In my third year at university I chose to specialise in clinical psychology.  After college I felt I had nothing left to do in Warsaw, a city I had never liked, and that I found artificial and unfriendly. So once I had decided to work in psychiatry, I returned to the remote provinces of Lower Silesia. I settled in Wałbrzych, a lovely town that had been ruined by industry, and that before the war was called Waldenburg. Here I got married to another psychologist and had a son. At the same time, I was honing my professional skills, and after a while I timidly went back to writing. In this period I plumbed the depths of psychology, including Jung, who kept me company for a long time, Eliade, Neumann and Hillman. Now I think I devoted myself to my work far too intensely; quite early on I reached professional burn-out, and perhaps a sense of the hopelessness of what I was doing. I took an extended break and went away for several months to London, which turned out to be a great inspiration and a source of new energy. I came home from London with several literary texts, a head full of new ideas and a suitcase full of books – mainly about feminism (there I had discovered the wonderful feminist bookshop, Silver Moon) and various oddities that greatly interested me at the time. A year after my return I had written my first novel and two or three short stories.  It took a long time to find a publisher for my first novel, *The Journey of the People of the Book.* It was a time of total market transformation in Poland – the socialist economy was being entirely replaced by the new, capitalist free-market economy, so there was chaos; the large state publishing houses were collapsing, while others that until recently had been illegal were emerging from the underground. The opening up of the book market gave rise to a tidal wave of translations from English – everything that couldn’t have been published until then suddenly appeared on sale, including crime fiction, thrillers and horror stories. All these were on display in the bookshops, in glaringly colourful covers. A writer (and especially a female one) with a Polish name had virtually no chance of breaking through this tsunami. There was probably no harder time to publish one’s first novel, and worse yet, a fantastical, philosophical tale about the limits of human perception. But it was at a small, until recently underground publishing house that I found support for my book, which in those days might have seemed a complete oddity.  Working on this simple little book taught me a lot – not just how to tell stories, and how to create characters and dialogue, but also how to edit the text and how to do the research. The book finally came out almost three years later, in 1993, and won a prize for the best debut, awarded by the Polish Book Publishers Association. That was probably why I didn’t have to look hard for the next publisher – my second book was accepted by the prestigious state publishing house, PWN (which no longer exists). After the success of my third novel, *Primeval and Other Times*, which was shortlisted for Poland’s most important literary prize, the Nike, I realised that from now on writing was going to be all I did, although for ages I went on regarding it as a bit of a shameful hobby, and it was a long time before I could admit to myself that it had actually become my profession. I remember the day at an airport when I had to fill in an immigration form, and I stood there for ages with my pen hovering over the box marked “Profession”, not knowing how to fill it in. Finally I plucked up the courage to put: “Writer”.  A fact I consider important to my biography is that I bought an old house in Kłodzko Valley, where I gradually made myself at home. Going deep into nature, but also into the cultural realm of Kłodzko Valley inspired me to look at my writing, and at life in general, in a different way. Here my interest in ecology intensified. The books that resulted marked the start of my first literary self-reflection, giving thought to a style of my own, to the pitfalls of linear story-telling, to ways of creating characters, and to a panoptic perspective. *House of Day, House of Night,* which then came into being, has had an evident influence on all my later work. My short stories were written in the same spirit. These books were about people’s attempts to put down roots in particular places, traditions or culture as a sustained effort that’s more or less doomed to failure, and they showed how hard or even impossible it is, because of the contradictory forces that do battle inside us – a sense of striving for security and stability, struggling against an uncontrollable, nomadic curiosity about the world.  The turn of the centuries was a period of intensive travel, during which the idea of a novel about travelling occurred to me, a constellation work to describe the atavistic nomadic nature that lies deeply hidden inside us. I owe a lot to those journeys, and regard them as a special sort of university. The most intense and important trips were the ones I took alone, when I had to deal with culture shock, ignorance of the language, and homesickness. The result of them was *Flights* – a very important book for me, in which I applied all my literary intuition, and which I called a “constellation novel”. It was an important time for me for personal reasons too. My relationship came to an end, and I moved house, but it never occurred to me to give up writing. In any case, I didn’t really know how to do anything else. Nor did it occur to me to emigrate, though I had often lived abroad for a longer or shorter time.  It’s hard to say how many years it took me to prepare to write *The Books of Jacob.* The history of Jacob Frank wasn’t very well known, so I had to do a vast amount of research, which stretched over several years, like regular academic studies. It also included two international journeys, during which I went from place to place in the footsteps of the historical characters who feature in the book. And it also meant hours on end slogging over documents, leafing through history books and patiently collecting details and local colour.  The rest is boring. I sit and write. When I’m not writing, I’m gathering material, exploring topics, coincidences and peculiarities. I still read a great deal, whatever happens to come my way. And I learn a lot from the cinema – these days I think it’s the cinema that wears the story-telling crown, and we writers can observe plenty of good dénouements there.  For the past fifteen years or so I’ve been living in Wrocław and in Kłodzko Valley. I don’t travel as often as in the past. As time goes by I’m becoming more settled and more introverted. I don’t need so much stimulation from the outside any more. I have a small family: my husband, my son, my sister and my mum. There’s also my old dog, Nina, who has been with us for well over ten years through various moves, and who has patiently adapted to each new home.  I’ve always been aware that as a writer I belong, like it or not, to the great land that is Central Europe (though there are many people who doubt whether such a thing really exists). All I know is that it’s the space between the West and the East, the North and the South. Time flows differently here, not in a linear way, but by turning circles, although nobody ever learns the lessons of history. Everything here seems fluid and sketchy – the borders wander, and so do the nations, the language influences shift, and views and ideas mix as in a melting pot. It’s a place where things bud and come into being, but afterwards the seeds always go off into the world and gather strength somewhere else. It’s a crater which pours out lava in the form of wave after wave of migrants who power Western Europe, and above all the New World. I’ve always felt myself to be part of this land, and as proof I’m happy to offer the fact that in the course of her life my grandmother, who had the same name as me, had four different passports.  I hope that one day I’ll manage to write about the mixed population that lives here, including its migrations and its eternal sense of instability. I am consciously trying to refer to this indescribable culture in what and how I write. This is not the place to go into digressions on the topic of this “Centreworld”, so all I shall say is that here we have leanings towards the grotesque and towards gentle surrealism, we’re drawn towards the uncanny and we believe in the power of the word, the power of language. A huge proportion of the population writes poetry. Here any form of realism seems suspect, and any kind of permanence seems temporary. It’s a good place to write. And a good language – Polish can be difficult to learn, but thanks to its anarchic nature and a sort of wonderful lack of precision it offers a huge sense of freedom.  I have ideas for several more books, and am now working on two of them. Writing continues to give me great pleasure. ***Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones*** |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0907=OT  Olga Tokarczuk: Hello, Olga Tokarczuk speaking.  Adam Smith: Oh hello, my name is Adam Smith. I’m speaking from Nobelprize.org, the website of the Nobel Prize. Many congratulations on the award of the Nobel Prize.  OT: Thank you so much. I am in the car still and I cannot, you know, really drive, and I have to be in the evening in Bielefeld.  AS: So, how did you hear the news?  OT: Funny situation because I am, as I told you, on the road. We are driving in Germany, so they called me from Nobel Academy just 15 minutes before and … and then I was so surprised, and I’m still very surprised. And I cannot find out, you know … the right words, how to express, and … which is very new for me, that there are thousands of telephones calls and texts. So I would like to reach a stable place somewhere, a hotel or whatever, and, yeah, just to take my time to … for reaction.  AS: Of course, no, being caught on the side of the road is hardly the most convenient thing.  OT: Yeah, yeah.  AS: In the citation, the Swedish Academy talk about ‘the crossing of boundaries as a form of life’, and that seems to apply particularly to you at this precise moment.  OT: Yeah, very literally, because I’m on the way, yeah.  AS: You sound very happy though.  OT: Yeah, I’m very happy. Of course I’m very happy, and I am proud that I am with [Peter Handke](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2019/handke/facts/), and that we, both of us, we are from central Europe. It’s really very meaningful for me, this Nobel Prize is going to central Europe. I’m really, really very proud.  AS: Can I just ask you, what is it that you think that makes the writing of central Europe different to, for instance, the west of Europe?  OT: Oh, this is a long subject. But I think just right now we have a problem in central Europe with democracy. We are trying to find out our own way to … how to manage with those problems. And I think that such a prize, literary prize, in a way will give us a kind of optimism that we have something to say to the world, and that we are still active, and we still have an ability to express ourselves, and we have something profound to tell to the world. So I hope so, so it’s really very special for me. And I’m also very proud that we, with Peter Handke, that I am, as the winner from 2018, I am the first writer awarded by this new Nobel Prize academy after this crisis. So it’s also very meaningful for me. Thank you so much.  AS: It’s a pleasure. We look forward to seeing you in Stockholm in December. Thank you very much indeed.  OT: Thank you, bye bye.  AS: Bye bye. |
| Interview |  |
| Q21 | Your parents were both teachers. How did that influence you? |
|  | It was really a very good beginning for a writer. The books were very present in our house. I saw from the beginning how my parents are discussing books, reading books, buying books and I could spend a lot of time with my father in the library which I remember very good. What I remember very good, and like here we have a shelf and the most interesting books for me were always close to the ground. So, I explored those shelfs very intensively and I think that was the way I really discovered books as a world, as an alternative world. Of course, I think in the beginning, were fairy tales many of them and I do still like fairy tales very much. Even recently I bought a new volume of *Brothers Grimm’s fairy tales* and they still, I read them as a kind of poetry, but later I think that Jules Verne affected me very much. So, I started to think in this way – crossing borders, thinking about other countries and other cultures, travelling – so that was the very strong idea for me. |
| Q6 | Did you enjoy school? |
|  | I liked my school but rather from social reasons because of my friends and the time spending together. But I was a type of child who rather preferred self-education, so I had many hobbies, many fascinating subjects like astronomy for instance. So, I really spent a lot of time studying for my pleasure. I remember very well my teacher from secondary school. She was biologist and she taught us biology and she opened my eyes for this beautiful aspect of physical existence of every living being. |
| Q6 | What did you want to be when you were younger? |
|  | Of course, as a very young child, I would be an actress like every single girl I think, but later I excepted that the progress of science will be quicker, I think and then I expected that it will be possible to be a physician, but a cosmic physician, so I was thinking about my future profession as taking part in cosmic, oh god, how to say, expedition. So, I remember myself dreaming about to be a part of a cosmic expedition and work in science checking how the human body is relating with cosmic space, it was a very fantastic idea. Of course, I think that I overestimated the time of development of science. Now I can realise that this is the same subject in my books – thank you for this question. |
| Q25 | How has your training as a psychologist affected the way you tell stories? |
|  | I think that it was a good choice to study psychology. Of course, I was temptated by my mother to study literature even if she knew from the beginning that I wanted to write, but psychology taught me very many important things. I think the one, the most important one that there is every single human being is the source of a novel, it’s a source of many stories. So, we are living in a world that like, more or less, five billion of stories, novels, in potential state existing still around us. But the second reason, why studying psychology was a very good choice, is that this training as a psychotherapist taught me how to listen to people. It’s a kind of ability you can really train and then you can be open much more for what people are saying to you. |
| Q25 | Which experience has most influenced your work? |
|  | The most influencial experience which really is strong related to my work is, I think, this moment I decided to move to the countryside and then … because I grew up as a child in the countryside, then after big cities and this kind of chaotic life, I came back to the nature. And then I discovered a kind of different state of mind which was very good for my writing and gave me a kind of concentration, silence, inner silence. |
| Q12 | What do you enjoy most about the process of writing? |
|  | I think that most funny and mysterious thing is creating characters. It looks, in the beginning, that I’m really inventing because I need a character, a personality to the story, to my story. But in fact, it looks rather like those characters are coming from outside to my story, so, they are already existing somewhere and there are the first step is that they look rather shapely, only cloudy, not in a physical way, but there is another step of this process when I can hear what they are talking between each other or when they are talking to me. So, this is the best moment in my writing. It must be special, very deep and special connection, relationship between me as a narrator, me as an author and my characters and for sure they are taking from me many things, but I’m also, I’ve learned from them. Sometimes they surprise me because of somethings I didn’t know about them, so, it’s really very mysterious. I’m going to write about it. And of course, there are many dimensions of writing because first of all you need to make a research or even to invent an entire story, to support yourself by another books, other ideas, to talk with people, to make some notes. And then there is a beginning of writing and sculpturing the entire story. So, it’s so many dimensions that it’s never boring really, and they like it. This is my only one profession, I cannot do anything else, so. |
| Q8 | Do you think there are specific qualities that you need to be a good writer? |
|  | There is one, I presume, which is ability to live in a kind of regime, so, kind of regularity in writing and also, how to say, to manage, kind of management of our time we have to dispose. |
| Q18 | Which book of yours would you recommend a new reader to start with? |
|  | There is no such a book I think, because, first of all, I should ask, who is the reader? If is, if it is young or middle-age, woman or man, I don’t know, introvert or extrovert, it’s quite complicated. But there are some books I like, there are some books of mine I like more than the other and I think there is still one book which wasn’t translated into Swedish, it’s called ‘Anna in the graves of the world’ [*Anna w grobowcach świata*], it’s like a cyber punk, a little bit, old story based on the Sumerian mythology. So, this book could be nice for teenagers for instance. |
| Q21 | Who has most influenced you as a writer? |
|  | It is also hard to answer, because it depends from in which moment of my life. There were many such a fascination of mine on a special kind of writing, special novels. So, it’s quite fluent I would say, but for sure I do belong to this Central European tradition of writing, telling story and also writing, and discovering the language, I would say. And among those writers from Central Europe, I would underline the name of Bruno Schulz, who was very important for me as a Polish writer, writing in Polish, because he did incredible things with Polish language. But I also like this kind of parabolic writing, also rooted in Central Europe, like Franz Kafka for instance. But of course, when I was young, much younger, as a teenager, I was fascinated by literature of Southern America. I like Russian writers very much, this kind of realism and irony. So, it could be a very long answer, till the evening. |
| Q5 | How can we make women’s voices more heard in literature – and beyond? |
|  | I think that the process already began but we are still somewhere on the beginning of this process. Once I wrote a book about three women, the mother, grandmother and the daughter, and I tried to describe their experiences as really existential, so the human being face to death and all those very demanding experiences in our life. And by the Polish critics this book was described as a saga, saga, is that good expression? I was so disappointed because when they realised that the main characters are women and the author is woman, it must be a saga. Sometimes I think that we need, not only female writing, but also creating the female characters in literature as a philosophical, ethical subject, facing towards the most important challenges, contemporary challenges then, because when we are thinking about a man, I mean a human being, we still have somewhere in the back of our minds, a man, the figure of man. So, this one is very important, this should be, to be changed. |
| Q29 | You unmask borders and nationalism in your work. Can you tell us about this theme? |
|  | The first, the very, the simplest answer should be connected with place of my growing up and also in the places where I used to live and it’s always kind of karma because I was born close to the German border and then I now living close to Czech border. My family was part of this big political changing of borders after the Second war, so they were refugees from one part of Poland territory to the other, gained after the second war. So, the story about borders were very present in my childhood and also in my own life. But also, this subject is fascinating because of, from this abstract site. Borders are a challenge for us but also feel very deeply the deep need to crossing the borders. It is something … I remember myself living in this small village, there was a, there is a still, an old border in the forest and I used to take my dogs and went to the forest just for crossing the border, for clear plain pleasure, for the joy that I’m a free person and the border in fact doesn’t exist in a real sense. And of course, especially in *Jakob’s book*, I would like to relate to the previous concept of Poland as a multi-culture country, as a society speaking many languages, which we completely lost after the Second war, so, this is also something deep need to rebuild the old image of Poland. |
| Q2 | Would you say that travel and movement is a key theme in your work? |
|  | Yes, it is. I do believe that we, all of us, we have somewhere in our, perhaps genes, our psyche, we have this nomadic instinct which creates our lives. And even if we are living entire life in one place, we’re still thinking about just crossing those places where we are designed to be. And this deep need is very, also very present in my life so, writing *Flights* I tried to write that kind of monographic of movement on many levels. From this touristic level, site for pilgrimage, for also kind of neurotic, you know, an easiness to go somewhere, to check somewhere, just to also missing places we’ve never been before, which also creates our lives in very, very visible ways. So, I would say this book is just monographic of movements, literary monographic of movements. |
| Q30 | How does the issue of sustainability appear in your work? |
|  | I’m not the type of activist. I’m too neurotic and too nervous to make a speech, you know, to a big group of people. I’m not this kind of fighter but what I can do it’s, I can invent some ideas and I can write down those ideas and I can create a story which will move another people like *Drive your plow over the bones of the dead*, and after this book many people told me that they became vegetarian so it is really something. So, I’m going to do what I really can do, this is my small field of my activity. And of course, literature is a very specific way of understanding the world and very specific and very raffinated, special, sophisticated way of communication. So, I would like, in my writing, I would like to try just a kind of general ideas of instruction, how to deal with those very dangerous things connected with climate changes. So, please understand that I am not an activist. This is what I’m going to say. I’m going to write about it in my own language, in using my imagination to make our consciousness broader. |
| Q14 | Tell us about the foundation you’re creating using the prize money? |
|  | That was one of the first thoughts after this announcement and after realising that I, in a completely different situation right now. I was always very active in doing something for the small community. I used to live of making some projects for other people and now I have such a possibility, now I can really do so. We are now writing a stated, or how, what is the English word? The plan of the foundation, goals of the foundation and the main goals will be connected with literature, the small residences for writers and translators of course, but I’m also very keen to focus on ecology, especially in our small community, in our village and there are many, many ideas, also animal rights which is also very important things for me. |
| Q8 | What’s the one piece of advice you’d give to aspiring writers? |
|  | It’s a complicated question. I know that there are many kinds of studying, called creative writing for instance and the people then trying to learn how to write, how to live in writing, because for me, writing is rather a psychological process, not just the process of writing on a paper, even not inventing a story, but something which is very deeply connected with our psychological side. So, I think that there is only one advice, to read, to read. I think read and read, and for every single one written page it is always one thousand pages which should be read. |
| ID | 0908 |
| Biographical | Kazuo ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan on 8th November 1954. The house he lived in for the first five years of his life had been built in the traditional Japanese style, with tatami mats and sliding shoji screens. Early photographs show Ishiguro as a baby, sitting as formally as he was then able, in front of family samurai swords, banner and heirlooms. The house was three generational, with his paternal grandfather as head of family. His grandfather had spent many years away from Japan, in Shanghai, charged with establishing Toyota, then a textile machinery company, in China. Ishiguro’s father, Shizuo, had been born in Shanghai in 1920. His mother, Shizuko, like all members of her immediate family, was in Nagasaki when the atom bomb was dropped on the city in August 1945. Ishiguro attended kindergarten in Nagasaki and learned hiragana, the first and simplest of the three Japanese alphabets.  Ishiguro left Japan with his parents and elder sister in April 1960 to live in Britain, after Shizuo Ishiguro, a research oceanographer, was invited to work for the British government at the National Institute of Oceanography. The family settled in Guildford, Surrey, thirty miles south of London, expecting to stay in England for two years at most. The young Ishiguro attended the local school and became a choirboy at the neighbourhood church. From age 11, he attended Woking County Grammar School where he was educated until going to university. Although the Ishiguro family regularly considered returning to Japan, Shizuo Ishiguro’s research continued to be supported by the British government, and the family never returned. (The storm surge machine Shizuo Ishiguro invented is now a part of the permanent exhibition at the Science Museum in London.)  During his teenage years Kazuo Ishiguro, like many of his peers, became interested in music, and from the age of fifteen began writing songs, inspired by his heroes [Bob Dylan](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/dylan/facts/), Leonard Cohen and Joni Mitchell, as well as by the traditional folk songs of America, Scotland and Ireland. He became part of a circle of friends who wrote and performed their own songs at small local venues, and who argued about and critiqued one another’s work, often savagely. (He had received piano lessons from the age of five, and had taught himself guitar from the age of fourteen.)  His first employment after leaving school in the summer of 1973 was on the Scottish moorland, working as a grouse-beater for the Queen Mother at Balmoral Castle (the British royal family’s summer retreat), assisting the royal guests to shoot game birds. In April 1974, after saving some money working in a storeroom packing baby food products, Ishiguro spent three months travelling with a backpack in the USA and Canada, usually hitch-hiking, but at one stage travelling by freight train from Washington state, across Idaho to Montana. On his return to England, he made his first attempts at fiction, writing two short stories inspired by his experiences in North America.  In the autumn of 1974 Ishiguro went to the University of Kent at Canterbury (UKC) to study for a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and Philosophy. Almost immediately on arrival, he was introduced to the works of Proust and Kafka, two writers who were to have a strong influence on him thereafter. After the fresher year, Ishiguro was permitted an intermission from the degree course, and in April 1976 went to Renfrew, Scotland, for six months to work as a community worker in a ‘multiple-deprived’ area. Here, associating with local trade union officials and struggling families, he became sensitive to political issues. Also in 1976 he began work on what was to be his first (unpublished) novel.  He returned to his university studies in the autumn of 1976, graduating in 1978. By the time of graduation, he had become interested in Charlotte Brontë, Jane Austen, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov and the Socratic dialogues of Plato. He had continued to write his own fiction, starting a second (unpublished) novel in 1977, and to write and perform songs at local folk clubs.  From January to summer of 1979 Ishiguro worked as a volunteer in the Notting Hill area of London for a charity organisation, West London Cyrenians, dedicated to campaigning about and tackling the homelessness problem. It was during this time that he met his future wife, Lorna MacDougall, also working for the organisation.  In the spring of 1979, while still working with the homeless, Ishiguro applied for a place on a pioneering Master of Arts course in Creative Writing at the University of East Anglia (UEA). At the time, no other university in the country offered such a degree. It was a small course (on average three or four students per year) and run by the renowned professor and novelist Malcolm Bradbury. Ishiguro was accepted on the course and was part of a class of six − the largest thus far in the ten year history of the course. The great British writer Angela Carter, then far from wellknown, became his personal tutor, and remained a close friend and mentor to him until her early death, aged 51, in 1992.  During his year at UEA, where he arrived in October 1979, Ishiguro began to publish short stories in small literary magazines. Three of his stories then were accepted by the London publishing house Faber and Faber (until not so long before run by [T.S. Eliot](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1948/eliot/facts/)) to be included in the forthcoming book *Faber Introductions 7: Stories By New Writers* (pub: 1981). This led to the start of an important relationship with Faber fiction editor Robert McCrum, who gave Ishiguro a contract and an advance for the novel he was then writing. The novel, *A Pale View of Hills*, was published in 1982 in the UK and in the USA. It was awarded the Winifred Holtby Memorial Prize by the Royal Society of Literature, and was subsequently published in several foreign languages. The novel allowed Ishiguro to be included as the youngest member of GRANTA magazine’s first ‘20 Best of Young British Novelists’ promotion in 1983, alongside writers such as Salman Rushdie, Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Julian Barnes, Graham Swift, Pat Barker, William Boyd and Rose Tremain, many of whom were little-known at that point.  After completing his Creative Writing MA, Ishiguro returned to work with homeless people at West London Cyrenians, but became a full-time writer in autumn 1983, following the publication of *A Pale View of Hills*. Around this time he wrote two screenplays for television, the first of which − *A Profile of Arthur J Mason* − was broadcast on British national television in 1984 (director Michael Whyte) and won the Golden Plaque Best Short Film at the Chicago Film Festival. This teleplay featured an English butler as its central character and was thus something of a forerunner to *The Remains of the Day*. A second screenplay, *The Gourmet* (director Michael Whyte), was filmed and broadcast in 1985. Meanwhile, Ishiguro had begun work on his second novel, *An Artist of the Floating World,* which was published in 1986.  *An Artist of the Floating World* was shortlisted for the Booker Prize and won the Whitbread Book of the Year Award, making Ishiguro a highly visible young writer. He married Lorna MacDougall in 1986. (Their daughter, Naomi, was born in 1992.)  In 1989 Ishiguro published *The Remains of the Day* which won the Booker Prize that year. The book was widely acclaimed and became an international best-seller. A film adaptation, directed by James Ivory, starring Anthony Hopkins and Emma Thompson, was released in 1992 and was nominated for eight Oscars.  In 1994 Ishiguro served on the jury at the Cannes Film Festival (alongside, among others, Clint Eastwood and Catherine Deneuve) that awarded the Palme d’Or to the then little-known Quentin Tarantino for his *Pulp Fiction*.  In the years that followed, Ishiguro published further novels − *The Unconsoled* (1995), *When We Were Orphans* (2000), *Never Let Me Go* (2005), *The Buried Giant* (2015) − and a volume of stories, *Nocturnes: Five Stories of Music and Nightfall* (2009). These books were translated widely and earned Ishiguro many honours around the world, including the Order of the British Empire (1990) and the French decoration Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres (1998).  A film co-written by Ishiguro, Guy Maddin and George Toles, *The Saddest Music in The World,* directed by Guy Maddin and starring Isabella Rossellini, was released in 2003. Another film, written by Ishiguro and directed by James Ivory, *The White Countess*, starring Ralph Fiennes and Natasha Richardson, was released in 2004. A film adaptation of *Never Let Me Go*, directed by Mark Romanek and starring Carey Mulligan, Andrew Garfield and Keira Knightley was released in 2010. A Japanese stage production of *Never Let Me Go,* directed by renowned theatre director Yukio Ninagawa opened in Tokyo in 2014, and in 2016 a 10-part series based on *Never Let Me Go* ran on Japanese prime time television.  Ishiguro has worked as a lyricist for the jazz singer Stacey Kent, writing songs in collaboration with the composer and saxophonist Jim Tomlinson. Their songs have appeared on the Stacey Kent albums *Breakfast on The Morning Tram* (2007), *Dreamer In Concert* (2011), *The Changing Lights* (2013) and *I Know I Dream* (2017).  In recent years, Ishiguro has received accolades with life-time achievement connotations: The Peggy V. Helmrich Award (2013), The Library Lion Medal from New York Public Library (2014), The Sunday Times Distinguished Author Award (2014), The Golden Plate from the American Academy of Achievement (2017). In 2018 he received a Knighthood from the United Kingdom, and the Order of the Rising Sun, Gold and Silver Star, from Japan. Also, in 2018, he was made an Honorary Citizen of Nagasaki City and Prefecture. In 2019 he received the Bodley Medal from the Bodleian Libraries of Oxford University.  He received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2017. |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0908=KI  Kazuo Ishiguro: Hi, hello, Mr Smith, how are you?  Adam Smith: Very well. Thank you very much indeed for calling, very kind. Congratulations on the award of the Nobel Prize.  KI: Yes, thank you. I’m sorry you were kept hanging on. It’s absolute chaos here I’m afraid. There’s suddenly … a lot of press has turned up and they’re queued up the road.  AS: I can imagine. So, yes, your day must have changed in a totally unexpected way. How did you hear this news?  KI: Well I was sitting in the kitchen writing an email to a friend and the phone rang. And it started off as not entirely certain. People at my literary agents were watching the live feed come through on the announcement. I don’t think they were expecting it, they were just waiting to hear who won the Nobel Prize this year. And so I started to receive calls back to back, and each time we were trying to establish if it was a hoax or if it was fake news, or what it was. And then it started to become more and more certain. By the time the BBC called I started to take it seriously. But I haven’t actually stopped since then. It’s a bit like the Marie Celeste here – everything’s exactly as it was at about 11 o’clock, or whenever, before the whole thing started. And then it was pandemonium. There’s now people queueing up the street to interview me.  AS: So has it sunk in?  KI: No! No, I don’t think it will sink in for a long time. I mean, it’s a ridiculously prestigious honour, in as far as these kinds of things go. I don’t think you would have a more prestigious prize than the Nobel Prize. And comments I would make, I mean, one is, a lot of that prestige must come from the fact that the Swedish Academy has successfully, I think, kept above the fray of partisan politics and so on. And I think it’s remained one of the few things that’s respected, whose integrity is respected by many people around the world, and so I think a lot of the sense of honour of receiving the Prize comes from the actual status of the Swedish Academy. And I think that’s a great achievement unto itself, over all these years the Swedish Academy has managed to retain that high ground, in all the different walks of life that it honours. And then the other reason it’s a terrific honour for me is because … you know I come in a line of lots of my greatest heroes, absolutely great authors. The greatest authors in history have received this Prize, and I have to say, you know, it’s great to come one year after [Bob Dylan](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2016/dylan-facts.html) who was my hero since the age of 13. He’s probably my biggest hero.  AS: That’s nice company to be in.  KI: Yeah. I do a very good Bob Dylan impersonation, but I won’t do it for you right now.  AS: That’s a pity, I would have liked that. Maybe at least when you come to Stockholm in December, please.  KI: Yes, I could try that.  AS: You must. It’s a funny time in Britain at the moment. Does that place any particular significance for you on receiving the Prize now?  KI: I think it does. I mean, in fact just before I picked up the phone to you I was writing a kind of statement for press release, and I was trying to think what could I say in three lines, and I think the timing is pertinent for me because I feel … I’m nearly 63 years old, I can’t remember a time when we were so uncertain about our values in the western world. You know, I think we are going through a time of great uncertainty about our values, about our leadership. People don’t feel safe. So I do hope that things like the Nobel Prize will in some way contribute to the positive things in the world, to the decent values in the world, and that it would contribute to some sense of continuity and decency. Yeah.  AS: I suppose what you have been writing about all this time, in a way, is that question of our place in the world, our connection to each other, our connection with the world. That is perhaps the theme you explore the most, do you think?  KI: Yes, I would say so, I mean I think … If I could put it a little bit more narrowly that that, I mean it’s probably … one of the things that’s interested me always is how we live in small worlds and big worlds at the same time, that we have a personal arena in which we have to try and find fulfilment and love. But that inevitably intersects with a larger world, where politics, or even dystopian universes, can prevail. So I think I’ve always been interested in that. We live in small worlds and big worlds at the same time and we can’t, you know, forget one or the other.  AS: Thank you, well, these are things to talk about on a different day I guess.  KI: Yes.  AS: For the moment you have to work out how you’re going to handle this line of press. Just a last thought – how do you feel about the deluge of attention you’re about to receive?  KI: Well, I think … I take it very positively. I mean, while it’s a little unsettling because I had no idea when I woke up this morning that it was going to be anything other than a very ordinary day, I think it’s a great thing that the press, the media, take the Nobel Prize for Literature seriously. I’ll be very alarmed if there was a day when somebody won the Nobel Prize for Literature and nobody was interested. That would suggest that some awful things had happened to the world.  AS: A day to celebrate literature has to be a good day.  KI: Yes, and I think literature can be a great thing, it can be sometimes a force for bad as well. You know I think things like the Nobel Prize for Literature exist to try and ensure that it is a force for good.  AS: Lovely. Well thank you very much indeed, and we very much look forward to welcoming you to Stockholm in December.  KI: Yeah, really looking forward to it. Well, very nice to talk to you Mr Smith.  AS: Thank you very much indeed.  KI: Take care now. Bye. |
| Interview |  |
| Q20 | What does the Nobel Prize mean to you? |
|  | Until October it was something that very great people, and in my imagination I always thought older people, won. It was not anything I would win. I am going to say this when I deliver my [banquet speech](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2017/ishiguro/speech/) later. But I first heard about the Nobel Prize when I was a small child in Japan and I remember still my mother explaining it to me, I am looking at, and it must have been some sort of educational book telling the readers about the history of the Nobel Prize. So for me it has been embedded in my imagination all through my life. It is probably the greatest prize that a person can win in the world. |
| Q21 | How do you feel about being a role model? |
|  | I think it is better not be too self-conscious about being a role model. Ever since I became a published writer and became well-known I think you have that sense anyway. That you have to be responsible to some extent but also to try to inspire younger people and your fellow writers. Becoming a Nobel Laureate has made me more conscious of this role. I think this has put me on a different level in terms of being a role model and my responsibility as a public figure so that is something I am going to have to think about and get used to. I am no longer just a writer of interest to people who are interested in writers. I am occupying some other special position as a Nobel Laureate. So it is something I have not quite worked out yet.  But I think I have to be very careful because I notice already in the two months since the announcement I have been asked to do all kinds of things, sign petitions, support all kinds of campaigns, take part in discussion programmes I have no qualification to take part in. Many invitations that have come in that I would not have received before October. I have had this advice from past Nobel Prize winners I have met to be careful. I must not put myself on a platform for which I am not qualified. I think that is a very important piece of advice not just for me, but for the world. We do not want people who are not experts talking as though they are. This is one of the problems in the world today. So that is something I am going to be quite disciplined about. I am only going to talk about things I know about. |
| Q20 | What is the importance of the Nobel Prize? |
|  | The importance of any prize, there are many prizes in the world. The importance of any prize, how seriously we take the prize, for me it depends on the integrity of the people who give the prize and also on the history of past winners. I think those are the two important things because prizes themselves are used as a tool all around the world now to promote things. Most often to promote a company or to promote something, but sometimes they are used to promote political ideas and sometimes quite subtly and sometimes less so. There have been prizes that I have turned down because I thought, you know, they were not hideously bad prizes, but I thought I don’t necessarily wish to be helping to promote something.  I think we have to be aware that prizes are a technique, they are sometimes propaganda, they are sometimes promotional tools for organisations, corporations, institutions. So I always ask myself this question about any prize, whether somebody else is getting it or whether I am being offered it. Who is giving it? Do I respect the values that lie behind the prize and the people who are giving it and do I respect the previous winners and I think this is the first thing I said quite spontaneously when I received the call from the Swedish Academy. I said, I feel emotionally truly honoured by the Nobel because I can absolutely honestly say the Nobel is an institution that I deeply respect, and I deeply deeply respect the past winners in literature that have received it since 1901. I mean a lot of my greatest heroes are there on that list.  The Nobel is a prize that has managed to capture the imagination of the world. Not as a promotional tool but as something that exemplifies an ideal about humanity and what we strive for and that is quite a rare thing. I think there are many great prizes, but I think the Nobel sets a very high standard because it is not just about the specialist area that we may or may not excel in. There is a higher idea I think about peace, cooperation between people, the striving of human beings to improve our civilisation and I think these are very very high ideals. |
| Q5 | Memory, guilt and delusion are recurring themes in your work – why? |
|  | I think earlier in my career I was always very interested in looking at individuals who struggled with their past and their memories. So typically I would look at a character in late middle age or old age. Someone who had been quite proud of himself or herself, but then quite late in life gains a perspective about his life. Let us just say his life. And he starts to think Oh actually, I had all my values wrong, I backed the wrong things, I backed the wrong causes. Does that mean my life has been wasted? I lived my life by the wrong values even though for most of my life I thought I was living by the right values. That was a typical situation I became fascinated in. I wrote at least three or four novels around these kinds of ideas.  As I got older as a writer I became interested in that same question but applied to societies and nations. That is something that I am still trying to figure out, how best to express that question? How would a nation or a country struggle with the nation’s dark or shameful memories? When is it better to just leave these things buried and move on. Because we can see all around the world now and, in history, cases where conflict just goes on and on and on. You just cannot stop it, stop the cycle because people will not forget atrocities from the past. Sometimes people, generations, are fighting over something that happened centuries ago and hatred has developed. So sometimes it is not good to remember.  But particularly in Europe I think, and America too, Japan we have problems of memories that have been suppressed and the society is not at peace with itself about say racism or what happened in the Second World War. There is a sense that issues have not been addressed and this leads to all kinds of tension. At the moment America is in a terrible turmoil because there is a feeling that certain things about its past, about African-Americans particularly have not been addressed properly. I think Europe has been in the state of tension ever since the Second World War. So this question about personal memory and national memory I think is something that interests me very much. |
| Q2 | What has influenced your writing style and for whom are you writing? |
|  | I never really think much about genre. Often I am drawn to a particular project which I have chosen quite carefully because I do not have many ideas. I have one good idea every five years or something so it is not as though I have a big choice. I don’t sit there thinking now I’ll write a thriller or now I’ll write a love story or a period thing. I have an idea and it is usually an idea that doesn’t yet have a setting. I don’t really have a time and place geographically or in time where I am going to put this story down. I just think wouldn’t it be interesting to write a story about a person who has this particularly issue and then this happens to them emotionally? It is something quite abstract so I find myself almost like, you know, the way movie people go location hunting when they have got a script, where would be a good place to film this? I find myself looking through history or looking through different genres to try and figure out what is the best way to express this story.  I am never particularly … I never start off by saying I might do something that is a bit like a science fiction book or something like a detective story. I become desperate and I use whatever I can to express the particular idea and it is only when I finish that somebody might look at what I have written from the outside and say, oh that looks like a piece of fantasy or that looks like science fiction. For me I have not looked at it from the outside and I am like a crazy person trying to build a flying machine in my garage or in my back garden and I am just putting anything on that will make this thing fly. You know, I might steal something from next door or borrow things. Anything that could make this thing go up in the air and fly. It is only when it is flying that people look at it and say that looks like a period of a love story or something like this. |
| Q1 | When did you decide to become a writer? |
|  | I never really had a big ambition to be a writer and until I was in my, almost in my mid-twenties. From the time I was around fifteen years old my big ambition was to be a songwriter and I spent a lot of time writing songs in my bedroom with a guitar. I think I was very much inspired by the man who won the Nobel Prize for Literature last year, in 2016, [Bob Dylan](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2016/dylan/facts/). I remember buying an album of his when I was thirteen years old. And I still remember the album, ‘John Wesley Harding’. I think that was when I first became very excited about the idea that you could use words in a very mysterious way and create entire worlds just with a few words. Of course the music and the singing and all these things were very important to me, it is that whole combination. But the excitement about words, I think, and the fact that you can use them in this way. I mean that really happened to me when I first listened to my very first Bob Dylan album, when I was thirteen years old.  And then I became interested in all these singer-songwriters who are at what you might call the literary end of the 1970s boom. Leonard Cohen was very important to me, Joni Mitchell. I learnt to play all their song myself. I knew all their lyrics off by heart and I tried, I wrote over a hundred songs myself in my bedroom and I played them with my friends. And in a way I feel that was my apprenticeship for becoming a writer of fiction. Somewhere in my twenties I made, to me a transition that did not seem like a very big one between writing songs and writing short stories. It was only over a period of about a year when I was writing songs at the beginning of this year towards the end of that year that energy had gone into writing short stories.  And after years of getting nowhere, professionally, as a singer-songwriter around the age of twenty-four, when I was twenty-four, twenty-five as soon as I started to write short stories they were being accepted and published by magazines. I was actually spotted by the publishing house that is still my publishing house in London, Faber and Faber. A company that’s published many many Nobel Prize winners actually. And I wrote my first novel under a contract with them. It’s like many things in life, I was knocking on one door for a long time and then another one opened. From then on I mean fiction has been my focus, but somewhere at the back of my mind I am still a singer-songwriter.  I still write, I write song lyrics for the American jazz singer Stacey Kent and in fact an album of hers came out in October, I think, and two of the tracks have my lyrics on. I still work as a song lyricist and for me it is quite an important part of my writing life. It is another kind of outlet and I feel it is quite important for me to have that, this other writing life, where I think in a very different kind of way. I am forced to think in a very different kind of way because I am collaborating, and I think that is always a healthy thing to have collaborators. One of the disadvantages of being a novelist as opposed to being … a lot of these scientists working in big teams and if you work in the theatre or films you work with teams of people. The danger for novelists I think, we work in isolation and so there is a problem. You may not grow and develop in the same way. It is easier to become ossified. I think for me it’s quite important to collaborate with people in other fields, like music or film. I find it very stimulating and I learn many things from what I am obliged to do in collaboration. |
| Q21 | Which writers do you look up to? |
|  | I have spoken about my early influences from the world of music, singer-songwriter music. But if we are talking about actually literary influences, oddly, people never seem to say this when they are looking at my work. But I know that the novelist that has influenced me the most is Charlotte Brontë, the nineteenth-century British novelist, and particularly two books Jane Eyre and Villette.  And I reread Jane Eyre and Villette about five years ago and I was quite embarrassed. It was full of things that I could recognise I had stolen from those books. But I read those books at a particularly crucial point in my writing life, I think. Before I actually started to write fiction, but when I was starting to think about writing fiction. And so particularly the use of first person, the first person technique. What the narrator hides from the reader and hides from herself in the Charlotte Brontë books became the foundation for me. And so Charlotte Brontë remains a big influence.  There are other writers that are great favourite writers of mine and possibly Dostoevsky is my favourite novelist but probably he hasn’t influenced my style very much. He writes in a very, very different way. However I think influence is a very interesting and subtle thing. Sometimes somebody who is very different to me in temperament, actually I think because of that difference it is almost like it is a, it creates a tension, a natural tension. I think that is very good. Something is pulling me away from my comfort zone and I think Oh yes I had to do that. What would Dostoevsky do with this? and of course I could never write like Dostoevsky but I think a little bit of Dostoevsky would help here.  Marcel Proust was very important to me. More technically, how to tell a story not necessarily through the plot or through chronology of how the events unfold in your story but the great freedom I see in Proust’s work of just following the drifting memories or the thought associations of the narrator. So you can have an episode from yesterday and it goes right into a memory from thirty years ago. This much more abstract way of ordering your canvas as a writer. I learnt an enormous amount from Proust. But everybody – Kafka is another writer who is very important to me. Kafka and [Samuel Beckett](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1969/beckett/facts/) and actually [Harold Pinter](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2005/pinter/facts/) another … I think Kafka isn’t, but the other two are Nobel Prize winners. People who give me guidance and inspiration about how to deviate from realism, from doing something to distort the familiar reality that we see around us. Once you move away from orthodox realism, the question becomes so what do you do, what are your new laws? In fact this is a Bob Dylan line isn’t it? “To live outside the law you have to be honest.” But I think that is very true when you deviate from realism. The great writers like Kafka, Beckett, Pinter, they are models for me. For how you deviate from conventional realism. |
| Q31 | How has your wife supported your work? |
|  | I’ve had many people who have been important editors and advisors in my writing over the years I mean, many of them are professional people, my editors at the publishing house. So my first agent Deborah Rogers who has passed away now, and my first editor Robert McCrum were very important influences. But the person who has a very deep influence on what I write at all kinds of levels is my wife Lorna. And I think part of it is because she is my wife and she tends to boss me around in many aspects of my life and so my work is not excluded. However the key thing here is that, we were together, we were a couple at a time, before I started to write fiction, so somewhere in her mind she doesn’t think that I am this kind of famous author and that she is criticising the work of a famous author. She still thinks I am this postgraduate student who has got this crazy idea that he can write fiction. She still thinks a bit like that.  So she looks at it and says What is this? That has never changed, because she was there looking at the very first things I wrote in a little room we shared together when we were both postgraduate students. I don’t think the relationship has changed very much. And the problem is that once you start to become well-known, well-established … For me I won the Booker Prize in Britain when I was thirty-four years old. The trouble with that is, there are many great things about becoming respected young, but a lot of people stop criticising you. They are afraid to criticise you or professional publishers think you will move to different publishing house if they speak frankly. So I need somebody like my wife who thinks of me as an upstart who has all these ideas above my station about writing and she can be quite brutal. I have sometimes abandoned whole projects because she has taken one glance, usually when she seems perhaps not in a very good mood and says This won’t do. Do something else! |
| Q17 | Do you have any advice for aspiring writers? |
|  | A lot of people ask me Do you have any advice for aspiring writers or young writers? These days, I don’t know how it is in Sweden but certainly in the English-speaking world every university seems to have a creative writing course. There are private creative writing programmes everywhere. Everyone is very keen to be a writer these days. That wasn’t the case when I was young. Nobody was interested in literature. It is very difficult for me to come out with any kind of useful advice about how you write. Everybody must do it in their own way but there is one fundamental thing I would say to young people at the early stages or people who have these ambitions. I would say particularly in the world as it is today, you have to ask yourself Do you really want to write or do you want to be a writer?  Because I think many people have this ambition to be a writer. They want the status, the position of being a writer. But actually they may find that they don’t particularly want to write and I think to be a successful writer and I mean successful not just commercially but to be a writer who achieves something worthwhile regardless of whether it is published or sold. You have to have a special relationship with writing. And I think part of the difficulty at the moment is that it is quite difficult for people to find out themselves which it is they really want. Because being a writer has become such a coveted position now and a lot of people dream of being a writer but sometimes perhaps that is not the right thing because you know writing is not for you and that is alright. Something else may be for you. So I would say, get that very clear. Try and find out, do you really want to write? That is the important thing! |
| ID | 0909 |
| Biographical | Bob Dylan was born on May 24, 1941 in Duluth, Minnesota. He grew up in the city of Hibbing. As a teenager, he played in various bands and with time his interest in music deepened, with a particular passion for American folk music and blues. One of his idols was the folk singer Woody Guthrie. He was also influenced by the early authors of the Beat Generation, as well as by modernist poets.  Dylan moved to New York City in 1961 and began to perform in clubs and cafés in Greenwich Village. He met the record producer John Hammond, with whom he signed a contract for his debut album, *Bob Dylan* (1962). In the following years, he recorded a number of albums which have had a tremendous impact on popular music: *Bringing It All Back Home* and *Highway 61 Revisited* in 1965, *Blonde On Blonde* in 1966 and *Blood On The Tracks* in 1975. His productivity continued in the following decades, resulting in masterpieces like *Oh Mercy* (1989), *Time Out of Mind* (1997) and *Modern Times* (2006).  Dylan’s tours in 1965 and 1966 attracted a lot of attention. For a period, he was accompanied by film maker D. A. Pennebaker, who documented life around the stage in what would come to be the movie *Dont Look Back* (1967). Dylan has recorded a large number of albums revolving around topics such as: the social conditions of man, religion, politics and love. The lyrics have continuously been published in new editions starting in 1973, under the title *WritingsandDrawings*, subsequently changed to *Lyrics*. As an artist, he is strikingly versatile; he has been active as a painter, actor and scriptwriter.  Besides his large production of albums, Dylan has published experimental work like the prose poetry collection *Tarantula* (1971). He has written an autobiography, *Chronicles* (2004), which depicts memories from the early years in New York and which provides glimpses of his life at the center of popular culture. Since the late 1980s, Bob Dylan has toured consistently, playing over 3000 concerts during the last 20 years. Dylan has the status of an icon. His influence on contemporary culture is profound, and he is the object of a steady stream of literary and musical analysis.  From [*The Nobel Prizes*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/nobel-prizes.html) *2016*. Published on behalf of The Nobel Foundation by Science History Publications/USA, division Watson Publishing International LLC, Sagamore Beach, 2017  This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and later published in the book series [*Les Prix Nobel/*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lesprix.html)[*Nobel Lectures*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lectures/index.html)*/*[*The Nobel Prizes*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/nobel-prizes.html). The information is sometimes updated with an addendum submitted by the Laureate. |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0909 |
| Interview |  |
|  |  |
| ID | 0910 |
| Biographical | Svetlana Alexievich was born on May 31, 1948 in the Ukrainian town of Ivano-Frankovsk into the family of a serviceman. Her father was Belarusian and her mother Ukrainian. After her father’s demobilization from the army the family returned to his native Belarus and settled in a village where both her parents worked as schoolteachers. (Her father’s grandfather was also a rural schoolteacher.) After finishing school, Alexievich worked as a reporter on the local newspaper in the town of Narovl, Gomel Region.  As early as during her school days she wrote poetry and contributed articles to the school newspaper. At that time she needed a two-year work record (the rule in those days) in order to enroll in the Department of Journalism of Minsk University, entering it in 1967. During her university years she won several awards at the republican and all-Union competitions for scholarly and student papers.  Having received her degree she was sent to the town of Beresa, Brest Region, to work at the local paper. At the same time Alexiyevich taught at the local school. She was torn between various career options: to continue the family tradition of school teaching, scholarly work, or journalism. But after a year she was invited to Minsk to work on the Rural Newspaper. Several years later she took the job of a correspondent for the literary magazine Neman and was soon promoted to the head of the section for non-fiction.  She tried her voice in various genres, such as the short story, essay, and reportage. The famous Belarusian writer Ales Adamovich had decisive influence on Svetlana’s choice, particularly his books *I’m from the Fiery Village* and *The Book of the Siege*. He wrote them jointly with other authors but the idea behind them and its development were entirely his own, and it was a new genre for both Belarusian and Russian literature. Adamovich was looking for the right definition of the genre, calling it a “collective novel,” “novel-oratorio,” “novel- evidence,” “people talking about themselves” and “epic chorus,” to name a few of his appellations. Alexievich has always named Adamovich as her main teacher. He helped her to find a path of her own.  In one of her interviews she said: “I’ve been searching for a literary method that would allow the closest possible approximation to real life. Reality has always attracted me like a magnet, it tortured and hypnotized me, I wanted to capture it on paper. So I immediately appropriated this genre of actual human voices and confessions, witness evidences and documents. This is how I hear and see the world – as a chorus of individual voices and a collage of everyday details. This is how my eye and ear function. In this way all my mental and emotional potential is realized to the full. In this way I can be simultaneously a writer, reporter, sociologist, psychologist and preacher.”  Alexievich has also said, “Today when man and the world have become so multifaceted and diversified, when we finally realized how mysterious and unfathomable man really is, a story of one life, or rather the documentary evidence of this story, brings us closest to reality.”  In 1983 she completed her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*. For two years it was sitting at a publishing house but was not published. Alexievich was accused of pacifism, naturalism and de-glorification of the heroic Soviet woman. Such accusations could have quite serious consequences in those days. All the more so since already after her first book *I’ve Left My Village* (monologues of people who abandoned their native parts), she has already had a reputation of being a dissident journalist with anti-Soviet sentiments. On order of the Belarusian Central Committee of the Communist Party Alexiyevich’s already completed book was destroyed and she was accused of anti-Communist and anti-government views. She was threatened with losing her job. They told her: “How can you work on our magazine with such alien views? And why are you not yet a member of the Communist Party?”  But new times came with Mikhail Gorbachev’s ascent to power and the start of *perestroika*.  In 1985 *The Unwomanly Face of War* came out simultaneously in Minsk and in Moscow. In subsequent years it was repeatedly reprinted; all in all more than two million copies were sold. This novel, which the author calls “the novel-chorus,” is made up of monologues of women in the war speaking about the unknown aspects of World War II that had never been related before. The book was hailed by war writers as well as the public.  In the same year her second book came out: *The Last Witnesses: 100 Unchildlike Stories*, which had also languished unpublished for the same reasons (pacifism, failure to meet ideological standards). This book also ran into many reprints and was acclaimed by numerous critics, who called both books “a discovery in the genre of war prose.” The war seen through women’s and children’s eyes opened up a whole new area of feelings and ideas.  The 40th anniversary of the war was marked by the theatrical production of *The Unwomanly Face of War* at the renowned Taganka Theater (staged by Anatoly Efros.) The Omsk Drama Theater received the State Prize for its production of *The Unwomanly Face of War*. The play based on this novel was running in many theaters around the country. A cycle of documentary films was produced on the basis of *The Unwomanly Face of War*. The film cycle was awarded with the State Prize, and received the Silver Dove at the Leipzig Documentary Film Festival. Alexievich also received many other prizes for this work.  1989 saw the publication of *The Boys in Zinc*, a book about the criminal Soviet-Afghan war that had been concealed from the Soviet people for ten years. To collect material for the book Alexievich traveled around the country for four years to meet war victims’ mothers and veterans of the Afghan war. She also visited the war zone in Afghanistan. The book was a bombshell and many people could not forgive the author for de-mythologizing the war. To begin with, the military and Communist papers attacked Alexievich. In 1992, court proceedings were opened against the author and her book in Minsk. The democratically minded public rose in defense of the book. The case was closed.  Later several documentary films and plays were based on this book.  In 1993, she published *Enchanted with Death*, a book about attempted suicides as a result of the downfall of the socialist Soviet Union. Those who attempted suicide were people who felt inseparable from socialist ideals, who were unable to accept the new order, the new country with its newly interpreted history. The book was adapted for the cinema (*The Cross*).  In 1997, Alexievich published her book *The Chernobyl Prayer: the Chronicles of the Future*. The book is not so much about the Chernobyl nuclear plant disaster as about the world after it: how are people adapting to the new reality, which is already here but is not yet perceived. Post-Chernobyl people have gained new knowledge, which is of benefit for all of mankind. They live – as it were – after World War III, after a nuclear war. The book’s subtitle is very significant in this respect.  Alexievich has said, “If you look back at the whole of our history, both Soviet and post-Soviet, it is a huge common grave and a blood bath – an eternal dialogue of the executioners and the victims. The accursed Russian questions: what is to be done and who is to blame. The revolution, the gulags, the Second World War, the Soviet-Afghan war hidden from the people, the downfall of the great empire, the downfall of the giant socialist land, the land-utopia, and now a challenge of cosmic dimensions – Chernobyl. This is a challenge for all the living things on earth. Such is our history. And this is the theme of my books, this is my path, my circles of hell, from man to man.”  At present, this writer of international renown and dedicated critic of the dictatorial regime of her country is living in Minsk, Belarus. Her books have been translated into 45 languages and published in 47 countries so far, formed the basis for a dozen plays, and more than twenty of her scripts have been filmed as documentaries. She is the recipient of numerous awards, including the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, the 2013 Peace Prize of the German Book Trade, the 2013 French Prix Médicis essai; the 2013 Best Book of the Year Prize by the French literary magazine *Lire* for her book *Time Second Hand*; the 2011 Ryszard Kapuściński Award for literary reportage (Poland); the 2011 Angelus Central European Literature Award (Poland) ; the 2006 National Book Critics Circle nonfiction award for “*Voices from Chernobyl* (New York); the 2001 Erich Maria Remarque Peace Prize (Osnabrück); the 2000 Robert Geisendörfer Radio Play Prize of the German Academy of the Performing Arts (Berlin); the 1999 “Témoin du Monde award (Paris); the 1998 Best Book on Politics of the Year award of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Bremen); the 1997 Andrei Sinyavsky Prize (Moscow); and the 1996 Kurt Tucholsky Prize of the Swedish PEN Club (Stockholm).  Alexievich has defined the main thrust of her life and her writings thusly: “I always aim to understand how much humanity is contained in each human being, and how I can protect this humanity in a person.”  These questions acquire a new implication in connection with the latest events in Belarus where a military-socialist regime has been restored, a post-Soviet dictatorship. And now Alexievich is again unwelcome to the authorities in her country because of her views and her independence. She belongs to the opposition, which also includes the country’s finest intellectuals.  Svetlana Alexievich has created a literary non-fiction genre that is entirely her own. She writes “novels of voices.” She has developed this genre book after book, constantly honing the esthetic of her documentary prose, which is based on hundreds of interviews. Her skill at this allows her to intertwine the original voices of her subjects into an artful condensation of a panorama of souls.  “I see the world as voices, as colors, as it were. From book to book, I change, the subjects change, but the narrative thread remains the same. It is the narrative thread of the people I have come to know … With thousands of voices I can create – you could hardly call it reality, since reality remains unfathomable – an image of my time, of my country … It all forms a sort of small encyclopedia, the encyclopedia of my generation, of the people I came to meet. How did they live? What did they believe in? How did they die and how did they kill? And how hard did they pursue happiness, and did they fail to catch it?”  Alexievich’s five great prose volumes represent an impressive history of a people’s mentality – but not only of the Soviet people. Each subsequent book poses still more radically the question, no longer merely about the meaning and meaninglessness of political ideologies, but truly the question for man’s makings.  For her 50th birthday, a two-volume collection of her works came out. In the introduction, the critic Lev Anninsky says: “This is a unique work, which has probably been undertaken for the first time in Russian, or rather in Soviet and post-Soviet culture: the author has traced and recorded the lives of several generations of Soviet people, and the very reality of the 70 years of socialism: from the 1917 Revolution through the Civil War, the youth and hypnotism of the great utopia, Stalin’s terror and the gulags, the Great Patriotic War, and the years of the downfall of the socialist mainland up to the present times. This is a living history told by the people themselves and recorded and selected by a talented and honest chronicler.”  Alexiyevich is currently finishing her book *The Wonderful Deer of the Eternal Hunt*, made up of love stories. Men and women of different generations tell their personal stories. “It occurred to me that I’ve been writing books about how people kill one another, how they die. But this is not the whole of human life. Now I’m writing about how people love one another. And again I ask myself the same question, this time through the prism of love: who are we and what country we are living in. Love is what brings us into this world. I want to love people. Although it’s hard to love them. And getting harder.” |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0910=SA  (Julia Chayka) Hello, my name is Julia Chayka, calling from Nobelprize.org, the official website of the Nobel Prize. I am honoured to congratulate you on the award of this year’s Nobel Prize.  (Svetlana Alexievich) Thank you very much!  (JC) You probably already know that you have been awarded a prize, do you?  (SA) Yes I know it, but it is still hard to believe that it’s true! [laughs]  (JC) We know that you are on your way to a press conference right now …  (SA) Yes, a taxi is waiting for me  (JC) Hopefully you have 2-3 minutes to answer several questions. This interview will be recorded and later on will be available on our website together with the interviews with other Laureates of the year.  (SA) Yes, sure.  (JC) We would like to ask you about you reaction, what are you feelings about the Prize? Or is it too early to ask such a question?  (SA) [laughs] It is, indeed, but I can describe how I feel right now. Of course, it’s a joy, it would be strange to hide it. But it makes me anxious as well because it revived all these great shadows: [Solzhenitsyn](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1970/solzhenitsyn/facts/), [Bunin](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1933/bunin/facts/), [Pasternak](https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1958/pasternak/facts/), all the Russian Nobel Laureates in literature. Belarus never got a Prize. It is of course an anxious feeling to realize that neither tiredness nor disappointment may let me lower the bar now. It’s been a long way, a huge work has been done and something new is waiting for me.  (JC) Thank you for these beautiful words. Now coming to your writing style, may I ask you what influenced you when you chose this kind of journalistic approach in your works?  (SA) You know, everything happens so fast and intensively in the modern world that neither one person nor the whole culture are able to conceive it. It is just too fast, unfortunately. There is no time to sit and think it over, as did Tolstoy, whose ideas matured over decades. Every person, me too, can only try to grasp a small piece of reality, conjecture only. Sometimes I leave only 10 lines out of 100 pages of my text, sometimes one page. And all together these pieces are united in a novel of voices creating the image of our time and telling what is happening to us.  (JC) You’ve just used a stunning metaphor a ”novel of voices” and my next question is connected to this. You have witnessed enormous suffering and seen awful evidence in your work. Has it influenced the way you look at a human being?  (SA) It may take some time to answer this question but I should say that I belong to the culture that constantly has this degree, this painful temperature. Something that is incomprehensible and unbearable in other cultures is a normal condition for us. We live in it, this is our environment. All the time we live among victims and executioners. In every family, in my family … the year of 1937, Chernobyl, the war. It can tell a lot, everyone has these stories … every family can tell you this novel of pain. And it’s is not that I have this point of view or that I like how people think in such situations. No, it is our life. Imagine a person who emerged from a madhouse and is writing about it. Should I tell this person: ”Listen, why are you writing about this?” Like Primo Levi, who wrote about concentration camps and couldn’t tear himself away from them, or Chalamov who was overtaken and killed by the camp, he just could not write about anything else. I myself have been wondering who we are, why our suffering cannot be converted into freedom. It is an important question for me. Why does slavish consciousness always prevail? Why do we change our freedom into material benefits? Or to fear, as we did earlier?  (JC) Whom are you writing for?  (SA) I think that if I can understand these questions myself than it would be easy for me to speak to anyone. Both on scene or when I am writing I wish to have a feeling of talking to nearest friends. I wish to tell them what I realised in this life. I never accept the role of a judge, I am not a cool chronicler. My heart is always there. The question that worries me is how long we can walk this road of horror, how much a human being can bear. That’s why the poetics of tragedy are important for me. It is important when somebody says that he or she has read such horrible books and feels better, that a reader got tears and these were purifying tears. You should have all this things in mind and not just overwhelm people with horror.  (JC) Thank you and please accept our congratulations once again. We will be happy to meet you here in Stockholm in December!  (SA) Thank you, good bye!  (JC) Good bye! |
| Interview |  |
|  |  |
| ID | 0911 |
| Biographical | The first sixty-nine years of my life are summed up here, as far as I can remember them. I was born on 30 July 1945 in France, at 11 allée Marguerite, Boulogne-Billancourt, close to Paris. My brother Rudy was born on 5 October 1947. Until the age of four I was brought up by my Flemish maternal grandparents, meaning that at the start of my life I spoke only Flemish. Strange for someone who was to become a French writer.  By 1949, at the age of four, I was living with my brother in a house in Biarritz on the Basque coast, away from our parents who had put us in the care of a “governess.” In September 1950, my brother and I were baptised at the Église Saint-Martin in Biarritz, in the absence of our parents. My first day of school was at the Sainte-Marie school in Biarritz.  In 1951 my brother and I were back in Paris in our parents’ house at 15 quai de Conti. The next year we were sent to friends of my mother’s in Jouy-en-Josas in the outskirts of Paris, at 38 rue du Docteur-Kurzenne, and I was enrolled in the Jeanne-d’Arc school then the Jouy-en-Josas elementary school.  We went back to Paris in 1953, where I attended the elementary school of the rue du Pont-de-Lodi, in the 6th arrondissement, until June 1956. That year, we spent the summer with a friend of my father’s, Nathalie E. Puis, and in October I became a boarder at the Ecole du Montcel in Jouy-en-Josas, where I stayed until June 1960.  On 29 January 1957 my brother died.  On 18 January 1960 I ran away from boarding school, but because I was nonetheless such a good student they waited until the end of the school year to expel me. In August that year I stayed with an English family in Bournemouth, from where I ran away to spend a few days in London.  In September I became a boarder in the Collège Saint-Joseph de Thônes, in the mountains of Haute-Savoie, where I would remain for two years until June 1962. During this period I ran away to Geneva, Lausanne and Lyon, and I passed my first baccalaureate in Annecy, Haute-Savoie, in June 1962. In October, back in Paris, I entered the Lycée Henri-IV, first as a boarder then as a day student. In 1963, I failed my second baccalaureate. I got to know the writer Raymond Queneau, who took me to the summer cocktail party in the garden of Éditions Gallimard, but I did not dare tell him I wanted to be a writer.  In 1964, I obtained my second baccalaureate. This would be my only degree.  Without asking my opinion, my father enrolled me in the Lycée Montaigne in Bordeaux, far from Paris, to prepare for competitive entrance to the *grandes écoles*. I ran away after the very first day and got on a train for Paris. I registered at the Sorbonne until 1967 in order to delay my military service. But I never attended classes and I was what people in those days called a “phantom student.”  In July 1965 I left for Vienna, Austria, where I tried and failed to find work. That is where I started my first book. I would always remember Vienna fondly, and that must be why, 35 years later, I wrote about the Austrian writer Joseph Roth.  The next year, to make a living, I worked as a researcher in Carlo Ponti’s cinema production company, in particular on plans for a screen adaptation of André Malraux’s *La condition humaine* (“Man’s Fate”).  In 1967, I wrote songs for a singer of my age, Françoise Hardy. In June of that year, my first book was accepted by Éditions Gallimard. It appeared on 5 April 1968, entitled *La place de l’étoile*.  In September 1969 my second book appeared, *La ronde de nuit* (“Night Rounds”).  In January 1970, in a restaurant on the Champs-Élysées, I met a very pretty girl called Dominique Zehrfuss, and we married in September. Our witnesses were the writers André Malraux and Raymond Queneau. We had extended trips to Rome and Tunisia, and in Paris we lived in Montmartre.  In September 1972 my third book appeared, *Les boulevards de ceinture* (“Ring Roads”).  In January 1973 I collaborated with film maker Louis Malle on the screenplay for *Lacombe Lucien*, and the film was released in January 1974. The Swedish actor Holger Löwenadler had an important role in the film and impressed the French public. I was proud to have written his dialogue.  Our first daughter Zina was born on 22 October 1974.  In September 1975 my fourth novel appeared, *Villa Triste* followed by a fifth in April 1977: *Livret de famille*.  My daughter Marie was born on 1 September 1978. In November of that year I was awarded the Prix Goncourt for *Rue des Boutiques Obscures* (“Missing Person”).  In 1981, I published *Une jeunesse* in February, and in August, accompanied by my wife Dominique, I rediscovered London. I had not been back there since the time I ran away in August 1960, left to my own devices at the age of 15.  Books followed one after the other. In October 1982, *De si braves garçons*; in January 1985, *Quartier perdu* (“A Trace of Malice”); in September 1986, *Dimanches d’août*, and *Une aventure de Choura*, written in collaboration with my wife Dominique.  In 1988, while flicking through some old newspapers, I read in a *Paris-Soir* from December 1941 a missing person’s report about a girl called Dora Bruder. I spent years trying to track her down, and it was not until 1996 that I finally wrote the book dedicated to her.  Also in 1988, I published *Remise de peine* (“Suspended Sentences”), then *Catherine Certitude* in collaboration with the illustrator Jean-Jacques Sempé. More books followed in the next 25 years: *Vestiaire de l’enfance* (1989), *Voyage de noces* (“Honeymoon”) (1990), *Fleurs de ruine* (“Flowers of Ruin”) (1991), *Un cirque passe* (1992), *Chien de printemps* (“Afterimage”) (1993), *Les chiens de la rue du Soleil*, in collaboration with my daughter Zina (1994), *Du plus loin de l’oubli* (“Out of the Dark”) (1996), *Dora Bruder* (1997).  In 1998, I sent Éditions Gallimard the manuscript of the first novel of a young American writer I admired, Tristan Egolf, entitled *Lord of the Barnyard*. Seven years later he committed suicide. He was doubtless the greatest American writer of his generation.  I wrote more books: *Des inconnues* (1999), *La Petite Bijou* (2001), *Accident nocturne* (2003), *Un pedigree* (2005), *28 Paradis*, in collaboration with my wife Dominique (2005), *Dans le café de la jeunesse perdue* (2007), *L’horizon* (2010), *L’herbe des nuits* (2012), *Pour que tu ne te perdes pas dans le quartier* (2014). Over these years I spent time in Berlin, Rome and Stockholm.  All these details may seem monotonous but when you think about it, that is often what the life of a writer is. |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0911=PM  [Patrick Modiano] Hello.  [Hélène Hernmarck] Yes, Hello, sincere congratulations on receiving the Nobel Prize.  [PM] You’re very kind and I’m very touched.  [HH] My name is Hélène and I’m calling from Nobelprize.org. Thank you for giving us the time to ask you a few questions.  [PM] Ah, yes, yes, yes.  [HH] Where were you when you received the news?  [PM] I was actually in the street. Yes, I was in the street. It was my daughter who notified me.  [HH] Your daughter called you on your mobile?  [PM] Yes, yes, yes. I was very touched. It gave me even greater pleasure because I have a Swedish grandson.  [HH] Where were you, in the centre of Paris? In which particular street?  [PM] Oh, I was just next to the Jardin de Luxembourg.  [HH] Oh, wonderful. What does it mean to you to receive the Nobel Prize, what does it signify?  [PM] First of all … so unexpected, it’s something I never thought I would receive … it really touched me. It’s made me very emotional.  [HH] You’ve been a writer for a long time. Why do you write?  [PM] Well, I started very early, in my twenties. It’s becoming a long time now. It’s something natural, it’s something that’s part of my life.  [HH] You’ve written 20 or 30 books. Is there a certain book that you take greater pleasure in, which signifies more to you than the others?  [PM] Listen, it’s difficult. I always have the impression that I write the same book. Which means it’s already 45 years that I’ve been writing the same book in a discontinuous manner. You don’t really know your reader.  [HH] Now that you will become world famous which book would you recommend everyone to read?  [PM] Yes, I always have the impression that’s the last book I write.  [HH] What’s the title?  [PM] It’s called *Pour que tu ne te perdes pas dans le quartier.*  [HH] *Pour que tu ne te perdes pas dans le quartier?*  [PM] *Pour que tu ne te perdes pas dans le quartier.* It’s about losing perspective within your surroundings. The last book is always the one I recommend because it leaves you …  [HH] Wishing for more?  [PM] Yes, yes.  [HH] Are you going to celebrate tonight with the whole family?  [PM] Yes, yes, I want to be with my family. Yes. Yes, with my Swedish grandson that gives me so much pleasure and loves me a lot. It’s to him I dedicate this Prize. It is, after all, from his country.  [HH] Are you coming to Sweden in December?  [PM] Yes, yes, certainly!  [HH] With the whole family?  [PM] Yes, yes. [Laughs]  [HH] Do you have a big family?  [PM] No, not really, I just have two daughters and a grandson. So not a big family.  [HH] Thank you very much and once again congratulations.  [PM] Thank you. I hope what I’ve told you is not too confusing?  [HH] No, no, not at all. Have a great evening and warm congratulations again from Sweden and Nobelprize.org.  [PM] Oh, I’m so touched. |
| Interview |  |
| Q1 | What made you become a writer? |
|  | I think I became a writer because I didn’t know of anything else to do. Maybe some incident from my childhood influenced me. I remember reading James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* when I was only six years old, and I didn’t understand much of it, but I still finished it. Possibly that reading obsession influenced me so much that later in life I became a writer. When I was older, after I had studied a while, I even tried to enrol to study medicine but failed a science exam. I started writing as it was the only thing I knew. And it just continued, I was launched and … it was like a snowball effect. |
| Q32 | How do you work? How does an novel originate? |
|  | I quickly realised that it is difficult to get started when writing a novel. You have this dream of what you want to create, but it is like walking around a swimming pool and hesitating to jump in, because the water is too cold. Once you get started you have to write every day, otherwise you lose the momentum. When I was younger I just put off the writing until later in the day, but now I write early every morning, to get it done. I can only write for a few hours at a time, after that my attention fades. |
| Q33 | Do you know the end of your novel when you start writing? |
|  | To know the end is always difficult. That is why I have always envied some crime writers who can foresee the end. Not knowing the end is hard, because you are obliged to continue without knowing where you are heading, though towards the end you do get a feeling for in which direction you’re going. Knowing when and where to end is always a delicate matter; you have to find the exact moment in which to cut, to stop yourself. |
| Q21 | Who or what is your source of inspiration? |
|  | I have to see an exact, real life, place in front of me. A realistic place, a street, a building where it is all happening and from which I can then continue dreaming. One of my books starts in the tube with a girl believing she sees her mother whom she hasn’t seen for a long time, and then follows her. |
| Q17 | Do you have any advice for aspiring writers? |
|  | At my time I improvised, so it is difficult to give specific advice. Best advices are the mundane ones, not too precise ones, rather indications. Encourage aspiring writers to continue writing when things are going against them, when it feels hard. Explain the typical obstacles that occur and encourage and reassure them to continue, never to give up. |
| Q34 | What were you doing when you heard you had been awarded the Nobel Prize? |
|  | It is a bit strange, but I was walking in rue d’Assas very close to the Luxembourg Gardens in Paris when my daughter called me and told me the news. Rue d’Assas happens to be the street where August Strindberg\* lived when he was in Paris. So, I don’t know, but it is a curious coincidence with this Swedish connection. |
| ID | 0912 |
| Biographical | Alice Laidlaw Munro was born in Wingham, Ontario, Canada on July 10, 1931, the eldest child of Robert Eric Laidlaw (1901–76), a fox farmer, and Anne Clarke Chamney Laidlaw (1898–1959), a former schoolteacher. Members of her father’s family, having emigrated to Upper Canada from the Ettrick Valley on the Scottish borderlands in 1818, were among the exodus of settlers from Britain who moved to the Americas seeking land and new opportunities following the Napoleonic wars. These Laidlaws settled west of York (now Toronto) in Halton Township and began farming. They were later joined by the family of their brother, William Laidlaw, who had emigrated to Illinois but died there. Some of the next generation – Munro’s great-grandfather, Thomas Laidlaw (1836–1915), among them – in turn moved farther west during the early 1850s for land of their own in the Huron Tract of Canada West (now Ontario) near to Lake Huron in the area around Goderich in Morris Township. These Laidlaws were some of the first settlers of Huron County, Ontario, farming outside of Blyth. Munro’s grandfather William Cole Laidlaw (1864–1938) married Sarah Jane “Sadie” Code in January 1901, and in November of that year the couple produced their only child, Robert Eric, Munro’s father. Sadie Code’s father Thomas had come to Huron County from eastern Ontario, from Scotch Corners near Carleton Place, and for his part was descended from Irish Protestants from County Wicklow who had themselves emigrated to Canada at about the same time as the first Laidlaws. His sister Ann married and a son of hers, George Chamney (1853–1934) became Munro’s maternal grandfather. He and his wife, Bertha Stanley Chamney (1867–1935), had four children on the farm in Scotch Corners, three sons and a daughter, Anne Clarke Chamney, who became Munro’s mother.  Before she married Robert “Bob” Laidlaw in 1927 and moved to Wingham to establish a fur farm there, Anne had through ambition and determination gotten herself off of her parents’ farm – where her father had expected her to stay and work for free until she married – and put herself through the Ottawa Normal School, training as a teacher. Off on her own, she then taught school in Ontario and Alberta between 1919 and July 28, 1927, when she married Bob Laidlaw at St. John’s Anglican church, Innisville, the Chamneys’ family church. Having worked as long as she had, Anne Chamney had saved some money which the young couple used, along with a mortgage held by his parents, to establish their farm west of Wingham along the Maitland River and adjacent to a separate, low-lying area which most years flooded, called Lower Wingham or “Lowertown.” It was there that they brought their first baby, Alice Ann, home during the summer of 1931.  Beyond the facts of this familial and personal history, this background is one that Alice Munro’s readers know from her work. Commenting in a review of *The View From Castle Rock* (2006) in the London *Guardian*, Karl Miller has written “But then the whole corpus of Munro’s stories is a memoir, the novel of her life.” There, in that “family book,” as she once called it, Munro treats her ancestors’ emigration from Scotland and their settlement in Ontario; her parents’ meeting, beginnings, and strivings; her own presence there growing up, her moving away, and continual imaginative returns there through her writing. While not exclusively so, Munro’s stories are mostly set in and drawn from Huron County, Ontario, elaborating its people, its changing culture, its way of life. As Munro once told an interviewer, “I am intoxicated by this particular landscape, at home with the brick houses, the falling down barns, the trailer parks, burdensome old churches …” Or as she wrote of her home place in 1974, having just returned to live again in Ontario after more than twenty years in British Columbia, on Canada’s west coast, “This ordinary place is sufficient, everything here is touchable and mysterious.” Munro’s probings of the place where she was born, the place that she went away from and returned to, the place where she has largely lived since, are seen in her earliest stories from the 1950s through her most recent. *Dear Life* (2012) ends with a “Finale” of four pieces – “not quite stories” – in which the young Munro and her parents are recalled and, yet again, recreated. The last one, “Dear Life” (2011), ends with the invocation of Munro’s mother’s last days and funeral. Introducing these pieces there, Munro writes, “I believe that they are the first and last – and the closest – things I have to say about my own life.”  As “Dear Life” shows again, Alice Laidlaw began her life as something of the celebrated only child of Anne and Bob Laidlaw. They would have two more children, a son born in 1936 and another daughter in 1937, but for those first years Alice was her mother’s own concern. Mrs. Laidlaw was socially ambitious and tended toward activities that set her apart from both other residents of Lower Wingham and from her husband’s family who lived nearby. She drove a car, a mark of independence in a married woman then. Living at the end of “The Flats Road” – as Munro would characterize it in *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) – the need for society led Anne and her daughter through “Lowertown” to Wingham proper, where a better class of people lived. Lower Wingham was a place, as Munro describes it in *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), where “the social structure” “ran from factory workers and foundry workers down to large improvident families of casual bootleggers and unsuccessful thieves.” Living as they did at “the edge of town” – the title of one of Munro’s early uncollected stories (1955) – the Laidlaws in effect ascended the social scale as they traveled into Wingham, set on higher ground, above Lower Town. Their home, a solid brick house built in the 1870s, was literally an island during the spring flooding of “Lowertown,” but in Munro’s early years it was also an island of social aspiration – her mother’s, borne of the same determination which made her a schoolteacher and led her to marry. Even so, she did not entirely fit into Wingham. For his part, Bob Laidlaw worked building the family fur farm and, having grown up nearby, he fit in well – and he was well liked.  Alice Laidlaw began school in 1937 at the Lower Town School and spent two years there, completing grades one and three. It was a rough place, one Munro details in her story “Privilege” (1977). Beginning with grade four in the fall of 1939, though, she attended the Wingham schools – where her mother preferred to have her – and that required a daily walk of just under three kilometers, traveling through Lower Town, across the Lower Town bridge into Wingham, and through the town to the school. “I was eight, it was quite a walk, but I liked it,” Munro recalled. This round trip continued until she graduated high school in 1949; these walks are a key to understanding Munro’s point-of-view, for in walking to school she ascended the social ladder and, returning, descended it through Lower Town, past its “casual bootleggers and unsuccessful thieves.”  By the time she was eleven in 1942, Alice Laidlaw was a reader. She has written of her early enthusiasm for Lucy Maud Montgomery and for Dickens’s *A Child’s History of England*, and by then too she had discovered Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*. She had also, through her walks back and forth to school and others nearby the farm, begun to see herself as “different, and different in what I considered a favorable way,” she has said. In such difference is Munro’s beginning as a writer. By the time she was eleven and had discovered Tennyson she had begun to write poetry, and she was “always making up stories in her mind.”  Such a scene occurs in her “Boys and Girls” (1964), and Munro has also said that when she was creating such stories they were “half and half,” partly imaginative and partly imitative of things she had read. Beginning then and throughout high school Munro worked on an imitation of *Wuthering Heights*, saying that it “was the soul of fiction I was trying to capture on my own …” She wanted to be a part of the excitement, she has also said.  By the summer of 1943, just as Munro was turning twelve, a salient fact of her life became evident: Anne Chamney Laidlaw was showing the advancing symptoms of Parkinson’s Disease. At the same time, her father’s fur business had begun to falter – he would eventually close it and take a job on the night shift of the local foundry. Speaking of this time, she has said: “the lack of money and Mother’s illness coming at the same time was pretty bad. But in adolescence I was very self-protected, I was ambitious and a lot of the time I was quite happy. But I ignored this. I knew it, but I didn’t want to be tainted by tragedy. I didn’t want to live in a tragedy.” As her Mother’s illness progressed, though, Alice’s role within the family changed. She took over the domestic duties – cleaning and cooking, looking after her brother and sister – and lived ever more within her own imagination, taking walks, thinking her thoughts.  Outwardly, Alice Laidlaw’s years in high school (1944–49) were usual enough. Owing to the situation at home – which her friends and the community understood – she did not have much of a social life; she did participate in some school activities – in an operetta like Del Jordan’s in *Lives of Girls and Women*, for instance – and also unequivocally established her academic excellence. She was the 1949 class valedictorian and also received a scholarship for two years at the University of Western Ontario in London, having the highest standing in English of any student who applied there. She had also looked into school teaching then and, had the scholarship not materialized, would probably have gone in that direction.  Beginning her studies at Western that autumn, Alice Laidlaw initially studied journalism but shifted to Honors English for her second year and won that year’s prize for the best grades in the major. In the spring of 1950 her first published story appeared in *Folio*, the undergraduate literary magazine; that story, “The Dimensions of a Shadow,” would be followed by two more there. During university, she spent about half of her time on academics and the other half writing – she has said that then she could feel the writing taking over. Another contributor to *Folio* was Gerald Fremlin, an older student and war veteran; Laidlaw noticed him and he noticed her, but by then she had met and was seeing James Munro. About two years older, from Oakville, Munro was the eldest son of a senior accountant at the Timothy Eaton department store in Toronto, and studying Honors History. He had aesthetic interests and was something of a romantic. Jim fell hard for Alice and, by the end of her second year, the couple had decided to marry. Jim opted to take a general degree and got a job with the Eaton store in Vancouver. They were married in Wingham at the Laidlaws’ home on December 29, 1951, and left for Vancouver by train immediately after a wedding dinner; only the parents, Alice’s siblings, and two close friends attended. One of the friends recalled the ceremony as “about as modest a wedding as you could have.”  When she married Alice Munro was just twenty years old – for her twentyfirst birthday the next July her husband gave her a typewriter as a gift. Together these two facts indicate Munro’s direction. With her scholarship money ending, she could either find another way to live or go home to Wingham. Should she do that, her Mother’s health and responsibilities there would require curtailing her own ambitions. And while she and her new husband came from very different class backgrounds – upper-class husbands based on Jim are recurrent throughout Munro’s work – there is no question but that he saw his new wife as a writer and supported her work. Thus the typewriter. Looking back, Munro has described this moment as “the twin choices of my life.”  At the same time the newlyweds embarked on the sort of conventional marriage common in postwar North America. Jim went to work downtown in a suit and tie, Alice kept house and cooked, but also read and wrote. Their first daughter, Sheila Margaret was born in October 1953; a second, Catherine Alice, was born in late July 1955 but, lacking functioning kidneys, died the same day; Jenny Alison followed in June 1957. They eventually settled in West Vancouver. Munro once recalled these years in “The Moons of Jupiter” (1978), writing of “wives yawning, napping, visiting, drinking coffee, and folding diapers; husbands coming home at night from the city across the water. Every night I kissed my homecoming husband in his wet Burberry and hoped he might wake me up …” “We had become a cartoon couple, more middle-aged in our twenties than we would be in middle age.” During these years too Munro read widely – it was in the late 1950s that she discovered Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples* (1949), an important influence – and tried to produce a novel. She never really liked Vancouver.  No novel emerged but stories did. Even before her marriage Munro had made contact with Robert Weaver at the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC); he produced a radio program called *Canadian Short Stories* and was looking for suitable contributions. In May 1951 he bought “The Strangers” from her, the first of fourteen stories he would broadcast. Weaver championed Canadian writing through the CBC and the *Tamarack Review*, a literary magazine, between the late 1940s and mid-1980s. He was critical to Munro’s career: an editor, advisor, and facilitator. He treated her seriously as a writer and was, beyond Munro’s husband and his own colleagues, among the very few who knew she wrote. Weaver encouraged, helped, and made suggestions – he is largely responsible for Munro’s early career, a fact she has acknowledged often. Throughout the 1950s and ’60s, Munro had stories broadcast on the CBC and she placed them in various Canadian periodicals – *The Canadian Forum*, *Chatelaine*, *Mayfair*, *Montrealer*, *Queen’s Quarterly*, and the *Tamarack Review*.  By 1963 Jim Munro had tired of working at Eaton’s – he was interested in selling books but the company had ignored requests to work in that department – so the couple decided to move to Victoria and open a bookstore. Munro’s Books opened that fall – it is still flourishing there. Independent bookstores were rare then, paperback lines were new, and so the Munros faced a real challenge. The work brought them together to make a go of the store – Munro has described the first years, from 1963–66, as the happiest years in the marriage: “We were very poor, but our aims were completely wound up in surviving in this place.” In September 1966 another daughter, Andrea Sarah, arrived a month after the Munros had moved into a large Tudor-style house which Munro did not want and never liked. Going there affected the marriage, as Munro told Catherine Ross: “something happened right then. Something pulled apart.” That this was happening during the 1960s is relevant: social mores were changing and, for her part, Munro was more sympathetic to the tumult, youth movements, and changes than her husband was.  Early in 1967 the publication of Munro’s first book began to come together. Earle Toppings, head of trade books at the Ryerson Press, had approached her in late 1964 about the possibility. Urged on by Weaver, Toppings and others at Ryerson had been collecting Munro’s stories as they appeared in magazines. The editor assigned to the book, Audrey Coffin, was “joyously” enthusiastic about Munro’s stories and wrote to her that they needed new stories to round out the volume. Domestic responsibilities and a five-month-old baby notwithstanding, Munro produced “Postcard,” “Walker Brothers Cowboy,” and “Images” – the last two the strongest stories in *Dance of the Happy Shades*, published in September 1968. It is dedicated to Robert E. Laidlaw. Weaver wrote the jacket copy and, as it turned out, he also served on that year’s Governor-General’s Award committee. Because of his long association and advocacy of Munro, he tried to withdraw from any discussion of her book, but at that point the other jurors told him Munro’s book had won. It was very well reviewed and, once the Governor-General’s Award was announced, one of the Victoria papers headlined its story “Literary Fame Catches City Mother Unprepared.”  Munro’s first book changed things for her. While some literary people had become aware of her writing – she had gotten support from Margaret Laurence during the 1960s – new people sought her out because of her writing: Margaret Atwood, John Metcalf, and Audrey Thomas among them. With the 1971 publication of *Lives of Girls and Women*, interconnected stories called a novel that became a feminist *cri de coeur*, Munro’s reputation grew further, and it did so at a time of increasing cultural nationalism in English Canada. Its writers were being noticed, valued, and celebrated in ways they had not been.  These attentions came at a difficult time. Munro knew that her marriage had faltered and in the early 1970s she decided to leave it. There were periods of living apart and sharing the children in Victoria, and of travel with them, but in 1973 she left British Columbia for good and moved to back to Ontario. Settling again in London, she initially commuted to Toronto to teach creative writing at York University. Seeking other opportunities to support herself as a writer, she concentrated on her own work and expanded her connections within the writing community. Munro was appointed Writer-in-Residence at the University of Western Ontario for 1974–75.  Living close to Wingham, Munro visited her father there – Bob had remarried after the death of Anne Laidlaw in 1959 – and so began rediscovering the textures of the home place she had been writing about through memory for over twenty years from far away. She was then working on the stories that became *Something I’ve Been Meaning to Tell You* (1974), her third book. Some of these were reworked versions of older pieces, but the best were altogether new and some of them – “Winter Wind” (1974), “The Ottawa Valley” (1974) – showed the imaginative effects of her return to Ontario. During this time too she wrote “Home” (1974), a memoir that even more starkly defines those effects. Returned home, Munro had begun a new life.  Yet two more steps were to be taken. In August 1974 Munro was interviewed on CBC Radio by Harry Boyle, another writer from Huron County. Among its listeners were two persons who proved pivotal to Munro’s life and career. The first, Douglas Gibson, was editorial director of the trade division of Macmillan of Canada; hearing the interview, he used it as an opportunity to write to Munro and begin pursuit of her as a Macmillan author. In this he succeeded completely, publishing her next book, *Who Do You Think You Are?* (1978), as well as all of her books since as her Canadian editor. As Munro has often said, he has been singular as an editor for her because he never asked for anything other than short stories. When he left Macmillan for McClelland & Stewart in 1986 to found his own imprint, Douglas Gibson Books, Munro elected to fight to go with him – her *The Progress of Love* (1986) was that imprint’s first book.  The second notable person hearing Munro’s interview with Boyle that August day in 1974, even more important, was Gerald Fremlin. Munro had shared the pages of the April 1950 *Folio* with him, knew him, and was attracted to him when they were students at Western. Deducing from her comments in the interview that she had moved back to Ontario, Fremlin reconnected with her. A physical geographer, he had retired from a career with the Canadian government and returned to his hometown in Huron County, Clinton, to look after his elderly mother in the house he grew up in. In August 1975 Munro moved to Clinton to live with Fremlin there. Returned to Huron County after over twenty years away, living just thirty-five kilometers south of Wingham where her father still was, Alice Munro had really come home.  Without Fremlin’s unplanned reconnection, Munro says she would not have returned to Huron County on her own. But returning there had immediate and clear effects on her work, even though Munro said at the time that she was not sure she would keep writing. She began working with Gibson on a text to accompany a book of Ontario photographs, “Places at Home,” and while the book was never published, Munro incorporated much of it into *Who Do You Think You Are?*. These were stark vignettes revealing close scrutiny to the physical details of place and, at the same time, they reveal in Munro’s writing what might be called a new “geological awareness.” Munro shared with Fremlin an interest in land forms, geological history, historical geography; throughout their time together, Munro has said, driving about Huron County (and other places too) and studying the land has been their greatest shared recreation. But returning to Huron County in 1975, by then scrutinizing the detail of her home place from a new perspective, by bringing these new perspectives into her work, Munro transformed her writing – *Who Do Your Think You Are?* (published as *The Beggar Maid* [1979] in the United States and Britain) shows that transformation throughout. There is a new immediacy, greater directness, and a more complex engagement with the local culture in those stories. Munro’s return to Huron County showed immediately.  Although she did not hear Munro’s interview with Boyle, Virginia Barber, a literary agent in New York, had begun thinking about her – she approached Munro’s former editor in Toronto about her in early 1976 and, in March of that year, approached Munro directly. After corresponding about the role of a literary agent, the two met that summer in Toronto and confirmed a business relation. Munro was then working on the stories that became *Who Do You Think You Are?* and, in November, she sent seven of them to Barber. Her agent then set to work at once and by the middle of that month Charles McGrath, a young fiction editor at the *New Yorker*, let Barber know that they would buy “Royal Beatings” and returned the rest of the stories to her. By the time that story appeared in March 1977 the *New Yorker* had considered ten of Munro’s stories and bought another, “The Beggar Maid” (1977). The editors knew that in Munro they had a real find, so beginning in 1978 she has had a right-of-first-refusal contract with the *New Yorker* and altogether has published sixty-two contributions there. In October 2013, just after Munro’s Nobel Prize in Literature was announced, the *New Yorker* republished her “The Bear Came Over the Mountain” (1999–2000) as a tribute to one of its own.  But in 1977 Munro’s relation with the *New Yorker* was just beginning, and once they had passed on most of the other stories Barber submitted them to other commercial magazines. She placed stories that figured in *Who Do You Think You Are?* in both Canadian and U. S. outlets: *Chatelaine*, *Ms.*, *Redbook*, *Saturday Night*, *Toronto Life*, and *Viva*. During the 1980s Munro’s periodical appearances became almost wholly international; Barber added the *Atlantic Monthly*, *GQ – Gentleman’s Quarterly*, *Grand Street*, *Granta*, *Mademoiselle*, and *Paris Review*; in the 1990s, *The London Review of Books* had a story and, during the 2000s, the *American Scholar*, *Harper’s*, *New Statesman*, and *Virginia Quarterly Review* were added. Since 1979, only two stories have been in Canadian publications. Throughout, the *New Yorker* has remained the primary venue for her stories.  Concurrent with her submission of Munro’s new stories to magazines in late 1977, Barber also sought an American publisher for Munro’s next book. Her first three had been published there by McGraw-Hill though not, the agent thought, very much to Munro’s advantage, gauged either by money or by increased reputation. Barber arranged an auction of the rights and, initially, W. W. Norton looked to publish the book, one that would take a different form than that envisioned in Canada by Gibson and Macmillan. During 1978 the Norton editor was pushing her to make a novel of the material and, through this process, those suggestions had an effect on Munro’s own conception of it. Due to be published by Macmillan in November, on a Saturday in mid-September Munro called Gibson and told him that she wanted to take the book off the press and restructure it, dropping stories, reshaping some, adding others; she would pay the costs. They did just that, and this episode is now celebrated in the history of Canadian publishing. It also shows Munro focused and sharp, a writer absolutely bent on reaching the forms she seeks, and one defining a new relation – a closer one than previously – to her materials.  Norton never published its version. Munro’s editor left the firm and Barber and Munro decided to seek another publisher. They took it to Alfred A. Knopf, where Munro began working with Ann Close in late 1978, just as *Who Do You Think You Are?* was finally being published in Canada. Like Gibson in Canada, Close is still Munro’s editor in the U. S. With her arrival, the third person in Munro’s editorial triumvirate was in place. Beginning with *The Beggar Maid: Stories of Flo and Rose* (1979) from Knopf, itself a slightly different version of *Who*, Barber, Close, and Gibson have worked together to produce eleven original story collections and three volumes of selected stories. Working together and with a succession of *New Yorker* editors – who have often helped reshape Munro’s stories for its pages, although sometimes those changes have been dropped in book versions – they provided the literary foundation for her reputation and celebrity. Although Barber retired in 2003, she has remained involved with Munro’s career, seeing new stories and celebrating such triumphs as the Man Booker International Prize in 2009 and the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature.  Once Munro returned to Huron County in 1975 to live with Fremlin in Clinton, most of her activities that might be cited here might well be seen as commonplace. Her father, with whom she have developed a new and different relationship since she had come back to Ontario, died from heart troubles during the summer of 1976; he had taken to writing himself in previous years, and Munro arranged for the publication of a book of his, *The McGregors* (1979), from Macmillan. His passing also allowed Munro a greater freedom in her use of childhood memories. In 1976 too Munro received the only honorary degree she has accepted, from the University of Western Ontario – becoming a graduate of that university at last. During the late 1970s too Munro became active – unusually so, given that she has never been very politically involved – in efforts to defend literature from people in Ontario who were seeking to censor Canadian works in high school curricula. Her friend Margaret Laurence’s *The Diviners* came under particular scrutiny, but *Lives of Girls and Women* was reviled too. Munro’s defense of these books, and of literature generally, had a particular sharpness to it, all more so since one of the forums she spoke at took place in Clinton – her neighbors, people she saw daily on Clinton’s streets, made up the audience. In 1980 the Wingham *Advance-Times* took exception to some remarks about Wingham erroneously attributed to her in a national magazine and published an anti-Alice Munro editorial, “A Genius of Sour Grapes.” Munro really was home.  Such instances largely ended during the 1980s as Munro’s reputation grew through her ongoing and frequent publication, and because of the long list of prizes she has received for her work. She and Fremlin lived in Clinton, saw friends and relatives, cross-country skied, travelled about. Each of them worked. They bought a place in Comox, British Columbia and began spending winters there, driving back and forth by various routes. Though largely averse to visiting-writer positions, Munro accepted one that brought her close to friends and relatives at the University of British Columbia in early 1980 and another later that year that took them to Australia. They returned there for an extended holiday in 1983. She also traveled to Europe, spending time and doing family research for *The View From Castle Rock* in Scotland and, on another trip, spending some extended time in Ireland. As her reputation grew, Munro abandoned book tours and did fewer public events, although she did do some and regularly traveled to accept many of the awards which she has won for her work. As each new book has been published – there have been ten since *The Beggar Maid* – Munro has emerged for interviews and attended to her celebrity. Yet she has also remained elusive, read and reviewed but not that often seen in the media. Her life has been quiet, lived mostly in Clinton among friends and family, concentrated on the richness of her literary imagination. And as her life has continued Munro has, as everyone does, experienced the vicissitudes of being: illnesses, slowing down, the deaths of friends and loved ones. Gerald Fremlin passed away in April 2013. Eighty-two years old herself, Munro’s own situation is that of a person her age. She has said that she has stopped writing. *Dear Life*, with its “Finale,” seems to suggest that this is so.  In 1980 Munro contributed her papers to the University of Calgary Archives – there have been three major accessions and the collection is now just over eight meters of textual records. These records are variable from the 1950s and early ’60s, offer great detail from *Lives of Girls and Women* (1971) though the stories contained in *The Progress of Love* (1986), and become variable again after that. Even so, the *Alice Munro Fonds* – which a very few scholars have availed themselves to – tell an eloquent and precise story detailing the focus of Alice Munro’s life. In draft upon draft, beginning upon beginning, story after story, version after version, revised ending after further revised ending, Munro’s papers reveal her to be just what she is: an artist who has lived her life mostly in Clinton, quietly, focused ever and always on her writing. She has been bent on discovering, as she once wrote, “the rest of the story” in each and every one she has produced.  Throughout her life and career, Alice Munro has meditated the life she has lived herself, that she has seen others live, the lives she has known and imagined. Through their complexity, through their clarity, and through their precision, the stories Munro has published capture the very feelings of what it is like to live, to be alive. The feeling of just being a human being. From first to last – whichever one the last may be – Munro’s stories reveal her as a consummate artist who is without question among the most accomplished masters of the short story. And of prose fiction. In her hands, the short story is complete, whole. Her work is a triumph. As Munro once said of the writing of another, “so this is how it should be done.”  From [*The Nobel Prizes*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/nobel-prizes.html) *2013*. Published on behalf of The Nobel Foundation by Science History Publications/USA, division Watson Publishing International LLC, Sagamore Beach, 2014  This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and later published in the book series [*Les Prix Nobel/*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lesprix.html)[*Nobel Lectures*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lectures/index.html)*/*[*The Nobel Prizes*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/nobel-prizes.html). The information is sometimes updated with an addendum submitted by the Laureate. |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast | **“It’s the insight, the work, the way you give yourself to the story that matters”** Listen to a heartwarming conversation with Canadian ’master of short stories’ and literature laureate Alice Munro.  This conversation between the Nobel Prize’s Adam Smith and Munro took place soon after she was awarded the 2013 Nobel Prize in Literature. In the episode, she reflects on how she creates short stories, what these stories have meant to her and her readers and why she started writing. Munro also tells Smith what she hopes to achieve with her writing: conveying stories that resonate, as well as surprise, her readers.  The host of this podcast is nobelprize.org’s Adam Smith, joined by Clare Brilliant. This podcast was first released in 2013 as part of the series ‘Nobel Prize Talks’ but was republished in a new format on 26 October, 2023.  Below you find a transcript of the podcast interview. The transcript was created using speech recognition software. While it has been reviewed by human transcribers, it may contain errors.  Clare Brilliant: Welcome to Nobel Prize Conversations and this encore presentation of our December 2013 talk with literature laureate Alice Munro. I’m Claire Brilliant and I’m here with our host Adam Smith. Hi Adam.  Adam Smith: Hi.  Brilliant: We’re actually about to revisit six podcasts – one from each prize category – and we’re kicking off with Literature, which is the oldest podcast of the bunch at just over 10 years old. Do you even remember when you recorded this, Adam?  Smith: Oh, very much so because it was quite a coup getting this interview with Alice Munro quite soon after she’d been awarded the prize. She didn’t speak often. So it was just a joy to be able to record it.  Brilliant: I think that really comes across in re-listening to the episode. In getting ready for this season we’ve been re-listening to quite a few of the upcoming episodes and we’ve seen how some conversations like this one have just aged very well. It feels so timeless. Why do you think this conversation was so good?  Smith: Partly because I think it was a conversation. You know, these Nobel Prize conversations sometimes they’re more conversational than other times when they’re a bit more interview-y. This one did feel like we’d somehow achieved that nirvana of proper conversation. Also because she’s dealing really with the subject of writing the short story.  Brilliant: I liked how she said that she saw the prize as a vindication, something that could make people like her who take short stories feel comforted. I really liked the way she described that.  Smith: I think one of the things about this conversation that I like is that she didn’t talk often about her writing her process. It seems to me that to a certain extent she’s also discovering things about herself in it. Maybe that’s saying too much, but she seems excited about talking about it and some of the things she says seem to excite her. That’s nice.  Brilliant: There were so many parts of this conversation when she described her process in such appealing ways. Another element that I remembered was how when she was younger when she was writing, she was more melancholy than when she was older. The way she described that was really interesting, I thought.  Smith: Yes, it’s hopeful that one gets happier as one gets older. That’s true.  Brilliant: So, I think it’s time to get started now.  Smith: Absolutely. Yes, let’s go back to those days and weeks just after Alice Munro had been awarded a Nobel Prize in 2013 and listen to this encore presentation of Nobel Prize Conversation.  Alice Munro: Hello.  Smith: It must have been a quite bewildering nu a few weeks since the prize was awarded.  Munro: Bewildering, but very, very pleasant. Very nice.  Smith: That’s nice to hear because you are notoriously quite a reserved person who doesn’t expose yourself to the media very much.  Munro: Well, probably not, but I’m really not quite a dragon. I’m quite and can be quite happy,  Smith: That’s nice. So have you actually enjoyed then the attention that the prize has brought?  Munro: I have enjoyed the whole thing. It’s wonderful in it’s just not necessarily this fact of me getting it as much as the whole thing. There is such a feeling, everybody who’s come to see me about it and it’s feeling of the importance of well, of the arts and that, that people are so interested and they’re so delightful to me. There’s a feeling that just that you’ve done the right thing.  Smith: It must be very nice to have that kind of app probation once in your life for me.  Munro: That is it. And because, you go for a long time with writing, just wondering what you’re doing and how it’s working and things like that. And you love finding out that it’s worked well.  Smith: And you were at pains to say on the day of the announcement that you saw this as a prize not only for yourself, but also for the short story.  Munro: Oh, very much so. All that I’ve written, and when I began to write short stories, there was not a very good feeling about it. It was something that you were supposed to sort of cut your teeth on until you got big and brave enough to write a novel. And so I knew I wasn’t probably going to write a novel. I wanted very much to do short stories, and I went, oh, I’m doing them, but I see this as a vindication. I see it as something that, as that made people who like me want to take short stories seriously made them feel comforted and to feel that it’s something you could work at seriously your whole life.  Smith: I’m sure that this isn’t an easy question to answer, but why did you specifically want to write short stories rather than moving to longer forms?  Munro: Well, I think it was because when I started to write, I was a young housewife and mother and I could not look ahead to doing a great deal of, though I know lots of housewives do write novels, I couldn’t seem to, to fit it in that way. Then I started writing short stories, thinking I would just do this for a while. Then I became so interested in the style itself that it became not an idea that you were doing until you grew up and wrote novels, but something that I never tired of doing, and I wanted to do it so much. To have that recognised is just wonderful for me.  Smith: Do you think of it as a sort of, I mean, it’s a fragmentary form, I suppose, so is it a fragmentary form which is well suited to a society which is becoming more atomised, less unified?  Munro: Perhaps that’s true, though. I don’t think of it necessary as fragmentary. I would think of it just as maybe condensed in a way, but given enormous importance in not very large space. And that’s what I particularly like about it. I like the glow you can get from a story. It’s a kind of shock to your system, a good shock and sometimes a frightening shock, but something that you can do with a short story in a very strong way that isn’t as easy in a longer piece of writing or isn’t possible. I think they’re very different forms, but I like very much working in the story form, so I write rather long stories.  Smith: Is that partly what you’re setting out to do, you’re setting out to arrest people, to shock them?  Munro: Perhaps shock is the wrong word, but yes. To arrest them, to surprise them, to make them think of something a little different from that perhaps that they started out thinking of the way the story was going. Something like that. No, I’m not a tall didactic as a writer, so I don’t wanna sound that way. I just want them to be surprises.  Smith: Are they also surprises for you? Do you know what the surprises are going to…  Munro: Be? Oh, goodness, yes. That’s what I like. I like very much to find out that what I was writing about does not turn out to be the main thing I was writing about and have to start again because I find things in myself and in the work I’m doing first in myself and then in the work I’m doing. And this will surprise me sometimes.  Smith: So when you are writing, are you writing for yourself alone for yourself and the audience alone?  Munro: I think I’m writing for myself alone in the beginning. I am. And then, of course, I want other people to read it because I do like communication very much, but I want just something that I think is worth communicating and that’s where the work comes in.  Smith: So you are the stories you write, of course, they’re published individually, I mean, especially for instance in places like the New Yorker, but then they’re collected into these volumes. Do you have the collection in mind as you are writing and creating?  Munro: No, not at all. I never can see further than the novel I’m working on. And then, towards the end, I’ll have a batch of stories and I will see them that there’s something about them that they’re, there’s not a very large similarity about them, but there’s something in them that shows what I was thinking at the time and that I maybe really didn’t even know was there. But it is important then that they go together, but they don’t go together while I’m working on them.  Smith: Where do you write?  Munro: Oh, well, in the house somewhere. I was starting writing when I had small children, and so I wrote when they were having their naps, and I would be at probably just sitting in a chair, a comfortable chair and writing by hand. After a while, I started learning to type for quite a long time. I didn’t have a special place to work, and I wrote when I could. Then I got a place that became much more certain about doing it.  Smith: Did the place help in making you a more confident writer?  Munro: No, I vary between wild enthusiasm and great doubts. That never stops,  Smith: Really?  Munro: Then you try to overcome the doubts, mind you don’t just get satisfied with them.  Smith: You still, as a writer feel doubt about what, what is the doubt?  Munro: Heavens yes.  Smith: What’s the doubt about?  Munro: Doubt is about whether I can translate this story that I see in my head with all the changes and the things that are half hidden, and can I get this through to the person who is reading the story? And I can’t explain any further than. It doesn’t mean that I make the story more or less elaborate. I just try to make it, well, I make it clearer to myself. I more and more see what I want to say, and then I work at saying it.  Smith: So are you surrounded by sort of by sheaves of notes of stories that have begun and not been finished? Or do you tend to finish it?  Munro: No, no. I usually, if I, if I see that the story isn’t going well, I usually just throw it out and I might come back to it much later having seen some value in it. But if I worked at a story, say for a week, and the story isn’t kind of doing its job for me, I get rid of it, forget about it, find another, that’s why stories are a lot more or less intense maybe than novels. Do you think so?  Smith: Yes. That, yes. That again, that makes perfect sense. You don’t have the sort of burden of a long-term relationship.  Munro: That sounds like marriage. But anyway, what I mean is, it’s not that I’m not working hard enough, but it’s that there’s something that in me is resisting the story because maybe I, at heart, don’t like it. I don’t like it for some, maybe for a certain glibness about it. This can be a problem with stories. And maybe because it doesn’t have the mystery I want or just the sense of involvement I want. Like if you start a story, which I don’t anymore, just because, you know, you say, well, I think that would make a good story, it generally doesn’t work, and I just stop it because it has to have that feeling. That excites me a lot. I have to be excited by  Smith: It’s very nice. I mean, again, it sounds like a very intense relationship you have with this.  Munro: It is very intense.  Smith: I hadn’t sort of thought I might ask this question, but given that you mentioned that you give it a week to sort of prove itself. How long does it take to write a story? Can you answer that?  Munro: Oh, it can be any length of tall. I think the shortest might be a month or six, you know. But often I will go back to a story and I will think I have finished the story. This isn’t when I’ve given up a story, but when I have finished a story and just put it away, I maybe even sent it to a publisher. And then I think, oh, I know what should be done with that to make it better. And I will have thought that it was as good as it could be, but I will haul it out and I will haul it back from the publisher, and I will fool around with it some more. And sometimes the people who are printing the story don’t think this is particularly necessary, but I’ve gotten them mostly so they’ll do it anyway. I sound like a tired.  Smith: So as the story moves from being, if you like, your possession to being other people’s possession, do you start to think of particular readers?  AMunro: No, no, I never think of readers as a particular kind of readers. I guess what I think is, if people like my stories and not everybody does if people like my stories and, and I’ve done the best I could with it, they’re going to like this one. Because I find too, maybe in the stories that I, other people’s stories I don’t like other people’s stories all the same. But in general, if I like what they’re doing, I’m going to like pretty well the way they’ve done it.  Smith: That I suppose begs the question of whether you feel your voice has been pretty much the same throughout your writing career?  Munro: I think so, yes. I think it’s been the same, but I’ve been in the way that I’ve been the same person. But, as a person, you do change. I think that’s what’s happened maybe with my stories, oddly enough. I think that in the beginning I was much more melancholy…  Smith: Mm-Hmm.  Munro: …than later because, and I think maybe a lot of us are like that.  Smith: Is that a reflection of you as a person? Were you more melancholy then, or is it just the way you wrote?  Munro: No, I think it was a characteristic of youth.  Smith: Yes.  Munro: Not necessarily anything I knew I was doing, but just that you’re apt to see things that way. Then later on when you’ve seen a few things that may actually make you very melancholy, you could kind of cheer up a bit.  Smith: True.  Munro: Sorry about this.  Smith: It’s not nonsense at all I think, but do you think writing gets easier as you get older?  Munro: I think a certain kind of facility gets easier. I’m not sure that that you know and facility is not enough. So I’m not sure that writing gets any easier at all. The only thing that gets easier is the fact that you’ve done this before. You’ve felt that something wasn’t working. You’ve been in despair about something much earlier in your life, and you’ve done it all your life. The despair has in general, changed to something that you could be more or less satisfied with. So I think as you’re older, you get to know that will probably happen and you don’t feel in such utter despair. But I’m not promising anything. Despair is still around.  Smith: But I suppose then that’s just, as in writing as in life, that what you just  Munro: Said? Yeah. Very much. Yes.  Smith: In fact, have you found that life is easier as you get older or maybe even happier as you get older?  Munro: I think it’s happier, but I think partly that’s been because I’ve been lucky.  Smith: Mm-Hmm.  Munro: I don’t know if there’s any general rules about this. There are certain things that can happen to people that make it very difficult to maintain any kind of happiness.  Smith: Sure. But I suppose quite a lot of older people say things say that one worries less about life as you get  Munro: Older. That’s what I think one worries less. But I think a lot depends on, I haven’t had a very unhappy life. I haven’t had big terrible things happen to me. This is partly even because of the chances of living in a country that’s been fairly comfortable. So that the outside things are not as ap to interfere with and hurt you but other things can come, but you’ve just didn’t expect.  Smith: In your stories you write quite a lot about very disagreeable things happening to people. You explore that territory.  Munro: Disagreeable, yes. By saying that terrible things haven’t happened. I mean, that I haven’t been in major wars, the kind of things from outside that come at us and that I have lived in a fairly comfortable country my whole life. That’s what I meant. But the things that can come from inside from a person’s fear of themselves or of their lack of what should I say, lack of confidence that you can have lack of confidence, even though you may live in a very nice, confident country. You can have all kinds of personal problems at that. You’re going to get in the way of, and these are one of the interesting things to write, I think not, I mean, not to write stories that are depressing. I don’t feel I do that. But stories that get into the unexpected, the lonely, the personal under what’s under the surface, and this I think can be not so much by what cabins to you in your life, is just what kind of person you are. When I was a little girl, I read the story of Hans Christian Anderson, do you know that story where the princess turns into a…  Smith: Mermaid? The little mermaid.  Munro: The mermaid? Yes, yes, yes. It was so sad I couldn’t bear it. I walked around and around in the garden and made up a happier story that had a happy ending on the princess and I forget just how it is. But anyway, she got the man, the Prince. It took me quite a while to realise that I had just done this in my own story. It wasn’t therefore changed in the world. I think you come to something like that you can’t, there are things you can’t change or do anything about, and that’s when the writing gets quite important to you and intense in a way that has not to do so much with reception or other people, but just what you get, what you find in yourself.  Smith: It seems like it’s quite a brave thing to go into yourself and find that side of life.  Munro: Yes. I know I’m not saying this very well, but I think you know what I mean.  Smith: It’s very clear. What do you mean? On this sort of idea of the bravery of it, I mean, these are, as a word I used earlier, disagreeable things to tackle, but it’s disagreeable for most people to think about such things. In a way, one tries to escape thinking about such things. So it’s interesting to me that you constantly revisit it. Do you do it because you have a responsibility to expose this?  Munro: Oh no, I never feel responsibility. I mean, not in that way. I feel responsibilities in my life, but not in my writing. I feel that this is what interests me. This is me, this is what I want to say I’ve felt, or something like this. It’s as if you only have, as you go through life, the only thing you can be sure of, or at least partially sure of is yourself and what you have felt and what you have done, and what you would do differently now and et cetera. But I don’t like a tall fiction that is written to make people change or become better people. I just like it to be, I would like the fiction to make a people start and say, oh, yes, that’s true, or that’s just what I thought.  Smith: Just the last question about these, the less pleasant sides of life that one writes about, you don’t pass judgment. Are you tempted to sometimes on your characters?  Munro: No. Heavens no.  Smith: Perhaps we could talk a little bit about your early life. Were you always a storyteller as a child?  Munro: Oh, yes, but I only told the stories to myself just walking around and around. I had a fairly long walk to school, which was a time for stories. A lot of them were about myself and my interesting future when I grew up  Smith: And you never shared them with anybody?  Munro: Oh, goodness, no.  Smith: Did they keep you happy?  Munro: Yes. Yes. They were extremely comforting.  Smith: So they were happy stories in general.  Munro: Oh, yes. Yes. There were stories of considerable success. Maybe in the movie star line.  Smith: What were your literary influences as a child?  Munro: Oh, well, I suppose the we have a series of stories in Canada that are called the Anna Green Gables Stories. These are about a little orphan girl growing up. Another stories would be the Hans Christian Anderson stories. Just about anything I could get my hands of real on really what became an important story. I read a child’s history of England, which was as it says, a history of England written for children by, I think it was Dickens. I loved those stories, and I reread them and sometimes reframed them with myself as a hero rather than the person in the story.  Smith: They’re quite gruesome, those histories.  Munro: Very gruesome. That didn’t bother me at all.  Smith: Maybe even that’s part of the appeal to children.  Munro: I think so. And there were of course, dreadful things happening in them. People often got their heads chopped. And this was for some misdemeanor or other, but if I really liked my hero in the story, I didn’t get her head chopped off. I made this, I changed the story so that that wouldn’t happen.  Smith: Somehow these happy stories in your head changed into more realistic stories that started to be written down. You said that happened when you had children?  Munro: Oh, I think it really happened before I had children. I was working at stories when I was in high school, and I did a shortened version of Pier gimp when I was at university. This was for a school production, a university production. I was doing a lot of things like that were sort of official stories that were real stories, not stories that I had made up, but I sometimes changed them. I shortened them so that we could do them in a play or something like that.  Smith: I suppose it’s when you started writing about life around you.  Munro: Yes, that would’ve happened when I was about, well, I got married when I was around 20-21. Then life around me became inescapable.  Smith: That’s a very good phrase.  Smith: People frequently compare you to Chekhov. That is partly, of course, because you share a love of this short story. But it’s partly, because you are both in a way, sort of pickers up of Unconsidered trifolds. I wonder, do you spend a lot of your time observing small events and thinking how they might expand into stories?  Munro: I don’t spend my time doing that with any conscious design, but I just do it naturally all the time. I mean what I see around me.  Smith: Would you say you were more observant than other people of these things?  Munro: Oh, yes. I think I got to be, but one of the reasons was falling in love with Chekhov, which I did probably when I was 16-17 years old. Not consciously copying, but thinking of what you could do with life and what you could do with story life. I think Chekhov was a revelation to me.  Smith: What would you say was the magic of Chekhov for you?  Munro: The extreme importance he would give to ordinary life, the dignity he gave to such people, people who generally didn’t get into stories. I think the kindness, there’s a wonderful mercy in Chekhov as if everybody is worthwhile.  Smith: Would you say that it is important to recognise people’s efforts?  Munro: Oh, yes. Yes.  Smith: Pathetically miserable.  Munro: Yes, yes. People’s own interpretation of what they’re doing compared to what other people may think or just the constant changes and just the interest of how people get through.  Smith: In a way, throughout all these decades of writing, you’ve been documenting the world around you.  Munro: I suppose you could say that, yes.  Smith: Sometimes people speak about a sort of photographic element in your work. Do you like the world you see around you more or less than you used to?  Munro: I really can’t answer to that because there are so many ways in which the world has changed. If you are my age, and I see things around me that are just so much more tolerant, give the individual so much ease compared to what I grew up in. So I’m naturally happy with that, but that isn’t really what I’m talking about when I write stories. I’m still writing stories, which are about problems that people have to solve in some way, or that they try to leave a alone or something. That really doesn’t change much, although the exact happenings might change if you live together with your lover unmarried. Obviously that’s something that has changed from being an absolutely amazingly horrible thing to being very commonplace. Things like that have changed, but I don’t think the major problems that people have in their getting along in life, getting along with other people or with their own emotions those haven’t changed. They’re just in different wrappings now, sort of.  Smith: Now you are very much viewed as a Canadian writer yes. But what does the description Canadian writer mean to you?  Munro: It means writing by anything. Who lives in everybody who lives in Canada? That’s all. I think when people use it they may use it for all kinds of things. Maybe for the fact that maybe my focus is on Canadians more definitely than that. It started out definitely because when I was young, I never knew anybody who wasn’t a Canadian. My life was not structured in that way, that I saw many people who were very different from the people I knew around me. So I started writing people who knew around me, and maybe I still feel that those are the people I know, and I know more deeply.  Smith: Have you ever wanted to be anything other than a Canadian writer?  Munro: No, I haven’t been because I could see more material there than I could ever live to write about. One doesn’t, I didn’t think of any other of going of a need to go anywhere else or try to take on other things that I should learn about. Perhaps. I do this in my real life. In my real life, I don’t stick to Canadian people or Canadian friends or Canadian life in any particular way. But when I write about it, that’s what I can write about and know that I’m not being shallow, and it’s important not to be shallow.  Smith: Do you think the setting matters? Do you think that actually the fundamental aspects of getting through life that you talk about would be the same if you were writing about a French group of people?  Munro: I think there’d be a great deal that was similar. I think a lot of superficial things would seem the same, and even some moral things or manners might seem different, but there would be a basic sameness. For instance, when I started reading Russian when I was fairly, not the Russian language, but Russian stories when I was very young. I found there a great sympathy with the Canadian stories that I was reading, although the incidents might not be very different.  Smith: What about the language you use?  Munro: Language is a tool, and it was what I started with. I still work with, but not all the time. I do write with now with a feeling for different classes of people, which does give what does give you changes in language, which are important.  Smith: There’s a sort of sparseness or a sort of…  Munro: Oh, yes. I’d say the sparseness was not particularly conscious. I don’t sit down and say, I will write a very sparse novel. I write, but just the way I see as most effective.  Smith: I suppose as a non-Canadian, I might say that it was a rather Canadian way of being. It’s a indeed to the point, straightforward.  Munro: Mm-Hmm.  Smith: Do you like that idea that that’s how Canadians speak?  Munro: No, not necessarily. It’s not a matter of liking, it’s a matter of being able to get out as much feeling and understanding as seriousness as I can. I suppose that I would do that in a language that seems most workable in that way.  Smith: I wanted to ask a little bit more about how you write.  Munro: Okay.  Smith: How do you inhabit a story? How do you populate it?  Munro: That’s an interesting question, but I don’t know the answer. I just start thinking about the people in it and I think I get to see them and hear them and want to know more about them. There will be a connection here sometimes by the story in my mind and the people that I have observed in my life. But I tend to put those things together in a way that I’m not writing about anybody in real life, and I’m inventing a kind of person that I will write about, but this person is always based on certain realities that have intrigued me.  Smith: Then as you structure the story. Is there a sequence to it? Does it flow as it would in the story as you build it? Or do you see the end?  Munro: That’s a very good question, because it starts in a way that almost any old way at all that I can get into it, and I get into it. Then I often do make changes in the way the story happens in the language. And not just in the language, but in what happens in the story and how the reader comes across what happens.  Smith: It must be, in some ways, difficult to limit the story,  Munro: Sometimes it is, sometimes not. But yes, I’ve tended to write sometimes quite long stories that we’re almost, I didn’t have a name for really. They just demanded, I didn’t think I will write a long story. I just found that what I was writing about demanded these characters and this time, and it just became a long story.  Smith: Many of your characters and the people at the center of your stories are women.  Munro: Mm-Hmm.  Smith: Maybe an obvious question, but why is that?  Munro: I suppose it’s because I am a woman and I know things about women’s lives, and maybe I’m more interested because of what I know and what I see has happened, what I see, what women do in certain situations. I know that males write about women sometimes very convincingly, but not always. There are great classics where I think the female characters are not very believable. So you could say, I’m writing against that.  Smith: Is it a conscious effort to portray women, or is it just a natural?  Munro: Oh, goodness, no. Goodness. No, because that’s the world I live in and have for my life. So it isn’t it sometimes I write about a male character, though whom I know very well, and I don’t feel at all that there’s no essential difference in writing about a male character. It might just be that in certain areas, I’m less well versed.  Smith: I suppose that raises the question of is it more fun to write about a character you know or a character who you feel you don’t know so well?  Munro: That is impossible to answer because it’s more fun with any story that is really going well. What I’m trying to say is it doesn’t matter the gender. If it’s just something that I feel I really know the character and who the paces I put the character through are very interesting.  Smith: Do you consider yourself to be a female writer or just a writer?  Munro: A writer. Because I think these things we’ve been talking about the differences in what you write about don’t matter a great deal. It’s the insight, the work, the way you give yourself to the story that matters.  Smith: Can you expand on that a bit more?  Munro: When I say give yourself to the story, that means that you don’t just do what is easy or what might have first occurred to you. You let the characters develop and you see that this person is acting in a certain way. Now that sounds a bit silly, because of course, everything that’s going on is going on in my head, but when it’s really working, it’s working in that way that you have to be to make the story any good. You have to be very truthful about your characters. You have to let them do what they really would do, rather than something that the reader might want them to do sometimes, if that makes any sense.  Smith: Yes, it does. It absolutely does. But that indicates that you are really creating a world in which they are free agents operating, and you are observing them.  Munro: Pretty much, yes. I don’t want to say things like that because it sounds a bit white but I’m a straightforward Canadian woman but, but yeah, sort of like that.  Smith: The future, you mentioned in the call on the day of the announcement that the Nobel Prize might induce you to start writing again.  Munro: Did I say that?  Smith: You did.  Munro: I was crazy. Of course it might, you never know, but I began to feel that I’d done my best work. I felt that the energy wasn’t in me anymore. As long as that is true, I will not try. But if it came back of course I would try, but I’m just not sure if that ever happening.  Smith: Without the end point of putting them down on paper. Are you still creating the stories in your head?  Munro: Not recently, because I haven’t had time, but that’s a very good question, Because if I’m not collecting them in my head, then it would be the first time since I was five years old. I expect that maybe I will start, I’m not right now because life is very intense and busy around me. But maybe that’s going to change. I don’t know.  Smith: Those who want you to start writing again, of whom there are many, should absolutely leave you alone?  Munro: Oh, yes, they should.  Smith: Okay. Well, that’s a good signature. That’s a good sign for me to stop. It’s been an enormous pleasure speaking to you, and I thank you very much indeed.  Munro: Glad. Okay, thank you very much. Bye-Bye.  Smith: Bye-Bye.  This podcast was presented by Nobel Prize Conversations. If you’d like to know more about Alice Munro, you can go to nobelprize.org. where you’ll find a wealth of information about the prizes and the people behind the discoveries.  Nobel Prize Conversations is a podcast series with Adam Smith, a co-production of FILT and Nobel Prize Outreach. The producer for Nobel Prize Talks was Magnus Gylje. The editorial team for this encore production includes Andrew Hart, Olivia Lundqvist and me, Clare Brilliant. Music by Epidemic Sound. You can find previous seasons and conversations on ACAST or wherever you listen to podcasts. Thanks for listening. |
| Telephone  interview | 0912=AM  [Adam Smith] Hello, Adam Smith.  [Alice Munro] Hello Adam!  [AS] Hello, this is Alice Munro?  [AM] Yes, this is Alice Munro. I just wanted to thank you, very much. This is quite a wonderful thing for me. It’s a wonderful thing for the short story.  [AS] It is indeed, and may we congratulate you in turn. It’s a wonderful day.  [AM] Thank you very, very much.  [AS] How did you hear the news?  [AM] Um, let me see, I was wandering around this morning, early. How did I hear it first? [Said to her daughter, Jenny, in the room with her] … Oh, the press called me.  [AS] And what was your first reaction? Do you remember?  [AM] Unbelief. [Laughs] I really couldn’t believe it, I was so happy, and I haven’t gotten over the delight yet.  [AS] You’ve produced an enormous body of work over four decades …  [AM] Well I have, yes. But, you know, because I work generally in the short story form, this is a special thing I think to get this recognition.  [AS] Yes indeed, yes indeed. Have you been basically the same sort of writer from the beginning to the end? Have you changed, do you think?  [AM] Well you know as far as I can tell, I have not changed very much. But someone else could answer that question better I think.  [AS] And the award will bring a great new readership to your work …  [AM] Well I would hope so, and I hope this would happen not just for me but for the short story in general. Because it’s often sort of brushed off, you know, as something that people do before they write their first novel. And I would like it to come to the fore, without any strings attached, so that there doesn’t have to be a novel.  [AS] And for those who don’t know your work, would you recommend a starting point?  [AM] Oh goodness! I don’t know, I can’t … You always think that your latest work is your best, at least I do. So I would want them to start with the latest book.  [AS] So they should start with *Dear Life* should they?  [AM] Well, in a way, yes, but then I hope they would go back and read the others as well.  [AS] And of course everybody is talking about the fact that you announced earlier this year that you were going to stop writing, and saying “Maybe this will encourage her to start again”.  [AM] [Laughs] Well you know I’ve been doing it for so many years. I’ve been writing and publishing, I think, since I was about twenty – just now and then I would get something published you know – but that’s a long time to be working and I thought maybe it’s time to take it easy. But this may change my mind. [Laughter]  [AS] That’s an exciting statement! That’s going to have everybody buzzing.  [Both laugh]  [AS] How splendid! So, I know that you must be tired after speaking to so many people so we would like very much to talk to you perhaps on another occasion …  [AM] That would be great, actually, because I am a little bit tired and woozy now and God knows what I might say!  [AS] [Laughs] OK, well we’ll wait until this quiet down a bit, and then …  [AM] OK.  [AS] It has been a great pleasure to speak to you, thank you so very much indeed.  [AM] Thank you, goodbye.  [AS] Bye, bye. |
| Interview |  |
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| ID | 0913 |
| Biographical | I was born on the 25 of March 1956\* into a peasant family in the Ping’an Village Production Brigade of the Heya People’s Commune, Northeast Gaomi Township, Shandong Province, the People’s Republic of China. The youngest of four children, I have two older brothers and a sister. Since my father and his brother had not yet divided the family property, ours was the largest clan in the village. These days people flock to see “Mo Yan’s former residence,” which has not changed much since the day I was born; gone, though, are the two side buildings, one to the east, another to the west, and two trees – an apricot and a pear – in the yard, which appear frequently in my novels.  Perhaps I should write about something other than hunger in this brief story of my life, but whenever I think back to my childhood, I cannot avoid scenes of hunger; they are engraved on my memory. The physical pain of hunger alone might not count as unbearable. Much harder to bear during my childhood was the absence of love. I was not well liked in the village, was in fact detested. I wrote about that boy in my story “Ox.” Though he isn’t me, the emotions I experienced in my childhood are re-created in him. I could abide the fact that people in my village hated me; harder to endure was the reality that even my own family did not like me. As I reflect on my past, I have no reason to complain, since I brought those sentiments on myself. I was lazy, I had a greedy mouth, and I could not stop talking. There really wasn’t much about me worth loving, and that often drew a sigh from my mother. Fortunately, I had some natural gifts. In school, despite the trouble I got into, my grades, especially in writing, were exceptional. A teacher in the nearby agricultural middle school once read one of my third-grade essays to his students, an incident that made my parents proud. But then came the Cultural Revolution, and this little talent of mine caused them considerable distress; then something I scribbled on the school wall brought trouble to their door.  I dropped out of elementary school in the summer of 1967, before I even graduated. Since I was too young for heavy work, I went out each day to tend livestock and cut grass for the production brigade. The sight of my former schoolmates playing in the schoolyard when I drove my animals past the gate always pained me, creating a feeling of being cast out of a group, the sadness of becoming the other, and that instilled in me a fear of becoming an outcast. That fear, which constituted a painful chapter of an era characterized by unending political campaigns, caused a great many intellectuals to sell out their friends, to spread unconscionable lies, and to dump shit on their own heads precisely. This phobia exists wherever there are people, but is especially strong in collectivist nations. I have described this phenomenon in much of my fiction and have created vivid characters who stand alone in defiance of society. Lan Lian, the farmer in *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* who chose not to join the brigade, was modeled on a peasant in a neighboring village who pushed his wooden-wheeled cart past the school gate and left an indelible impression on me.  As I think back over my writing career, leaving school may have been the best thing that happened to me. Having been cast out of the group, I changed into a child who was accustomed to being alone. Spending my days with cattle and sheep and wandering the grassland, I became one with nature. That experience nurtured in me a reverence toward the natural world and engendered an understanding of the animal world. These two in turn comprise a foundation of my fictional world.  During my herding days, I dreamed of growing up fast, with a physique like the village’s brawniest men, someone who could lift objects too heavy for other people, who could do jobs beyond their ability, who could grasp the most complex labor techniques, and who could thus earn the respect of his fellow villagers. Naturally, practicing martial arts and coming to the aid of the weak were at the top of my dream list. I haunted the house of an old villager named Wang, a martial arts master, a terrific storyteller, and a practitioner of healing massage techniques. With five daughters and no son, he was regularly visited by young men in the village, all of whom hoped to become his son-in-law, while others merely wanted to study martial arts. I too wanted to study martial arts, but I also loved to hear him tell stories. Though I lacked the physique and stamina to become proficient in the martial arts, I heard some wonderful stories, many of which became material for my writing.  Father felt guilty that his class standing had curtailed my right to an education. I was forced to leave school, not because I was a mischievous student, but because powerful people in my village were afraid that I’d gain knowledge that placed me a cut above them. Father wrote to my eldest brother, who taught in a Hunan factory school, and asked him to enroll me so I could continue my studies. My brother quickly wrote back to say that was highly impractical. Without doubt, a romantic conception had gotten into Father’s head. Though he never actually talked about my leaving school, deep down he was worried. One day, after saying he wanted me to become a useful member of society, he took out some of my brother’s traditional medical books and told me to read them till I knew them inside and out. He also told me to study Chinese medicine under my grandfather’s brother during my spare time. There probably isn’t a better profession anywhere than physician, he said. Everyone gets sick at some time, and no matter who’s running the country, a doctor will always have a job.  I quickly memorized those few books, and I took every opportunity to watch my great uncle treat patients with traditional Chinese medicine. He had been born into a landlord’s family, and his only son had fled to Taiwan with the Nationalist army in 1947. With that sort of bad family background, by rights the dictatorship of the proletariat should have sent him under the whip to perform hard labor. But, dressed in silk and sporting a beard, he continued taking the pulse of his patients and curing their illnesses. This dialectic proves that the medical arts can transcend class.  This great uncle discouraged me from going into medicine. What good will that do you? he asked. You need to go out into the world and do big things. He refused to teach me his medical skills, but he did urge me to read the Chinese classics. If you don’t, he said, Chinese medicine will always be a mystery to you. So while I did not learn the arts of medicine from my great uncle, I did hear some wonderful stories that subvert history and penetrate reality, that tie together Heaven, Hell, and humankind, and that treat animals, nature, and human beings equally. Most important, he narrated his fantastic stories in the first person, leaving no doubt about their authenticity, as if he had seen, heard, and lived every word of it. That is what made them so believable. Years later, when I read the novels of Kafka and [García Márquez](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1982/marquez-facts.html), I understood the secrets at their core. Truth be told, I had no interest in studying medicine. What I wanted most of all was to go out into the world and do big things. But society got caught up in class struggle, assigning class lines as the sole determinant. The occupations that made it possible for a young villager to leave home – soldier, student, worker – could not possibly fall to the son of a middle peasant father. Nothing but illusions, and yet I pursued them with all my heart. Once, as I entertained a dream of becoming a student in a worker-peasant-soldier college, I wrote to the Minister of Education, and actually received a return letter. Though written in “officialese,” it pumped me up so much I envisioned college doors opening up to me one day. I even boasted to girls who worked in the village flourmill; thinking I was soft in the head, they spread the story, and in short order, my unrealistic sense of worth was passed among the clever villagers as a joke. Every time one old woman who was constantly ill treated by her daughter-in-law met me, I recall, she called me by my infant name and said, “You’re not stupid, you’re a good boy. The people who laugh at you are the stupid ones.”  When my father saw that I was no good at medicine, he encouraged me to go into music, all because he had seen a musical performance when he was at a meeting in the county seat; the two-stringed *huqin* and flutes deeply impressed him. Getting by in life requires a skill, he said, and even though playing the *huqin* or flute does not count as much of an occupation, if you do it well, it beats laboring in a rural village. He must have discussed this with his younger brother, because a few days later, my uncle rode his bicycle over from the commune head-quarters with one of his own *huqin* for me, and gave me a demonstration of a song from a model Peking opera. Before picking up the *huqin*, he said, you must learn how to read music. If you don’t, no matter how good you get, you will never be more than a local talent, with little chance to appeal to refined tastes. The big stage is reserved for those who can read music. Back then I revered my uncle and could not imagine anyone who played the *huqin* as well as he. I later discovered that he did not read music, that his skills were on a par with local musicians, and that he had hoped I could rise to a level of artistry he had only dreamed about.  So I picked up the *huqin* and began on my own, producing scratchy noises like the sound of a stone roller’s wooden axel. “Take a break, Son,” my mother would say, her voice evoking concern and sarcasm in equal measure. “We’ve got enough rice for today.” After a period of time, I began to sense that my internal rhythms and the sounds I produced on the *huqin* were nicely in sync. That is to say, melodies that rattled around in my head found expression in the notes I played. My mind and my hand were in perfect harmony. This was the path village musicians took in learning to play musical instruments, but most stopped at this point. A talented few worked with a master or experimented on their own to rise to a professional level. Many years later, I wrote about my experience with the *huqin* in a story I called “Popular Music.”  At the age of fifteen I was assigned to record work points. In those days, everyone who worked in a production brigade was required to keep a “worker’s logbook.” My job was to go to a special room after the evening meal and enter each commune member’s work points into his or her logbook. These books served as the sole annual record of each commune member’s work history. At year’s end, a family’s accumulated points determined rations and allowances. Since an uncle of mine, the brigade commander, was illiterate, he had chosen me to record out of a fear that people might try to hoodwink him with false numbers.  As the place where brigade members gathered each night, the recording room was where frequent disputes over the distribution of work points occurred. It was also where news was collected and became a window for observing society. The responsibilities of my job were what launched me into adulthood, and created a gulf between children who were still quarreling and fighting in school and me. I was still developing physically, but the satisfaction of working with grownups at my young age helped me evolve into a relatively productive worker, even though I usually made a fool of myself when I emulated the skills of the best workers.  During this period, I devoted all my spare time to reading the high school textbooks my brother had left at home and other books I borrowed from nearby villages. A “rightist” neighbor who had been sent back to labor in the fields – a college graduate in Chinese literature – poured all sorts of literary knowledge into me, and my writing dream was born.  I became a full-fledged laborer in February 1973, when I turned eighteen, which meant that I had the skills and experience to engage in all forms of labor, and that my strength was adequate to any task; I managed to accumulate the maximum number of work points. In order to build up arm strength, each evening, after recording the work points, I went to the threshing ground to work out with stonerollers that weighed a hundred jin apiece; I could do a hundred presses at a time. Soon thereafter, the village sent a hundred able-bodied men to Changyi County, more than two hundred li away, to excavate the Jiaolai River. I was one of them. This huge water project involved hundreds of thousands of laborers from three counties, who worked with no equipment other than their hands and the shoulders over which dirt was carried off. What had once been level land was converted into a broad riverbed, and at the time, I thought back to Emperor Yang of the Sui dynasty, who must have used an identical method to dig the Grand Canal, the sole difference being the loudspeakers on poles erected on the work site to broadcast quotations from Chairman Mao and songs of praise to him. The living accommodations were crude – just holes in the ground – and the food was coarse, if sufficient to fill our bellies. In those days I had a fearsome appetite; my gruel bowl was nearly the size of a small basin. And yet, even under such trying conditions, lilting strains of a harmonica came on the air every night, played by a youngster from our village. It was in that environment that I began thinking of a novel, one about excavating a river.  I returned from the Jiaolai River during harvest season, and as I walked around my village I felt that I had become a man.  In the fall of that year, the 20th of August to be precise, through my uncle’s contacts, I was given a job as a contract worker in Gaomi Cotton Processing Plant No. 5. As a contract worker I was still considered a resident of my village, and a portion of my monthly wages was sent back to the village. I received one Yuan, thirty-five fen a day, sixty percent of which went to the production brigade, leaving me with a monthly total of less than twenty Yuan. But that was quite a sum in those days, and it made contract labor a plum job that required an outside recommendation and the approval of a village cadre; not just anyone qualified. One of my uncles, the plant accountant, had spoken to the village Party secretary, who reluctantly approved my request with a condition that his daughter would go as well. I wrote about this in the story “White Cotton.”  The several hundred contract laborers in the plant came from nearly a hundred villages in the county’s dozens of communes, plus urban locals who were waiting for job assignments and some sent-down students from Qingdao. Everyone showed up in their best clothes, especially the young women, whose dressy appearance was an eye-opener to someone like me, a young man who had seldom strayed from his village. Most of the workers had attended middle school, and among them were a few who could play musical instruments or sing well. Their music gave birth to a feeling that I had left the muddy confines of a village where “even a diamond encrusted sword will rust” and entered the ranks of the upper class.  But this sort of illusion did not last. There were, in fact, only two kinds of people in the plant: city and town residents, who ate high-quality food, and villagers, who ate food distributed by the brigade. Though in theory they were equal, in practice they were anything but. Contract workers all dreamed of one day becoming regulars and, in the process, urban residents who would earn enough to eat better, and as we lay on our bunks at night, we gazed out the window at the stars and dreamed our dreams.  Work at the plant was seasonal. The annual cotton harvest from dozens of villages arrived around the middle of the eighth lunar month. Since there were no warehouses, the raw cotton was left out in the open in stacks that were many meters high, a sight to behold. Thanks to my uncle’s status, I was assigned the job of scales clerk, responsible for weighing each farmer’s harvest. The job required an abacus and a bit of education.  The real work began after the plant bought the desired amount of cotton, when it was sent to the roller shop, where the bolls and seeds were separated. A total of twenty rollers were tended by the same number of young women, behind whom mountains of cotton waited to be thrown between a pair of rollers at a steady pace. It was boring, dangerous work, and no year went by without casualties. The women wore hospital masks, and their eyelashes were so densely covered with cotton fuzz you could not see what they looked like. The plant was not equipped with air filters, and when good quality cotton was processed, fine cotton fibers floated throughout the plant. But fibers from lower quality cotton merged with dust and fouled the air, some of which was breathed in despite the presence of facemasks. One of these women, Du Qinlan, became my wife.  It happened very fast. Before I’d had a chance to settle into adulthood, I was engaged to be married. I’d only been working at the plant a little over a month when a man named Li – also a contract worker – surprised me by saying he’d introduce me to someone, his niece, a good worker who was not afraid of hard-ships to get through life. He invited me to his home to celebrate his birthday, and Du Qinlan was there. She asked me: What’s your family’s class standing? I said middle peasant. I asked her the same question. She said poor peasant, and I detected an air of superiority in her response, which instilled in me a sort of inferiority complex. Arrangements soon followed, and she and I were engaged before I’d even asked her age. For the longest time it all seemed unreal. One meeting, a couple of comments back and forth, and two people’s fates were entwined, just like that? Well, that’s what happened. From 1973 to now I have lived with this daughter of a poor peasant; we have raised a daughter of our own, and there have been many hardships over that forty-year period, but in the end she and I appeared together on the Nobel stand, and in one sense, this must count as testimony to our mutual affection.  My ideal was to make a life out in the world. Those three years in the plant facilitated my eventual departure from home: while there, in addition to making contacts with talented people and raising my cultural level, in terms of my long-range goal, the experience laid the groundwork for writing in the years to come. I set my eyes on the army as a way out. Though the prospects for the son of a middle peasant to be admitted into the army were extremely remote, and though I’d twice answered the call for recruits and passed the physical exams, only to fail to be admitted, I refused to give up. If I was going to realize my dream, it would have to be in the army, for it was the only place a young man like me could reach his potential in the society of that time. In the winter of 1976, I took advantage of an opportunity for contract workers to apply directly at the commune where they worked, bypassing the village level, and, supported by some armed forces cadres, I finally received my enlistment notification.  My first assignment was for guard duty at a small outpost. Our barracks were near a livestock-feeding shelter, and from my post I could see cows and horses hitched to posts. Villagers walked past my post; wheat fields in the spring and corn in the fall were everyday scenes, and all that differentiated me from the locals, I felt, was my uniform. The contrast between my idealized army life and the real thing was so great I predicted that I’d be out of the army and back home within two years. Worst to contemplate was that I might not regain my job at the cotton processing plant, even as a contract worker.  Mao Zedong died in September of that year, and China entered a new historical era. Before long, *People’s Literature* and other magazines resumed publication. The ban on “poisonous weeds” was lifted and “scar literature” came into being. A frenzy for literature gripped the nation, and my literary dream was reborn. I subscribed to several literary magazines and borrowed dozens of highly regarded novels from the county library, where the girlfriend of one of my comrades worked. I began creating story lines in my head when I was on duty and hid out in the tool shed to start writing during my time off. My first attempt, a play I called “Divorce,” was patterned after popular dramas of the day. I followed that with a short piece called “Mama’s Story.” I sent both off to several magazines, but they were all rejected. Once, I recall, one of the magazine editors included a personal letter with the rejection slip. Even though it informed me that they would not publish my work, I was thrilled to receive it.  I returned home in July 1979 to marry Du Qinlan, but before my marriage leave was over, I received a telegram to return to my unit, which I did without delay, and learned I was being posted to the Hebei city of Baoding. My comrades all felt that I was being groomed for promotion to officer ranks, and I was excited by the news.  My new unit was in a ravine deep in the mountains, a base area during the war with Japan, and a two-hundred-li trip on rugged mountain roads to Baoding. My first assignment was as a squad leader, responsible for training sixteen recent high school graduates. They were to learn basic military skills from formation drills to marksmanship and grenade use. My military skills were so poor that none of my trainees passed muster as soldiers. After the completion of recruit training, I remained in the unit as a confidential clerk and librarian. This assignment was a sure sign that my superiors were grooming me for officer ranks. But not long after my reassignment, the General Political Department sent down an order to stop the direct promotion of enlisted men to officer rank; such promotions could be approved only after a candidate had completed military academy training. That effectively blocked my promotion. But an article in the document stated: “Exceptional soldiers may be promoted to cadre status, but only if approved by the cadre section of a military area command or above.” A thread of hope in the midst of my despair.  My jobs as confidential clerk and librarian gave me private space to read, and I was like a fish in water with the thousands of volumes in the library. Before long, my superiors appointed me to be an instructor of theory, responsible for teaching philosophy and political economics to two classes of students. Both subjects were totally alien to me, but the position created the condition for my possible promotion, so I braced myself and accepted the assignment, taking advantage of a summer break to read as many of the library books on philosophy and political economics as possible to prepare myself for the classroom. That was also the time I began to write again. In September 1981, my short story “A Rainy Spring Night” was published in the Baoding literary magazine *Lotus Pond* as the first selection in its fifth issue. My daughter Xiaoxiao was born back home on November 3rd. The attending physician at her birth was the daughter of my great uncle, the model for Aunt in my novel *Frogs*. I wheeled my wife in a wheel-barrow to the health center, whose facilities were rudimentary at best; the day was cold, and I waited outside the delivery room listening to my Aunt’s crisp talk and laughter. All this I wrote about in the novel *The Garlic Ballads*.  The publication of “A Rainy Spring Night” boosted my confidence and set loose my passion for writing. The support of *Lotus Pond* was a boon, for its editors published five of my stories in a row, and the famous writer Sun Li even wrote a critical piece in praise of the story “Popular Music.”  In July 1982, I was promoted as a regular instructor, which was a bending of the rules. Not long after that I was transferred to Beijing.  In September 1984, my high exam scores got me into the Literature Department of the PLA Arts Academy.  Acceptance into the Academy was a major turning point in my literary career. There I undertook a systematic study of Chinese and foreign literary histories and read many foreign novels in translation: works by [Faulkner](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-facts.html), García Márquez, and others inspired me to concentrate on my native home. Northeast Gaomi Township became my literary kingdom; childhood memories and the people from my hometown became the material for my fiction.  In March 1985, the publication of my novella “The Transparent Carrot” elicited strong reactions. It established my status as a writer and was partially responsible for changing the face of contemporary Chinese literature.  In the year that followed, I published a series of novellas – “Dry River,” “The White Dog and the Swing Set,” “Explosion,” and “Red Sorghum” – in what critics called a literary “carpet bombing.” My work demolished an ossified literary concept that had shackled Chinese writers for decades; many pieces were no sooner published than they created firestorms of controversy. It is no exaggeration to say that I took a considerable risk by what I wrote, and many people were shocked and affronted to learn that a military academy literature department had produced a writer like me. During my most trying moments, my revered teacher, the chair of the academy’s literature department and a highly regarded writer in his own right, Mr. Xu Huaizhong, shielded me from attacks.  Foreigners are often amazed to learn that the Chinese military has a literary component, but this has been a unique constituent of modern Chinese history. Military writers have been key in the development and transformation of China’s new literature. With bold experiments and a disdain for hardship, we have served as vanguards.  Upon my graduation from the Arts Academy, I was assigned as a writer in the cultural department of a military unit. There I wrote a series of novels set in Northeast Gaomi Township. Anyone reading *The Garlic Ballads* and *Thirteen Paces* today will be astounded by the power of the criticism and the courage of my advocacy for the poor and disadvantaged. In the fall of 1988, I was admitted into a graduate seminar on creative writing jointly offered by Beijing Normal University and the Lu Xun Literary Academy. While attending classes I wrote, among other works, *The Republic of Wine*. All these works penetrate deeply into the roots of corruption from a humanistic perspective and, to my way of thinking, are more significant as literature than the “novels of officialdom” and “anti-corruption” fiction that would later gain popularity.  Back home in 1995, I wrote the controversial novel *Big Breasts and Wide Hips*, and was roundly criticized. Among the most frequently reviled features of contemporary Chinese fiction has been a co-optation of art by politics, narratives based on class replacing those based on humanity. *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* was a total subversion of that narrow literary concept, and its publication shocked both literary and intellectual circles to a degree current readers would find unimaginable.  I left the army in October 1997 and took a job at the *Procuratorate Daily*. During my ten years with the publication I wrote three novels: *Sandalwood Death*, *POW!* and *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out*.  *Sandalwood Death* constituted a course change in my twenty-year writing career. In striving to break free from Western influences, in particular the magic realism of Latin America, I set out to write a novel in my distinct style, informed by Chinese characteristics. To reach this goal, I drew nourishment from popular culture, especially drama, in writing a “drama-inspired novel.” Though the novel is set in the late Qing era, it is infused with a contemporary consciousness. In it I inherited and developed a critique of national characteristics by Lu Xun and other modern writers and created a set of richly symbolic characters.  That was followed by *POW!* In this novel I employed “water-infused meat,” which was based upon a real-life case, as a point of entry in constructing a novel from the perspective of a boy, resulting in one that reads like a fairy tale. In an act of defiance, the protagonist, Luo Xiaotong, asks members of the power structure to kill him with his own knife, a trick commonly employed by rough-hewn proletarians in China’s agricultural society. I witnessed such a scene in the marketplace with my own eyes.  In 2005, when I was tormented by severe insomnia, I wrote the novel *Life and Death Are Wearing Me Out* in the space of forty-three days. In it I borrowed the concept of the Buddhist “wheel of life” to throw light on half a century of enormous changes in Chinese society, narrated from the perspective of animals. I explore modern Chinese society’s most critical issues, describing a series of tragedies associated with land. Naturally, what I find most satisfying about this novel is not its social significance, but the representative characters inhabiting it.  In October I was transferred to the Chinese Arts Research Institute, where I remain today. In 2009, my novel *Frogs* appeared.  I have repeatedly suggested that *Frogs* is a novel about people and not about “family planning.” In novels dealing with social issues, an author usually is absent, but in this novel I included myself as a target of exposure and criticism.  On October 11, 2012, I was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature.  Looking back over the course of my life is a very emotional experience. People who are critical of me cannot begin to imagine the suffering I have endured. The courage I have demonstrated in attacking what was considered orthodox revolutionary literature, and an absence of fear over being consigned to Hell is something today’s lickspittle individuals cannot possibly understand. Knowing what resides in my heart is possible only by reading my written works with care. I have been deeply influenced by traditional concepts of morality. Treating people with kindness and sincerity are the principles by which I engage in interpersonal relationships. In my youth I hated evil with a passion and yearned to die fighting evildoers; but as I grew older and gained a greater understanding of human beings, my attitude gradually softened. I am getting to know myself better all the time, and am gaining a more thorough understanding of others. My play, *Our Jing Ke*, which was performed in Beijing in 2012, is an expression of my new understanding of people and an earnest quest to attain my ideal of a “man of noble character.”  If life is a river, then I am now on the lower reaches.  I will roar no more, and I no longer favor waves.  I have the capacity to tolerate filth and mire.  I am hiding my strength in a deep place.  I am a storyteller, I tell stories of people. I enjoy watching plays, I write plays, but I do not act in them.  *Translated by Howard Goldblatt*  \* Due to the difference between the Chinese calendar and Gregorian calendar Mo Yan’s birthday is commonly recorded as one of two dates. 25 March 1956 is the laureate’s preferred birth date. |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0913=MY  [Yan Shuang Lindblom] Firstly, congratulations … what was your feeling when you received the news of being awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature?  [Mo Yan] I feel so surprised … when I heard this, because I considered the Nobel Prize in Literature to be far away from me.  [YSL] Many of Nobelprize.org’s visitors are high school students, which of your books would be a good starting point for a young person or newcomer to your work?  [MY] I hope readers start with my book *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* which was published in Sweden this year. Then read the others, such as *Red Sorghum*, *Big Breasts and Wide Hips* and so on. I recommend *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* first because this book reflects my writing style relatively comprehensively, and also my exploration on the art of novel.  [YSL] As a young man, what inspired you to become a writer?  [MY] I started to read books when I was a child. This triggered my strong interest in literature after reading more and more books. I felt I had many words to express, I thought the strongest and most unconstrained way was through literature, so I started to write. Of course, I also had a desire to prove myself, and a wish to change my destiny.  [YSL] Could you introduce us to your creative works?  [MY] Right now I recommended my book *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out*. Firstly this book deals with major issues from Chinese history and reality, such as the land issues, the farmers’ issues. Secondly, in this book I have used the oriental surreal wording. In this novel, the human and the animal can switch freely, can observe the changes that Chinese society and history have underwent in the last 50 years, through the eyes of the animal. In addition, I made many attempts in my use of language to try the most free style and most unconstrained way to describe my ideas from the heart. So I think this book is a relatively perfect and uniform combination between attention to reality and the exploration of creative style.  [YSL] I read that you wrote *Life and Death are Wearing me Out* in 43 days, what drove you to write so fast? How do you find the writing process?  [MY] How I could write the novel *Life and Death are Wearing Me Out* so quickly? Firstly, this book is based on reality. When I was of the ages 6 and 7, there was a farmer who lived nearby our school. He did the counterwork against the whole society, against the “people’s communes”, and the “collectivization ” individually, he was insisting to the last. At that time a person like him was considered to be very extreme, he was considered as monster, people carried out beatings and abuse towards him. He made huge sacrifices in order to insist upon his own opinion. His family, including his son and daughter, parted way from him and were separated from him, but he still would not yield. Later on, history proved that he had been right. After I embarked on writing the novel, I felt this guy would go into it sooner or later, so this book was written very quickly. I spent only 43 days writing the draft, but in fact the novel’s characters had already existed in my mind for many decades. The thinking was very adequate, so the writing was fast.  [YSL] How are you going to celebrate and are you coming to Sweden for the award ceremony?  [MY] I think I will be with my family tomorrow and eat dumplings, because I hope we can eat dumplings together. I will also certainly come to Sweden on 10 December for the Nobel Prize Award Ceremony. Thanks very much! And see you in Sweden! |
| Interview |  |
| Q1 | Mr Mo Yan, I’d like to congratulate you to the 2012 Nobel Prize in Literature. First of all, I’d like to ask you… You were born in a village in Shandong to illiterate parents, so how did you start writing? |
|  | Yes, I was born in a village in Shandong, but my father was literate. He studied in a private village school and was a cultured village intellectual. He always encouraged us to study.  My eldest brother went to Shanghai’s East China Normal University in the 1960s. This wasn’t very common in my village. He left many books at home and I read those language and history textbooks when I was young. Gradually, through reading novels, I developed my interest in literature. |
| Q2 | So how did you start writing? Did you decide to do it by yourself? |
|  | I think all writers start as keen readers. We develop a desire to write while reading. We like to learn how to write. Besides, for village teenagers like myself at that time, writers were stars.Anyone who writes a novel is truly exceptional.  Moreover, there were some intellectuals in my village at the time. They were university graduates who had come from Jinan, Shandong’s capital. They taught me about literature and writers. So the interest for writing grew in me already at a young age. In primary school, I was good at writing and often complimented by my teachers. These are the reasons why I gradually got into writing. |
| Q6 | Can you tell us more about your childhood? What was it like? |
|  | All writers start by writing about their childhood, especially childhood memories. I was born in 1955. When I started forming memories, it was the most difficult time in China’s history. Most people were starving at the time. People led a tough life. People starved to death all the time, even in my village. I think that children’s memories from such times can be haunting.  I remember that there were many children in the village.When the sun came out in winter, we all sat by a wall and bathed in the sun. Our clothes were all torn and ripped. We were barely covered. We also had bloated stomachs, because of lack of nutrients. Our legs and arms were thin, like those typical for starved children.  I was quite naughty when I was in primary school and I was expelled in fifth grade. But I couldn’t join the adult workforce after the expulsion because I didn’t have much work ability. So I herded cattle and sheep alone. In such a solitary environment one has only the animals and the plants to talk to. I think the kind of childhood I had was quite unique.  When I later started writing, everything in my childhood came back to me, so I used these memories, mixed with ideas and events from real life, when I created my earliest novels. |
| Q6 | Why were you expelled in fifth grade? |
|  | It was during the Cultural Revolution. There were political activities and class struggle, and people were insecure. My family owned land before the liberation, so my background wasn’t great. Children like us could go to school in theory but if one did go, and didn’t do well. By “do well” I mean being liked by the teachers. If they didn’t like you, you’d be deprived and denied the right to continue in school.  Another reason is that the school didn’t teach much at the time. We read “The Quotations from Chairman Mao” in language class and in mathematics or other classes, students were rebelling. Students fought and quarreled every day.  My parents felt that I couldn’t learn anything there. So when I was thrown out, they didn’t fight for me and I didn’t care much about that kind of school anyway. So I left school very early. I was only 11. |
| Q19 | How did you feel like at the time? |
|  | I felt quite lonely. Children like to hang out in groups and those in my age were all in school. They may not have learned much, but they fought and quarreled and had fun. When I was herding cattle and sheep, I passed the front door of my school and saw children in my age having fun in school. I was the only outsider. So I felt very lonely at the time.  Also, I didn’t know what to do with my future. Here I was, herding cattle at a young age. Would I ever do anything else? What would my future hold? What would I do when I grew up? I felt hopeless.  The experiences I had in my childhood have been crucial to my writing. I wrote about all kinds of animals and plants in my novels. I wrote about the close and mysterious relationship between children and nature. This is all inseparable of my personal experiences.  If I look back at my past… First of all, I couldn’t go to school when I was young, and I regret that. But at the same time, I feel kind of glad about it. If I hadn’t gone through that painful experience as a child I would probably not have become a writer. If I had, I would definitely have become a different kind of writer. I would definitely be writing a different kind of books.  That’s why, in a sense, dropping out at a young age returning to the farm, being embraced by nature and the rural culture helped me a great deal in becoming a writer. Of course, I wouldn’t take my children out of school to make them writers by taking them back to the farm. It doesn’t work that way.  As I said before, the painful experiences in my childhood helped me in my writing, but if I had the chance to choose how I lived my childhood, I would definitely go for a happy one, instead of a lonely and hungry childhood. |
| Q25 | In what ways did it help your writing? |
|  | Firstly, I was able to establish an intimate relationship with nature. A child growing up in school, and a child growing up in the field have different relationships to nature, different feelings for animals and plants. The other were surrounded by other kids and teachers every day. But I was surrounded by sheep, cattle, plants, grass and trees every day. The feelings I had towards nature were so delicate and sentimental. For a long time, I thought animals and plants could communicate with humans. And I felt that they understood what I said. This kind of experience is unique and valuable.  Also, I didn’t hang out with a group of children. I was with a group of adults. I didn’t have the right to speak. They were my uncles, and they were adults. They would be scornful if I interrupted their conversation. But I could listen. I started observing the adult world earlier than most children. I started listening to adults earlier than most.  From my grandparents I learned about the rural culture. In rural culture there are historical figures, legends, historical events and even myths and ghost stories such as a wolf or a rooster turning into a human. So folk elements and oral tradition figure strongly in my books, as they are part of my experiences at that time.  It’s a unique point of view, to observe the world through the eyes of a child. When an adult looks at things, he’s not surprised by what he sees. But when a child looks up from below, because it is an upward view it sees a lot of things that adults don’t see. It helps me a lot in my writing as well.  Of course there are also other aspects, that I can’t explain all at once. |
| Q35 | In your childhood, you had an intimate relationship with nature. When you look at China of today, how do you feel about it? |
|  | I’m a conservationist. I have expressed my conservationism clearly in my books. In “Life and Death are Wearing Me Out” and “Big Breasts and Wide Hips” I expressed my agony and anger over overexploitation and the destruction of the environment.  I’ve always believed that we should slow down our pace of development. We shouldn’t exploit things so quickly. We should preserve rural culture and natural heritage. Stop turning all the villages into towns. We should let the land rest. We shouldn’t work the land as hard as if it was a human.  I’m very distressed by the pollution and the destruction of China’s environment since the 1980s. I feel really bad about it. When I see that factories are built everywhere even in a village I was familiar with… When I see that the river I swam and fished in as a boy has become a dirty ditch, I can’t begin to describe the pain. When I see the trees in my village hung with old plastic bags… This kind of plastic pollution scares me. That’s why, when I give speeches in Japan and other countries, I criticise this kind of overexploitation, which only centres on economic gain based on unsustainable development. |
| Q5 | Let’s return to the subject of literature. Do you think that literature is of any meaning to the general public today? |
|  | The relationship between literature and reality; its emotional connection to people; is a subject many have theorised on. My perspective on literature is: First of all, don’t overestimate it. Don’t expect a novel, a poem or a play to change the realities of our society. That’s a too high expectation. Of course, it has happened that a piece of literature has led to war. But such incidents are very unique. Most often, the impact of literature is very delicate.  That’s because literature is a form of art. Through the appreciation of the aesthetic, the impact is gradual and descreet, like spring showers moistening the soil. So I think, to put literature on such a high pedestal, expecting it to alter reality to do that to literature, is to give it too much weight or responsibility.  Yet one shouldn’t belittle it, either. Literature is not just for fun; its purpose is not simply to draw a few laughs. I think literature’s most precious quality lies is its study of the human soul. Literature praises what’s true and kind. Literature exposes and criticises what is dark and ugly. Its ultimate goal is to let our mind become richer and more expansive and make us kinder and more gracious. Via its transformation of people literature affects our society’s development and improvement. But I think it is a very gradual process.  I have an analogy to the relationship between literature and society, and that is the relationship people have with their hair: It is, of course, good to have a full head of hair. It looks nice and helps protect one’s head. But if one doesn’t have much hair, like me, that’s fine, as I’m still healthy. So it is with literature. A society may have many novels, poems, poets and writers which is very good. But if there are less of them, life is still…survivable. So I think, whether it is literature or art, it’s like human hair.  In the end, when a person dies, he gets buried in the ground. If he is dug up after many years, we find that his flesh has become earth but his hair remains. I mean, many things in society changes and disappear perhaps only literature and art will remain. |
| Q33 | That is a very interesting analogy. When you started writing, what was your reason? What were you thinking about? |
|  | I used to half-jokingly, half-seriously say that my initial reason for writing was that I wanted to live a happy life of eating dumplings three times a day. I said it so often that I grew tired of it. But in truth, my answer is still the same. My initial reason for writing wasn’t all that noble.  Some writers say, “I want my writing to change society.” “I want to shape beautiful minds through literature.” They give literature all these definitions. There are many writers like that. I think that for Chinese writers like me, who were born in farming villages and have lived a lower class life in poverty, our initial reason to write was probably very simple – lowly, even. It was to put food on the table, to change our situation and improve our position. Taking up a pen actually has many material benefits.  Of course, through the process of writing, when your life changes as a result many other ideas about literature naturally ensue. So, the initial reason was really not noble at all – even kind of vulgar. But that was actually the first idea I had.  I mentioned earlier that there were some educated people in my village. Some of them were educated people who had made a mistake in the 1960s. Today, when we say “made a mistake”, we should put quotation marks around it. They came to our village as punishment.  One of them used to tell me, that he had known a writer who lived lavishly and would eat dumplings three times a day. Families like mine would only have dumplings during the Spring Festival, so only once or twice a year. But here was someone who had dumplings three times a day! We were in disbelief. We thought not even a king could live such a life. But as a writer, he could. So I asked him, “If I could write books, would I be able to live such a life, too?” “But of course”, he said. So that was my first reason for writing. |
| Q33 | This reason for you… What is your reason for writing today? |
|  | Today, I can surely eat dumplings three times a day. Even in the middle of the night: I just take some out of the fridge and cook them. So today, my goals from those first days have long been achieved. So what drives me? What’s motivates me to keep writing? I can’t explain it in just a few sentences.  First of all, I just feel that I have something to say. I want to write down my thoughts and relate them to my readers through a polished piece of work.  Secondly, there are many things in society that I feel a duty to write about.  Another reason is my explorations to innovate literature as an art, which also drives me to write. Since the fictional form first emerged, at least a thousand years have passed. Within the art of literature and fiction there have always emerged new forms. Writers kept making changes to the form of fiction, whether in language or format. So, is there room for creativity for our generation of writers? I think there is. I see fiction as an art, and its development as infinite. Its format also has infinite possibilities. This near obsessive pursuit of fiction as an art, encourages me to keep writing. |
| Q28 | Why do you use a pen name, and why Mo Yan? |
|  | I talked about this at the press conference this afternoon. My name is Guan Moye. The second part becomes Mo Yan if broken up. In traditional writing, the left side of the ideogram is “Yan” and the right is “Mo”. Also, the second part, “Moye”, sounds like “Mo Yan”.  Another reason is that I was a very talkative child. Back in those days, if one talked too much one could get oneself and one’s family into trouble. It wasn’t always political, as when one said something counter-revolutionary but could also be social relationships. One could say something that offended a neighbour and upset one’s parents as the neighbour would get angry with them. When I was a child, I was too talkative which caused my parents much trouble. They would often criticise me, educate me, or even scold me. They would scold me for running my mouth.  Also, when I decided to start writing I had a somewhat superstitious idea as many great writers had pen names. People like Lu Xun and Ba Jin all used pen names. Many foreign writers as well. So, I thought, in order to write novels, one should first have a pen name. So when thinking about it, I came up with “Mo Yan”.  It is a way of paying respect to my parents’ teachings. Also, it is a kind of reminder and encouragement to myself. I think, if one wants to be a writer, one must speak less and write more. Talking exhausts energy and is time-consuming. If one puts the time and energy spent on talking into writing one can write more. So part of the pen name’s meaning is to encourage myself to work hard. |
| Q36 | If you look back on your work, do you see any recurring theme or recurring perspective? |
|  | There are two recurring themes. One is hunger, the other is loneliness. I have mentioned this many times. In my novels, especially the earlier ones these are two very important themes as these two things have affected me the most and deepest. Whenever I write about the past, these two themes will inevitably come up.  I think there is one more, something I have been pursuing until this day: my interest in the exploration of the depths of the human soul. Why are people the way they are? Why are some good and some bad? When facing the same things, why do people react so differently? Why are some naturally kind, while others, born into comfortable lives and given good education, grow up to be so evil? These are things I find unfathomable. I want to search for an answer through my writings and study this profound issue, to which there is no simple answer. |
| Q36 | This sounds like psychology to me. Have you found an answer? |
|  | I have not found an answer. Sometimes I am prone to superstition. Sometimes I think… We often believe that education and socialisation can remove hereditary traits. When we speak of someone being good or bad, we often link it to socialisation. But after my long-term observation and first-hand experiences I think it’s not always decided by socialisation. Some people are just born that way. Their thought processes are different. They are born to promote self-interest at others’ expense. Some are born to endure hardship and perform good deeds for others.  I think this is God’s will. God wanted to make the human world more complex so he created a group of true saints people with higher-than-average morality, such as Confucius. Such people are selfless and prioritise other people’s interests. For other people’s sake, they will give up what they treasure most. This is not a result of education.  The majority, average people like us two have the basic capacity for kindness. But there is also a grey area, deep within us, that sometimes puts our self-interest first. Sometimes we also have vulgar emotions. Most people are like that.  Another group is the opposite of saints. They are born evil. They have no sense of morality. People like us, because we have a basic notion of morality, if we do something that hurts others we feel bad, we criticise ourselves, and we even repent. People who are born evil have no basic notion of morality, and no conscience. When they do something we consider to be extremely evil, they don’t. They don’t feel bad, they are fine with it.  So, I can only leave the reasoning behind all this to God. God created three types of people, so we can compare and contrast us. |
| Q37 | Do you have a religious faith? |
|  | I am a polytheist. It comes from my childhood, cattle-herding in the fields. In that environment, I could feel that all things have souls. García Márquez said something similar: “Things have a life of their own. It’s simply a matter of waking up their souls.” When I was herding cattle, I felt that the birds, the animals on the ground even the trees and grass, has a soul. Everything has feelings. So I think I’ve been a polytheist since childhood.  There is also this folk culture in our village. Not far from my hometown there was a famous writer, Pu Songling, during the Qing dynasty. He wrote about gods and spirits of various animals and plants, that can change into the shape of humans. This kind of belief is common in the countryside. I was often told such stories by my grandparents and neighbours.  That was when I was a child. Then I went to the city, where I learned many theories, including Marxist atheism and theories about various gods. And I thought that all the religious faiths are humanity’s spiritual wealth and should be studied from an academic perspective.  So now I think I have religious faith. I respect all religions that teach people to be kind. But I am no follower of any one religion. |
| Q14 | Our time is almost up. I want to ask, what does the Nobel Prize money mean to you? |
|  | The money… When I was interviewed by Chinese reporters, they said: “You’ve been awarded such a large sum. What do you plan to do with it?” I jokingly said, “I plan to buy a bigger house in Beijing”, but someone immediately replied, “Not with that money.” Beijing’s real estate prices are too high. It may buy a 100 square-metre house.  Even without this money I can live comfortably and meet my basic needs but it will allow me to do more things. First of all, I won’t have to write quickly, or without rest, just to make a living. Now I have time to fine-tune my writing as I won’t be pressed to produce a large quantity. I can produce higher quality instead. Also, I can use the money to help those who need my help in my hometown my friends and relatives or villagers. |
| ID | 0914 |
| Biographical | Tomas Tranströmer was born on April 15, 1931, the son of Gösta and Helmy, née Westerberg. His parents divorced when Thomas was three years old, so he grew up in Stockholm with his mother, who was a schoolteacher. They spent their summers at his maternal grandfather’s pilot station on the island of Runmarö in the Stockholm archipelago, an environment that has always been an important starting point for his poetry, particularly *Östersjöar*, 1974 (*Baltics*, 1975). Here, among islets and skerries, he developed an early interest in geography and science, especially entomology. Because of his work in collecting insects, a newly discovered beetle now bears Tranströmer’s name: *Mordellistena transtroemeriana*.  As a teenager, Tranströmer cultivated artistic interests. Music became essential to him; he began to play the piano, and he soon approached poetry. His first poems were published in student magazines during the late 1940s.  After completing secondary school, Tranströmer studied literary history (writing his graduation essay on Swedish Baroque poetry), history of religion and psychology at Stockholm University College (now Stockholm University). During the late 50s he worked at the Institute for Psychometrics at Stockholm University College, then as a psychologist at Roxtuna outside Linköping, a youth correctional facility, and then from 1965 to 1990 as a psychologist at the Labor Market Institute in Västerås.  During the 50s he also took a number of trips, for example to Iceland, Yugoslavia, Greece, Italy, Morocco, Portugal, Spain and Egypt. His later worldwide travels, including many visits to the United States, mainly included reading tours and contacts with his translators.  In 1958 Tranströmer married Monica, née Bladh. Their two daughters, Emma and Paula, were born in 1961 and 1964.  Right from his debut book *17 dikter* (17 poems) in 1954, Tranströmer came to be regarded as the leading Swedish poet of his generation. To a substantial degree, he had already developed his distinctive language here: his original and sharply contoured metaphors, nature mysticism, musicality, strictness of form and natural diction – qualities that reappeared in his later books of poetry.  His poetry incessantly moved closer to the secrets of existence – note such titles as *Hemligheter på vägen*, 1958 (Secrets Along the Way), *Den halvfärdiga himlen*, 1962 (The Half-Finished Heaven) and his latest book, *Den stora gåtan*, 2004 (*The Great Enigma*, 2006). His interest in what, in a true sense, is unspeakable is nevertheless dictated by a desire for poetic concreteness – as if the inaccessible regions of the mind and of existence can only be sensed or touched with the exact instruments of sensuality.  Yet Tranströmer’s exploration of the complex nature of human identity and his instantly constructed bridges between nature, the cosmos and the dead never result in structured patterns or loud-voiced confessions. His poetry is a tranquil affirmation of few words, but is nevertheless a form of resistance to power, the market and media clichés.  Especially starting in the 60s, his poetry thus contains social and societal motifs – for example in *Klanger och spår*, 1966 (see *Windows and Stones: Selected Poems*, 1972) and M*örkerseende*, 1970 (*Night Vision*, 1972). Experiences that were based the poet’s simultaneous career as a psychologist also influenced many of his poems. He combines factual observation and a psychologist’s fascination with the metaphorical reality of dreams.  In later collections such as *För levande och döda*, 1989 (*For the Living and the Dead*, 1994) and *Sorgegondolen*, 1996 (*The Sorrow Gondola*, 1997), death – though never an unfamiliar guest in his poetry – has demanded more and more space, but not as an unambiguous threat. With trusting stillness, Tranströmer notes that life includes death, and vice versa. Sometimes his poems thus possess a kind of non-dogmatic religiosity.  Since the Swedish language can not be read by more than about one thousandth of the world’s population, the skillfulness of his translators has been especially vital. Since efforts to translate his works began in earnest during the 60s, Tranströmer’s international reputation has constantly gained strength. Today his works are available to readers of some sixty languages.  If anyone should be mentioned especially in this context, one cannot ignore the contributions of Tranströmer’s American friend and fellow poet Robert Bly in introducing and translating his work. The two have interpreted each other’s poetry, and much of their copious correspondence has been published in *Air Mail*, 2001.  In 1990 Tranströmer suffered a stroke that paralyzed his right side. He almost entirely lost his ability to speak. Since then, writing has taken him longer, although he has published some poetry collections and a memoir, *Minnena ser mig*, 1993 (*Memories Look at Me*, 2011). Tranströmer has increasingly embraced short forms of poetry such as haiku, which only reinforce his focus on concentration of expression. But even before he became ill, he took plenty of time to write his vivid, precise poetry. Some poems took him years to complete.  Tranströmer’s lifelong interest in music, which has left significant traces in his writings, has actually deepened since his stroke. Several composers have been inspired by his poetry and have set it to music, as well as dedicating to him a number of newly composed piano works for the left hand.  Between 1965 and 2000, Tranströmer lived in Västerås, Sweden. In 1997 the Municipality of Västerås established the Tranströmer Prize, which rewards outstanding poetic writing. Since 2000 he has lived in his childhood city of Stockholm.   |  | | --- | | Books in Swedish, English Translations and Selected Anthologies | | *17 dikter,* 1954 | | *Hemligheter på vägen,* 1958 | | *Den halvfärdiga himlen,* 1962 | | *Klanger och spår,* 1966 | | *Mörkerseende, 1970* (*Night Vision,* 1972) | | *Twenty Poems,* 1970 | | *Windows and Stones − Selected Poems,* 1972 | | *Stigar,* 1973 (including translations of poems by Robert Bly and Jánosz Pilinszky) | | *Östersjöar,* 1974 (*Baltics,* 1980) | | *Sanningsbarriären,* 1978 (*Truth Barriers,* 1984) | | *Det vilda torget,* 1983 (*The Wild Marketplace,* 1985) | | *Tomas Tranströmer: Selected Poems, 1954-1986,* 1987 | | *The Blue House = Det blå huset,* 1987 | | *För levande och döda,* 1989 (*For the Living and the Dead,* 1994) | | *Minnena ser mig,* 1993 | | *Sorgegondolen,* 1996 (*The Sorrow Gondola,* 2010) | | *Tolkningar,* 1999 (translations of other poets; ed. Niklas Schiöler) | | *Air Mail,* 2001 (correspondence between Tranströmer och Bly; ed. Torbjörn Schmidt) | | *Fängelse,* 2001 (nine haiku poems from Hällby Youth Prison, written in 1959) | | *The Half-Finished Heaven: The Best Poems of Tomas Tranströmer,* 2001 | | *Den stora gåtan,* 2004 (*The Great Enigma,* 2006) | | *Tomas Tranströmers ungdomsdikter,* 2011 (ed. Jonas Ellerström) | |  | | Selected Prizes and Honors | | Bellman Prize (Sweden), 1966 | | Petrarch Prize (Germany), 1981 | | Pilot Prize (Sweden), 1988 | | Nordic Council Literature Prize, 1990 | | Neustadt International Prize for Literature (United States), 1990 | | Swedish Academy Nordic Prize, 1991 | | August Prize (Sweden), 1996 | | The Griffin Trust, Lifetime Recognition Award (Canada), 2007 | | Title of Professor granted by the Swedish Government, 2011 | | Nobel Prize in Literature (Sweden), 2011 |   *Tomas Tranströmer died on 26 March 2015* |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0914 |
| Interview |  |
|  |  |
| ID | 0915 |
| Biographical | Mario Vargas Llosa was born in 1936 in Arequipa, Peru’s second largest city. During his childhood in Cochabamba, Bolivia, and Piura, a city in the north of Peru, he believed that his father had died. However, this was a lie told by his mother to conceal their tortuous separation. The truth emerged when, in 1946, his father appeared unexpectedly to take him away from his mother’s parents, moving with him and his mother to Lima. This revelation signified an abrupt change in Vargas Llosa’s life, from the pampered upbringing of a feminine environment to the hostile treatment of an authoritarian father. At his side, he was to discover fear, injustice and violence for the first time.  During these years in which he left his childhood behind, devouring the works of Dumas and Victor Hugo, the political climate in Peru was a reflection of Vargas Llosa’s home life. The dictator Manuel Odría rose to power in 1948 and over the next eight years, while Vargas Llosa studied law and literature at the University of San Marcos, he imposed rigid controls on social life which stifled individuality, engendering scepticism, defeatism and frustration among Peruvians. This period later inspired his novel *Conversation in the Cathedral*, published in 1969.  The dominant presence of authoritarianism in both public and private spheres led Vargas Llosa to strongly condemn systems which, in one way or another, sought to inhibit individual initiative and restrict personal freedom. His literary works, starting with *The Time of the Hero* (1963) – one of the key novels which pioneered the ‘Boom’ period in Latin American literature – reflect his loathing of arbitrary manifestations of power and the absence of law which enables the strongest to impose their will. The inspiration for this novel was the time he spent between 1950 and 1951 in the Leoncio Prado Military Academy, where he was sent by his father to stifle his literary ambitions through military discipline. However, Vargas Llosa managed to rebel against his paternal yoke, not only pursuing a writing career, but also marrying his maternal uncle’s sister-in-law Julia Urquidi, who was eleven years older than him and divorced. He drew on these experiences to write his novel *Aunt Julia and the Scriptwriter*, published in 1977.  Another fundamental experience in his life was a journey he made in the Amazon jungle in 1958, which inspired novels such as *The Green House* (1966), *Captain Pantoja and the Special Service* (1973), *The Storyteller* (1987) and *The Dream of the Celt* (2010). As opposed to other city dwellers who first came into contact with the remote jungle landscapes of Peru, which are still inhabited by primitive indigenous tribes, Vargas Llosa found neither exoticism nor harmony between humanity and nature but rather despotism, violence and cruelty. The absence of law and institutions exposed the jungle natives to the worst humiliations and acts of injustice by colonists, missionaries and adventurers, who had come to impose their will through the use of terror and force. What he heard, saw and felt in the jungle convinced Vargas Llosa that the archaic Peru which survived in the depths of the Amazon and the peaks of the Andes should be integrated into a modern Peru, the only Peru which, due to its legal framework, could stop the pillaging and wrongful acts committed against minorities and the most vulnerable sectors of Peruvian society.  Until the early seventies, Vargas Llosa perceived in socialism and the Cuban revolution a series of ideas which embodied modernity and a solution to the moral vices and economic underdevelopment of Latin America. However, when the revolution showed signs of having become an oppressive dictatorship where writers felt their freedom to create was restricted, Vargas Llosa distanced himself from Fidel Castro and socialism and began to advocate reformism, liberal pluralism, democracy and the free market. His changing political inclination brought with it a new way of understanding Latin American problems. The revolution, the dictatorship, nationalism, racism and religious mysticism, all of which are present throughout the course of the republican history of Latin America, now proved to be symptoms of a deeper problem related to intolerance and dogmatism. A host of leaders, rebels and saviours had instigated fanatical attempts to impose a closed view of the world with no concern for the consequences. This human tendency, which is ever present in Latin America and the root cause behind innumerable tragedies, provided the plot for his novel *The War of the End of the World* in 1981.  In 1987 the attempt by the then president of Peru, Alan García, to nationalise the banking industry was vehemently rejected by Vargas Llosa, who saw this project as a strategy to accumulate power and place the media and businesses in government hands. With the support of large sectors of the population, Vargas Llosa organised protest marches which catapulted him into the political arena. His *Movimiento Libertad*, which opposed Alan García, evolved into the *Frente Democrático,* three years later. As the leader of this party he ran in the presidential elections in 1990. However, he lost in the second round to the engineer Alberto Fujimori, who then shut down congress and established a despotic and corrupt dictatorship for which he is currently serving a sentence. Memories of these years can be found in his book of memoirs *A Fish in the Water* (1993).  Since 1990 Vargas Llosa has published a fortnightly column in the Spanish daily newspaper *El País*, which is reprinted in different media sources all over the world. In these, he states his opinion regarding the most important current political, social and cultural events. He also teaches literature courses at American universities and writes literary essays. Although Vargas Llosa began writing plays in the 1980s, it was not until 2005 that he decided to take to the stage himself to portray his characters. Aitana Sánchez Gijón, the actress who accompanies him in this new adventure, has described him as a promising young actor.  Translated by Colin Howe |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0915=MVL  [Mario Vargas Llosa] Hello?  [Adam Smith] Oh, hello, is that Mario Vargas Llosa?  [MVL] Yes, speaking?  [AS] Oh, hello, my name is Adam Smith. I’m calling from the Nobel Prize website in Stockholm. My congratulations on the news of the award.  [MVL] Well, so, is it true then? Ha ha!  [AS] Ha, ha! It most certainly …  [MVL] Because, I received a call from the Secretary General of the Academy, and I was wonder if it was true or joke of a friend!  [AS] Well, I can confirm that it has just been announced to the public in Stockholm.  [MVL] Ah, it has already been announced. Well, I’m deeply moved and grateful! It’s been a great surprise! Well, I don’t know what to say … I feel overwhelmed, really!  [AS] That’s a nice thing to say! You’ve been tipped for some years, so … what does it mean to be awarded the Prize, do you know?  [MVL] Well, I know but I still don’t believe it, you know? I need to read it in the papers.  [AS] Of course, yes. Once it’s in literature, then it’s real.  [MVL] I feel very moved and it’s a fantastic encouragement. And, frankly, I didn’t expect it, you know! I never knew that it was true that my name was among the possible candidates and … But, anyway, it’s a fantastic event and I feel very surprised, you know! Very surprised.  Writing has been such a fantastic pleasure for me all my life, that I cannot believe that I am honored and recompensed for something that has been a recompense in itself, you know? Anyway, please …  [AS] My sincere congratulations …  [MVL] Anyway, please convey my gratitude to all the members of the Academy.  [AS] Of course, may I … keep you on the phone for just a couple of minutes because we like to record a very brief telephone interview?  [MVL] Yes, of course.  [AS] Thank you. Ok, so I gather you’re in Princeton at the moment, teaching?  [MVL] I am in New York, but teaching in Princeton. I spend Monday and Tuesdays teaching, but I am living in New York until December.  [AS] Ok. And, you live in many different places. You’re Peruvian …  [MVL] I live in, well, in Lima [phone line drops out], and Madrid. But mostly between Lima and Madrid.  [AS] And, I was going to ask: does it change the way you write, where you’re living? Because it, in some …  [MVL] Oh, I don’t think so. I don’t think so. I write about different places of course but, ah, I’m not … Sometimes I move because I am writing about a certain place. But, I don’t think the environment change very much the idea that I have of a story … But, maybe, maybe, yes… but not in a very conscious way? Maybe unconsciously, yes, I am impregnated by the place in which I am. I, I don’t [phone line drops out] know.  [AS] What about language? Because, of the …  [MVL] The language, I am convinced that the fact of living in a foreign, let’s say, language, enriches very much the relationship that I have with Spanish. I think that I have understood better my own language in this constant confrontation – of the Spanish with the English, with the French, with the German. Ah, I think you become much more conscious of the nuances that each language has to express the same idea, same feelings. I think in this [phone line drops out] my relationship with my own language has been much, much more rich because I have lived in countries where the Spanish language was not a national language, you see.  [AS] And, you write in a very large number of forms – and unusually large number of forms – why is that so?  [MVL] Well, I write novels, and ah … But, I think I am a writer of fiction, you know, because I write plays also, or short stories. But, ah, I don’t believe that the different literary genres change the vision, the beliefs … the feelings that I try to express in my stories.  But, I think certain stories expressed or represented in a play, than in a novel, or in a short story that in another [phone line drops out] . In other stories, of course, I think that the novel is the ideal way to tell them, no?  [AS] Yes. And, may I ask about your interest in politics? You say that you entered politics from a sense of obligation. Was this personal obligation or the obligation of the writer?  [MVL] I think writers are citizens too, you know, and have the moral obligation to participate in the civic debate, in the debate about the solutions to the problems that the societies face. That doesn’t mean that I think that writers should become professional politicians. No, I never thought, I never wanted to become a professional politician. I did it once because the situation in Peru was deeply, deeply serious. We had hyperinflation, we have terrorism, there was war, civil war, in the country. And, in this environment, my impression was that the very fragile democracy that we had [phone line drops out] was on the point of collapse! So, it was in this circumstances. But, I did it as something very exceptional and knowing perfectly well that this would be a transitory experience, no, which it was.  But, on the other hand, I think that writers, as the rest of citizens, should participate in the civic problems. Otherwise, you couldn’t … you couldn’t protest! You couldn’t [phone line drops out] participate. If you believe in democracy, democracy is participation, and I don’t think why writers, or artists, or intellectuals should exonerate themselves of this moral obligation to participate.  [AS] Ok, a last question. The announcement will expose you to a whole new readership, who have never read you before. Would you recommend that they start with one book in particular?  [MVL] Oh, well, ha ha! I don’t know! I suppose … I don’t really know. But, maybe … No! I cannot say. No, I cannot say.  [AS] Ok. That’s good: leave them to their free choice, yes.  [MVL] Very well, sir.  [AS] Well, it’s been a pleasure to talk to you.  [MVL] Thank you very much.  [AS] Congratulations. Thank you very much, good bye.  [MVL] Good bye! |
| Interview |  |
| Q21 | Who has most inspired you as a writer? |
|  | I had of course the models of great writers and many … very important for me was the case of Flaubert for example. And the reason was that unlike all the writers who seemed geniuses since they were born, Flaubert had to work a lot in this life to achieve master works. So in his case talent was something that was the result of perseverance, discipline, the will to be a good writer. And when I … I love Flaubert since I read his first novel which was *Madame Bovary*, I read a lot about his life and I discovered that when he started he was not a genius at all, but he was a very, let’s say, common writer who wrote under the influence of his models and that his originality and really his talent is something that he achieved through discipline and very, very hard work. So that gave me the, let’s say, a kind a method for writing which I think was very, very important because I felt that I was not a genius at all so, that I wanted to write good books I had to work. And Flaubert was a great inspiration because he was a writer that had built his talent, his genius through very, very hard work, to a very deep commitment with his vocation, what he wanted to achieve. So he helped me enormously, not only by the beauty and the richness of his books but also because he managed not being a born genius, to build his genius through effort, commitment, perseverance, discipline. |
| Q16 | How important are your origins in your writing? |
|  | I was born in Peru, but I spend my first ten years, not in Peru but in Bolivia. Then when we returned to Peru, I lived in Piura, in Lima and then I have lived in Spain, in France, in England in the Unites States and I’ve been moving all the way. I think my Peruvian roots are very important for me because the first images that my memory has preserved are related to Peru. The kind of Spanish that I speak, is the Peruvian Spanish which of course is part of the Spanish but with certain nuances, with a certain music. And in this sense, I can say that I am a Peruvian writer, but I am not nationalistic, I am a declared enemy of all forms of nationalism. So, I think for me has been as important as to be born in Peru, to have spent so many years in France, so many years in England. I think all places in which I have lived have produced the writer that I am.  I think this is another very important knowledge that you receive being a writer, everything that you do is something that contributes to build your personality, to build your sensibility. I think this nationalistic vision is so limited, is so provincial, put you in such a restricted space to understand problems, to understand life that it is very, very important to leave it to yourself to build this kind of rationalistic or nationalistic perspective. And I think literature helps you a lot to overcome this very limited perspective of life. What you discover reading, you know, authors from different languages, from different traditions, is that the common denominator is much more important, much more larger than this localistic, regionalistic, nationalistic kind of perspective. So, in this sense I consider myself a citizen of the world and I think literature has helped me very much to have this attitude. I belong, of course, to Peru, but I belong to Latin America, I belong to the Spanish-speaking world, which means a lot of traditions and at the same time I feel in a way that I owe a lot to French culture or to English culture, to culture of my time. And I would like very much a world where people from all places consider themselves belonging to all places and achieve this kind of goal through culture. Culture is the great instrument to overcome the geographic, cultural or religious limitations that you have and understand the rest and participate of everything that is good, important, beautiful in other cultures, in other traditions, in other countries. |
| Q6 | What were your childhood dreams? |
|  | I had the dream which at that time seemed totally impossible, to be a writer because I enjoy reading so much that I had the idea that life concentrated to tell stories, to invent stories, would be something absolutely fantastic. But it seemed impossible, because at that time there were not many Latin Americans who were only writers, so the writers that I knew were writers only for holidays or for weekends. They were professionals, there were lawyers, there were diplomats who had their lives completely consecrated to different professions and that people who practised literature as a hobby, an eventual hobby. And I didn’t want to be a writer only of Sundays and holidays. So, my dream at that time was to be a writer, but it seemed something impossible. Then I discovered that it was a city in the world in which apparently it was possible to be only a writer, and that was Paris. Since I was very young, I had the idea that I should organise my life in order to reach Paris, because in Paris it was possible to be only a writer. And in fact, something of the sort happened to me because when I finished university, I studied to be a lawyer and at the same time for pleasure, humanities. When I finished university, I got a grant to make a doctorate in Spain, in Madrid, I was in Madrid a year and a half and then I moved to Paris.  And finally, in Paris I could organise my life in order to, not only to be exclusively a writer, but to get jobs that let me free time to write and to read and. So it was in Paris that I became a professional writer as I had thought when I was a boy. And I lived seven years in Paris working as a journalist, as a teacher first and then as a journalist, but there were jobs that gave me a lot of free time so I could consecrate most of my time to write. Which I was very lucky because that what I was longing since I was very young. To write books, to write novels, to write short stories, to write plays, I thought it was the most extraordinary activity in the world. And it was in Paris in a way that I could organise more and more my life with enough free time, in order to consecrate most of my time to writing. I finished my first novel there, my second novel and I was writing my third novel when I moved from Paris to London where I went to teach. And teaching in a London university was something very pleasant because I taught literature, Latin American and Spanish literature, and it was a kind of job that let me a lot of free time for writing. I can say that I really became a real writer in Paris, in London, in Europe. |
| Q5 | Does literature play a part in today’s world? |
|  | Literature is of course something that gives you enormous pleasure. That is essential. Good literature is an extraordinary experience of pleasure, of entertainment, but it is not only that. I think good literature is something that enrich very much, your sensibility, your imagination and I think good literature, great literature develops in readers a critical attitude towards the world. When you return to real life after experiencing the beauty, the richness of war and peace, of *Don Quijote*, of *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo, all very great worlds of literature, I think you are much more sensible to the deficiencies of real life to everything that is wrong because it’s unjust, unfair or brutal in the world as it is. So, I think this critical attitude towards the world which I think is essential to change things, to improve society and to correct the deficiencies of the real world, is something from what you are much more aware if you are impregnated of good literature. I think that is one of the most important social and political and moral effects of good literature. You understand better what is wrong in life, you discover that real life is never apt to fulfil your appetites, your desires, your dreams. I think this is an essential aspect of progress because if you don’t have citizens that are aware that things are wrong, that things are insufficient to fulfil the expectations of society, you are not mobilised to change things, to reform what is wrong and in this sense I think literature, in particular, and culture in general, play a fundamental role in what is civilisation, what is progress.  I am convinced that, for example, democratic culture, culture based on freedom, on respect of human rights, was something that was possible because we had people that were sensibilized by art, by literature, by culture in general, about the sufferance, the injustices, the inequalities, the abuses who were so extended in real life. So, I think literature is pleasure but it’s also a very important instrument to move forward in life. And that is the reason why all dictators have been always trying to create systems to control literature. They were aware that in literature they had an enemy, someone who was a way of resisting abuses and particularly this kind of total control that a dictatorship tried to impose in a society. |
| Q4 | What do you think of the Swedish Academy’s motivation for your Nobel Prize? |
|  | I think it is true that one of my major preoccupations has been power. Not only political, but also social, economic power, probably because I was born in a country and in a region in which power were synonymous of brutality. We have had so many kinds of dictatorship in Latin America. Things are changing, fortunately, but when I was young, when I was a boy, Latin America was a region full of military dictatorships and that was synonymous with brutality, with brutal imposition of ideas, of attitudes, of behaviours. So, this is a kind of theme or subject that reappear constantly in my work and I think in my stories there is always a great respect and admiration of people that in spite of this kind of environment in which forced brutality are the main reasons to behave and to act and fulfil your daily life, are able to resist, to fight and to demonstrate that this is not /- – -/, that things can change, that life can get better, that societies can be freer than they are. And I think in this kind of fighting against the established order enrich themselves, enrich, let’s say, a superior kind of moral value. I think this kind of people are the heroes of my stories and I think in a way this is more or less synthetized in this description, of the reasons for why the Swedish Academy gave me the Nobel Prize. |
| Q17 | Do you have any advice for aspiring writers? |
|  | Work very hard, enjoy what you are doing. I think it is essential when you have a literary vocation to feel that writing, practicing this vocation, you are receiving the most important rewards for what you are doing. And I think if you work with this kind of feeling, it is much more possible that what you’ll write will be good literature, that you will succeed as a writer. That if you write in a mechanical way, as if you were practicing any other kind of work or job. I think writing or composing or painting is also a job, of course, but it’s a very special kind of job in which practicing the job you are already receiving a fantastic kind of reward for what you do. You are doing something in which you are realising yourself, accomplishing yourself something that was a very important necessity of your own personality in order to be, how can I say, loyal with yourself. That would be my advice to a young writer – enjoy what you do, be very serious self-critic of yourself and receive this kind of compliments that is to be satisfied with what you are doing. |
| Q34 | How did you react to being awarded the Nobel Prize? |
|  | It was a very big surprise. I had really discarded the possibility of receiving the Nobel Prize. I was in New York at that time because I was teaching at Princeton but living in New York. I usually start to work very early, it was five in the morning I think. I was preparing a lesson that I had to deliver the next day. It was, I think, 5 a.m. and suddenly I saw my wife appear where I was working, with the telephone and with a very strange attitude, like she was having a kind of mystical trance. She didn’t say a word and she gave me the telephone. And what was funny was I thought immediately, someone in the family is very ill or is dead, because it was 5 in morning. And then I took the telephone, and I couldn’t hear anything because there were all kind of electric, you know, sounds, but suddenly I heard very far away “Swedish Academy”. And then I was cut. So, I said to my wife, “He has said Swedish Academy” and she was still in state of trance, of mystical trance. And immediately after, the telephone rang again and this time I could speak, and I was told “I am the secretary of the Swedish Academy and you have received the Nobel Prize in Literature”. And I was so surprised that I could only react with a stupid question. I said, “Is that official?” and I was told “It will be in half an hour. Open the radio and the television and you will see.” And that was all, and I was talking to my wife and I said, “Do you think this is true?”.  And I remember that we were in Rome, several years ago, in which there was a fantastic misunderstanding because an Italian writer had received a call like this, and he was naïve enough to call the press to say, “I have been told that I have received the Nobel Prize” and it wasn’t true. It was a joke which had been played on him of his so-called friends. And we were talking, and I said, “And what about if this is some kind of joke?”, like the joke that was done to Moravia, Alberto Moravia, you know. But then we were hesitating if we would call our children, or we expected the half an hour, but finally we decided that it was true and so we called two sons and our daughter. They were very surprised of course. And at 6 o’clock New York time, it was given the news everywhere, in radios, in TV. And what was even more incredible, is that half an hour later, I had at least twenty newspaper men at the door of my apartment in New York, 6.30 in the morning. Mostly from Nordic TVs and radio stations, Dutch, Norwegian, Sweden, it was incredible, you know. I am still thinking, is this true or a kind of fairy tale, you know. That I have been living in since. |
| ID | 0916 |
| Biographical | Herta Müller was born in 1953 in Nitzkydorf, a German-speaking village in the Banat, a region that had passed from the Austro-Hungarian Empire to Romania in the wake of the First World War. During the Second World War, Romania had allied with the National-Socialist German Reich, and like many of the Romanian-Germans, Herta Müller’s father volunteered for Hitler’s Waffen-SS. Shortly before the end of the war Romania changed positions, and in January 1945, while the fighting was still on, Stalin ordered all Romanian-Germans between the ages of 17 and 45 to be deported to the Soviet Union to perform five years of forced labor. Among them was Herta Müller’s mother.  From 1973 to 1976, Herta Müller studied Romanian and German literature in Timişoara, where she befriended authors from the “Aktionsgruppe Banat,” a group of writers opposed to the Ceauşescu dictatorship and the official literature of the ruling socialist party. For Herta Müller, her father’s service as an SS soldier in the “Panzer Division Frundsberg” provided a frightening example of how individuals can be corrupted by ideology and opportunism – and inoculated her at a young age against similar structures within the communist ideology. Upon completing her studies, Herta Müller worked as a translator in a machine factory in Timişoara. In 1979 she was approached by the Romanian secret police (Securitate), but she refused to spy on her colleagues and foreign guests, and as a result she lost her job and could only find occasional employment.  Her first book *Niederungen* (English title: *Nadirs*) dates from this period, although it wasn’t until 1982 that a censored version appeared in Romania. In 1984 she published a collection of short prose in Romania entitled *Drückender Tango*; that same year an uncensored but abridged edition of *Niederungen* came out in Germany, making her name as a writer overnight. Told from the perspective of a young girl, with all her fantasies and fears, the book depicts the confinement, corruption, intolerance, and oppression of a Swabian village in the Banat. In the German media, Herta Müller openly criticized the communist dictatorship: as a result she was prohibited from publishing and repeatedly summoned by the Securitate for interrogations, where she was confronted with absurd accusations, reviled as a prostitute, charged with black marketeering, and threatened with death. In 1987 she emigrated to Germany together with writer Richard Wagner, her husband at the time. Since then she has lived in Berlin.  Even there, however, she was persecuted and threatened by the Securitate, in the perfidious manner described in her 2009 book *Cristina und ihre Attrappe* which is based on materials in her secret police file the author was able to obtain. The dossier revealed that only her reputation in Germany protected her from a trial that had already been prepared, on the trumped-up charge of being a foreign agent.  In the first book she wrote in Germany, which appeared in 1989 as *Reisende auf einem Bein* (English title: *Traveling on One Leg)*, she portrayed the difficulties of finding a foothold in strange surroundings. Other novels followed about daily life in a dictatorship, difficult friendships, and the long arm of the secret police reaching into the private sphere – such as her 1994 book *Herztier* (English title: *The Land of Green Plums*) or the 1997 *Heute wär ich* *mir lieber nicht begegnet* (English title: *The Appointment*). Further publications include essays on her own poetics (*Der König verneigt sich und tötet*, 2003) and several volumes of collages combining images and text, most recently *Die blassen Herren mit den Mokkatassen* (2005).  In 2009 she published the novel *Atemschaukel*, about the deportation of the Romanian-German minority to the Soviet Union. Originally she wanted to write this novel together with the poet Oskar Pastior, who himself had been deported for five years of forced labor in what is now Ukraine. It is his detailed recollections that provide the basis of the novel. While they were still in the preparatory phase, Oskar Pastior died, and Herta Müller was forced to write the book alone. *Atemschaukel* is not only a moving depiction of the unknown deportation of the Romanian-Germans; in the voice of the protagonist Leo Auberg, it is also Herta Müller’s literary monument to Oskar Pastior. |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0916=HM  [Herta Müller] Hello …  [Marika Griehsel] Ms. Müller, congratulations. My name is Marika Griehsel and I am calling from the Nobel Foundation’s website offices. Again, our warmest congratulations…  [HM] Thank you.  [MG] You write in German, and you once said that writing is very important to you, existential …  [HM] Well, writing was the only thing where I could be myself, because under the dictatorship … and, well, it gave me something to hold on to … but actually it was not that important when I did work – when I had a job – for I was always getting fired, from everywhere. And then I was subjected to all this chicanery, continually; the interrogations and the persecution. Sometimes the writing also appeared as though one were a bit crazy … because the country was so poor and one had witnessed such unhappiness and sometimes one thought to oneself, well, in a way it really is … these things have no place in this world.  [MG] But it was somehow always what you did in order to see the other side, wasn’t it?  [HM] So that I can nevertheless be certain that I am still myself, that I exist.  [MG] You went to live in Germany in 1987?  [HM] Yes.  [MG] But you continue to write a lot about the old country … why is that, do you think?  [HM] Well, I think that the heavy weight … that literature goes to where the weight is. And I lived under this dictatorship for over thirty years and that is where the injuries and the theme are … I did not choose this theme, the theme always seeks me out. This theme I shall not … I am still not rid of this theme. And one has to write about the things that occupy one incessantly. And it’s important, dictatorship … for unfortunately that dictatorship was not the very last. Regrettably, there are still so many in the world.  [MG] When you started to write, for whom did you write, and whom do you write for now?  [HM] Well, actually, I have always written only for myself. To clarify things, to clarify things with myself, to understand in an inner way what is actually happening. Or: What has become of me? I come from a very small village, and then came the city, and there were always discontinuities and then I was a minority, German … and one didn’t belong anyway. Then I had this major conflict with my compatriots, with the German minority: they excommunicated me, already when I wrote my first book, as someone who fouls their own nest, so to speak, because I wrote about the situation with the involvement with National Socialism, and about the archaic fossilized way of life in the village, about its ethnocentrism. And they did not forgive me for that.  They wanted literature about their homeland, “Heimatliteratur”, and they felt that I, well that I compromised them. It is a very conservative minority and thus I was excluded, and I was excluded from Romanian society for political reasons. And then I came to Germany and here in Germany I was always the Romanian, and in Romania I was always the German. So somehow one is always the other …  [MG] Yes, indeed. Is that important, do you think, that you felt you were on the outside?  [HM] I don’t know whether it’s important. It’s certainly something one can do without. And sometimes it hurts. People want to belong in certain respects, but it was as it was and I got used to it and at some point it was just a matter of fact. And that’s what it is. And, one can’t force oneself upon people and betray the way one thinks? If I don’t belong because of what I think and because of my opinions, then so be it. What can one do about it? One can’t bend over backwards or pretend to be someone else just to belong. And in any case it doesn’t work. Once you no longer belong, it’s over.  [MG] Is literature for you … writing … does one have to be very honest?  [HM] Yes, one has to be honest with oneself. Through writing one experiences something different to what one experiences with the five senses one has because language is a different métier. And in writing one searches, and that is what keeps one writing, that one sees and experiences things from another angle entirely, one experiences oneself during the process of writing. Writing itself does not know what it looks like while one is doing it, only when it’s finished. And as long as I am writing I am in safekeeping, then I have some idea of how life could go on, and when I get to the end of a text I don’t know it anymore.  [MG] That sounds good. “Atemschaukel” [literally: breath swing/see-saw] – do you think it is difficult – You have a group of people, Germans, who were in prison; they were not very well-liked, were they? Nobody thought about them after World War II was over … what did you mean by that?  [HM] Yes, well, … deportation after 1945 naturally had to do with the Second World War …  Oh, there’s the door bell. It’s utter madness here in the house … they are already at the front door …  Well, they were deported in the name of collective guilt, the German minority was involved; they were in the SS or the German army. Romania under Antonescu was a fascist state …  [HM] *Be a bit quiet, otherwise I can’t talk on the phone … it’s a friend of mine … oh, I can’t understand you …*  [MG] O.K. I think the big party is about to start – just quickly: you said it was collective guilt, just quickly.  [HM] Yes, and in my opinion collective guilt is always unjust because the people who were deported were not in the war back then. The deportations took place already in January 1945, but the war didn’t end until May. My father was in the SS, he had not even returned from the front. And so they took civilians, took really young people, 17-year-olds like Oskar Pastior, who were personally not guilty, and Romania was also a fascist state with Antonescu on Hitler’s side and it only changed sides at the last minute, or was made to change sides, because the Soviets made Romania change sides. And that also made the German minority stubborn about reflecting on their involvement with National Socialism, because the Romanians were also all at Stalingrad with Antonescu, and afterwards, after 1945, only the minorities were held responsible. The Hungarian minority with Horthy, Horthy’s followers and the Germans as the supporters of Hitler, but that the entire population of Romania at that time was on the side of Nazi Germany, afterwards, after 1945, history was falsified.  Yes, my mother was also deported, for five years. But I tried to see these things in context. If Nazi Germany had not committed such crimes, there would have been no deportation. One must always keep this in mind. It didn’t just come out of nowhere. But it was a consequence of the crimes in which the minority was involved of course.  [MG] What do you think, your books will also be translated into Romanian. How will your reception be there?  [HM] Well, it will vary. In general the books are well received. But that’s just one side. Probably if someone selects a book to review, they perhaps quite like it. But in Romanian society I am not particularly well-liked. I don’t often receive invitations. Because still today I have too many negative things to say about the conditions in Romania, because that is what it’s like. Because the entire old nomenklatura and the secret service have divided up all the positions in the country between them. And that is an entire network. They help themselves and help each other. And that is also an explanation of why corruption is all-pervasive in Romania. Regrettably, Romania is still quite a long way away from democracy.  They don’t like to hear that in Romania. That is an everlasting problem. Those in exile should hold their tongues, and then they also say that I don’t know anything about it anymore.  [MG] Your language is German but you also have Romanian influences … how does this make itself apparent?  [HM] Well, that is my native tongue, German. I learned Romanian very late, when I was fifteen, in town, and I wanted to learn it. I like the language very much. Romanian is a very beautiful, sensual, poetic language. And from that moment onward – it was perhaps good that I learned it so late because – then I had an eye for it – I realised just how rich Romanian is in imagery, what marvellous metaphors there are, the common metaphors that people use every day, in superstitions or … in expressions, many things are contradictory, or the names of plants, that they are called something completely different than in German. That is then a different look at the same thing … I have always seen that there are two stations, the one is the station on my language for something, and the other is this other station. It is not only a different word, it is a different view. Language has different eyes. In my case Romanian always writes with me, also when I am not writing in Romanian, because I have it in my head.  And I have two views from the other language, they are always there. I frequently don’t know which one it is from which I am writing.  [MG] Which works of yours do you recommend we read first?  [HM] I don’t know. Well, in German I would of course recommend my last book. One is always closest to the last work. “Die Atemschaukel”.  [MG] “Die Atemschaukel”. Well, the publicity now will be tremendous; how do you feel about that?  [HM] Well, I don’t know what to say.  [MG] *(laughs)*  [HM] One is not a different person. All this has actually nothing to do with the writing itself. I am happy now, but I shall remain down to earth. So I shall file this away for the time being. And in two or three days it will hit home. I know it in this moment, but I still don’t believe it. I can’t realise it. It has to be that way. I don’t know why I deserve such happiness. I sometimes think that happiness has erred. Perhaps I don’t deserve it at all. Why am I entitled to so much happiness?  [MG] Ms. Müller, many, many, thanks, and congratulations …  [HM] I thank you. All the best.  [MG] All the best to you. Thank you very much, bye. |
| Interview |  |
|  |  |
| ID | 0917 |
| Biographical | J.M. G. Le Clézio was born in 1940 in Nice, France. He is a descendent of a Breton family that emigrated in the 18th century to Mauritius. He completed his undergraduate studies at the Institut d’Études Littéraires in Nice and is a Doctor of Philosophy.  Despite his extensive travels, since the age of seven or eight J. M. G. Le Clézio has never stopped writing: poems, sagas, tales, short stories, of which nothing was published until *Le Procès-verbal (The Interrogation)*, his first novel, appeared in print in September 1963, for which he received Le Prix Renaudot. In 1980 he received Le Grand Prix Paul-Morand from the French Academy for his novel *Désert*.  In 2008 he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0917=J-MGLC  [Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio] Yes, Le Clézio speaking.  [Adam Smith] Oh hello, my name is Adam Smith and I’m calling from the Nobel Foundation web site in Stockholm.  [J-MGLC] Yes.  [AS] And, would you mind if we spoke just for five minutes on the telephone?  [J-MGLC] No, not at all. I am ready for that.  [AS] Thank you so much. You’re an inhabitant of many countries but we catch you in France now, is that correct?  [J-MGLC] Yes, yes. I am in France presently. Normally I am going to Canada in a few days, but I’m still in France now.  [AS] And given that you were brought up in many countries and you’ve lived around the world, is there anywhere that you consider to be home?  [J-MGLC] Yes, in fact, I would say that Mauritius, which is the place of my ancestors, is really the place I consider my small homeland. So, this would be Mauritius definitely.  [AS] And, you were brought up bilingual, but you always write in French. Is there a particular reason?  [J-MGLC] Well, yes. In fact, when I was a child I grew up speaking French, I mean, in a French public school. So my first contact with literature was in French, and that’s the reason why I write in French.  [AS] And, you started writing as a young child, and are very prolific. You’ve written over 30 books alone. Does writing come very easily? Do you enjoy putting pen to paper?  [J-MGLC] Yes, definitely. This is one of my greatest pleasures in life is to sit at a table, wherever it is. I don’t have any office, I can write everywhere. So, I put a piece of paper on the table and then I travel. Literally, writing for me is like travelling. It’s getting out of myself and living another life; maybe a better life.  [AS] That’s nice. People often say that reading is like travelling, but writing, also, that’s nice.  [J-MGLC] Yes, both go together for me. I enjoy very much being in a foreign country, in a new country, new place. And I enjoy also beginning a new book. It’s like being someone else.  [AS] You write about other places, other cultures, other possibilities a great deal, and in particular you’ve written a book about the Amerindians. What is particularly appealing about their culture?  [J-MGLC] Well, it’s probably because it’s a culture so different from the European culture, and on the other hand it didn’t have the chance of expressing itself. It’s a culture which has been in some ways broken by the modern world, and especially by the conquests from Europe. So I feel there is a strong message here for the Europeans … I am European essentially. So, I feel there is a strong message here for the Europeans to encounter this culture which is so different from the European culture. They have a lot to learn from this culture; the Amerindian cultures.  [AS] You also write about the colonial experience a lot. Do you feel it’s important for modern European culture to examine its past in this way?  [J-MGLC] Yes, because I feel, it’s my feeling that the, Europe, and I would say also the American society are – it owes a lot to the people that submitted during the colonial times. I mean the wealth of Europe comes from sugar, cotton, from the colonies. And from this wealth they began the industrial world. So they really owe a lot to the colonized people. And they have to pay their debts to them.  [AS] The wide range of your writing is unclassifiable, but is there some unifying purpose in why you write?  [J-MGLC] Mainly would be to be true to myself, to express myself in the most accurate way. I feel that the writer is just a kind of witness of what is happening. A writer is not a prophet, is not a philosopher, he’s just someone who is witness to what is around him. And so writing is a way to … it’s the best way to testify, to be a witness.  [AS] And for those who are unfamiliar with your work, would you suggest any particular starting points?  [J-MGLC] Uh, no. I would not dare to do that. I mean reading is a free practice. You have to, you have to be led by not haphazard, but to be led by your own feelings. I think the readers are free to begin by the books where they want to. They don’t have to be led in their, in their reading.  [AS] That’s a very appealing answer, thank you. Ah, last question. The Prize will bring some further notoriety. Is there a particular message you think you might use that notoriety to spread?  [J-MGLC] Well, let me think about that! It’s a … in a way it’s a very intimidating situation, because I’m not familiar … it’s not my habit to give messages, and to express thoughts. I would say, rather, I would prefer to be read, and to, that my writings might inspire some people. I, anyway, there is of course the speech I have to deliver to the Nobel Academy, so maybe I will find some, some messages to express at that time.  [AS] So we will wait for December.  [J-MGLC] Yes.  [AS] Okay. Well, we will look forward to seeing you in Stockholm in due course, but thank you very much indeed.  [J-MGLC] Thank you very much indeed.  [AS] And congratulations.  [J-MGLC] Bye bye.  [AS] Bye bye. |
| Interview |  |
| Q3 | My name is Horace Engdahl, I’m the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy and I have here beside me the Laureate for Literature of the year 2008, Jean-Marie Le Clézio. I will speak in English here – brings us immediately on the question of languages – we were asked by the director of the Nobel Web service to do that, and we have agreed. Of course your literary language is French, but apart from that, which are your languages? You speak English because your father was a British citizen, you also maybe speak Spanish because you’ve spent a lot of years in Mexico, and I’ve read somewhere that at a certain stage of your career you even learnt Embera Indian language, is that true? |
|  | Yes, personally I belong to a dual culture because my family is from Mauritius, and as you may know in Mauritius the official language is English, the current language is Creole and the literary language is French, but I do not speak Creole, I speak very little Creole, I would not try to speak with you in Creole.  I wouldn’t understand, It’s no use!  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: So I’m used to shifting languages because my father used to speak to us, to my brother and I, he used to speak in English. He wanted us to be quite fluent in English, especially when he was trying to correct our behaviour, he would do that in English.  I see.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: And then of course I have lived in other countries, in Latin America, I learnt to speak what they call the Espanol /- – -/, the Spanish from the streets …  Oh, that’s not bad.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: … which is not literary Spanish. After that I lived for some time in the forest with the Embera Indians and I had to learn some Embera language which is totally different from the indo-European languages. So I …  Did you arrive speaking that language?  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Yes, I could speak fairly fluently, but they have also a literary language for tales or stories or for myths and this language I never spoke, it’s too complicated, so I spoke a very simplified Embera language, probably a rather simplified Spanish and a not too simplified but not too colloquial English. In fact I think I’m better in reading English than speaking English. My English is closer to the literary English and I’m not very familiar with jokes in English or with, you know, with small talk in English.  No. That’s always terribly difficult in any language that you’re not born with, I suppose.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Yes, yes, definitely.  It’s probably the sign of having really learnt a foreign language that you can laugh without looking at the people sitting beside you when you’re in a theatre for instance.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Yes. |
| Q21 | I’m not sure I could do that in English either really, but coming to this question in another perspective, I feel that today there is a tendency in many parts of the world, in the Western world particularly, to look upon English as a vehicle language. It’s used more and more in all circumstances and there are several realms of research that have been completely taken over by English. In international conferences in the European Union etc we tend to be more and more mono-lingual and even if … I know that the French are defending their positions with a lot of conviction, they find it increasingly hard to do so. But it’s odd and it’s very apparent if you, like me, belong to a small group that has as one of its main tasks to study world literature, to read books from all over the world, to look at the development of universal literature in a broad perspective. It’s quite apparent that there is no such thing as a universal language in the world of literature. The only universal language in literature is translation, and you said earlier this morning on a press conference that for you it’s not only the French literature tradition that is the basis of your writing, but it’s also to a large extent books that you read in translations, English, American books, Scandinavian books, books from lots of other countries. Could you comment a bit on that? Which are the most important non-French writers that sort of belong to you through your literary schooling? |
|  | In fact I was told that in Sweden 80% of the population speaks English. This is amazing if you compare with the French people for instance. French speaking people or Spanish speaking people, where I suppose in Mexico they hardly speak, I would say 10% of the population will probably manage with English, but most of the population is ignorant of English. And for the French people it might be worse than 10% even, might find only 5% of people in France are able to have a conversation or read in English, so in that matter I would say that Sweden is probably ahead of all the countries.  On the other hand, what is amazing, which is very strange, is that the countries where most translations occur are not English speaking countries, for instance Korea is probably ahead of all countries for translations. Books are being translated from all languages, even very … even first novels or poems are translated into Korean very quickly, probably the same in Japan, and it’s very likely it would be close to that number in Sweden because Sweden has a good interest in translations.  I think it’s slightly more than 50% of all books published in this country that are translations in the literary field.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: And not all from English, they are from all languages, and on the contrary, when you go to the United States and look at the books stalls and you see what is sold in book stalls most, if not all, books are from English speaking persons. Very few books are translated, so it’s a kind of a paradox that the, what you would call the mono-lingual empire, is not interested at all in other languages, in other countries and trying to translate into this language.  No I think that …  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: And on the other hand all the countries where English is not so much spoken are the countries where people are interested in the English literature. So it’s probably an answer to what you were saying, that mono-culture is dangerous because it tends to ignore the other countries, it tends to be … reduce you then to be closed on itself, and to have no openness on the outside world. |
| Q38 | As I understand your relationship to French culture, to your own language, to your own literature, is not the typical one that you find with a French writer. I mean, I’ve been reading a lot of French writers and even if they often deny this fact quite often it’s so obvious that the very centre of their work is Paris, that’s where everybody wants to go, that’s where everybody wants to make a name, and there are certain rules and there are certain circles that you have to make yourself known by and you have to triumph on a certain scene. And this has been going on in very much the same way for hundreds of years, but somehow you don’t seem to belong to this play, this race, you have to a large extent even ignored it, I should say, could you comment on that? Why did you never quite go to Paris? |
|  | It’s a long story, I was born in the south of France, but my family was, as I mentioned, from Mauritius, so I was raised with the belief that I was in France. I was there but I was not from there, that I was from some other place. And when I was a child I tried to explain to my fellow students where I came from and they were not interested in the least bit, they were not interested at all in the Mauritian part of myself, and they even ignored that because at that time it was not so fashionable to be from Mauritius. So they ignored where it was and they thought it was St Maurice, a kind of suburb of Nice, but they could not understand why I was behaving in such a different way.  My father also tried to give us the … not an English education, but to value the English literature as well as the French literature, so he gave us a lot of English books to read and I must say I’ve read *Gulliver’s Travels* in the original, not in translation, and some ways my culture was really different from the others. So I did not feel so much attracted by the umbilical literature by the, you know, by the secret of the secrets by Paris, I didn’t feel so much attracted by that, I felt that being in Nice I was in, belonged more to the Mediterranean Sea than to the grey skies of Paris. And having Mauritian ancestors and Mauritian family I was more attracted by this kind of other world which was not exotic for me, it was the normal world, and I was using some Creole worlds in French which were not understood by the others, and my references were not in Paris at all. And in fact when I began to read the modern literature I was reading more American novels than French novels, I discovered very late the new “nouveax roman” and those writers, and to them I preferred the, I would say, the Jewish writers from New York, I felt they were much more inventive in the way they wrote stories like /- – -/ or Salinger, Salinger especially was very attractive for me.  Yes, you mentioned him.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Though he was describing a life I didn’t know really, it was the décor he was describing, I didn’t know anything about it, but I preferred the way he was telling the story, he was …  You said that *Catcher in the Rye* was an important book to you.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Yes, *Catcher in the Rye* because it was such an overwhelming way of telling a story. You had to be inside the body of a 14 year old and you were already 19 or 20, so already very far from that, and this man succeeded in making you feel you were in the body of a 14 year old, it was amazing, and no new novel in France was able to offer such a travel, such an experiment, and the humour, the good humour in the English literature was …I felt very attracted to that, and I felt like French literature was lacking cruelly this sense of humour, this distance. Very few writers had managed it and most writers in France were very serious, for me too serious.  So for all these reasons I didn’t feel very much interested by the Paris intelligentsia and the small chapels which were still alive when I was 20 years old. At first I refused to go to Paris and my publisher was asking for a picture so I went to an automatic picture and I sent him 4 ugly pictures and said I live in Nice, my father is English, my mother is French, that was all the details for us I was sending at the time, and they were asking me to come to Paris, and I was trying to invent a pretext not to go there. I think in a way I was afraid of Paris, I was afraid of getting to a foreign country, you know, to a place where I would not speak the language, a place where everything would be very intelligent and very serious and I had to give proofs of my seriousness which I was unable to do. |
| Q16 | But your first book *Le procès-verbal* came out in 1963 was very well received I understand? |
|  | Yes it was, yes it was, but in fact it was better received by Europe I would say because I was, when I was 22 years old the manuscript was offered for a prize which doesn’t exist anymore which was called the Formentor Prize and this prize was awarded by publishers from all Europe, so all the publishers had to translate this book and then to publish it in their … and they would publish it, and unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, I didn’t have this award, I didn’t get the Formentor Prize. The prize though was very interesting, it was a stay in the Island of Formentora for 15 days. The hotel was paid and the travel was paid and it was, for me, a terrific prize.  But I didn’t get it, it was Uwe Johnson, a German writer, who got that prize, but still as my book had been translated in all those languages, in German, French, Italian, not French, in Germany, this is a lapsus, in German, English, Italian, Spanish and some other languages, Portuguese, then it was ready to be known in Europe, so at once I got a European public and this was a great chance for me because I didn’t have to go through the triumph arc of the French Quartier Latin, I didn’t have to pay my respects to the critics in Paris, I was already known in Europe. That was a good thing, that was luck. |
| Q1 | Still, I mean reading a book, if we move a bit ahead now in the list of your books, we come to a remarkable thing like *L’extase matérielle*. I find it very hard to imagine that book written in any other language but the French, this mixture of very good prose and “discours” which seems to be so very French, can you give us an idea of how you decide such a book, what made you write it in this way? |
|  | It’s a funny thing, because in fact it was not meant to be a book, at first it was meant to be a play, a theatre play, and it was the time where the Cinéma vérité, I don’t know the name of this in English Cinéma vérité, I need a name…  Describe what it is?  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: It’s a time where there were all those experiments with cinema, improvisation and there would not be any script. There was a writer who did that, Paul Bowles, he wrote a book which was the result of a discussion with a young Berber boy and this was recorded on a tape recorder and published as the raw material. This was very fashionable at that time, and with a friend of mine in Nice we were gathering in a small room and with the tape recorder and we were speaking and this would normally be a play, but in fact it would have been a terribly boring play because the subjects were very abstract, sometimes very philosophical or pretended to be very philosophical, and in other places they were kind of aggressive also, say political background. So eventually we renounced to do that play, but instead of go into the recorded material then I was trying to remember what we had talked about and I wrote it down, evening after evening, and it came out to be that book which was a mixture as you said of all this, some philosophy, some imagination, some poetry, some… |
| Q2 | Well then, if we move ahead a bit quickly now and come to something that to me looks like the sort of turning point in your career as a writer, the novel which is in French it’s called *Désert*, *Desert*, which came out in 1980 and was a big success and seems to have been the first book to give you a wide readership, not only in France but in many other countries. It was also, I think, celebrated by the French Academy which is something very unexpected in your case, you got a prize, I don’t remember the exact name of it but it’s a sort of novel prize that’s given by the French Academy. How did you come to write that book which is so different from your early books? |
|  | I think I reached at that time a crisis because I had been writing on myself, and to the point I felt disgusted by writing, and I, at that time, I went to live in the forest with some American Indians in the East of Panama in the Darien forests. I spent around three years there without writing, just living, moving and watching people and talking to them, and being pretty useless for the people themselves, but I came to understand all my errors there, it was a kind of psychoanalysis without any psychiatrists, I had to do that myself.  A sort of pilgrimage almost.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Not really, I was not prepared to what was happening there, I was not expecting anything, I was just attracted by the extraordinary beauty of the place and of the people, they were extremely beautiful people, and some of them, not all of them, but some of them were for me really like, I would say like teachers or like mentors. They helped me a lot to change my mind, so when I came out of there I got married, which was a change, and then I decided to speak about other people, not about me, this was really the change, I had to shift from myself to the others and from there, some of the critics were very indignant saying that I had …  You had betrayed yourself.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: … I had been a traitor, in fact I was a traitor to myself …  Yes, I remember that.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: But it’s a good thing to be a traitor to yourself when you can’t bear yourself any more, you have to survive, and literature can offer a good survival, it’s a … |
| Q39 | In this book there is a violent clash between the north, an ancient north African culture that is based on the desert people, and the French culture or the culture of Europe, we can say the urbanised Europe. What were your sources in describing this traditional north African culture? |
|  | I wrote the first version of that book when I was 14 years old because at that time I really enjoyed writing adventure stories, so I wrote a first version of that novel which was called *The White Sheik*, I was inventing a Sheik who was resisting to the French in Morocco.  But that’s not altogether an invention, there was such a war of resistance in the early 20th century?  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Yes, so after that when I was married to Jemia, to my wife, I found out that she was the descendent of a leader in what was called the Rio de Oro or Western Sahara, the Spanish colony south of Morocco, and I read a lot about that man whose name was Ma al-Aynayn which means “the water from the eyes”, because he had watery eyes, he was afflicted by that, so this man was a leader, he was a Sufi philosopher and a leader, a very, very astonishing man who tried to resist both Spaniards and French and tried to expel the imperialist forces from the land.  That was before the first world war I think.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: That was the … it began in 1902 and it lasted until around 1911, 1912, and he died without seeing the victory. He was defeated by the French army which was overrunned, he was with his army, he was fighting with one very simple guns against the machine guns and especially the German machine guns which were sold to the French army at the time, so it was an unequal fight and he was defeated, but I was really attracted by this resistance spirit and it was very convenient for me because it gave me the impression that literature could be used for describing something else than just exotism or personal problems, that it could deal also with a movement.  It doesn’t at all give the effect of exotism when you read it because … Especially in the beginning of the book when you’re following this march through the desert, and these rites that take place in order to strengthen the spirit of resistance in this group of men, women and children which we are witnessing. It’s my impression that you approach a sort of sacred language, it’s the language of religious ceremony really, you come very close to that. I won’t call you a religious writer just because of that, but you have a sort of … there is a power, an attraction in it that very much resembles …  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: I was attracted by this figure because he was indeed not only a political leader, he was also a religious leader which meant at that time a good knowledge not only of religion but also in mathematics, in astronomy, the Sufi philosophers were well acquainted with sciences as well. He had a huge library, his personal library, which was probably a moving library because he had to change places, and which probably was dispersed, was liquidated after his defeat, and this kind of figure was, for me, a good example of what human beings can be, what sort of models they can be, because he was characterised by the French politics at that time as a fanatic, but he was not a fanatic. He was a very peaceful man, a very religious, peaceful, in some ways very modern, very tolerant, nothing to do with the present times, fundamentalism or fanatism, he was a good example of what was /- – -/ by the French forces and might have been different solution to the after colonialism, he would be, he would have been, definitely. |
| Q16 | And then you, when you move on in the book, and you arrive at our own time and you have this main character Lalla who is a young girl whose ancestors were among the followers of this /- – -/, though she doesn’t know that, she just feels it somehow, and she goes across the Mediterranean and she comes to Marseilles I suppose … then the language of the book changes altogether it’s a new style, it’s a new approach, there’s a new way of writing that goes with this discovery of the urban world, of Europe, which is really like the kingdom of death, it’s like entering a world where no-one is really alive, that’s my impression in reading the book. This topic, image of our country, how did you come to that? |
|  | Yes, well in fact you know when, what I really wanted to say or what was my main preoccupation is that when you travel in Europe you very often come, you very often meet very ordinary people, and those people can be workers in the street, they can be people plastering houses or repairing roofs, they could be people serving in the restaurants, and you don’t know their stories. But some of them belong to very ancient families, they have this kind of noble background which has nothing to do with being born noble but it’s the kind of noble heritage they have, and you simply ignore it, and those people are living in terrible situations.  They are renting poor rooms in very bad parts of the city, they are confronted to violence every day and they see the worst part of our modern civilisation, and it’s surely very difficult to compare what they see to what they are, they are refined and they have a very elegant and very significant family background. And when they are in Europe they are isolated and sometimes they are compelled to live with criminals or with the destructive parts of the population, sometimes they are even by chance taken and put into jail and they don’t understand that. So it’s this contradiction between what they are and what they look like, what they seem to us and what they are really in their soul.  And I suppose that’s in a way an allegory of global relationships because …  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Yes it is, it is.  … across distances we tend to look at some foreign people in that way.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: I was stricken by a sight when I was going to England, it was around the late 50’s, I used to go very often to England, I was a student at the university of Bristol, so I was taking the boat because at that time you were not taking the plane. And when I was taking the boat on the same boat going between Calais and Dover, on the main deck of the boat you were seeing a population coming from Africa, and some of these people had travelled for months before reaching that boat, they were trying to get into England to find jobs in England. It was the beginning of what was called after that the general immigration, at that time we were not speaking of immigrants, we were just speaking of workers, and those people, some of those people, they looked so dignified, they were coming to England dressed in their robes, African robes, with the hat made of leopard skin, and they did not speak a word of English.  They had on their face the scars from their tribes in Africa and they looked, and they looked so afraid on the deck of the boat, and once I tried to speak to some of them and I tried to speak in English, in pigeon English, and for some reason they did not understand. They looked so frightened and I was asking to myself why are those people who look like kings, why are they so frightened to come to Europe? And after that I got the answer that most of the people thought that they had to go because of economical reasons. Bbut they knew, or they were persuaded that most of them would die there, they were going to their deaths, and they were convinced that England was a place where they would be killed, but they had to go there to escape hunger and economical difficulties in Nigeria or Uganda. But they still were convinced that maybe they would die there, this is amazing, because generally the Europeans think about themselves as living in a very safe place and for Africans it was a terribly dangerous place to go to.  Maybe in some ways it was also.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Maybe in some ways it was. So this, probably those situations gave me the need to write, to try to change my personal thing to …  You see this French city from the inside on this immigrant that actually it’s completely foreign to everything she sees.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: The same thing was happening in France for the people coming from North Africa, the general opinion for the French people was that most of them are criminals, most of these people coming from north Africa are criminals, and for the north Africans they were getting into a country of criminals, so it was …  Complete misunderstanding from both sides.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: From both sides. |
| Q30 | I have to ask you before we get to the close a little about your latest book because it’s apparent that if we move onto the books you’ve written in this century, you have begun to exploit the history of your own family in a way that you didn’t do before. Of course this started in the 90’s with books like *Onitsha* who is partly a story about your experience of Africa and your father’s experience of Africa but not quite, and a book like *La Quarantaine* also has a lot of material that has to do with Mauritius and your family background, and this wonderful story of, was it your grandfather Jacques, who saw Rimbaud coming out of the bistro at the corner of Rue Madame in Saint-Sulpice – that becomes a sort of legend that you have to follow on, but as you read these books, *Révolutions,* for instance, or *L’Africain* and now *Ritournelle de la faim* you realise that you’re not quite telling the real story, those are not facts, this is still a novel. It’s sometimes called a semi-autobiographical but that’s a rather elusive term I think. Which is the relationship actually in those books between fiction and actuality |
|  | The first books I was writing were closer to autobiography because I was, as I told, speaking about myself and I was overwhelmed by this need to explain who I was and what were my reactions to the modern world, to the city, to the violence of the city. And when I decided to change and to speak about the others naturally the subjects would be the closest person I would know, and those closest persons were from my family, but I didn’t use my family really, I was not trying to give a detailed relation of what my family had been, what they had experimented, I was more interested by the kind of, not symbol, but a kind of exemplary history they had been through. One of my grandfathers was a judge in Mauritius, was sent to a very isolated island, /- – -/ and didn’t enjoy so much life there, so he invented the story of this treasure and I found this was a good idea to replace a boring reality by something which would give an aim to his life, and he was really a prisoner of this dream and was trying to reach, to find the treasure which in my mind didn’t exist, was just an invention …  So you transform that in your book to another kind of treasure?  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: I thought it was a good theme for a novel, trying to find something which doesn’t exist, it generally could be a resumé of most novels, most heroes or anti-heroes start trying to find something which doesn’t exist.  But your hero finds something else.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Yes of course, because you always find something else, and I suppose my grandfather also found something else which was the love of the Rodriguan people, he was … then he went to Rodriguez Island and got in so good relations with the people, I happened to meet a very old man who knew my grandfather and accompanied my grandfather when he was doing his research for this treasure and this man told me in Creole that my grandfather was … as soon as he was getting to Rodriguez he would take off his jacket, his celluloid collar and be in sleeves, and then would sing all the time. I can’t imagine my grandfather singing, he was a judge after all, can you imagine a judge singing? And then some other people in my family had other experiences which were formly symbolic of those times, and *Ritounelle de la faim*, the ultimate novel I published I was…  You make your mother slightly younger I think in…  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Yes, much younger, 10 years younger, because my idea was what is it to live a war when you are 20 years old, when you are ready to live and you’re ready to be happy, to marry and to lead a peaceful and a life full of love. And then war comes and you are separated from your love and everything is crumbling everywhere, your family is falling down and they are losing their money, they are losing their properties and so this was the idea, because I feel that nowadays we are in some places of the world people are living this, exactly this, we are not aware of it but in some places …  Yes certainly.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: … women are separated from their love and I was, I wanted also to speak about the people who are not heroes in wars, because I hardly can think that a general is a hero, I think the real heroes are the survivors, the civilians who survive wars, the women who find food and try to escape from bombings and try to survive with their children. Very, very marvellous writer in Korea, Hwang Sok-yong, who wrote a book called *Monsieur Han*, *Mr Han*, … and he tells about his crossing of a river escaping from North Korea to South Korea in the middle of bombs, and he described the same situation, so this type of situation happens again and again and is still happening now.  Well, shall we stop here?  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Yes.  I’m most satisfied and I hope you are too.  Jean-Marie Gustave Le Clézio: Yes. It was a very pleasant moment, I could have … |
| ID | 0918 |
| Biographical | From the old stone house where I was born were views of the mountains with snow on them, and of the dusty plains that surround the little town. A high dry place. My mother said that the washing, put out to dry at eight in the morning was dry long before lunchtime. The outside world was present inside the house itself, in the person of a young American sharing the house with us. He was an oil man. “There were a lot of oil men around then”. Thus did the future announce itself. It was his voice I remember but overlaid by probably a hundred American voices since.  It was 1919 when I was born. Many decades later a book came into my hands of the kind you see on “remaindered” boxes, or – once – second hand bookshops. It was written by a British “businessman”, obviously an agent, or spy of some kind. He was ambling through Persia, through tribes and villages, sheep and shepherds. Long ago did this Persia disappear. He thoroughly enjoyed it all, and they were fascinated by him, this exotic from the outside world, and he was so interested in them, asking so many questions. He wrote about Kermanshah, where he said, the 1918−1919 flu epidemic took its toll. And the war had blown through there too. My parents had plentiful reminisces about those two years in Kermanshah, but nothing was said about the flu or the refugees from war.  There is one memory, indubitably from that time. My father rode to work at the bank, (The Imperial Bank of Persia) on a horse. Every morning I was lifted up, grasped by my father’s hands on my ribs, to be put before him. I rode with him a short way, before he turned off onto a big road. Now, all that I remember is strong, even violent. First of all, the smell of horse, and then the slippery heat of the horse’s hide under my palms. The heat of the horse on my legs. My father had his arm around me, and I leaned back into him. The smell of his jacket, the faintly smoky smell of tweed. And inside the tweed, the straps that went across his body and over his shoulder, to hold the wooden leg in position. The leg, responded with a hollow *knock* if you kicked it, was a legacy from the war – the Trenches.  When you see some little sprite of a girl or a little boy absorbed in his toy, you are seeing beings assaulted by storms of sensory inputs. In front of my father, I held tight – “Hold her tight, don’t let her fall” – various female voices, irritants in this storm of smells, noises, sounds. We were going slowly towards the big gates, the horse moving awkwardly under me, my father’s wooden leg straps poking into my back. The moment I was set down from the horse, I knew my father would set off on a trot and then a gallop. How I longed to be there still. But no. It was a slow walk, and my father’s voice, just behind me, cajoled the horse, “Gently there, slow there…”  And as for what the little child you see there eats… Unless some late reversal of your taste buds allows you, every adult forgets what it is a small child tastes, what it has in its mouth – explosions of taste.  If I want to know what some small child is experiencing, I make myself remember that slow ride on my father’s horse, gripped tight by my father. The smell of horse in itself is a giddying intoxicant.  Some memories have to be cherished, held tight, kept as reminders.  That was my best memory of my first two years, that and the smell that comes back at the words *market*, *bazaar*, a warm spicy smell, and the cries and commands in the other language.  And then there was Tehran, and I have so many memories, but one chief one, which is the birth of my brother.  No doubt this is a real memory, because everything is high around me, the loo handle miles above my head, my father who is ill, in a version of *couvade*, is on a high bed and I can scarcely see him. I am touching the frills of a cot, by reaching up my hand to them. My mother, tall and powerful, is standing by the cot with a baby, and urging me, saying “And this is your baby” and “Now you must love it.” Well, it was not my baby, but I did indeed love it. This little scene was a motivator for the rest of my emotional life. Not till I wrote, late in my life, Mara and Dann, about how a small girl loves and guards her small brother, did I remember just how powerful was that injunction. “And now you must love him.” But the lie there, “This is your baby,” well, I never forgot that. Mistrust of bad faith, Trust once lost is not easily regained.  The three years in Tehran are a gallery of memories, but I will use three.  The little children are carried out to see the full moon, the stars. I lisped out the words for moon, stars, doubtless a dear little thing, but later when I was a horrible teenager, under another sky, other moons and stars, my father barked at me, “You were such lovely little things, with your ‘mun, mun,’ your ‘stars,’ but look at you now, who would believe you were ever such a pretty little thing.” I did see his point, yes, and I did leave home about then, fifteen or so, I was.  If the moon and the stars were what every proud parent wants to show his little children, the next memory is fit for a treatise on nursery psychology. We are in the nursery in Tehran, I and my brother, undressing for bed, and I say to him, “What’s that you’ve got there.” And I point at his male equipment. Yet I have been familiar with my brother’s sexual endowment for years, since he was born in fact. Yet, it seems, I only now notice it. “What’s that you’ve got there?” And my brother, aged three, perhaps, four, pushes out his front, and points it at me. “Mine” he says, “it’s mine.” “My pee place is better that your pee place,” I claim, vainly trying to make something impressive of my cleft. “It’s mine, mine” said Harry, making of his penis a little bow, which he releases, at me. “You haven’t got anything,” he asserts. This scene I put into my novel *The Cleft*, as a key moment in the lives of those two little children. And of course we have all witnessed something similar if we have had any connection at all with nursery life. Surely a scene that must recur again and again, an exemplary Scene.  Then, from many memories one that is fit for the educationalists. It is winter, my mother has made a cat in snow, much more than life-size. It sits on its base of a box, draped in cloth, where snow is making patterns. The cat is sitting with its fore paws down, and it is looking out from green shiny eyes, a potent figure in the falling snow.  I am entranced, bewitched by this white cat. His eyes follow me, I cry “Look he is looking at me.” And the cat does look, through the falling snow, which glitters. “Don’t be silly” says my mother, “It’s only bits of green stone.” And she whisks out the cats eyes, one, two, shows me the bright green pebbles – and puts them back in.  Somewhere in a Tehran garden are lying two green pebbles, that were once a white cat’s eyes, shining through falling snow.  Other memories – oh many, but then I am getting on for five, and the family is leaving Tehran, and we are going to get to England via Moscow. There is a train from the Caspian to Moscow. For those Edwardians, my parents, a train means dining cars and conductors, something safe and regulated, not dangerous, for my mother wasn’t going to take her precious little children through the Red Sea in all that heat.  And now the memories are a river, a flood. First that train journey through Russia, on a train recently a troop train, dirty, with torn seats, needing applications of insect powder. No food on the train. My mother leaped down at the stations to buy hardboiled eggs and pies from the peasant women. She was left behind on a station, and then, without a word of Russian, she stopped the next train, commandeered it and caught up with our train the next day: panic, even terror. Never will I forget those stations, each crowded with raggedy hungry children, who had lost parents in the Civil War. It was possible for children not to have a mother, a father? More panic. And each station crowded with people and children who saw our dilapidated train as a promise of food and safety. Then Moscow, a real hotel and then a boat through the Baltic States. Years later I was in Riga, saw the little park where I played with my brother but it had been war damaged (like Kermanshah in the Iran war, like Zimbabwe years later). And the hotel was there but are those memories really mine or clips from a Bergman film. His films love wide hotel corridors, not like nowadays, into which may come a dwarf, strolling players, a kind of old man beckoning one into amazing secrets…  England. I loathed it. Not a false memory. I had come from high, dry sunlit Persia where there was snow on the mountains. And now – one memory sums it all up. A fishmonger’s slab, with its dead staring fish, and over them weakly clambers a black lobster, “looking for the sea” someone says, “Yes, it’s not going to find the sea again,” and the grey rain falling – six months of England.  The boat, the sea voyage. My mother liked the captain, and they had jolly times, while poor father, very sea sick, lay on his bunk.  At evening they danced and dined, and I wanting to join in was told that I wouldn’t enjoy it. Of course I would enjoy it. I behaved badly to punish my mother for her lie. I tried to cut up her evening dresses with a little pair of nail scissors. I went on behaving badly during a journey lit with marvels… “Look at that, look at the ostriches!” There they were, highstepping it across some sandy flat, and then after so much wicked behaviour on my part, and I was on the wagon (a covered wagon, like on the films) where I lay at night and watched the hurricane lamp swaying where it hung from the canvas, and beyond that the bush and the noises of the night.  What about that house, the building of it… It was very quick, building that house. You dig a trench, insert poles cut from the bush, tie them with the wonderfully smelling apricot coloured “bush rope,” the fleshy underbark of the Mususa tree, you slap handfuls of mud on to the poles, cover it all with sheaves of fragrant new cut grass, doors and windows appear, and there is the house, which soon we occupied.  Of course there were minor setbacks, like all the family getting married, not once, but twice.  I could rhapsodise, which I tend to do, secretly, remembering prize moments, about the warm glow of the oil lamps on the white shed walls, and the gleaming thatch.  But now I suppose must begin that adventure which was my life, shall I dwell on the horrors of the convent school, where I was so unhappy, nothing in my life could ever be as bad.  Much better the times in the bush, where I was so often, by myself or with my brother.  The point of these memories is that they are beyond reach, now for as far away as “Scenes from the Boer War” might be for my parents. It was virgin bush, our farm, full of the animals born to be there. The elephants had gone, and the lions, but all the rest were there, and wandering out in the early morning just down the hill a few paces, I might see Kudu, the eland, the little duiker, a porcupine, snakes, the little bush monkeys some people made into pets and which might flit across the rafters of our house at night.  I would stand outside my room and look down on the backs of hunting hawks, as they soared over the maize fields.  These animals are in game parks now.  The birds are always fewer and fewer. Whites and blacks, are too much for the animals and birds who once said “This bush is ours…”  There were a hundred adventures and pleasures in the bush.  And now I must record that my brother and I became friends late in life and I would reminisce about my days in the bush, but noticed he was often silent.  He said he did not remember anything at all before he was eleven. “What, nothing?”  Nothing.  “You don’t remember how we were in the bush and some wild pig chased us and we went up a tree and you were laughing so hard you nearly fell straight down in front of her?”  “No I don’t remember.”  “You don’t remember how we walked to the river and sat and watched the troop of baboons feeding and drinking until the big baboon gesticulated and threatened us, until we gave in and went away?”  “No”  “You don’t remember how we…”  “No, nothing”  There sat my brother across from me at the table, and my mind was full of memories, but his mind, he said was a blank.  *How was that possible?*  When he was seven, he said, he would take the cookboy’s son with him, with a gun, and some bread, and go off into the bush for days.  “We had all kinds of jolly good chinwags, I can tell you.”  Then I was in the city, for a year I was one of the girls. A small number of the city’s eligible young men, and the girls – we went to the bioscope every night (the films) and wore evening dresses. The provinces tend to make great occasions out of the ordinary. We danced too. When I say “We” I mean the young whites.  And then there was the war, and I got married, because that is what happens in a war and for three years I was the most conventional white madam, doing everything just right, cooking, making clothes and there were two babes. How infinitely adaptable we all are. I hated the life, the society – one hundred thousand whites commanded half a million blacks in old Southern Rhodesia.  I left that marriage, married a German refugee, Gottfried Lessing, had another child. Having babies when you are very young is really very easy: it seems one must make this point now, when getting children seems to be increasingly difficult.  Ten years of the war. The colony was full of the refugees from Europe and then the RAF. Amazing that this chapter of the war should be forgotten.  1939 to 1945. From ’45 to ’49 were the worst years of my life. I longed to leave for England, which is where I would have gone in ’38, ’39 if I had had the money. I couldn’t leave at once then, because of complications over Gottfried wanting to get British nationality: a divorce would not have helped him. But I stuck it out and we got amicably divorced and at last I did leave for England. I think all the rest has been adequately chronicled.  I felt as if my real life was beginning when I at last arrived in war-torn, grubby, cold England. And of course, it was. Since then, I have written, that has been my life.  Very hard work, life is – that’s my summing up as I reach the end of life. “Oh such hard work. All of it.”  For most of the time I had a child and we all know that the life of a writer is better without small children. But that is not to say I had ever wished the child away. And I even at various points in my life added children and young people when I didn’t have to, as in *The Sweetest Dream*, for instance. But the real story of a life is in the record of the memories or dreams… and where should I begin, or end? Once I thought I would write my autobiography in dreams. My failed attempt became *Memoirs of a Survivor.* Dreams, a dream, have often rescued me when stuck in a story or a novel.  From [*Les Prix Nobel*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lesprix.html)*. The Nobel Prizes 2007*, Editor Karl Grandin, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 2008  This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and later published in the book series [*Les Prix Nobel/*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lesprix.html)[*Nobel Lectures*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lectures/index.html)*/*[*The Nobel Prizes*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/nobel-prizes.html). The information is sometimes updated with an addendum submitted by the Laureate.  *Doris Lessing died on 17 November 2013.* |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0918=DL  [Doris Lessing] – Hello.  [Adam Smith] – Good morning, may I speak to Doris Lessing please?  [DL] – Who is that?  [AS] – This is Adam Smith from the Nobel Foundation’s website. We have a tradition of recording very short interviews on the telephone with new Laureates for our archives, and I was hoping that we might speak for just a very few minutes?  [DL] – OK, well let’s go ahead then.  [AS] – Thank you very much indeed. Congratulations, of course.  [DL] – Thank you.  [AS] – I wonder, have you had a chance to see the citation from the Swedish Academy?  [DL] – No, not really, I haven’t seen it. You know, I was coming back at midday from taking my son to the hospital. I’ve never seen anything written, or … I did talk to the chap who runs the Nobel Committee.  [AS] – So you’ve spoken to Horace Engdahl?  [DL] – Yes.  [AS] – They describe you, in their citation, as “that epicist of the female experience, who with scepticism, fire and visionary power has subjected a divided civilisation to scrutiny”. Do you think that goes some way towards capturing the mission with which you write?  [DL] – Well I don’t really know what they had in mind when they wrote it, you see. I mean they were faced with a quite astonishing number and range of writing. To sum it all up must have been quite *formidable*, don’t you think?  [AS] – Yes, indeed.  [DL] – Not easy at all.  [AS] – Well over 50 books and a combination of styles of writing which defies description. Quite so. Do you think of yourself as having a mission when you write though, more than to tell stories?  [DL] – Absolutely not. No, because don’t forget that I was a communist once, and we had very, very nasty examples of the writer as engineer of the human soul. It’s enough to make any of us scared. You know, I was of that generation.  [AS] – So you leave it to the reader to decide what mission they find in your writing?  [DL] – Well you know the reader does anyway. The reader makes up his or her mind and the writer goes along with it. There’s nothing you can do, really, if they get something that you’ve written absolutely wrong. You’re not then going to issue a sort of statement saying “Oh dear, that’s not right at all. What I really meant was something else.” No, no, you write, and then they make what they want of it.  [AS] – And so, for those who … on past experience the award of the Nobel Prize will encourage millions to come to your writing who haven’t been there before. For those who haven’t experienced your writing, would you suggest a starting place for them?  [DL] – Well I’m going to suggest something that might surprise you, simply because I know the young people like it. It’s *The Fifth Child*. Much to my surprise, I found out that the adolescents like it very much. So they could begin with that, and see how they did. I’ve written an adventure story called *Mara and Dan*, which I know young people like, about the … Then my very first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, is still very much alive. They might like to try that.  [AS] – Your productivity is of course phenomenal, and I suppose some people may wonder just how you manage to produce so much literature. Is it that you have an unstoppable workaholic tendency? Do you just have so many stories to tell? What drives it?  [DL] – Well, it’s certainly true that I have a, I’m driven myself, about writing. But you know I don’t do anything else. I don’t have much of a social life, and I’ve been very circumscribed by other circumstances in my life which keep me writing. You know, if I hadn’t (I am a naturally social person) I think I would have frittered away my life having fun, which I’m quite good at.  [AS] – So is this a self-imposed exile, or is it just that writing always presented itself as a better possibility?  [DL] – Well it’s what I do. I naturally turn to it, always. I always, I’m usually thinking about what I’m writing now. But you know I don’t have a great range of other interests, let’s put it like that. For one reason or another.  [AS] – And seeing the televised coverage of your reaction to the news yesterday, one might guess the answer to this question, but how does the prospect of the increased attention that the prize will focus on you, um, grab you?  [DL] – Oh I don’t think … you know, people are going to lose all interest in a month or two. They can’t spend all their time wanting interviews. And I haven’t got time you know. I haven’t got time for all that. So the problem will solve itself.  [AS] – One other question I wanted to ask is about the range of styles you write in. You’ve tackled almost everything, except perhaps poetry. Is that a conscious choice to try and expand your repertoire, or are these just the forms that you need to use to express yourself?  [DL] – No, once I have an idea, a story, or something, in my mind, then it has to find the right expression. You know, I don’t say “Oh, now I’m going to write a, I don’t know what, a realistic book of 50,000 words”. What happens is that the book, the story dictates how I’m going to have to do it. The story dictates the means of telling it. So I have written a lot of different styles, if you want to call it that, because I’ve written a lot of different stories. It’s not at all a question of wanting to try out this or try out that. I mean when I started to write the *Shikasta* series, which covers millions of years, that fact in itself dictates a style. You can’t start that by saying, “Oh well, Joe Bloggs sat in his kitchen and drank a cup of Typhoo tea, and wrote a letter to his sister-in-law”. You have to have a different way of doing it. So that’s how that comes about.  [AS] – Yes. It has perhaps contributed to the length of time that the Swedish Academy has taken to make the decision to award you the Nobel Prize that you’ve adopted styles that are perhaps non-traditional.  [DL] – I think that, probably, the Nobel people didn’t like what they call ‘Science Fiction’. I mean I think it’s a very mistaken label that they use, but they probably were put off by, I mean *Memoirs of a Survivor* for example, or *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. These are hardly easy to categorize. It probably was difficult for them.  [AS] – Well there seem to be a lot of people who are delighted by the choice. There was an enormous cheer went up when Horace Engdahl announced your name yesterday.  [DL] – Thank you, thank you, thank you.  [AS] – Well thank you very much for speaking to us and when you come to Stockholm in December to receive the award I think Horace Engdahl is going to interview you at greater length. So we look forward to seeing you then.  [DL] – See you then. OK, thank you.  [AS] – Thank you very much indeed.  [DL] – Bye.  [AS] – Bye, bye. |
| Interview |  |
| Q2 | Can you remember what impelled you to write it? |
|  | Yes, of course. Yes, it’s because I’d been saying that I’m a writer and all this and I had short stories. But in fact, I hadn’t written a novel and there was in fact that moment – I was working in a lawyer’s office. I said: Enough now, I’m going to write this novel. And I went in to see my boss, Mr Hill, and I said: Mr Hill, I’m going to leave you and I’m going to write a novel, at which of course he fell about laughing because of how I left him. And I wrote a novel but while this sounds quite … we now embark on 10 years of difficulty.  … what the whites couldn’t stand, ever, was somebody who didn’t think they were wonderful …  So it was all based on a little newspaper cutting which I kept because it said so much about what I had been brought up in. See, what the whites couldn’t stand, ever, was somebody who didn’t think they were wonderful, who didn’t fit in. And I’d seen that so often. I hadn’t almost really thought about it. And among the things that went into that book was a woman on the next farm, a new one, who had all the farmers scandalised, a farmer’s wife, because she let her cook boy button her dress up to the back and brush her hair. Now as a girl, I couldn’t see. I mean I knew it was absolutely beyond the pale. So you see when I have to try and explain why this cook murdered his mistress, I have to find something pretty difficult. |
| Q34 | And the newspaper cutting that you mentioned, what did that say? |
|  | It said something like, I have it somewhere … it’s so and so’s cook of so and so murdered so and so. And there’s no motive for the crime. |
| Q34 | And so something quite similar to the sort of, the little bit which actually starts the novel? |
|  | Yes, that kind of thing, probably the same thing. But you have to ask why because, why did he murder her? So when I thought of the sheer unkindness and lack of ordinary human feeling at a lot of the … particularly the women used to the boys, you understood it. I mean it was easy to understand. So we have my black cook, who’d actually had some human feelings for Mary Turner. And then suddenly treated like a dog and thrown out of any kind of possibility of affection. So that was it. All I had to do was to remember the farmer’s wife and the voices when they said … she actually lets the cook boy button up her dress … You have, as a child, you have to really think hard about this. It doesn’t, it’s perfectly evident to them of course what it was all about, but not to a girl.  So, OK, years and years later I wrote it. And that book was centred in the middle of the war, so all the U-boats that went to England twice and was rejected and they came back for a third time. And I looked at it and I thought: My god, this book is two thirds too long. It was perfectly, you know, I could suddenly see it. So I cut out the third that nobody needed and it turned into *The Grass is Singing*, just like that. And now people say what a beautiful structure it has. They only knew how arbitrary that was. So then of course a friend sold it to a publisher, /—/ wouldn’t publish it because it was too abrasive. I don’t know how many times I’ve been told that. Like *The Golden Notebook*, too abrasive. So then he didn’t publish it and it sat there in Johannesburg.  And years passed and I came to England and I sent short stories to Curtis Brown, the publisher and Juliette O’Hare wrote and said: Have I got a novel? And I wrote and said: Yes, but it was bought for by Johannesburg. She asked to see the … whatever there was, it wasn’t very much, probably half a page. And she said she’d never seen anything so disgraceful in all her life. And she sent a telegram, remember telegram, to him and said: Release this writer at once or I shall shame you before your entire … Not that he would have cared, he was a crook. So she got the book and sold it over the weekend to Michael Joseph. And then, you see, it did very well before publication, but I was such an innocent, you’d never believe it. They would ring up and say: We are republishing before publication and I’d say: Oh yes. I thought everybody had this. So then he came out and it got, no, it got good reviews. We started having the then progress of a novel you get good reviews, and then … it all took five or six books. Now of course it all happens in one go, doesn’t it?  Yes.  Doris Lessing: So …  I mean it seems like … I was re-reading it before coming to see you and it does feel like not just the voices of those women, but it does feel as if it’s got real shards of your own very particular memories in it. I mean the descriptions, the sort of the scenery, I suppose you would call in a banal way. It feels like a book which I remember when I first read it, absolutely caught a particular world that …  Doris Lessing: Now gone.  Yes.  Doris Lessing: The world as a white farmer, it’s all gone. |
| Q16 | And I’m interested if you were conscious of this at the time. The heroine, the protagonist, she’s hardly heroic in it. The interesting thing about it seems to be that she is where a lot of our interest lies, but she’s also in some ways quite obnoxious I suppose, or she behaves badly. And you have a strange mixture of sympathy and disgust. |
|  | You see, she was modelled on someone I knew very well – a town girl. Hard to imagine in Africa – a town girl who hated to be out of the street. She was a woman I used to watch her putting her skirt up, afraid of an ant going across her leg or something like this. And I thought, I remember thinking, supposing she landed as a wife, and one of these farmers wives, she’d go crazy – I was thinking something like that. So I made her do this. She married and of course she did go crazy because she couldn’t stand the bush, the felt, she couldn’t bear it. And she’s not the only one I’ve known who couldn’t bear it either. They go out as if they’re still in a street somewhere and live as if they are still on a street.  So you have to ask why on earth do they go and marry?  And somebody told me the other day that they could quote some people from Australia, women of the same kind. So you have to ask why on earth do they go and marry? Well, look, she wants to get married. This is a society where people have to get married. And even now they should get married. But then, if you weren’t married by the time you were 20, there was something very wrong with you. So she wasn’t married. She was everybody’s best friend. I remember the original. She was everybody’s pal. And none of this is a good prognosis for marriage. |
| Q16 | The books that followed that, did that … did the success of *The Grass is Singing* sort of make you think: Right, I can now be a writer. This is going to be my career, I can actually survive doing this? |
|  | But I was surviving. It’s interesting. I’ve just seen today a resume of my life which said that I was working as a shorthand typist. Of course I wasn’t. They can’t believe that I actually lived on what I earned, which I did for years you know. It just … I had been writing for 10 years when somebody pointed out I was earning the average wage for a worker. Whatever it was. I can’t remember what it was at that, the last year. And you see, we didn’t think then the way people think now about if you write a book, then you have to get a lot of money.  Yes.  Doris Lessing: It’s all gone. We just took it for granted we wouldn’t have much money. We didn’t have any and it didn’t bother us particularly. But nobody had any money, that’s the point, nobody was rich. And nobody was longing for a big refrigerator and two cars. We just didn’t. We thought it was all very vulgar and bourgeois of them. |
| Q40 | So does that mean that the books you were writing in the sort of 1950s say that you felt quite free to write what you wanted. You didn’t have to worry about trying to please a publisher or please a public? |
|  | No. I had a very good. I wrote short stories, which no publisher then was pleased about. And then I just set off, one after the other and this is what I was doing and I don’t think I said: Now I am a writer. But I was, I suppose. It’s just it was different, it was completely different then. |
|  | No. I had a very good. I wrote short stories, which no publisher then was pleased about. And then I just set off, one after the other and this is what I was doing and I don’t think I said: Now I am a writer. But I was, I suppose. It’s just it was different, it was completely different then.  And you were still, I mean the *Children of Violence* sort of series in the 1950s, those also, those books you were using quite a lot of your African experience.  Doris Lessing: Yes, a lot of it was autobiographical. Until about *The Four Gated City* which wasn’t.  No. And was Martha Quest the protagonist of those, was she a sort of alter ego for you?  Doris Lessing: Yes, she was. Not entirely, because, you know, you invent whole sections of something and then later, some biographer wants to know which is true and what isn’t and you have to sit and think. You can’t remember anymore. So no, a lot of it is invented and the half of it is true in inverted commas. But everything you write is altered in some way. |
| Q16 | And in these novels, Martha gets involved, as I think you did, in Marxism, in communist politics, doesn’t she? Did you sort feel looking back that that was kind of a rich material for fiction? |
|  | One book, it was *A Ripple from the Storm* which is very, very close to what happened. But the joke is you see, this is a bit of an indictment, this the communist group in Southern Rhodesia. But a friend of mine said that a student of his had read this and was so amazed with the wonder of it all that he went off to join, I’ve forgotten what group or other to discover the same thing. And I thought this would put anybody off ever joining anything. So, but no. It’s the kind of thing that happens. |
| Q30 | And I mean, formally it’s quite a … I mean, it’s a fairly extraordinary book now, but it must have been a very strange one, I think, for its first readers in all these different kind of … these multiple narratives reflecting different aspects of the protagonist’s experience. I mean, do you remember sort of devising that? |
|  | Oh, very clearly. But first of all there was a great demand in all the newspapers that the novel needed to have a new form. This was in the air, right. So when I was working this one out, because the essence of *a* Golden Notebook is I think I said before recently. The second sentence in a book, as far as I’m concerned, everything is cracking up. I thought this is what I was writing about. But not the feminists who said it was all about feminism. So anyway, so I was really teased about that for a long time.  It was very just ready to explode, that book.  Anyway, so how do I convey this fragmentation? I don’t know, I remember I got these notebooks and I remember actually imagining the notebooks. I remember that, the notebooks on their different tables. And it wrote very fast. It was very just ready to explode, that book. And it was very … You see what nobody now is going to remember, or care about, every time the telephone rang, somebody was leaving a communist party, committing suicide, taking you to religion, just becoming a famous businessman. It was an extraordinary time, it really was, and you see the party listen to me, after all these years. The party was such a strong experience for everybody. There was this utopia hatching itself out over there and a lot of people believed it, you know. Oh well, never mind, life goes on without me.  And did you, I mean, did you get much kind of reaction from …?  Doris Lessing: Yes, I got the most appalling reviews. Now people come and see me and say: I’ve just been reading your reviews in Collindale or wherever they are, and they’re terrible. And I say: Well yes, I remember. This balls breaker, this is a great favourite expression and a man hater.  Harold Bloom said it was a crusade against the male sex.  Doris Lessing: Has he said it recently?  No, I think he said it quite a while back.  Doris Lessing: Oh well, you see that’s the kind of thing they said. So what really made me cross was not one of these precious reviews noticed it had quite an interesting form. They didn’t even notice it. They were so upset by what I was saying apparently, they couldn’t bother to see anything else. Ever since then I’ve had a certain attitude towards reviews. They … it is possible for them not to be very bright, you know. So anyway, that was going on and I got … But some people sort of championed me in a very positive and good way like Edwin Muir, the poet who wrote to me a long letter about *The Golden Notebook*. And various people who said: Take no notice of them, they’re just dumb, you know.  So, and then time passed after all. The book had come out in all these different countries. America, everywhere by then. Except of course precious France and precious Germany who wouldn’t publish it because it was too abrasive. Can you imagine for 10 years? Everybody else was perfectly happy with *The Golden Notebook*, but no, they wouldn’t publish it. So, you know, one has to have, what can I say? This kind of experience gives one a certain attitude to places and people. Suddenly they publish it in the feminist days as a feminist document. |
| Q16 | So the sections of conventional third person narrative in the novel, the bits which aren’t written in Anna’s notebooks are titled *Free women* and when I was re-reading it recently, that came to sound almost sarcastic actually. |
|  | It’s meant to be sarcastic. Because what it is is a conventional little novel, fitted into the West. And one of the things I was saying, I was trying to express the pain I think some writers feel. That all this experience, and it can be very rich and tumultuous experience, going into a tiny narrative. There was a tiny narrative. And there was the thick experience that went into it. So, and then of course, it all cracked up. Because don’t forget, I was seeing people cracking up at that time. When the communist party was shattered by Khrushchev and his speech, it was terrible for some communists. You know some people, their whole lives came to an end.  Particularly, for the working class boys from the East End, from the young communist league. This was their university. They learnt everything there. Suddenly, it’s all not true. Well, even now I’m sorry for them, it was such a terrible thing to happen. I mean for less, what is the word, tougher characters, their lives had come to an end. Some people were very sorry like I was that Khrushchev hadn’t said more than he did. Because some of us, knowing what was going on at the Soviet Union thought that he could have said a lot more. You know, it was quite a muted complaint that he gave about Stalin. So while some people were saying: Oh no, this couldn’t possibly be true, it’s all a capitalist press, which is what most orthodox communists said, other people would say: For god’s sake, why didn’t he do it properly. But, you see, it’s taken many, many years for it to come out. |
| Q16 | I suppose this is a trick of time that now people think of *The Golden Notebook*, I mean the politics you’re talking about is sort of perhaps hidden history to lots of its new readers and they notice the sexual politics, I suppose, of it, much more than they notice what you’ve been saying about communism and the end of lots of peoples’ faith in that. And they notice, they notice I suppose, things about … I mean, how it seems an extraordinary satire on actually the behaviour of men. That’s one thing I think I noticed recently. I mean the men in the novel are a pretty ghastly lot aren’t they? |
|  | You said they were a ghastly lot. I’ve never seen it for how a … You know, they seem to me that some of them are just normal men.  Yes.  Doris Lessing: Behaving normally. I’m sure you’re not like that. But …  There’s a lot, there are a lot of, I mean, it may be a reflection of the times.  Doris Lessing: You mean they were unfaithful to their wives.  There were a lot of married men in it, aren’t there, who are Anna and her friend Molly.  Doris Lessing: Yes.  They’re always ending up with these or getting the chance to end up briefly with these married men who are looking for a little bit of sort of, a little Friesian but without actually wanting to leave their sort of nice bourgeois lives.  Doris Lessing: Well, that seems to me nothing but the Paris realism. You have two women living alone, quite attractive women. In a society which I think was a pretty free society. I’m using it ironically. And so what do you expect to happen? I mean, I don’t want to be unduly cynical. So yes, anyway, what have I forgotten, I’ve lost my thread now.  Just thinking about the various kind of minor male characters in the novel. Anna Wolfe ends up being a marriage guidance counsellor doesn’t she?  Doris Lessing: I thought that was funny.  That is funny, yes.  Doris Lessing: And she’s the … Molly is in, I don’t know what, she’s doing something like that. Because don’t forget they were communists and waiting for the utopia to explode on the world.  Well, Molly having criticised marriage ends up getting married again.  Doris Lessing: Well, there you are, you see. This is … So, well I thought all of that was very funny. You just want to contrast it of what they were like. Communists fighting for the new world and look where they end up. Marriage guidance, I ask you.  Was it a long time before you were aware that that book had become, I don’t know, a bit of a cult book. Had made the impact amongst people who admired it. Not amongst people who’d detracted but amongst people who loved it. Did that take a long time to happen?  Doris Lessing: Yes, it took a bit of time. The thing is that it was, it was a cult book among the feminists which did me a lot of harm. Which had meant that as I’ve had letters from men, we didn’t read it because it was supposed to be a feminist book. And now it’s … yes I had that letter several times. So it didn’t do me any good the feminists. They never quite, they were very extreme the feminists of that time. I remember going to Sweden and some actress coming up to me and saying: This is my book, it is not your book. It is not yours. I only read the Blue Notebook. So this kind of exaggerated hysterical rubbish was going on.  Did it sort of, thinking just formerly what you’d done there. Did that give you a feeling that you were now free to experiment in other ways with how you made a novel or the kind of the genres of novel that you wrote?  Doris Lessing: Well, I was writing a lot of books that were not realistic, you know. *The Memoirs of a Survivor* and *Briefing for a Descent into Hell*. Those are my two non-realistic books before I got round to *Shikasta*. That was five books which I think are some of the best writing I’ve ever done. I know a lot of people did.  Your *Canopus in Argos*?  Doris Lessing: Yes.  Yes.  Doris Lessing: So. You know, I’d already been doing all that before the *Shikasta* series. Which incidentally, each book is quite different from every other. It isn’t a series at all really. So … and then I wrote, I was just going on all the time. You see, I’ve never done anything else in my life. I didn’t ever have a vivid social life because I had a child. You can’t go dancing every night when you’ve got a child. |
| Q41 | But people, I think, are thinking perhaps of the science fiction books. People sometimes think describe you as quite a sort of contrarian writer that as soon as you’ve established one way of doing things and you’ve got fans for that, you then go off and try something completely different and risk leaving all those admirers in your wake. |
|  | Well. You don’t leave. I mean things have changed now. The novel as you know is not everybody’s favourite cup of tea if I can put it like that. But I can remember being in San Francisco and somebody, a man stands up and says: Now Doris, I hope you’re not going to waste any more time on that boring old realism. And up bounces a woman and says: Now Doris, I hope you’re not going to write any of that awful science fiction. Then they get into an argument and the entire audience gets into an argument and I just listen. This wouldn’t happen now because nobody cares about. That’s the trouble. I mean, a novel is not where the passion is situated, is it? So I don’t think we’d have that now.  Can you tell us a bit more about why you found it so useful to you or so expressive for your purposes to write science fiction, why you wanted to do that.  But I didn’t think now I’m going to write Sci Fi. I just wrote it as it came along.  Doris Lessing: I just did it because I wanted to write a book because somebody, not of this culture, said that nobody ever read the Old Testament, that is the Jewish books, the Apocrypha, the New Testament and the Koran, one after another. Nobody did. He said if anyone did that they would see that this is phases of the same religion, it’s perfectly obvious. So I did this and I thought: My god, of course it’s phases of the same religion. So then I was inspired to write *Shikasta*. But I didn’t think now I’m going to write Sci Fi. I just wrote it as it came along. And another book that I’d been wanting to write for a long time, that’s *The Marriages Between Zones Three, Four and Five*. I had been thinking about it for 10 years. I couldn’t get it to gel. Suddenly, it just gelled.  There was something about writing that series that was enormously productive for me. I was suddenly able to write that book and then I wrote *The Sirian Experiments* which I think is one my very best. But however very few people ever read it. And so on. And then that was an end. And I’ve forgotten why it came to an end. It was some kind of legal something. I’ve forgotten what it was. And yes, you get all these things happening you forget. This was quite a dramatic thing that somebody or something signed up that series to go somewhere and I can’t remember where, and I can’t remember now even where it was going. But I stopped writing it. Which was a pity really. But it doesn’t matter, I wrote other books. |
| Q22 | I just wanted to ask you actually after the Canopus in Argos books, you published what I suppose I’ve always taken as being a bit of a sort of rejoinder to the people who perhaps complained, critics who complained that you weren’t doing realism anymore because you publish *The Diary of a Good Neighbour* under a pseudonym, Jane Somers, didn’t you? I wonder if you could tell us about that little strategy? |
|  | Well, you get very bored if you’re in a … often it’s exactly the same thing as a previous review and so on. So I thought I’d write something like this and see what happened. And I knew perfectly well what would happen. Because this book went to my two main publishers at that time. And then neither of them wanted it. And I saw a couple of readers reports which were extremely iffy. But Michael Joseph, my first publisher took it. And so we swore her to secrecy. Now what was interesting is that two major publishing houses, with all these people working for them were able to keep quiet about the fact that I’d written.  That is incredible, yes.  Doris Lessing: Enormously impressed by that. Then it came out and I got the kind of reviews that a promising first book gets. But one interesting thing was, somebody wrote from America to say that the New York Times had commissioned a review which said that this was a wonderful book and they didn’t publish it. Now if in fact they had published it, that book would have done very well. Much better than just a promising first book. So it’s all very chancy all this you know. The whole thing. So then, nobody guessed who I was which I thought was quite extraordinary. Now the French and Germans published it not knowing it was me and they did quite … I was very pleased about that.  Wasn’t there something on the dust jacket, because I think I’ve seen a first edition of it and there’s something on the dust jacket which indicates that Jane Somers isn’t the real name of the author. I think it says something like the author is a well known London journalist or something.  Doris Lessing: Is that on the continent?  I think that’s on … Is that not on the British edition? I think it is.  Doris Lessing: I don’t know, I haven’t seen it.  That there’s some clue that it’s a pseudonym which would sort of, you know …  Doris Lessing: Well, I can’t remember now.  And I mean it’s a wonderful bleak, it’s a bleak book. I mean it’s almost if you want realism here is some very stringent realism indeed because it’s all about …  Doris Lessing: Old age.  Old age. Unblinkingly so.  Doris Lessing: For some reason I can’t remember now, I was involved with a group of old people not far away. There were three old women and an old man. And it went on for, what, seven or eight years, these people. But the one I really liked was Maudy who was a very angry old woman, well she was a very angry woman.  So the character’s based on a real …  Doris Lessing: Yes, she is. And then you see it ended in us. I can’t remember if it’s in the book or not. She died of cancer.  Yes, that’s in the book.  Doris Lessing: And I was very fond of her. But they all died, you see. They were as old as I am now. So they died, they have to die. And it was enormously instructive because there was a house not far from here where there was a good church going woman, Sarah, who did everything right like going to church meetings and parties and bus rides and all that. And the other bad one who had decided she couldn’t move from her chair, which was rubbish, and she got everyone running around after her. And she was a thoroughly bad lot. She really was a wicked old woman. But another interesting thing that happened was that you were watching the services, the complaint was that old people were living on the smell of an oil rag, how wicked. In actual fact, they had so much money, they couldn’t spend it. Because their rents were paid and their food was paid and everything was paid all the time.  And what actually happened was the weekly packet would stack up in drawers everywhere and it was quietly lifted by every social worker that came and, well, they needed money for their kids. So this is what actually happened, not as one likes to say it should happen. And some very high place social worker would come in and you’d see this rather thoughtful look come over her face. I’ll just nick out a couple of twenties. Into the bag, off you go.  I hadn’t realised that that novel was also based on sort of things that you’d observed for yourself.  Doris Lessing: Oh yes, it was, it was very, there was a lot of that. |
| Q30 | What about then after that, there’s a novel that you published in 1985 which I confess is a favourite one of mine which I read soon after it was first published, *The Good Terrorist*, which seems in a way, although it’s about its own times, it seems also to take you back a bit to that territory of these sort of groups of self righteous so called idealists or political idealists. |
|  | Well, that was very much based. People have forgotten that everywhere, America, Europe, everywhere. There were these groups of so called revolutionaries, you know, we are revolutionaries. And they would be in a house somewhere, and I had very interesting letters about that. The most interesting being coming from Ireland saying did I realise that it was enough for these young people, if they wore the right uniform and used the right jargon to live quite happily for years, never go so much as to a political meeting? But they were revolutionaries. Now that era has absolutely gone with the death of the Soviet Union. That came to an end. But there were a lot of them you know. You met them all around the place.  They might be revolutionaries, but money, this is what they talked about.  And so that one was based on partly remembering what it was like being a member of a communist group when, you know, come the revolution, which was always said half laughing, which is very funny when I look back. And next door to me at that particular time, just down, across the road was a house stuffed full of squatters and revolutionaries. So I saw them quite a lot. But what was really interesting about this was they never stopped talking about money. They might be revolutionaries, but money, this is what they talked about. How to get the next payment from somewhere. So that was really hilarious. |
| Q2 | And in the 1990s, I mean you were writing these novels and more that we haven’t talked about. In the 1990s, you wrote a couple of volumes of autobiography as well which I think some people like as much as your novels. But you stopped in 1962 with those. I mean they only take your life to 1962. Why did you decide? |
|  | Well, it’s very simple. In 1960, I was one of these earth mothers. And the house was full of kids and trouble in one way or another. And in it at that time, I don’t know if you noticed it. There were these women with housefuls of kids. Why did that happen? I don’t know why it did. But the point is that all these kids are now grown up and are close friends and I couldn’t possibly write about them. I just couldn’t do it. So I wrote *The Sweetest Dream* but I didn’t use the people but I used, I hope, the atmosphere of the 60s. And that started off because I was in Germany being interviewed. And this young man wanted to know about the 60s. And he’s talking with such contempt. I said: Whatever else, it had this most wonderful generosity. And I said: Imagine, a young man will just turn up somewhere and say my name is Bert and I’m a friend of Freddy’s. Can I come in? Oh, do come in, and they might be there for a month. He said: You can’t just let anybody into your house just like that. You can’t do that. He might be a thief. And I said: But maybe he was a thief, but this is what we did. And I thought my god, everyone has forgotten it.  And it was in fact a wonderfully generous time because it was going on everywhere. I’ve got letters somewhere from other earth mothers and sort of. The one that I like best was someone in Mississippi or somewhere saying: I understand that you’ve had Tom there. Don’t you think we should do something about his teeth. Wonderful. Anyway, I can’t remember about his teeth. We probably did do something about his teeth.  So there’s sort of affection as well as ridicule when you look back to …  Doris Lessing: I don’t ridicule. It was a wonderfully … Well, no-one now can just go round the world on a half a sentence: You know, I’m Freddy and I know Janet. I mean it was wonderful wasn’t it?  Well, I don’t know, I didn’t really live through it I suppose.  Doris Lessing: No, well I think it was terrific. No-one could do it now because you’re too suspicious. |
| Q42 | Yes. And you were writing also, I don’t know if this is a fair way of describing that some of your books from the late 80s and the 1990s they seem sort of just like Shakespeare wrote problem plays, I think you wrote some problem novels. So there’s *The Fifth Child* for instance, about a couple who think they’re going to have this kind of wonderful blissful family life and they have a sort of malevolent child. Or there’s *Love, Again* about a woman in the1990s, about a woman who thinks all the sort of tumult of passion is perhaps with relief passed and then she falls in love again. I mean is that a … to think of them as problem. |
|  | I’ve never thought of it as problem novels. *The Fifth Child*. It was simply because I wanted to write a version of the fairy leaving a baby in a human cradle. Because, you know, it’s an ancient story in practically every culture, which makes you wonder if in fact babies have been left in cradles and we’ve forgotten that time. Because I maintain there were little people. They’ve just found some over in Sumatra somewhere called the Flores, have you read about them?  No, I haven’t, no.  Doris Lessing: They found a race of people who are humans but smaller. And some of the scientists say no, this is totally impossible, this is just an aberrant human. Couldn’t be, but other scientists say no, these were human beings, they were just smaller. And I always thought this always. Where did our tales come from about the little people. It was based on something. So I think there were little people. And so we called them fairies or trolls or whatever. But I’m sure they were here. Why does every second garden have gnomes in it? What are we remembering? We’re remembering something. It’s half out of memory. |
| Q16 | And you’ve done fantasy although I don’t know if fantasy’s the right word for it but quite recently, I mean only a year ago, you published *The Cleft* which is … is fantasy the right word for it, it’s an extraordinary kind of imaginative projection of a sort of primitive tale in which the female sex pre-existed the male sex and then … |
|  | Well, it was in the papers of that time. You know how there’s an idea and it’s around and it disappears. The idea was that the basic human stock was female and then men came along later. The more you think about this, the more it explains. Because as you know, all women say men are just nothing but children.  Yes.  Doris Lessing: I mean nearly always. So I thought it made a lot of sense if we had women on their seashore, you know because it was a very nice climate, they just ate fish, they never had anything to startle them out of their boring life. And suddenly men arrived. You know, men always rushing after Eiger and going around the world on small boats. Must have been very like Top Gear suddenly arrived.  Yes.  Doris Lessing: Must have been awful for the poor girls.  I wonder if our international viewers will know what Top Gear is, but …  Doris Lessing: I don’t know. Well it’s a very, it’s one of the funniest programmes on television.  Inadvertently though isn’t it?  Doris Lessing: I know it’s so hilarious. It’s about motoring.  About men in cars, yes.  Doris Lessing: And I swear that all women must look at that just marvelling. There you have these men, absorbed in these horrible cars. I’ve laughed so much over that programme. Anyway, just imagine the girls who’ve never ever been upset by anything. Not only do they have little boys with penises. Because I’m going back to memory when I had my first child. There was a woman in the same room who was having her third child. She’d had two girls and this was a boy. I was having my first. And she was in a state of absolute incandescent. She says to the nurse: What’s this? Meaning that little boys apparatus. So the nurse said: Oh Mrs Johnson, aren’t you lucky, you’ve got such a dear little boy. Take it away, I’m not taking that home. So I said to her: What’s the matter with you, you know there’s my boy. She says: I’m not going to take that. I mean look at it. Isn’t that horrible. Because you probably know because you’ve got children that little boys have a lot of physical apparatus. Then it goes into … it sort of comes right in about a week or two. But it’s quite a surprise seeing a newborn baby. They’re all genitals. Well, just imagine these poor girls suddenly faced with this. So it’s quite a funny idea actually.  I mean, since then you’ve written another book actually, *Alfred & Emily*, you’re still writing. I mean that’s a book which I think uses, I mean explores in a certain way the lives of your parents, is that right? I wonder if you could tell us a bit about that.  Doris Lessing: Well, the reason for that is. For no reason I can see the wars in my life sit on me more and more as a kind of horror. I still can’t believe that we’re so stupid as to. Anyway, it’s no good going into it. Either you feel that way or you don’t. I’m so appalled by those wars. I mean the First World War by god, it did Europe in. We’re still living in the aftermath.  And that book’s about … isn’t that book about the aftermath?  Doris Lessing: Yes, I’ve simply taken my parents and abolished World War I. And if I might remind you, no World War I, no Russian Revolution, no Soviet Union, no Soviet Empire, no Hitler, no Holocaust, no World War II. It all came from World War I. And I’ve given them rather ordinary lives. Sort of decent, sensible lives. Particularly my mother, who has some money and can use it, which she should have done. And made my father a farmer, because he longed all his life to be an English farmer in Essex or Suffolk where his forbears came from. So I gave him that and I gave him a nice loving wife instead of a rather prickly one. And then I have the second half of the book which is what actually happened which I think is a heartbreaker. Because that’s my father’s life as it happened. You know, he got diabetes, he got all the things that you get as an effect of diabetes.  So the book has the imagined life and the real life sort of interleafed.  Doris Lessing: So I think it’s an anti war book. It’s a war violently against … It’s a book against war. Which I felt all my life and I just feel it more and more. And things like Iraq. I mean I don’t have to go into that. There’s so many people appalled by it.  So you’re still sort of feeling driven to write things?  Doris Lessing: Yes. Well, I don’t think so anymore. I think I’ve had it. I don’t have any energy.  Well, I don’t, I’m not sure I believe.  Doris Lessing: The energy’s gone.  I’m not sure I believe it.  Doris Lessing: Well, that’s alright, I haven’t got it. |
| ID | 0919 |
| Biographical | Half of my book *Istanbul* is about the city; the other half chronicles the first 22 years of my life. I remember my huge disillusionment when it was finished. Of all the things I had wanted to express about my life, of all the memories that I considered the most crucial, only a few had found their way into the book. I could have written another twenty volumes describing the first twentytwo years of my life, each one drawing from a different set of experiences. It was then that I discovered that autobiographies served not to preserve our pasts, but to help us forget them.  I was born in Istanbul in 1952. My grandfather was a successful civil engineer and businessman who made his fortune building railroads and factories. My father followed in his footsteps, but instead of making money, he kept losing it. I was educated in private schools in Istanbul, and after studying architecture for three years, I dropped out, enrolled in a journalism course, and set out to become a writer. Between the ages of 7 and 22, I dreamed of being a painter. During my childhood and early youth, I painted with a happy and passionate sense of purpose. But by the time I stopped painting at the age of 22, I knew that I had no choice but to devote my life to art. At the same time, I had no idea why I gave up painting at the age of 22 and began to write my first novel, *Cevdet Bey and Sons*. It was to explore that mystery that, years later, I wrote *Istanbul*.  When I look back on my life up to the age of 54, I see a person who has worked long hours at a desk, in both happiness and in misery. I have written my books with care, patience, and good intentions, believing in each and every one. Success, fame, professional happiness… these did not come to me easily. Today my novels have been translated into 55 languages, but the hardest thing was finding a Turkish publisher for my first novel. It took me four years to find a publisher to take on *Cevdet Bey and Sons*. This despite the fact that it had won a national prize for unpublished novels …  In 1982 at about the same time that I published my first novel, I married Aylin Türegün, and because we had both grown up in the same affluent, westernised Istanbul neighbourhood, walking the same streets and before we ever knew each other attending the same schools, I used to tease her by saying I had ‘married a girl from my village’. Our daughter was born in 1991, and we named her after Rüya, the heroine of *The Black Book*.  I have made my living exclusively from writing. Between 1985 and 1988, I was a visiting scholar at Columbia University in New York, while my wife was working on her doctorate at the same university. I was greatly impressed by the richness of America’s libraries, bookstores, and museums. My wife and I were divorced in 2002. She and our daughter remain my best friends. In 2006, a month before I won the Nobel Prize, I began to teach at Columbia University for one semester a year.  For me, a good day is a day like any other, when I have written one page well. Except for the hours I spend writing, life seems to me to be flawed, deficient, and senseless. Those who know me well understand how dependent I am on writing, tables, pens, and white paper, but they still urge me to ‘take a bit of time off, do some travelling, enjoy life!’ Those who know me even better understand that my greatest happiness is writing, so they tell me that nothing that keeps me far from writing, paper, and ink will ever do me any good. I am one of those rare happy creatures who have been able to do what they most desired, and who have been able to devote themselves to that task to the exclusion of all else.  I spent my childhood in a large family surrounded by uncles and aunts. My two first novels, *Cevdet Bey and Sons*, and *Silent House*, are family sagas. I enjoy describing crowded family gatherings the meals they eat together, the feuds, and the quarrels. But with the passage of time, as our fortunes dwindled and our family dispersed, it gradually ceased to be a source of protection or a centre to which I felt obliged to return. Every night, when I curl up in bed and pull my quilt over me, I am swept away by a sweet fear that walks between solitude and dreams, the beauties of life, and its cruelties, and it is then that I shiver in the same way I did when I listened to scary stories, or read fairy tales, as a child.  In *Silent House*, it was through my grandmother’s monologues that I tried to penetrate this world between sleep and wakefulness. There are traces of that same world in *The White Castle*, which also explores the shadows between dreams and reality, imagination and history. But it was in *The Black Book*, which I began in 1985, that I felt I found my own voice. I was 33 years old at the time, living in New York, and asking myself hard questions about who I was, and about my history. I spent all my time in my room in the Columbia Library, reading and writing. During my time in New York, my longing for Istanbul mixed in with my fascination for the wonders of Ottoman, Persian, Arab, and Islamic culture. *The Black Book* was a book that took me a very long time to plan, a book that I wrote without knowing exactly what I was doing, feeling my way forward like a blind man. I am still surprised that I was able to finish it.  *The New Life* is a lyrical exploration of the thing I first discovered in *The Black Book*, this time not in Istanbul, but in Anatolia. *My Name is Red* is the novel that perplexes my mother: she always tells me that she cannot understand how I wrote it …There is nothing in any of my other novels that surprises her; she knows that I drew upon the stuff of my own life. But in *My Name is Red* there is an aspect that she cannot connect with this son she knows so well, this son about whom she is certain that she knows everything… This must, in my view, be the greatest compliment to any writer can hear: to hear from his mother that his books are wiser than he is.  What has surprised me the most was the popularity of *Snow*. In the beginning I thought this was down to growing interest in political Islam, the clash of East-West stereotypes and their reflections in everyday life. But now I have come to think that what sets the book apart is what transpires in the *Hotel Asia* when the political activists are furiously preparing their statements. But in so thinking, I may have again misread my readers’ minds. In the early nineties, when I was known only in Turkey, and Turkish journalists would sometimes ask me in a hostile way why people liked my books, and why I was so widely read, I’d come up with all sorts of reasons that I liked a great deal, but now I don’t believe a single one of them. Later on, when I slowly came to be read all over the world, foreign journalists and literary critics began to ask the same question. I write the books I myself would like to read. And sometimes I take this to mean that everyone in the world shares my feelings. This attempt to explain the popularity of my books is probably as misguided as all the others. Even so, talking about one’s books is as pointless as talking about one’s life. In the end, a writer will see his life as more important than his books. But it is those books that give life its meaning and value. From the age of 22, when I began to write novels, I have never been able to separate my life from my novels. I think that the books I shall write in the future will be thought more entertaining, and more important, than my life. I take this to mean that a person must look ahead to the moment of his death, that he must resign himself to that moment. Despite this, it still seems that there is a lot of time left.  Because as I write these words at the age of 54 in April 2007, I know that my life has long since passed its midpoint, but, having written for thirty-two years now, I believe that I am at the midpoint of my career. I must have another thirty-two years in which to write more books, and to surprise my mother and other readers at least one more time.  *Translation from Turkish by Maureen Freely* |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0919=OP  [Orhan Pamuk] – Hello.  [Adam Smith] – Hello, may I speak to Orhan Pamuk please? Hello?  [OP] – Hello.  [AS] – Hello, may I speak to Orhan Pamuk please?  [OP] – Speaking.  [AS] – Oh, my name is Adam Smith and I’m calling from the official website of the Nobel Foundation in Stockholm.  [OP] – Yes.  [AS] – We have a tradition of recording very short conversations with new Laureates immediately after the announcements.  [OP] – OK.  [AS] – So, first of all, many, many congratulations on being awarded …  [OP] – Oh, thank you very much. It’s such a great honour.  [AS] – I gather you’re in New York. What were you doing when you received the news?  [OP] – Oh, I was sleeping, and thinking that, in a hour, probably they will announce the Nobel Prize, and then someone would maybe tell me who won it. And then I’m thinking, so what am I going to do, what’s today’s work? And I’m a little bit sleepy. And then the phone call, and then I’m “Oh, it’s already half past seven”. You know, this is New York and I don’t know the light, so I don’t feel pretty … And I answered, and they said I won the Nobel Prize.  [AS] – That’s an extraordinary phone call to receive. There was an enormous cheer went up at the press conference when they announced the prize.  [OP] – Really, of that’s great, I’m very happy to hear this. This is great.  [AS] – We’ve recorded it on the website so you can, when finally you get off the phone you can go and relive the moment.  [OP] – And also I saw so many journalists you know, wanted me to have it, so I’m pleased about that. I’m very pleased about all these details. Thank you very much, sir.  [AS] – You’re the first ever Turkish writer to be awarded a Nobel Prize for Literature. Does that give the award a special significance for you?  [OP] – Well, unfortunately, that makes the thing very precious in Turkey, which is good for Turkey of course, getting this prize, but makes it more extra sensitive and political and it somehow tends to make it as a sort of a burden.  [AS] – Yes, because it’s been quite a public year for you.  [OP] – Yes.  [AS] – So I imagine this will add to that. The citation for the award refers particularly to your “quest for the melancholic soul of (your) native city”, and there’s an extremely long tradition of writing about Istanbul, and in praise of Istanbul. Could you describe briefly what it is about the city that has acted as such a strong draw for people’s imagination over the years?  [OP] – Well, it was at the edge of Europe, but different. So it was the closest ‘other’. And it was really both close and, in a way, other. Mysterious, strange, uncompromising and totally un-European in ways, although in its spirit there was such a great place for Europe [words unclear].  [AS] – And referring to the phrase “melancholic soul”, how would you describe Istanbul to those who’ve never seen it?  [OP] – I would say that it’s one of the early modern cities where modernity decayed earlier than expected. I would say that the ruins of the past gave the city its melancholy, along with its poverty. But then I would also say that it’s now recovering from this melancholy, hopefully.  [AS] – And another facet of your writing that was particularly emphasized in the citation, from the Committee, is the way that you deal with the interactions between different cultures. And of course it’s a cliché to say that Turkey lies at the crossroads between East and West, but it does presumably offer the perfect vantage point from which to view the cross-cultural interface?  [OP] – This meet of East and West and clash of civilizations, this is unfortunately one of the most dangerous and horrific ideas that have been produced in the last twenty years, and is now serving for… This fanciful idea is now unfortunately getting to be real, and this theory is serving the clash of civilizations and the deaths of so many people.  [AS] – Because historically there has really been much more mixing of cultures than is popularly supposed.  [OP] – Culture is mix. Culture means a mix of things from other sources. And my town, Istanbul, was this kind of mix. Istanbul, in fact, and my work, is a testimony to the fact that East and West combine cultural gracefully, or sometimes in an anarchic way, came together, and that is what we should search for. This is getting to be a good interview by the way.  [AS] – Thank you, that’s very kind of you. Many of your characters might be said to embody multiple cultural influences. I mean your writing indicates that they’re far from uniformly either Eastern or Western, it’s a mix.  [OP] – Yes.  [AS] – Do you write solely in Turkish?  [OP] – Yes. I think I wrote some six or seven articles in English, in international magazines, in Times Literary Supplement, in Village Voice.  [AS] – So there are presumably …  [OP] – But of course I’m a Turkish writer, essentially, and live in the language. Language is me, in a way. Really, I feel it.  [AS] – Right, and there are ideas that you can express in Turkish, I assume, that would be very hard to capture in other languages?  [OP] – Exactly. Because thinking is composed of two things; language and images, and then yeah, half of thinking is the language. I agree, yes sir, please ask the question.  [AS] – Well, could you give an example of a concept that …  [OP] – Wow! I can of course, but not on the day that I have received the Nobel Prize.  [AS] – That’s fair enough, you don’t really have to answer any questions on the day you receive the Nobel Prize.  [OP] – Yeah, OK.  [AS] – You can say anything you like.  [OP] – OK, thank you very much sir.  [AS] – So then an easy question. I mean the award will encourage a lot of new readers to dip into your work for the first time. Where would you recommend they start? What would you suggest to people, and also …  [OP] – Oh, depending on the reader of course; the reader who buys books because the writer has received the Nobel Prize should start with *My Name is Red*. The reader who has already read that book should continue with *The Black Book*. The reader who is interested in more contemporary issues and politics should go ahead with *Snow*, so forth and so on.  [AS] – Wonderful, wonderful. And if your readers are lucky enough to be able to read in multiple languages, but can’t manage Turkish, do you have a recommendation for which language most excellently captures the spirit?  [OP] – Of course English is the world’s language now, and that’s the language I’ve been checking my books with, and I’m proud with my translator and I’m also confident. So, basically English translations.  [AS] – OK, thank you very much.  [OP] – Thanks, as you see I’m a dutiful good boy, I did my homework very well now.  [AS] – Very well indeed! No, I’m thrilled with your cooperation. Thank you very much.  [OP] – Bye, bye. I’m have to hang now because my agent is calling and others, so many responsibilities that I have to address.  [AS] – Of course, quite so, thank you for sparing the time. See you soon, bye, bye.  [OP] – OK, bye, bye. |
| Interview |  |
| Q33 | My name is Horace Engdahl, I am the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish academy, and here beside me is Mr Orhan Pamuk, the literary Nobel Laureate of the year 2007. *[Editor’s correction: Pamuk was awarded the 2006 prize.]* Welcome. First question I would like to ask you to describe the circumstances around your first book? How you came to write it and what kind of writer you thought you were going to be when you wrote it. |
|  | As I narrated in my book *Istanbul,* which is half an autobiography, half an essay about the town, I wanted to be a painter between the ages of 7 and 22, and with mysterious reason which I cannot explain with one single sentence, but which it took me so perhaps answer the whole Istanbul book to explain, I quit the drawing or painting or in fact my desire to be a painter and immediately started writing my first book *Cevdet Bey and His Sons*. I had an idea about the book, but more so I’d been reading fiction, seriously fiction, for the last eight years, seven years, and I had a deep understanding or some sort of understanding of what I wanted to do in literature, that I wanted to write a 19th century novel, a sort of family chronicle …  Like *Buddenbrooks*?  Orhan Pamuk: *Buddenbrooks* or like *The Forsyte Saga*, chronicling the adventures of a Turkish upper middle class rich family with the emergence of the new Turkish ruling elites. And yes, *Buddenbrooks* was a heavy influence on that book and I started to make myself a sort of a 19th century old fashioned realist. I have still some readers in Turkey who tell me that Well, this is your best book, Mr Pamuk, with these other experimental novels you have lost whatever I had in that book, which I sometimes naively listen and say I may even have one or two seconds of regret, maybe I should have continued in that line.  I have no opinion on that, but please continue.  Then there was a military coup and I realised that I cannot publish that book …  Orhan Pamuk: Then after a while it took for me four years between early 23 and 26 to finish that book, it took another three years, in fact four years, to publish that book, but in between time there was a military coup in Turkey, and right after finishing that I gave that manuscript to a competition for unpublished manuscripts which I won, but then publication at that time was hard.  Then I began writing my second novel, which was in fact a political novel, but like *Snow* a political novel written not for propaganda but to explore the youthful and a sort of anarchic enthusiasm my generation of upper middle class Istanbul, secular boys were enjoying with the heavy influence of Marxism at that time. Then there was a military coup and I realised that I cannot publish that book, I switched, I began writing a third book which is my published second book which is *The Silent House*, and then finally in 1982, I managed to get published this first book, 600 pages of family chronicle also narrating the coming into being of the Turkish upper middle classes, the invention of the Turkish identity, in fact the making of the …  You’re referring to *The Silent House*?  Orhan Pamuk: No. I’m referring to the first book. Once I published that, that was successful, I got national prizes. Then I continued with *The Silent House*, after which, and that was also successful, I began to find my voice. These two books, the first one was typically 19th century realism and the second one was also influenced by [Faulkner](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1949/faulkner-facts.html) kind of point of view …  Point of view …  Orhan Pamuk: … points of view which I experimented more radically in *My Name Is Red*. The third book was a strange book which took its final shape with coincidences is *The White Castle*, it’s the story of a 16th century Ottoman scholar who buys Italian slaves, so to speak, and then sort of dramatical interchange of the spirits of these people, sort of an east west novel in which I began to experiment a little and also went to places when I was writing the book that I was not sure about.  Yes, and that book won you international fame.  Orhan Pamuk: *The White Castle* was published in 1985 and there, at that time, when it was published, I was in the United States, the Columbia University in New York, a sort of, as I sometimes jokingly tell, my being my wife’s husband because I was the spouse and she was taking her PhD. Columbia University was kind to me and I was also teaching and giving native Turkish courses while, on the other hand, I had a little room at the library in which I wrote more than half of *The Black Book*, and it’s very typical of the non-resident person coming through main cultural centres of western civilisation, say London, Paris, New York, and then having a sort of an anxiety about his cultural identity and I lived these things when I was … and I faced the immense richness of American libraries and culture.  … there at the age of 32 I begin to read old Sufi allegorism …  Then I begin to ask myself what is Turkish culture? What am I doing there? And at that time I used to think that Turkey’s cultural roles, identity, should only be a sort of an ultra-Occidentalism, there at the age of 32 I begin to read old Sufi allegorism, the whole classic texts of classic texts of Islamic mysticism, most of them are classical Persian texts, with an eye on Borges and Calvino whom they have taught me to look at literary texts as not as a sort of a structures which has metaphysical qualities, I have learned from Borges and Calvino to delete the very heavy religious way of classical Islamic text and try and see these texts as sort of geometrical shapes and metaphysical structures and allegories …  Parables.  Orhan Pamuk: Parables full of literary games …  And paradox of course.  Orhan Pamuk: Yes. And then after the heavy influence of 19th century novel, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Proust and Nabokov and Faulkner, Borges and Calvino opened a way to look at, a secular way of looking at classic Islamic heritage.  Yes, I mean it’s amazing the richness of the oriental material that you bring into especially *The Black Book*, I mean It’s overwhelming for a western reader, and one starts to ask oneself questions like in which languages have you read all these …  Orhan Pamuk: Oh, most of them I have read ironically enough, of course in Turkish, and in English and I’m heavily indebted to a Turkish translation of /- – -/ which was very well translated to Turkish, but /- – -/ translation even the /- – -/ edition was a sort of an inspiring encyclopaedia of medieval Islamic culture with all its glory, with all its rhetoric and literary games that I was now my desire to say to the rest of the world, to the western, great western writers, you know, there is also some literary material here. I think that all the questions of literary heritage, identity, most of the time are answered by these people who are heavily influenced by the international style, international avant garde so to speak.  It’s true that more than once when you read *The White Castle* and *The Black Book* you think of Calvino for instance, *Le città invisibili*, *Invisible Citie*s which I suppose you must have liked, but still there’s a lot of it that is very unexpected to the western reader and it has to do of course with the Sufi tradition and also where the writing’s are roomy, especially.  Orhan Pamuk: There is also an influence of *Arabian Nights* or as the Turks call it *One Thousand and One Nights*, I think that book, although the details, some of the stories, are oriental, actually a western invention, a sort of an … it’s found by the western compilers who had put together books, some of the books, some of the most famous stories are not even … we doubt that now, are not even original, but that book as a sort of a book which comes from, heavily from Indian tradition going through Arabic and Persian influences, and then as a sort of a text, an ocean of stories, which was given a shape and an understanding and elevated to a higher stature by the French and English, Orientalist was also behind *The Black Book*, the idea of constantly telling stories, the idea of a person who is in deep trouble but who cannot face that his trouble, problems, who instead of addressing the question gives you another story, is a heavy influence but with a light touch from *Arabian Nights*.  Yes, but in *The Black Book* you seem to move from story to story through tales and parables endlessly and there is no end, there is no bottom, and there is no origin either.  Orhan Pamuk: There’s no?  Origin.  Orhan Pamuk: I thought that the formula or the structure of *The Black Book*, the idea was to put together whatever you find interesting about Istanbul, its old book shops, its stories, Its mysteries, the chemistry of its streets, and what I have lived and loved when I lived there all my life, remembering your childhood and try to see the city as a sort of a place where layers of layers, things and images, history and myth combined, and combine this with experimental post modern European avant gardism, all together with a classical Sufi text and see what happens. I strongly believe that creativity in literature comes from first an understanding that you have to put together two things that have never been put together and see if there is an electricity in between them, of course for here the author, the narrator wants to be the source of that electricity.  Someone makes that remark in *My Name Is Red*, that there’s great innovations in painting often come from two different traditions being brought together at a specific point. So I suppose you can use this in writing as well as in painting.  … the beginnings of good art or different art is a Dadaist idea.  Orhan Pamuk: I think Dadaists are so important in literature although that at first they were the source for surrealists, but the idea of bringing things that we at first think that are impossible to bring together or almost daring and scandalous to combine, in fact Dadaist taught us that the art can be putting first an attempt to put together things that never came together, the beginnings of good art or different art is a Dadaist idea. |
| Q39 | In *The Black Book* there’s also for a western reader this magic of the fluent identities that sometimes even borders on Metempsychosis and is this something that came to you during the writing? Because you have the element of course in *The White Castle*, but it’s so much more poetic in *The Black Book*. |
|  | I like the idea, maybe personal, but that the boundary of human personality is not strong, my understanding of human nature is not Freudian, but I think that there are no essences of, there are no characters or essences that make us constantly. I believe that we constantly change, and these are dear ideas which in my novels perhaps I combine with my countries, Turkey’s history that of, you know, having two souls, two spirits, that of believing in nature and harmony with TUSTUS science, while on the other hand keeping an eye on the fact that there is almost always a dramatical tension with two sides of our personality. We have to address these issues, we have to see these hidden depths or hidden characters in us, but on the other hand believe that we have to search for these dark places deep inside us, rather than thinking flatly that they will not come together, that east and west will not come together, that harmony between peoples or cultures are impossible, these are ideas I do not believe in.  No but there’s also this fascinating thing in *The Black Book* that makes for a lot of the tensions that are … whenever someone tells a story he or she is gradually transformed into the object of that story, and when you make love you imitate someone else making love, when you start to write you imagine yourself to be the writer you’re going to be as in the extreme case of the main character becoming his relative Celal or whatever, and this is, you know, to me there is a great western French philosopher and literary scholar who’s been working in the United States for most of his life, René Girard, I don’t know If you’re familiar with his work?  Orhan Pamuk: Yes, of course.  And his theory of mimetical desire and it fits very well with your …  Orhan Pamuk: I understand, I am an admirer of René Girard’s work but I have come across him later in years, *The Scapegoat*, *Sacrifice*, I like these subjects, but on the other hand it was a rather simplistic or simple idea that I think that even in the worst conditions that to be able to tell a story is a sort of a great relief for me, that I believe that in fact if there are Hegelian minds who are trying to over- rule each other which is a Hegelian point of view of history, I think that my understanding of people’s wills or minds clashing is who is going to tell who’s story earlier? Who is going to impose his or her story? It think all of my characters in various books be it *My Name is Red*, be it *The Black Book* or even *Snow*, the one who manages to tell his story, pass his story, survives or telling stories is a way of surviving and continuing to live. |
| Q39 | Yes, this is true, I mean there is this rivalry for instance in *Snow* between the poet Ka and Blue, the religious leader, they are struggling for the same woman, for the same women, and God knows who comes out victorious because you leave lots of things open in that novel. And it comes to a moment towards the end of the book which I find particularly fascinating when Ka is actually betraying Blue to the security forces and he’s killed, and why does he do that? We’re never told, but there’s one hypothesis that’s put forward is that Ka suddenly came to realise that he is not as he had believed, the sublime poet, he’s the poet clerk and it’s the other one who is so to say chosen by the gods. I find that particularly arresting I must say and it brings to mind something that i personally feel to be one of your sort of … one of the keys to your work, now I’m advancing a very, daring hypothesis, but I have to do it, namely that jealousy is one of your main things. |
|  | I agree, that this begins from … it was strong even in my early book *Cevdet Bey and his Sons*, that was jealousy between brothers, then there is, it is still there in *The Silent House*, obviously there a sort of a not jealousy but a sort of this time Hegelian master and slave form in *The White Castle* and it continues that presence of a person who may be more wiser, more intelligent, more cunning and who goes to a place that is, and enjoys a life which is richer and deeper than us is another theme that I like and it’s also related to jealousy, and I continue to have that theme all my life including in my autobiographical Istanbul book in which I mention about a sort of rivalry with my brother.  Yes, yes. And I think in *My Name is Red* it’s very obvious, this force …  Orhan Pamuk: Yes, it’s who …  The emotional basis of the whole novel.  Orhan Pamuk: Is that who is the best artist is an idea that is hovering around and makes all the artists more jealous and in fact leads to the murder of …  It leads to violence.  Orhan Pamuk: Yes. |
| Q5 | That’s interesting. If I may come to address the question of your role as a writer, you’ve been saying something in interviews that I have read about how much you value isolation, that what really makes you write is that you can retire into a room where you’re absolutely alone and even bored, and when nothing happens and you can sit hour after hour and the only thing that will ever happen there is that you start to write. This of course brings to mind the famous passage in one of Montaigne’s essays where he talks about his “arrière boutique”, the secret to how you always have to keep behind the shop where you never let anybody into and where things like your wife, your children, your father, your mother, your country doesn’t exist for you any more, where you’re absolutely alone. |
|  | Montaigne invented first for the western, French and western civilisation the idea of a solitary person who reads books on his own, passes judgement on his own, who believes his idea and his reasoning and then has a deep conviction of brotherhood of humanity, of all the persons in the world because we share the same mind, and he I think paved the way for not only the enlightenment and glorification or proliferation of western thoughts but this idea which I cherish, that of the solitary person who not necessarily political, but who at the back of his room reads, writes and produces something that had never been thought before entirely, that is the beginnings of perhaps the uniqueness, the cult of personality in western civilisation, the uniqueness of the character and the consequence of these thoughts are style, style in literature so forth, and …  And also this particular structure that you touch upon that is the relationship between the implicit writer and the implicit reader.  Orhan Pamuk: I see.  Because that really doesn’t exist before Montaigne in my view.  Orhan Pamuk: Yes I agree.  It’s a result of this.  … he explores perhaps first the inner depths of his soul …  Orhan Pamuk: So my idea of a writer is not a person, a social person, a person who expresses himself in society or in a community but a person who for this or that reason, tragically or self, with joy, who leaves the community, the society, the group, the tribe, the nation or that he or she belongs, and first it’s some sort of an instinct that he doesn’t want to understand, goes to a room and writes there. There he explores perhaps first the inner depths of his soul but then comes out with something new which will address to all humanity because the essential idea being that we are all, we have the same kind of minds.  Yes. Yes. I mean probably the possibility of being alone between four walls is the greatest leap forward in the history of civilisation …  Orhan Pamuk: Hoping this belief that in your loneliness you’re writing something but then there is a secret or unexpressed belief that it will address the hearts of the other readers, that is a strong belief in humanity.  Yes, I think you can see in Montaigne, you have this idea /- – -/ when he has a friend, you know, de La Boetie, and …  Orhan Pamuk: He wrote very well about friendship.  Yes, when the friend dies he has to find someone else and that is eventually the reader.  Orhan Pamuk: I see, I agree yes.  That’s how it happens, and this has to be an anonymous reader, it’s very important, because earlier everybody writes for people they know, they have an addressee that is known that is socially close so to speak, but from this moment on it’s anybody.  Orhan Pamuk: Yes, and modernity was invented with this idea that we are not, yes, we are not writing for one particular person, but then we’re addressing a sort of an other non-existent in a room, but with a non-existent readership.  And the book is calling forth someone who would be this person, able to understand.  Orhan Pamuk: I have all my life played around with the idea of the reader looking over my text over my shoulder, sometimes talking with them, which upset my readers sometimes, sometimes openly addressing them, sometimes playing around with their expectation, sometimes pulling the reader into the story, sometimes also introducing myself or a person who is very like me as also, figures who talk with the reader …  You use your own name.  Orhan Pamuk: Yes, I use them, then obviously they are characters who are very close to me, maybe someone, a fictional realistic portrait of me.  But not quite you yet.  Orhan Pamuk: Yes, yes. We have to be elusive to continue in this art of fiction, we should never give up everything, but we should continue to give up something from the inner depths of our spirit, from our heart. I believe the power of fiction comes from also, not only from that, but of course also from frankness, from honesty, from telling the truth which your friends suspect that you will never tell, be not politically but spiritually brave and believe that at one part, a student, a person like you, a person who maybe 30 years, 40 years younger but who may experience the same thing either in your country or in another corner of the world, will share the sentiments, these little details that you would think that’s only personal and should be neglected, will address the hearts of every reader. |
| Q39 | Yes, on the other hand one has to ask oneself at some point whether this possibility of sharing is universal, I mean you deny the clash of civilisation, right, and of course what you show in your writing is how things go around and return from unexpected directions and things that you believed to be foreign are actually very close to yourself, and vice versa. On the other hand I as a western reader, a Nordic reader, have to ask myself if there is something in your books that you believe is difficult for a northerner or a westerner to understand. Let me point to one rather peculiar detail in one of your books, in *Istanbul*, when you speak about some famous travel logs written by French poets in the 19th century, Gérard de Nerval, *Voyage en Orient.* I’ve read that book, it’s a marvellous book, I mean it’s a marvellous description of what he calls Constantinople, at the beginning of his visit to Constantinople he gets out to look at the Sultan, you know, and you have picked this up, and the Sultan is leaving his carriage and Nerval believes that he meets the eye of the Sultan, do you remember that? |
|  | Yes.  And he feels such pity for the Sultan and it’s almost a spontaneous brotherhood that emerges between these two men in a matter of seconds, you know, when he thinks through what must be this man’s existence with his slave women and all that sort of thing, but you deny the possibility of Nerval catching the Sultan’s eye and I must ask myself why, and is that not a way of telling us that …  Orhan Pamuk: I think that …  … no you don’t quite understand.  Orhan Pamuk: … the detail that comes across other travel books as well, that everyone go to this Friday the Sultan is going around and you can see him only on Fridays, and they’ll go there and they’ll say “oh we came eye to eye and we had a little sort of a spiritual one moment understanding” which I thought was a …  So it’s sort of a cliché …  Orhan Pamuk: I thought it was a bit of a cliché, and then of course there were most of these in mid 19th century French visitors are writing for the newspapers, for your /- – -/ now, and then you have to be, you know, it’s like “a reporter came face to face with the Sultan and they had a moment of understanding” which is good, yes, which is good, but also on the other hand there is this very western idea that, not Muslim or Eastern, that you come an eye to an eye and then, in those days he has also passages like that, then our story teller meets a reporter or a novelist or a Gérard de Nerval or a traveller, begins to put himself in the shoes of this other person …  That’s exactly what it is.  … that it’s very interesting to understand the other.  Orhan Pamuk: … which is a great invention, which is the beginnings of the art of the novel. I strongly believe that what makes the art of the novel continue with all its glory is that it is about compassion, understanding others, people who are not like us, it is about the human beings desire to put itself, himself, herself in the place of the other that’s strange, even as strange as the Ottoman Sultan, and he wants to understand this person, that is the beginning of putting a frame into the world and thinking that we can understand each other, that it’s very interesting to understand the other. We read novels thinking that here is a representation of an other, say a man is writing about a woman, Gérard de Nerval is writing about the Ottoman Sultan, very different entities, but we enjoy a novel not believing that here is a woman speaking, we enjoy a novel here is Tolstoy imagining a woman, adulterous woman and we know that this is … we also know that we never lose that this is written by a man who is not in the same shoes, but the interesting thing as we read a novel and we …  We will …  Orhan Pamuk: … we think that Flaubert is doing his best to identify with Madame Bovary, and then we follow the novel both … It’s not a one to one representation of a woman but a man’s attempt to understand the other.  So if we judge Nerval as a reporter we must say he was wrong, but if we look at him as a writer he was right.  Orhan Pamuk: As a reporter he was using the regular clichés, but as an artist he was developing, he has such a nature of inborn storyteller, injects the story and injects a situation.  Because it is a very good story.  Orhan Pamuk: He had, he managed to identify with the Sultan like that.  Well, I have no further questions as they say in the courts.  Orhan Pamuk: Thank you, it was a pleasant conversation. |
| ID | 0920 |
| Biographical | *Harold Pinter did not submit an autobiography.* |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0920  – Hello. Good morning.  – Good morning, good morning, Mr Pinter. Congratulations. I’m calling from the official website of the Nobel Foundation.  – Yes. Well, thank you very much.  – It’s fantastic news for us here; and I would like to hear what your thoughts were when you received the news.  – Well, I’ve … I’ve been absolutely speechless. I am … I’m overwhelmed by the news, very deeply moved by the news. But I can’t really articulate what I feel.  – You didn’t have any idea it could come your way, did you?  – No idea whatsoever! No. So I’m just bowled over.  – There’s so much to talk about. But I would like just to ask you what, in your career, you think has been the most important, what has the most …  – I cannot answer … I can’t answer these questions.  – No, I understand.  – There’s nothing more I can say, except that I am deeply moved; and, as I say, I have no words at the moment. I shall have words by the time I get to Stockholm.  – You will be coming to Stockholm?  – Oh, yes.  – Okay. Thank you, Sir.  – Okay?  – Thank you.  – Thank you very much.  – Thank you. |
| Interview |  |
|  |  |
| ID | 0921 |
| Biographical | *Elfriede Jelinek did not submit an autobiography.* |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0921  The phone is constantly ringing in the middle class area in Vienna where Elfriede Jelinek lives, but there is no invasion of journalists. Jelinek does not like showing herself and is left alone. But she was astonished when she received the phone call about the Prize.  – At 12:30 I got a call from the Secretary of the Swedish Academy. He personally informed me about the decision in German. It felt like having a black hole in my head – and it still does.  Elfriede Jelinek is an amiable but frail person who lives in seclusion. She has more or less withdrawn from public appearances and will not be coming to Stockholm to personally accept the Prize.  – I would gladly do it but I am suffering from social phobia. I cannot manage being in a crowd of people. I cannot stand public attention, I just can’t. Of course, if I may I might write something instead.  She had a difficult childhood, both her parents were ill, and for sometime now she has been critical of Austrian society.  – The government has once again made the right socially acceptable. That was when I finally parted ways with Austria. I forbade them to perform my plays in the state theaters, and I took all of them back because it does not give anything.  She is no longer a Marxist but definitely describes herself as a left-wing feminist.  – I do not fight against men, but against the system that is sexist. The system that judges the worth of women, the system that judges a woman’s worth through her youthful body and looks and not for what she does. Men are defined through what they do, women through their looks.  She is both a dramatist and prose writer, but above all a writer who experiments and breaks borders.  – My plays are made up of long monologues, which is similar to prose working with the language. If I have to describe my literature, then it can be likened to a musical or compositional work with the language. The problem is that it is difficult to translate. In that sense, I am a provincial writer … |
| Interview |  |
| Q1 | Why did you become a writer? Who inspired you? |
|  | As is said about most writers: on the one hand all I ever did from when I was a child was read, and I was a loner, which was furthered by my parents and my upbringing. On the other hand, the more I read, the more I felt this well-known fissure between me and the world. That started very early on, and then I guess I tried to close up this fissure with something that was accessible to me, and all I had was writing. My inspiration came especially in the 1950s through the Vienna Group founded by writer H.C. Artmann. It showed me that if you want to say something, you have to let the language itself say it, because language is usually more meaningful than the mere content that one wishes to convey. My training in music and composition then led me to a kind of musical language process in which, for example, the sound of the words I play with has to expose their true meaning against their will so to speak. |
| Q20 | Some time has now passed since the announcement that you have been awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature for 2004. Do you think this will affect your future writing? |
|  | I have the feeling it will influence my future writing to the extent that without any material worries I could develop a greater ease, even lightheartedness, in my writing. That might be good for my language process, which as I said tends to be compositional. It could draw from a greater reservoir of freedom. The irony could develop an even greater ease. |
| Q5 | What role has Internet had for you as a writer? |
|  | Internet is exemplary for me. I do not want to have the feeling of writing “for eternity,” so to speak. The fleetingness of the Internet has therefore become very attractive to me. At some point I set up a heading on my homepage called *“Notizen,”* or “Notes,” in which I try to capture the fleetingness of jotting things down, similar to emails, which on the one hand acknowledges current events but on the other hand is not carved in stone. Instead it is more like something you write in wet sand with your finger. You can remove it at any time, whereas a book is more an object that “remains,” as it were, something you hold in your hand. |
| Q29 | In your opinion what is the most pressing social issue in Western society today? |
|  | That is very difficult to answer. I think isolation is one of the greatest problems, an ever-growing obstacle to political solidarity. In the past we would’ve said: to the development of class consciousness. The petty-bourgeoisification of society, with its hopes of climbing socially and its apprehension that a fall could come at any moment (there are no “jobs for life” anymore; everyone is at risk; jobs are becoming increasingly insecure; each individual’s survival is becoming more and more precarious, yet this doesn’t seem to lead to greater solidarity with others in a similar situation) – this all seems very dangerous to me. Eroding solidarity paradoxically makes a society more susceptible to the construction of substitute collectives and fascisms of all kinds. |
| Q4 | As a Nobel Laureate you will have the opportunity to nominate for the Nobel Literature Prize in the future. What kind of literature would you like to see awarded a Nobel Prize? |
|  | Literature that keeps employing new linguistic and formal modes of expression to draft a panorama of society as a whole while at the same time exposing it, tearing the masks from its face – for me that would be deserving of an award. |
| ID | 0922 |
| Biographical | John Maxwell Coetzee was born in Cape Town, South Africa, on 9 February 1940, the elder of two children. His mother was a primary school teacher. His father was trained as an attorney, but practiced as such only intermittently; during the years 1941–45 he served with the South African forces in North Africa and Italy. Though Coetzee’s parents were not of British descent, the language spoken at home was English.  Coetzee received his primary schooling in Cape Town and in the nearby town of Worcester. For his secondary education he attended a school in Cape Town run by a Catholic order, the Marist Brothers. He matriculated in 1956.  Coetzee entered the University of Cape Town in 1957, and in 1960 and 1961 graduated successively with honours degrees in English and mathematics. He spent the years 1962–65 in England, working as a computer programmer while doing research for a thesis on the English novelist Ford Madox Ford.  In 1963 he married Philippa Jubber (1939–1991). They had two children, Nicolas (1966–1989) and Gisela (b. 1968).  In 1965 Coetzee entered the graduate school of the University of Texas at Austin, and in 1968 graduated with a PhD in English, linguistics, and Germanic languages. His doctoral dissertation was on the early fiction of [Samuel Beckett](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1969/index.html).  For three years (1968–71) Coetzee was assistant professor of English at the State University of New York in Buffalo. After an application for permanent residence in the United States was denied, he returned to South Africa. From 1972 until 2000 he held a series of positions at the University of Cape Town, the last of them as Distinguished Professor of Literature.  Between 1984 and 2003 he also taught frequently in the United States: at the State University of New York, Johns Hopkins University, Harvard University, Stanford University, and the University of Chicago, where for six years he was a member of the Committee on Social Thought.  Coetzee began writing fiction in 1969. His first book, *Dusklands*, was published in South Africa in 1974. *In the Heart of the Country* (1977) won South Africa’s then principal literary award, the CNA Prize, and was published in Britain and the USA. *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980) received international notice. His reputation was confirmed by *Life & Times of Michael K* (1983), which won Britain’s Booker Prize. It was followed by *Foe* (1986), *Age of Iron* (1990), *The Master of Petersburg* (1994), and *Disgrace* (1999), which again won the Booker Prize.  Coetzee also wrote two fictionalized memoirs, *Boyhood* (1997) and *Youth* (2002). *The Lives of Animals* (1999) is a fictionalized lecture, later absorbed into *Elizabeth Costello* (2003). *White Writing* (1988) is a set of essays on South African literature and culture. *Doubling the Point* (1992) consists of essays and interviews with David Attwell. *Giving Offense* (1996) is a study of literary censorship. *Stranger Shores* (2001) collects his later literary essays.  Coetzee has also been active as a translator of Dutch and Afrikaans literature.  In 2002 Coetzee emigrated to Australia. He lives with his partner Dorothy Driver in Adelaide, South Australia, where he holds an honorary position at the University of Adelaide. |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0922 |
| Interview |  |
|  |  |
| ID | 0923 |
| Biographical | Imre Kertész was born in Budapest on November 9, 1929. Of Jewish descent, in 1944 he was deported to Auschwitz and from there to Buchenwald, where he was liberated in 1945. On his return to Hungary he worked for a Budapest newspaper, *Világosság*, but was dismissed in 1951 when it adopted the Communist party line. After two years of military service he began supporting himself as an independent writer and translator of German-language authors such as Nietzsche, Hofmannsthal, Schnitzler, Freud, Roth, Wittgenstein, and [Canetti](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1981/index.html), who have all had a significant influence on his own writing.  Kertész’s first novel, *Sorstalanság* (Eng. *Fateless*, 1992; see *WLT* 67:4, p. 863), a work based on his experiences in Auschwitz and Buchenwald, was published in 1975. “When I am thinking about a new novel, I always think of Auschwitz,” he has said. This does not mean, however, that *Sorstalanság* is autobiographical in any simple sense: Kertész says himself that he has used the form of the autobiographical novel but that it is not autobiography. Sorstalanság was initially rejected for publication. When published eventually in 1975, it was received with compact silence. Kertész has written about this experience in *A kudarc* (1988; *Fiasco*). This novel is normally regarded as the second volume in a trilogy that begins with *Sorstalanság* and concludes with *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért* (1990; Eng. *Kaddish for a Child Not Born*, 1997; see *WLT* 74:1, p. 205), in a title that refers to the Jewish prayer for the dead. In *Kaddis a meg nem született gyermekért*, the protagonist of *Sorstalanság* and *A kudarc*, György Köves, reappears. His Kaddish is said for the child he refuses to beget in a world that permitted the existence of Auschwitz. Other prose works are *A nyomkereső* (1977; *The pathfinder*) and *Az angol lobogó* (1991; *The English flag*; see *WLT* 67:2, p. 412).  *Gályanapló* (*Galley diary*; see WLT 67:2, p. 412), a diary in fictional form that covers the years 1961-91, was published in 1992. *Valaki más: A változás krónikája* (1997; *I – another: Chronicle of a metamorphosis*), continues this inner monologue in the form of notes made during the years 1991-95. After the political upheavals of 1989, Kertész was able to make more public appearances. His lectures and essays have been collected in *A holocaust mint kultúra* (1993; *The holocaust as culture*), *A gondolatnyi csend, amíg kivegzőoztag újratölt* (1998; *Moments of silence while the execution squad reloads*), and *A száműzött nyelv* (2001; *The exiled language*).  Imre Kertész was awarded the Brandenburger Literaturpreis in 1995, the Leipziger Buchpreis zur Europäischen Verständigung in 1997, the Herder- Preis and the WELT-Literaturpreis in 2000, the Ehrenpreis der Robert-Bosch-Stiftung in 2001, and the Hans Sahl-Preis in 2002. His works have been translated into numerous languages, including German, Spanish, French, English, Czech, Russian, Swedish, and Hebrew.  *Translated by Ivan Sanders*  From [*Les Prix Nobel*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lesprix.html)*. The Nobel Prizes 2002*, Editor Tore Frängsmyr, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 2003  This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and later published in the book series [*Les Prix Nobel/*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lesprix.html)[*Nobel Lectures*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lectures/index.html)*/*[*The Nobel Prizes*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/nobel-prizes.html). The information is sometimes updated with an addendum submitted by the Laureate.  *Imre Kertész died on 31 March 2016.* |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0923 |
| Interview |  |
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| ID | 0924 |
| Biographical | The Nobel Prize for literature has gone to someone who deserves it. Like the great masters of the past, V.S. Naipaul tells stories which show us ourselves and the reality we live in. His use of language is as precise as it is beautiful. Simple, strong words, with which to express the humanity of all of us.  Born in Trinidad in 1932, the descendant of indentured labourers shipped from India, this dispossessed child of the Raj has come on a long and marvellous journey. His upbringing familiarised him with every sort of deprivation, material and cultural. A scholarship to Oxford brought him to this country. Nothing sustained him afterwards except the determination, often close to despair, to become a writer. Against all likelihood, a spirit of pure comedy flows through his early books. It is a saving grace.  Footloose, he began to travel for long periods in India and Africa. It was at a time of decolonisation, when so many people the whole world over had to reassess their identity. Naipaul saw for himself the resulting turmoil of emotions, that collision of self-serving myth and guilt which make up today’s bewildered world and prevents people from coming to terms with who they really are, and to know how to treat one another. On these travels he was exploring nothing less than the meaning of culture and history.  Victimhood might have been his central theme, granted his background. Not at all. That same determination to be a writer also liberated him from self-pity. Each one of us, his books declare, can choose to be a free individual. It is a matter of will and choice, and above all intellect. Critics have sometimes argued that people – in the Third World especially – are trapped in their culture and history without possibility of choice, and can only be free if others make them so. To them, V.S. Naipaul’s vision that they have to take responsibility for themselves can seem like some sort of First World privilege, and a conservative philosophy at that.  Quite the contrary: the absolute rejection of victimhood is necessary if we are to meet as we must on an equal footing, and it is no exaggeration to say that he has shifted public opinion towards this understanding as no other writer has done. Courage and persistence were required to hold a belief quite so unfashionable in recent years, but it is this belief that has made Naipaul the universal writer and humanist that he is.  The comic spirit is still present, though submerged in his later books beneath a darkening sense of tragedy. Naipaul has written about slavery, revolution, guerrillas, corrupt politicians, the poor and the oppressed, interpreting the rages so deeply rooted in our societies. Long before others, he began to report on the irrational frenzy loosed these past two decades by religion in the Islamic world from Iran to Indonesia and Pakistan. This phenomenon too was a retreat from history into self-serving myth. Self-pity possesses Islamic fundamentalists so absolutely that they are able to close out everything else. Yet Naipaul also observed with profound insight that even the most fanaticised among them know that the West will always be there setting the objective standards, and that they can do nothing about that. They are to be pitied for rage so helpless.  In himself, Naipaul is a private man, who lives in the country in order to have the solitude for thinking and writing. Everything that has ever happened to him is pigeonholed with exactitude in his memory. Formidably well-read, he can quote books he read years ago, and all the conversations he has had. Melancholy grips him at the spectacle of “the steady grinding down of the old world” as he put it, and he might complain to an interviewer that he is living in a “plebeian culture that celebrates itself.”  Other writers born abroad have settled here and enriched our literature, but there has never been one like Naipaul. His personal story is moving; his achievement extraordinary. There is a great moral to his life’s work, that the human comedy will come out all right because, when all is said and done, intellect is more powerful than vicissitude and wickedness.  *The writer is the author of “The Closed Circle: An Interpretation of the Arabs”.* **Who’s Who 2000 Entry** NAIPAUL, Sir Vidiadhar Surajprasad, (Sir Vidia), Kt 1990; author; b. 17 August 1932; m. 1st, 1955, Patricia Ann Hale (d. 1996); 2nd, 1996, Nadira Khannum Alvi. *Educ:* Queen’s Royal Coll., Trinidad; University Coll., Oxford (Hon. Fellow 1983). Hon. Dr Letters Columbia Univ., NY, 1981; Hon. LittD. Cambridge, 1983; London, 1988; Oxford, 1992. British Literature Prize, 1993. *Publications:* The Middle Passage, 1962; An Area of Darkness, 1964; The Loss of El Dorado, 1969; The Overcrowded Barracoon, and other articles, 1972; India: a wounded civilisation, 1977; The Return of Eva Peron, 1980; Among the Believers, 1981; Finding the Centre, 1984; A Turn in the South, 1989; India: a million mutinies now, 1990; Beyond Belief: Islamic Excursions, 1998; Letters, 1999; *novels:* The Mystic Masseur, 1957; (John Llewelyn Rhys Memorial Prize, 1958); The Suffrage of Elvira, 1958; Miguel Street, 1959; (Somerset Maugham Award, 1961); A House for Mr Biswas, 1961; Mr Stone and the Knights Companion, 1963, (Hawthornden Prize, 1964); The Mimic Men, 1967 (W.H. Smith Award 1968); A Flag on the Island, 1967; In a Free State, 1971 (Booker Prize, 1971); Guerrillas, 1975; A Bend in the River, 1979; The Enigma of Arrival, 1987; A Way in the World, 1994. *Address:* c/o Gillon Aitken Associates Ltd, 29 Fernshaw Road, London SW10 OTG, UK.  From [*Les Prix Nobel*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lesprix.html)*. The Nobel Prizes 2001*, Editor Tore Frängsmyr, [Nobel Foundation], Stockholm, 2002  This autobiography/biography was written at the time of the award and later published in the book series [*Les Prix Nobel/*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lesprix.html)[*Nobel Lectures*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/lectures/index.html)*/*[*The Nobel Prizes*](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_organizations/nobelfoundation/publications/nobel-prizes.html). The information is sometimes updated with an addendum submitted by the Laureate.  *V. S. Naipaul died on 11 August 2018.* |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0924 |
| Interview |  |
| Q6 | Nobel Laureate in Literature of the year 2001. Sir Vidia, if you try to think back to your beginnings as a writer, when you were a young man, and hadn’t yet published anything, what was your idea of the kind of writer you wanted to begin with being? What kind of literature did you want to produce? Into what tradition, if I may say so, did you wish to insert yourself in those days? |
|  | Actually it was, it couldn’t be that kind of question that one had to answer. One’s wish was to learn to write. You know, I could write school essays, I could do university writing, but to become a writer was another matter. The writing had to have another kind of internal life and spring and tension, so I had to learn. And the great, great problem for me, just beginning, was to find out what kind of person I was. Now, this is not pretentious. I began when I was about 17, much influenced by Evelyn Waugh, I began writing a farce, set in Trinidad, and I worked at that for two years. Now, nothing happened to that. I was heartbroken, but not disappointed. The value of that to me was that I learned how to take a book to the end. I learned distance in writing. But the farce was not suited to me.  Still, if I may interrupt you, in the short stories of *Miguel Street*, there seems to be farcical elements in your writing.  I spent a long time working at something much more serious, much more sombre.  V. S. Naipaul: When I became secure, when I became secure, because after that farcical Evelyn Waugh-like book, I spent a long time working at something much more serious, much more sombre. And I sent that to … I was doing a BBC programme, editing it, once a week, and a literary person came to do something on the programme, and I asked him to look, look at what I was doing, and he replied very promptly, saying please abandon this. This was a serious book.  So, out of these two rejections the farce and then this very sombre later book, these two failures, I arrived one day in my mind quite miraculously at this other tone in *Miguel Street*, which you just mentioned. And I’ve thought about the origin of that, and I believe it has a base in Spanish picaresque writing. I believe it derives from Lazarillo de Tormes, one aspect, one aspect. That was a book I studied in the sixth form before going to Oxford, and when I was in Oxford, and out of this wish to be a writer, not knowing what to write about, one of the things I did was to translate the Lazarillo for my own benefit. I sent it to the editor of the Penguin Classics and, oh no, I asked him whether he’d like me to translate it and he didn’t think it was a classic. So nothing happened to that, but it was with me for a long time, and I think the tone was still with me. I can still, as it were, give you the rhythm and the language of the Lazarillo. Well, first of all, you must know that my name is so-and-so, and I was the son of so-and-so, and I was born on the River Tormes, it came about in this way. So I know the rhythm of that kind of thing. Yes, so that’s where it began really. |
|  | And once you arrive at *A House for Mr Biswas* things are very different in your writing. Why was that? |
| Q39 | And once you arrive at *A House for Mr Biswas* things are very different in your writing. Why was that? |
|  | It was a great … this early writing, which was full of jokes, and it … those jokes were a form of hysteria, and the hysteria had to do with my own uncertainty, in every way. Uncertainty about myself, uncertainty about my writing, my family life, the whole thing. And when people are so uncertain they can make a lot of jokes like that.  Protecting oneself.  V. S. Naipaul: Yes. It is the response, really, it’s the way you deal with it. And when a bit of certainty came in, with the writing, then I found other aspects of my personality now, without striving for them, entering the writing, and it was in that book. You are quite right, that fourth book was where another personality emerged which had been dragged out by labour, by literary labour.  And this book made you famous, is that right?  V. S. Naipaul: Not immediately. I’ll tell you what it did. It took a long time to get started as a piece of writing, and I think it took about seven or eight months to feel that it was a real book. And then it became grander and grander in my mind, and for the first time I felt I was a writer.  … and for the first time I felt I was a writer.  I used to walk the streets feeling very confident and I told someone that if, at that stage, someone had said to me, now, I’ll give you a million pounds, but on this condition, that you stop writing, I would have said no. It gave that confidence. So that was one of the great effects of it. It gave confidence in the handling of language. I told you I had to learn to write. Now, I haven’t told you that it was a deliberate learning. I forgot everything I knew when I was beginning to learn to write, and I did this thing about writing one sentence after another, adding one bit of meaning to another bit of meaning. And probably it became stilted. In this fourth book, the one you mentioned, I could let the sentences become longer, I could let there be subordinate clauses. I was very much aware of that feeling, I was confident enough to do that. |
| Q43 | And also it seems that you’ve won confidence in the form of the novel with that book, because it is a grand novel, on the scale of the Victorian novels that we know of the 19th century. I think of it personally as one of the very few examples in the 20th century of the truly successful novel, in the classical sense. Where did you learn the craft of the novel? Who were your models, if you had any? |
|  | I had none. The learning came with what I had done before. That prentice work, those first three books, *Miguel Street*, *The Masseur*, another comic book, that, and the beginning of Mr Biswas, that was where I learned it. I learned it by the writing.  And the fact that you arrived in Mr Biswas as a novel on the grand scale, it came naturally out of the material, you mean?  V. S. Naipaul: Yes, and it began in a rather stilted way. So I wasn’t prepared for what happened. And again and again in my writing and in my literary life it comes with this idea of surprise, I’m taken by surprise. Things happen and I don’t know why. My original idea for that book, the fourth book, which you say is very big and successful, was very schematic. I thought I would have a man dying. My father had died in 1952 so that would be an element in that. And he’d be surrounded by a few simple pieces of furniture. Again, this would echo something in our past. And I thought he would tell the story, or the writer would tell the story, of the various pieces of furniture. I think by the time I got to writing the book, the schematic thing was abandoned. But I needed that to feel I knew where I was going. But I learned it myself. And what I was doing in that book, the big fourth book, everything was visual. There was a picture in every paragraph, and every sentence as I wished, every sentence adds, adds, adds. So the book is very fast and very pictorial. It was because I had had to learn for myself, really. |
| Q44 | Later on you wrote other novels, but gradually you came to move away from the novel in the classical sense. To me, this process begins already with *The Loss of El Dorado*, which is a book that resembles nothing else. I can think of very few parallels to that book. I mean, it’s not a piece of history in the ordinary sense, it’s not a novel, it’s not a fantasy, it’s documentary in a sense, but it has the atmosphere of a piece of fiction without being one. How did you find that form? |
|  | Well, it came naturally because I was asked to do this book about a city, so I chose Port of Spain. And then I found that there were not the, the material was not available. So I had, living in London, to go to the sources. And of course I’m not an historian, not an academic historian. I look for the people, I look for the stories, and I wrote it in my own way, so the labour was quite immense. To write a paragraph of narrative, seemingly simple narrative, I probably had consulted about 20 documents. So every little detail about the commissioner’s wife, churning butter, thinking it was as good as Cambridge butter, little details, everything had been arrived at through the documents. And I was not interested in the other kind of history, only this human history. And I paid a bitter price for it.  In what sense?  V. S. Naipaul: No-one was interested in it. It’s very hard to imagine now, but 69 years ago that kind of work about the New World, and this place in the New World, from which I had come, it was not considered a good way of writing history, and the area itself was not considered important. It’s a singular way of looking at the world, but it existed in those days. I remember the man who wrote for The Times, he actually was a friend of mine, disliking the book, and saying I should have written a pamphlet. You know?  I’m glad you didn’t, though.  V. S. Naipaul: I’m glad I didn’t. So I paid a price, the American publisher who commissioned it didn’t pay for it, so I had to look around for another publisher. So I got very little money for two years’ hard labour. Anyway, there we are, that’s the story of that. And again, it was a writer working in his own way, and not knowing he was doing anything original. It just seemed natural. |
| Q44 | But you came to discover that you had landed upon a new way of writing, a new method in this book, because later when you reflect on, for instance, when you found the name Chaguanas in the archives you had become aware that there was something in fiction that didn’t quite suit your needs, and that you had to develop a form that was more tied to factual details, and to the actual utterings of people that you had met. And let me recall another thing you said, just the other week, at the press conference when you arrived in Stockholm, and someone asked you your opinion of Stendhal, and it so happened that you had just re-read his two major novels, and become violently disappointed with them, having been an ardent admirer of Stendhal. This must mean that to you the novel, after all, is a form of some importance and that makes high demands on its writer, and perhaps even a very gifted man like Stendhal was not able to answer to that demand. |
|  | He couldn’t do it, he couldn’t do it. He had intelligence, he had a lot of social experience, he had the wish to be a writer, but there was something where the inspiration dried up very soon. And he couldn’t take you along, possibly because actually he probably had lived too full a life. Probably had found fulfilment in real life, whereas I think writers probably have to live more seriously in this other world, the world they create. I think it’s possible.  The parallel you made then was with Flaubert who lived in his country house without any life at all. It’s throughout long stretches of his life with only the rats for company, and some old ladies who sat with his mother on the ground floor. But where do you come in yourself in this, I mean, are you, do you feel yourself to be primarily a novelist? Personally, although I praised in my speech at the Concert House, your travel books and your non-fiction, I feel that maybe you are at heart a man of the imagination, because everything you write, even if it is based on factual details, seems to be, how shall I say, there is an all-pervasive vision that colours it and that melts it into something different, transforms experience into, well, literature. We don’t have to call it novel but it is definitely literature.  … one is so much seeking to understand the world through their eyes.  V. S. Naipaul: Well, they are almost works of the imagination. Although shall we say with the travel books, bad word, the books of enquiry, you know, on certain movements, one is so much looking for people. One is so much looking, one is so much seeking to understand the world through their eyes, these people who are quite different from me, and I’m interested in them, the way I’m interested in all people, and I try to present the world through their eyes, so inevitably, as you’ve just said, it does become a work of the imagination. It’s actually my writing imagination, observing and dealing with their experience.  Your style, that is a much discussed phenomenon. I even heard someone who had computed the average number of letters in a word in your texts and that should be four, I think, if I remember right. That may very well be correct. It’s obvious that to any reader the style strikes one as transparent and very clear, I think Coetzee said in an article recently that it’s cool and clean like a knife. And how do you arrive at that style? Is it something that comes naturally, or do you arrive at it by elimination, by crossing out words, removing unnecessary adjectives, and so on?  V. S. Naipaul: Well, it begins with what I said earlier about how I learned to write, when I try to get every sentence to say something. And I think that’s become a habit. I no longer think I’m doing it but that is the habit of writing. So the writing moves very fast. And then I do have to get everything I want to say into the sentences. I must be careful not in my speed to leave things out.  I made a speech, a two-minute speech, at the banquet, the awards banquet. I give you my word, that was written three times, there were three drafts for it. One draft, then typed out, that corrected, then corrected yet again, so as to get it all. And one aspect was to get the spoken language, to get it, the quality of speech in it, and the other thing was to, as it were, to get, well, I was talking with a watch, my watchstrap was broken, and I wanted to make a little story about this for the dinner. And I wondered about the symbolism, and I’d talk about various people in the past who looked for portents, and then I said well, yes, because I was coming to the ceremony, that it was OK, that’s what it meant, that time was going to stop and then time was going to become new. And so the watch then had become benign again. Now I had to, that came in about the third version, the watch was benign again. And it was telling me that my time was running out, and I had, I forgot to put in the first draft, it was telling me without threat that my time was running out. You know, that is, these are the little things I do. I hope, I’m sorry to give it in this little fine detail, but this is …  It’s most useful, I think, for the listener.  V. S. Naipaul: This is how the writing is done. What I don’t do, I don’t rewrite whole areas to make it fit. I write as I go along. There must be that progressive discovery.  That puts me in mind of the quotation from Proust that you used in your Nobel Lecture, with this melody that exists somewhere in the head, and you had to get down all the notes. And sometimes you miss a few, and then you have to return to …  V. S. Naipaul: You have to return and get the other notes …  … get the additional notes until they are all there and you sing the melody like it was meant. Well, that makes sense, somehow.  V. S. Naipaul: But it’s not done self consciously. It’s not done for effect at all. It’s done, in fact, not to be noticed.  Yes, and I mean when the melody’s there nobody sings what went before.  V. S. Naipaul: Exactly. |
| Q44 | I think that if you look at your writing as a whole, there are at least to me two books that tower over the landscape, one we have already mentioned, *A House for Mr Biswas*, the other one being *The Enigma of Arrival*, which to me is one of the true masterpieces of contemporary literature, and an amazingly difficult book to describe. One doesn’t know quite what it is. Did that also just evolve? |
|  | It just came to me to write it like that. It just absolutely came to me to write it with this outer autobiographical crust, about the man being a writer, and how out of this wish to be a writer, and out of social ignorance, he is still looking only for what he’s read, and when he comes to England, and missing the great stories around him in 1950, which England was full of, still, you know, the post-war refugees, the displaced persons they were called, I missed all of that, or the writer missed all of that, and was looking for what he had read in books, and at last the narrative, the outer narrative is he finds, he stumbles on his material, which is his own background, his past, the Empire, it gets ever bigger, and final irony, he comes to rest in the manner created by an Imperial fortune, which is now in decay. So the outer part was …  But this decay also, in a way, makes room for him.  V. S. Naipaul: It makes room for him, yes.  Which otherwise wouldn’t have been there.  V. S. Naipaul: Exactly, exactly. And he’s aware of that, and he’s grateful for it. Yes, it makes room for him.  And to a certain extent identifies himself, I think …  V. S. Naipaul: With the decay.  And also with his aristocrat he sees across the lawn. At least, there is a sympathy.  V. S. Naipaul: Yes, there is a sympathy. But I suppose if the writer in that book had got to know the aristocrat, had got to understand his limitations, had got to understand the boastfulness …  It’s like when Proust finally made his way into St Germain and discovered that the wonderful conversations that he had dreamed of didn’t exist, they were talking nonsense. It was as superficial as you could ever imagine.  V. S. Naipaul: But if I, if the writer had met the landlord figure, then probably he couldn’t have written that book. It’s better for the landlord to be vague, in the background. And I was very much aware when I was writing that, the word ‘landlord’ comes from *Wuthering Heights*. *Wuthering Heights* is written in the first person, an unimportant person tells the story, and he just says I’ve just visited, or had a visit from, my landlord. And it was Mr Heathcliff, you know, who was the landlord. And that word, just used it there, but English, if you use the language, I’m afraid it’s full of these little echoes and verbal borrowings and things like that.  Every literary language is a kind of a churchyard.  V. S. Naipaul: Absolutely.  Other writers buried beneath.  V. S. Naipaul: Yes, good way, good way of saying it, yes. |
| Q44 | However, if you look at the title of that book, *The Enigma of Arrival*, it first puzzles the reader, but after a while you come to a chapter where the whole thing is explained, it goes back to a painting or, to be exact, a reproduction of a painting by de Chirico, and you make a sort of reading or interpretation of that painting and you tell a little story, and that is the enigma of arrival. Well, that story I personally find to be completely amazing. It so fascinated me when I read it, and also the fact that you make practically no use of that story in the book. It is just there, isolated. But still it radiates a sort of energy into everything else in that book. And I have to ask you, how you came to this fantasy, because it isn’t really in the picture. This is something that you have found. |
|  | Ah well, I suppose it, in the de Chirico painting there is a sail, and the people, it is a quayside, if we can describe it, it’s very hard to describe it, nothing is strictly real. It’s a quayside and there’s half of a mast of an old fashioned sailing vessel, probably an old fashioned galley, and the figures look classical, so my thoughts go back to the classical world. It’s always interested me, the way the ships stayed close to the coast.  You think of Ostia, or something like that.  V. S. Naipaul: Something like that, yes. And then I thought of all the food and how it would have travelled, so it came like that, it came like that. And probably there might have been some element of a dream …  Yes, that’s what I was going to suggest.  V. S. Naipaul: … there would have been a …  There is a dreamlike quality to the tail. This way of losing one’s self. You have a goal in a dream but you never reach it, you know, you’re always diverted. Endlessly.  V. S. Naipaul: In that little story you liked, the man gets off the ship, he comes to the strange classical world, he has adventures and then he’s got to run away again because they become nasty adventures. And he …  Yes, that’s interesting. And how do they get nasty? Well, he becomes involved in some sort of religious procession, or ceremony, and suddenly you realise that he is going to be the victim. And that’s interesting because I think here we strike at a deep almost anthropological fantasy that has a real content, what one anthropologist has described as the original system of our culture, human sacrifice, which kept the community together by directing the evil energies to one particular person that was thrown out of the community and became a victim, was emulated and later sanctified, and transferred to God. I mean, you find this mechanism in all religions if you go far back. And I think there is a remnant of this in everybody’s psychology, especially people who, like writers, become a bit isolated in society, and are faced with groups into which they are never quite integrated.  V. S. Naipaul: I think you’re probably right.  They always fear that they’re going to turn into lynch mobs so it’s a potential in every group and congregation you meet, that they will discover the victim in you. That’s, I mean, I’m not taking this out of your writing because that’s a personal feeling that I have myself, and I was very touched by that when I read it, when I came to this detail in your dream, or your interpretation of it. But that’s the way it has to end, suddenly you realise that this place that seems so full of promise is actually a place where people are going to sacrifice you. And you have to get away.  V. S. Naipaul: But when he gets back to the quay, there is no sail. There is no ship. And it’s rather frightening.  Yes, it’s very frightening, because it means that his life is over.  V. S. Naipaul: Yes. And you, just this second, what I say is really quite true, things occur to be only when things are talked about. There is an echo of that in a book I wrote about Africa, four years later, *A Bend in the River*. It occurs right at the end, when the African boy, who is serving a dictator like Mobutu has cooked up a plan to kill Mobutu, has that dream, he says I have a dream, and how are we going to go, are we going to go in one car, or are we going to go in two cars? So, with the man who is going to be killed, would he be with the rest of us? Would we be able to talk with him, or … so it occurs again. It’s the same story. It’s the same story, and …  And it’s equally frightening.  V. S. Naipaul: … it’s equally frightening. Equally frightening. Yes, equally frightening.  And this, I think, is the basic element of epics, you know, that this possibility always exists. That you can always be the victim, unsuspecting, and you suddenly find yourself confronted with this, this mob that is going to destroy you.  V. S. Naipaul: Well, you know, that it’s your analysis and you know, I actually accept it.  I think it’s just a situation of literature, in a sense, too, and I mean, we’ve seen tragic examples of that over the last decades in various parts of the world. And whenever someone raises the voice against literature, like they have sometimes done when criticising your book, I always hear this murmur of the mob.  V. S. Naipaul: The mob. The academic mob.  Yes, it can be an academic mob, or it can be just a …  V. S. Naipaul: Yes.  … a vulgar mob. But it’s there, somewhere. That’s the frightening aspect of …  V. S. Naipaul: But fortunately I have worked in a free society, fortunately. And I have been able to ignore those murmurs and get on with my work. I could easily imagine, though, not being in a free society and really being, as it were, silenced. That’s unbearable. But there we are, there we are. |
| Q24 | Well, one aspect of being a writer, I suppose, is that other people gain control of your myth. But this, in a way, recalls the fact that everyone has to live with that. You have a name, but the name is nothing having lent it, other people have called you by that name, and you don’t pronounce your name, other people do. You know, myself, a couple of years ago, I realised that I was no longer sure how my first name should be pronounced. It’s an English name, it comes from my grandmother, and my father used it with an English pronunciation, just like you do. But living in Sweden all my life, the pronunciation’s gradually been corrupted, and now people in the literary world usually say it in quite a different way, and there are three or four pronunciations of it, and when asked myself which is the correct one, I have no answer. Because I never use the name myself. Then I happened to come upon a passage in the letters that you published the other year, between father and son, which is the letters between yourself and your family, and there in a letter to Kamla, it’s your sister I understand, from 1952, you say like this. Let me quote: ‘Everybody calls me Vidiadhar. Disgusting name, and even I have got into the habit of calling myself that way.’ How do you feel today? |
|  | Well, I was attracted to the long name. Vidiadhar. It is a Sanskrit compound word and it’s very simple. The word vidia has the same root as the word video, to see, from which we get everything, video, vision, everything, vista. So it means the bearer of wisdom. And I cherished it, you see, it was given to me, by my father, and at one time it was my only possession. It was my name as a child, so when it was shortened, I really felt I had debased it a little bit, yes. That was probably what was meant there. But now I have to live with that.  I suppose you have.  V. S. Naipaul: There’s a little question for me. There’s some talk of having a library with my name, and I am wondering what name I should give it. And I would very much like the full name, rather than this easy abbreviation. But I’ve thought about it like that. The name was important to me, and you know, one doesn’t wish to talk too much about things like this in this way, but there was a man I met, in India, who was a fan of my work, and to my great surprise he came to see me last year, an elderly man, of course, and then he turned up in Chicago to a reading I was giving and brought his daughter. He’d given his grandson my name, so this sort of magic was going on. He gave it as a kind of magic. So, it’s magical, magical.  But your comfort must be that whatever people will call you, your books will always retain your full name. That’s how it’s going to be preserved.  V. S. Naipaul: It will be preserved like that, yes, good. |
| ID | 0925 |
| Biographical | Gao Xingjian, born January 4, 1940 in Ganzhou (Jiangxi province) in eastern China, is today a French citizen. Writer of prose, translator, dramatist, director, critic and artist. Gao Xingjian grew up during the aftermath of the Japanese invasion, his father was a bank official and his mother an amateur actress who stimulated the young Gao’s interest in the theatre and writing. He received his basic education in the schools of the People’s Republic and took a degree in French in 1962 at the Department of Foreign Languages in Beijing. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) he was sent to a re-education camp and felt it necessary to burn a suitcase full of manuscripts. Not until 1979 could he publish his work and travel abroad, to France and Italy. During the period 1980-87 he published short stories, essays and dramas in literary magazines in China and also four books: *Premier essai sur les techniques du roman moderne*/*A Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction* (1981) which gave rise to a violent polemic on “modernism”, the narrative *A Pigeon Called Red Beak* (1985), *Collected Plays* (1985) and *In Search of a Modern Form of Dramatic Representation* (1987). Several of his experimental and pioneering plays – inspired in part by Brecht, Artaud and [Beckett](https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1969/index.html) – were produced at the Theatre of Popular Art in Beijing: his theatrical debut with *Signal d’alarme*/*Signal Alarm* (1982) was a tempestuous success, and the absurd drama which established his reputation *Arrêt de bus*/*Bus Stop* (1983) was condemned during the campaign against “intellectual pollution” (described by one eminent member of the party as the most pernicious piece of writing since the foundation of the People’s Republic); *L’Homme sauvage*/*Wild Man* (1985) also gave rise to heated domestic polemic and international attention.  In 1986 *L’autre rive*/*The Other Shore* was banned and since then none of his plays have been performed in China. In order to avoid harassment he undertook a ten-month walking-tour of the forest and mountain regions of Sichuan Province, tracing the course of the Yangzi river from its source to the coast. In 1987 he left China and settled down a year later in Paris as a political refugee. After the massacre on the Square of Heavenly Peace in 1989 he left the Chinese Communist Party. After publication of *La fuite*/*Fugitives*, which takes place against the background of this massacre, he was declared *persona non grata* by the regime and his works were banned. In the summer of 1982, Gao Xingjian had already started working on his prodigious novel *La Montagne de l’Âme*/*Soul Mountain*, in which – by means of an odyssey in time and space through the Chinese countryside – he enacts an individual’s search for roots, inner peace and liberty. This is supplemented by the more autobiographical *Le Livre d’un homme seul*/*One Man’s Bible*.  A number of his works have been translated into various languages, and today several of his plays are being produced in various parts of the world. In Sweden he has been translated and introduced by Göran Malmqvist, and two of his plays (*Summer Rain in Peking*, *Fugitives*) have been performed at the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm.  Gao Xingjian paints in ink and has had some thirty international exhibitions and provides the cover illustrations for his own books.  Awards: Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres 1992; Prix Communauté française de Belgique 1994 (for *Le somnambule*), Prix du Nouvel An chinois 1997 (for *Soul Mountain*).   |  | | --- | | A selection of works by Gao Xingjian in English | | *Wild Man: a Contemporary Chinese Spoken Drama*. Transl. and annotated by Bruno Roubicek. Asian Theatre Journal. Vol. 7, Nr 2. Fa1l 1990. | | *Fugitives*. Transl. by Gregory B. Lee. In: Lee, Gregory B., *Chinese Writing and Exile*. Central Chinese Studies of the University of Chicago, 1993. | | *The Other Shore : Plays by Gao Xingjian*. Transl. by Gilbert C.F. Fong. Hong Kong: The Chinese University Press, 1999. | | *Soul Mountain*. Transl. by Mabel Lee. HarperCollins, 1999. | | *One Man’s Bible*. Transl. by Mabel Lee. HarperCollins, 2002. | | *Contemporary Technique and National Character in Fiction*. Transl. by Ng Mau-sang.  [Extract from *A Preliminary Discussion of the Art of Modern Fiction*, 1981.] | | “The Voice of the Individual”. *Stockholm Journal of East Asian Studies* 6, 1995. | | “Without isms”. Transl. by W. Lau, D. Sauviat & M. Williams. *Journal of the Oriental Society of Australia*. Vols. 27 & 28, 1995-96. | |
| Autobiographical |  |
| Podcast |  |
| Telephone  interview | 0925 |
| Interview | Gao Xingjian talks about his passion for the theatre and how it is reflected in his writings; how he uses time in his books (7:23); how he combines various cultures (14:05); and the loneliness of the author (19:09). |
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