

2014 EU PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

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Books that bind Europe together: This year's EU Literature Prize

Can a majority Muslim state, on Europe's southernmost periphery, be considered not just European, but even worthy of an EU prize for literature?

It seemed unlikely after May's European elections, when the far-right enjoyed sweeping gains at the polls.

In that context, the choice of the winner of the 2014 European Union Prize for Literature (EUPL) is a rebuke to that more intolerant interpretation of what Europe really is.

An adaptation of Shakespeare's *Othello* by Ben Blushi, former Deputy Foreign Minister of Albania, an EU candidate country, took the top prize. The idea that a Balkan writer, from a predominantly Muslim state, could remake the English classic in his national vernacular, is of course a statement in itself

The novel, *Otello, Arapi, i Vlores* (*Otello, Arap of Vlora*), is set in medieval Venice and Vlora (Albania's second port city, after Durrës).

Few, on the European right, of course, would care to remember that Albania was



Ferries cross the Bosphorus. Istanbul, 2011. [Moyan Brenn/Flickr]

once a part of the Kingdom of Venice, in the early 15th century.

The novel could not be more timely. For critics of EU enlargement, *Otello* is a poignant literary reminder of Albania's natural place in European culture and politics, and why it advanced to EU candidate status in 2012.

Not only is this Muslim country European. It is worthy of the cultural imprimatur of the EU.

Blushi is not alone. One of three non-EU member prize winners, this year's selections are as reflective of current enlargement initiatives as they are a cultural vision of the EU.

Serbia and Montenegro, both of which started the process of Accession, as a unified state, in 2005, are represented by Ognjen Spahic and Ugljesa Sajtinac, respectively.

Their novels are appropriately outward looking, reflecting their home countries' transitional status, before becoming members of the Union. To that end, Spahic's *Puna Glava Radosti* (*Head Full of Joy*) published earlier this year, recounts

the collision of the outer and inner worlds of modern man, an allegory for the reconciliation of the local and the universal.

Sajtinac's 2011 novel, *Sasvim Skromni Darovi* (*Quite Modest Gifts*) deals in equally philosophical ideas about commonality, but from the vantage point of two brothers trading emails about life in Serbia, and the United States.

Emphasising the ordinary, the story reconciles the idea of the national not being especially distinct from the foreign, something which, given Serbia's recent history, has its own political significance. It also speaks to the country's growing sense of itself as a European country. Though Montenegro and Serbia are now on separate accession tracks, the inclusion of these ex-Yugoslavian authors among this year's prizewinners is its own reminder of their former - as well as future - association with each other, and the EU.

Novels by Greece's Makis Tsitsas, and Turkey's Birgül Oğuz, both emphasise

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themes such as decline and powerlessness. The subject of their books speaks reams about their complex national situations, and the ennui they inspire in their protagonists.

Tsitas' *God is My Witness* (2013) narrates the plight of a middle-aged man trying to maintain his dignity, despite being unemployed and ill. Repeatedly rebuffed by his circumstances, it is an unmistakable reflection of the experience of powerlessness Greeks have felt since the financial crisis first started. Greece deserves better, is the message.

Birgül Oğuz' 2012 short story collection, *Hah (Aha)* is equally reflective of her national situation, albeit on a different level. Focused on mourning and melancholy, *Hah* searches for a way of politicising the observation of loss. Considering how abstract mourning is, how can we frame it in such a way as to make it meaningful, albeit transformative?

Given the rise to power of conservative Islamists in Turkey over the last decade, and their overhauling of Atatürk's secular state in a distinctly sectarian, non-democratic

manner, Oğuz' project has an especially contemporary hue.

How can European-identified Turks express their lack of agency and sense of failure, and learn from it, in order to change their circumstances? Though Turkey has been negotiating for EU membership since 1995, given how much resistance remains to its accession, it is increasingly hard to imagine it joining the European Union.

Aha is, in its own way, a means of looking back on that failure, and wondering where to go next.

Navracsics: The 'European literature prize can seal the gap between Western Europe and Eastern Europe'



Tibor Navracsics [European Commission]

In November, 13 fiction writers received the 2014 European Union Prize for Literature. Best-known for having served in the government

of Viktor Orbán, EurActiv spoke to Commissioner Tibor Navracsics about the significance of this year's awards, and what they personally mean to him, as a Hungarian.

Tibor Navracsics is Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport.

This year's selections for the literature prize are noteworthy for their edginess. Is this a European phenomenon, or one of its time?

The main effect of the EU literature prize is that it can connect 37 European nations, and the young talents of those nations, with a prize. You know that we just handed over 13 this year, for the translation of these pieces of art, for those people who have been awarded. That means that for some, it is the biggest opportunity for making themselves visible to the European public. That is a unique European phenomenon. That is why I am proud of the EU literature prize.

Six out of thirteen of this year's selections came from former communist states. Is the EU literary prize a tool for strengthening democracy in Europe?

Yes, I think it is. The European literature prize can seal the gap that still exists between Western Europe and Eastern Europe, and [foster] a common understanding, a better mutual understanding of the European nations.

I was particularly pleased to note the inclusion of a Turkish author amongst this year's award winners, Birgül Oğuz. Her book was also distinctly political.

I think it's just about literature, and Turkey took part. That means that if there's a talented young writer, he or she must be rewarded. She's a very talented young writer. As far as I [understand] her literary activity, [Oğuz] might be one of the great promises of the future.

I think so too. Her work is outstanding. Do you have a personal favorite among this year's prize winners?

(Laughter) Writers coming from the Balkans are probably closer to my personal feelings, because of my original identity, and the language. But I think all of them are talented, and that this is the best thing. We had the opportunity witness how rich we are; how rich European culture is, at the beginning of the 21st century.

What kind of examples, from your own personal experience in Hungary, can enhance the future impact of endeavors like the EUPL?

Hungary has taken part in the [initiative] as well. We've awarded a very famous and talented writer. She made her career in Hungary earlier. It [was] a good

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opportunity for her to introduce herself to the European public. I hope we can use the financial resources to make that translation happen, because the Hungarian language is an isolated language. Hungarian literature is in a pretty isolated position in European culture. But through EU translation, other nations and other readers can access Hungarian literature as well. I think that might be the biggest contribution of Hungarian literature to the European

achievement.

What's next for you, as Commissioner?

My portfolio is a pretty vast portfolio. It covers education, youth, sport and culture - all important aspects of life. However, there is a convergence of those elements, because if we talk about youth, we have to talk about education, culture and sport as well. If we talk about sport, it is about community, so it is again about youth, culture, and

education. My duty is to raise awareness of the importance of communities at the European level.

My definition of the future of European integration is the community of communities. That means that in the coming five years, I would like to do everything possible to build up or contribute to building a community at the European level, a community which respects all other communities, at various levels, in Europe.

Heavy metal Brussels: The 2014 European Union Prize for Literature award ceremony



Janis Jonevs

'Anal Cunt' isn't an everyday sort of band name. Even in underground metal circles, it still inspires a pause, despite the fact that the defunct American grindcore group got its start in 1988. That didn't stop its display, on a large video screen, at the 2014 European Union Prize for

Literature award ceremony, from being a big surprise.

Embedded in an English-language excerpt from Jelgava '94, a Latvian novel about teenage metal fans in the Baltic state, in the years immediately following independence from the USSR, its soft-spoken author read the relevant passage from the work, in his native language, like he was still a teenage music fan.

The elegantly dressed, distinctly non-metal audience drank Janis Jonevs up, as though he were a refreshing drink in an otherwise dry literary space. One of this year's thirteen award winners, Jonevs' novel could not stand out more.

Equal parts bildungsroman, and a portrait of the cultural chaos that reigned in former communist states during the 1990s, the book serves as a stark reminder of what has been left behind over the last year, as Cold War style tensions resumed between Moscow and the West, and border countries such as Latvia, grew increasingly concerned about their independence.

The freedom to transgress, to misbehave, to be heavy metal kids, may have been a hard-won freedom, despite the fact that anti-establishment subcultures, as in the West, often flourished behind the Iron Curtain. Still, the release that Jonevs recounts is indelibly linked to its historic context, one which, in retrospect, is not just a middle aged exercise in remembering one's carefree youth.

The book is also, despite its intense specificity, about being part of a larger

world, linked by underground music, and its influence on young persons lives. Featuring a protagonist with the nickname Death, namedropping American indie bands like Anglo kids, the characters in the book are harbingers of the global youth culture that fully emerged with the mainstreaming of the Internet in the early '00s. There's nothing about them, at least culturally, that couldn't mark them as British, German, or Americans. Except, perhaps, how metal fits into their local lives, and structures their relations.

In literary awards ceremonies like this year's EUPL event, it's oftentimes hard to connect with authors so immediately, particularly when there are so many to choose from. At least in this reporter's case. A former music journalist and punk 'zine editor, in the 1990s, Janis Jonevs' work was an especially easy sell. Though the rest of the award recipients produced equally topical, deserving works, Jelgava '94 spoke to me, most personally.

Though not a patron of underground culture like I used to be, I remain as interested in it as I was in my twenties. I just have less time to seek it out, as the old mediums for discovering it – record stores, fanzines – have largely disappeared, in favor of the largely anonymous online space, where there is little distinction between alternative and mainstream, independent and major label. Just try searching for a record in the iTunes store, and you'll see. It takes more work, ironically, to find things

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to connect to.

Hence, my surprise, to discover the literary equivalent of a great metal record of its day, in the form of a novel, at a European Union sponsored literary awards ceremony, in Brussels. It may be stereotypically 'adult' to discover it that way, but the context, in terms of encountering it within a specific community setting, was not. That the funding for the awards comes from governments, of course, is a far cry from the DIY ethos of the underground. But money is money. What matters is the culture we sponsor with it. There's always something worthy.

Reading through the selection of translations of this year's European Union

Prize for Literature winners, I'm sure that other attendees of the Wednesday ceremony had the same sort of experience, albeit with different authors. I'm equally certain that if I set myself to it, I might find similar, albeit less intense connections, as well. Practically everything I've read (that I could translate) seems worthwhile, on one level or another. When full English translations become available, I'll gladly buy them all.

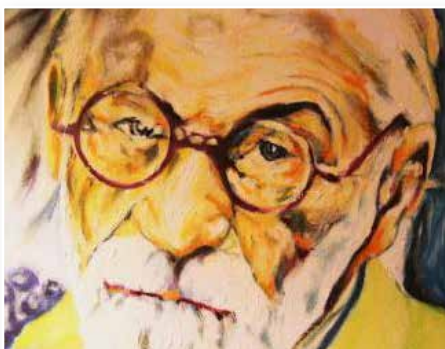
While I've already praised the choices made by the national committees [See: Books That Bind Europe Together] as a political gesture, it wasn't until attending the awards event that it became clear to me what a profound cultural happening this was. For anyone who knows what a sorry state

the book business is in, and how difficult it is to match deserving literary talent with publishers, the recognition granted to the thirteen award winners, is the sort of gesture that compensates for it.

Never mind that all of this year's prize winners have publishing deals. Every writer knows that books are quickly lost in the ether, as audiences move on from one title to the next. The European Union Prize for Literature is the sort of initiative that helps authors to avoid invisibility, by supporting writers on the basis of merit, not just marketability. Thus, my delight at discovering the name of an obscure American underground metal band, a stone's throw away from the European Parliament.

Smilevski: Adolfina is a metaphor for the people that are forgotten

"Historiography is obsessed with the rulers, men of power and influential people, while the memories about ordinary people die with those that have known them," says Goce Smilevski, about his decision to write a novel about Sigmund Freud's sister, Adolfina.



Sigmund Freud portrait. [Wikimedia]

Goce Smilevski is a Macedonian novelist, and the author of the 2010 European Union Prize for Literature winner, Freud's Sister.

Who, exactly, is the ideal audience, for *Freud's Sister*? Historians, feminists, or psychoanalysts? You seem to be asking so many questions, simultaneously, it's difficult to parse who it is that is actually being addressed. That's not a value judgment - it's one of the book's strengths. I'm more interested in hearing who you initially thought you were addressing, if that was important, to you.

Writing this novel, I had no impression I am addressing some audience. I had no impression of addressing someone, or talking to someone. During all the seven and a half years of writing it, I had an impression of listening to someone, and it was the voice of Adolfina Freud. You can assume that voice was "imaginary", but that does not make it less real for me.

Freud has always given psychoanalysis a gender, so to speak. When we think of analysis, we imagine men - the central European, German-accented archetype, despite the contributions of highly influential later analysts, for example, like Melanie Klein, and Jessica Benjamin. Does telling the story of Adolfina help contribute

to changing that narrative, insofar as it lends diversity to the Freud story?

The sister-brother relationship, narrated in the novel, opens to this perspective, too. Freud was, in a way, misogynist, saying that the character of each female originates from her penis envy. Later he wanted to (excuse) himself, saying that women will always remain for him a "dark continent". Why it was so, (we) cannot know. Maybe the reason lies in the fact that he himself never tried to really understand his relationship with his mother. He was talking about Oedipus complex, but he never explained how it worked in his case.

And, we should not forget (that) Freud is the only psychoanalyst that never underwent psychoanalysis. He had what he called auto-analysis. The result of it is his work, his magnum opus, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. He mentioned his mother there just a few times. And that is a work that puts the basis of the theory on Oedipus complex. So my novel was maybe also an attempt to have a few details on the relationship of Freud and his mother, although the main focus is on the sister - brother relationship. Opening these questions from the perspective of Freud's sister, the novel, I suppose, as you say, contributes to changing that narrative as

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structured by Sigmund Freud.

How do you feel about the critical reception of the novel, to date? It received an especially difficult review from the American writer Joyce Carol Oates, in the *New York Review of Books*, in 2012, which, as you pointed out, contained historical errors about Terezin, the Nazi concentration camp, Freud's Jewishness, as well as criticized you for your depiction of Adolfina's handicaps. Did you expect to receive criticism like this, or does it come with the territory of taking on such a topic?

Joyce Carol Oates is one of the most extraordinary American novelists. I responded to Ms. Oates in the *New York Review of Books*, and she responded to my reply in the same magazine, saying "*Freud's Sister* is a challenging novel to read, as it must have been enormously challenging to write. The claustrophobic nature of the narrative, the fairy-tale simplicity of the characters, the reader's uneasy sense that the historical

Sigmund Freud is being exploited in a highly impressionable, prejudicial agenda in which the founder of psychoanalysis is both the primary resource and the villain—all combine to create a unique work of art, as I'd tried to convey in my review, that many readers may find mesmerizing and some will find highly controversial."

I think that the most important qualification of Ms. Oates statements of my novel is: "a unique work of art." Later, Ms. Oates, in an interview for the Spanish edition of *Elle*, was asked about European literature, and she mentioned *Freud's Sister*, saying about her experience of reading my novel: "I've been deeply moved. . . . It's very difficult to forget and is very likely to be as controversial as it is acclaimed."

Was Freud responsible for Adolfina's death?

No.

What got you interested in taking on this specific story? Was it Freud himself, his

sister's neglected narrative, or something completely different?

For me, Adolfina became a metaphor for women from the past deprived of their voice. That was the reason why I became obsessed with her story. Historiography is obsessed with the rulers, men of power and influential people, while the memories about ordinary people die with those that have known them. Adolfina Freud spent all of her life close to her brother, of whom we know so many important and trivial things (including where he bought his cigars and how many cigars he smoked per day), and we know almost nothing of what could be called her personal life, nothing of her joys and sorrows.

Seen in this perspective, Adolfina is a metaphor for the people that are forgotten, those whose lives were, if there is nothing but a material realm, less than traces on the sand of time. Her voice narrating the novel is an echo of the voices of the people that had lives similar to her, and that disappeared from the earth without remaining anything that would witness their existence.

Literature in the era of populism

The European Union Literature Prize promotes the notions of diversity and tolerance at the core of the European project. Its challenge is to continue to champion those values in the face of resurgent populism.

The 140 Eurosceptics elected to the European Parliament in the 2104 elections are the ideal audience for the winners of this year's awards.

Neo-fascist MEP Udo Voigt reading an Albanian adaptation of *Othello*, set in a multicultural Venice?

Though it's doubtful that Voigt will ever peruse the books honored this year, there's no arguing that he wouldn't get



2014 European Union Literature Prize awards ceremony. Brussels, 18 November.

something out of them.

The titles communicate the cosmopolitan ideals of the European Union, by fostering a linguistically and culturally diverse idea of community, one that transcends the borders of the states of their authors, through the promotion and

translation of European literature.

Intended, in part, to foster intercultural dialogue, the European Union Prize for Literature has a very contemporary political connotation, one

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which goes to the heart of the European project, experiencing such dramatic pushback in member states like France today, where the extreme right National Front topped a Presidential poll, in September, for the very first time.

The EUPL positions the programme in a distinctly conservative light, despite its obvious relationship to post-WWII debates about diversity. If its partisanship suggests anything, it's more about the margins that today's populists inhabit, than the alleged anachronism that is the EU.

At the very least, the literature prize promotes the idea that conversations can still be had in Europe, even if they only take the form of fiction. Still, that's something. Thankfully, as EurActiv France reported last May, the influence of rightist legislators, like Voigt, remains 'marginal', relative to the larger parties that make up

the rest of the European Parliament.

It may be just literature, but its the metaphor that counts. That's what it means to place a premium on culture. In another time, and another era, whatever may seem out of sync with this zeitgeist will very obviously be a thing of the past.

It also, as importantly, validates the non-political work being done behind the scenes, by Creative Europe, of funding such events, and collaborating with publishers, across Europe, to commission translations.

The idea of a European publishing community may not exactly be a new one, but it has never received such an explicit push, from the European institutions, either.

Supporting the publishing sector this way will only serve to reinforce the notion that literature produced in Europe is as much a European event as it is a national one.



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