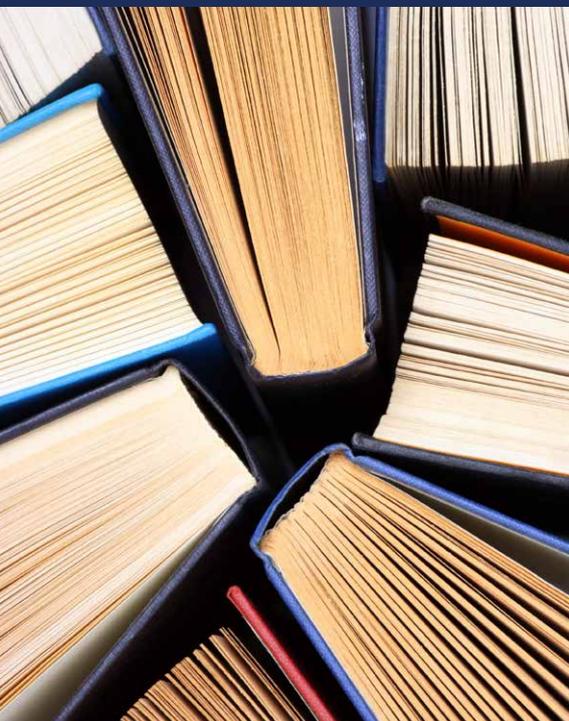


# 2015 EU PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

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Winners Ida Hegazi Høyer and David Machado [European Union Prize for Literature]

## EU literary awards come to London

The winners of the 2015 European Union Prize for Literature were announced at the London Book Fair last week (14 April).

Taking to the stage during the opening ceremony, European Commissioner for Education, Culture, Youth and Sport Tibor Navracsics, announced the 12 award recipients as:

Carolina Schutti (Austria); Luka Bekavac (Croatia); Gaëlle Josse (France); Edina Szvoren (Hungary); Donal Ryan (Ireland); Lorenzo Amurri (Italy); Undinė Radzevičiūtė (Lithuania); Ida Hegazi Høyer (Norway); Magdalena Parys (Poland); David Machado (Portugal); Svetlana Žuchová (Slovakia) and Sara Stridsberg (Sweden).

The prize aims to put the spotlight on the creativity and wealth of European contemporary fiction. It is open to emerging authors from across the 36 countries taking part in the Creative Europe programme, which includes not only EU member states, but other European nations as well.

Each year 12 winners are announced, giving each participating country a representative over the three year cycle. Each winner is judged by a panel of local judges. The winners receive €5,000 and the opportunity to have their work translated into either

English or French. The aim is to bring national literatures to the attention of an audience beyond their native language.

Navracsics told EurActiv such prizes are symbols of a community, and, despite the range of languages, a European cultural community does exist. "It is not a homogenous one. It is not characterised by a single language or heritage," said Navracsics. "But still there is an element of coherence in that community."

Anne Bergman is the director of the Federation of European Publishers, one of the prize's organising bodies. Bergman thinks its value lies in bringing authors to the attention of a wider audience.

"If you look at previous winners, they have reached readers and markets they wouldn't have been able to reach. The real virtue of the prize is to increase the circulation of literature," she said.

"We are looking to make authors better known. That is why we collaborate with the London and Frankfurt Book Fairs."

That the prize has 12 annual winners could be seen as diluting its value. But, the organisers say it helps to reflect the variety of literature on offer throughout the continent.

"It's a lovely complicated prize, just like the European Union," said Bergman

It is a sentiment which Navracsics agrees with. "It would be very difficult

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to have a single winner [...] We cannot cast truth between different nationalities and different literatures.”

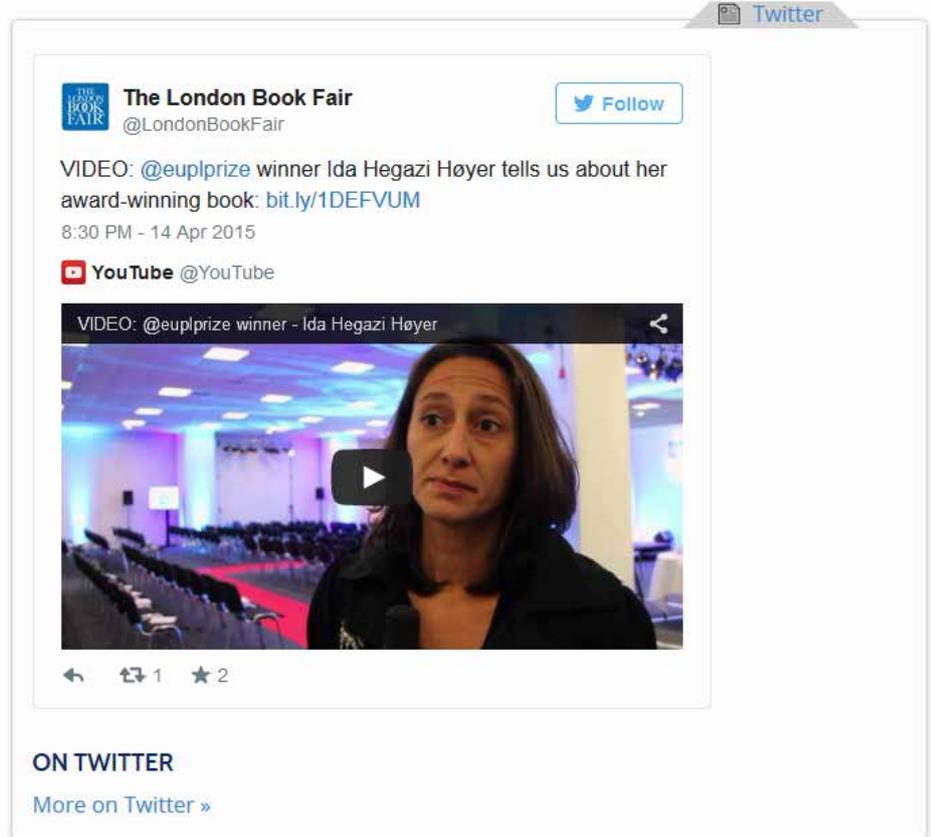
That said, there is an acceptance the format may be holding the prize back from wider recognition.

“It will be while before the prize receives true recognition, because it is complicated,” accepts Bergman.

### But, the future appears bright.

“Prizes are becoming more important in promoting authors to readers and the EUPL prize has a great role to play in promoting modern European literature,” said the London Book Fair’s Jack Thomas.

“This prize is extremely significant, and we hope that by announcing the winners in front of a global publishing audience, it can spread its influence even further.”



## INTERVIEW

# EU literature prize winners: Winning is an honour, but surreal

In a “very tough market” for books, winning a prize can make a huge difference and open the door for international recognition, say this year’s winners of the EU’s Prize for Literature.

David Machado and Ida Hegazi Høyer were two winners of the 2015 European Union Prize for Literature. They sat down with EurActiv to discuss the prize and what winning it means to them.

**Could we start with a summary of both of your books? Without giving away any of the twists!**

Ida Hegazi Høyer: My book is called *Forgive Me*, in English. It is about a young boy and young girl meeting and falling instantly in love. They get engaged the same day and move in together almost immediately without knowing anything about each other.

Quite soon she finds he is hiding things and lying. Gradually, his past reveals itself. It turns out he comes from a very tough upbringing, with a violent, dark home. The book is about love and love falling apart on one hand. On the other, it’s about a man who is mentally sick and learned as child to lie as a defence mechanism. The novel is written as a letter from her to him.

David Machado: My novel is called *Average Happiness Index*. It is a story of man at a moment of crisis

in his life, during the economic and financial crisis we are living in at the moment, in Europe and around the world. He gets to a point where he is unemployed, his wife moves away with his kids to where she has a job. He loses his house, starts living in his car. It is about how this man, who always thought of himself as happy and optimistic, has to deal with this new situation where everything he thought was going to be there forever is gone. He questions himself, his happiness, his values and his plans for the future. It is a book about happiness with unhappy people.

**How do you feel about winning the prize?**

IHH: It’s amazing, but quite surreal. It’s an honour and I’m very humbled by it. It is a very tough market but a prize like this helps your chances. I’m hoping

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the book can be translated, initially into Swedish or Danish, we'll see.

DM: I think it's always a very good thing when someone looks at your work and thinks it is worth giving it a distinction like this. A novel takes months or even years, a lot of research, thinking, rewriting, and sweat. It is a very good feeling to have someone believing in what you did.

#### What are you hoping to do next?

IHH: I'm working on my fourth novel. It is supposed to come out in the autumn. I don't have a title in English yet, but it is a story I wrote when I went to the Galapagos islands. It's actually a true story so it's very different from my other work.

DM: I'm trying to write my next novel but other things keep showing up. Like other books and some work I wasn't expecting. For the last couple of months I was writing a movie script for Average Happiness Index. We

don't know yet if the movie will be produced but I'm hoping it gets made. I also write children books, and I just published a new one in Portugal, last week. I have a lot of things going on at the same time.

#### Is the EU aspect of the prize important to you? Does it change how you look at the prize, or does it remain just a literature prize?

IHH: I actually haven't thought that much about it to be honest. Norway isn't even part of the European Union. The fact that it is international makes a huge difference, but the EU aspect I haven't given much thought.

DM: I agree that it being an international prize means it is not just a prize. The fact it is the EU prize is something very political, but I don't feel part of that. But the DG that gives the prize is doing an interesting thing in getting more people involved in literature. I'm happy to be a part of that.

#### Have you read the English versions of your works?

IHH: Almost, I read the first part of the translation. It was very hard actually. It feels like it isn't mine anymore. It feels very different, to me. In a way, it's nice to see it in another language, but it is strange.

DM: I have some books translated already, and I always feel it sounds better translated into another language. It gives it a distance from me, and it sounds exotic. I read my text so many times in Portuguese, I can't have an opinion. So when I read it in English or Italian, it gives a fresh perspective. I find it much better.

Most of the time, I think it is good to trust your translator. The translation is not your book anymore. The translator is also a writer, and there is something there that is not mine. That's okay. I wrote it in Portuguese, but someone else finished it in another language.

IHH: Yes, you just have to let it go.



Ida Hegazi Høyer [London Book Fair/YouTube]

## The Great Recession novel: David Machado's Average Happiness Index

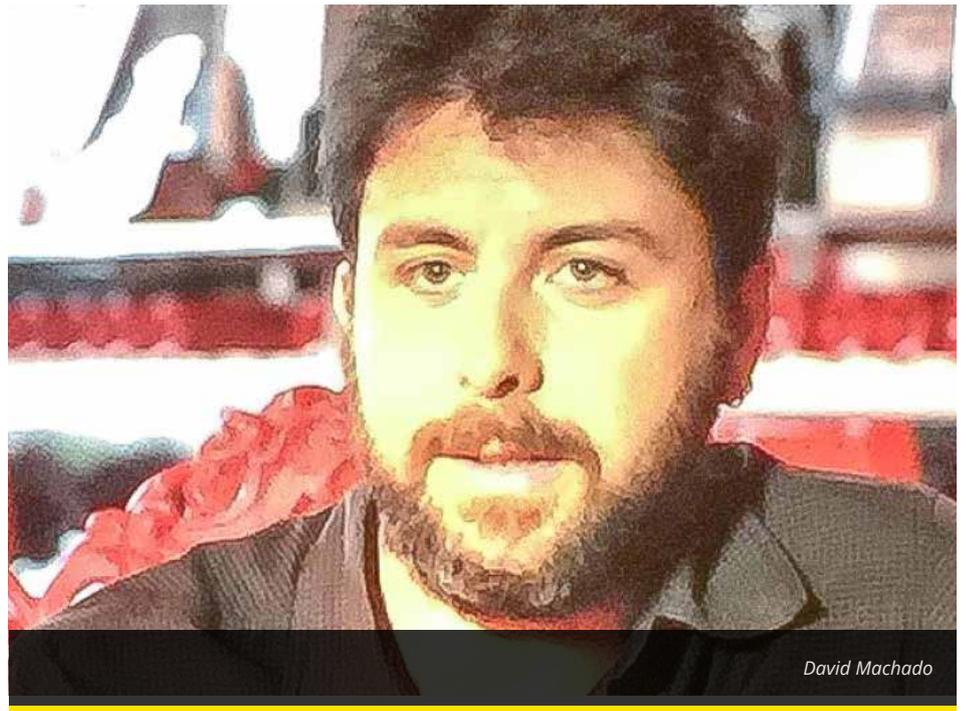
Economic crises might not be ideal for funding newspapers, but they've always inspired great fiction.

America's Great Depression is probably the best-known example, producing such literary milestones as John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), and *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), to name just a few.

Europe's ongoing economic crisis, AKA the Great Recession, has produced few works of parallel significance, at least ones that we know about so far, outside of their immediate national contexts. Thanks to the 2015 European Union Prize for Literature, we now know of one such work: Portuguese novelist David Machado's appropriately titled 2013 novel, *Average Happiness Index*.

Though it is hard to imagine a contemporary work of fiction achieving the kind of cultural significance of the aforementioned American giants, for the first time since the late Portuguese novelist Jose Saramago won the Nobel Prize for Literature, in 1998, Machado's novel has all the ingredients to put his country's fiction writers back on the map, albeit on a more whimsical note.

The story of Daniel, an aspiring writer, who loses everything during the economic crisis – his home, his job, and his family - *Average Happiness Index* reads like a secular retelling of the Book of Job, where everything that could go wrong does, for no moral reason at all. For Machado's characters, fate is particularly unkind. No one is left untouched by the crisis, which turns Portugal upside down, leaving everyone



David Machado

bereft and devastated.

For those member states that have recovered from the crisis, like Portugal, the travails of Daniel and his friends still sound all too contemporary. Though Portugal exited its bailout program in May 2014, it still carried 214 billion euros in debt at the time of its ending, and throughout that same year, suffered from an unemployment rate that oscillated between 15.1 and 13.9 percent.

For readers of *Average Happiness Index*, the novel feels as much like a newspaper article about the present, as much as it does a framing of the horrors of the recent past, albeit something a lot deeper. And that's precisely where Machado's book begins to take on a life of its own, as a form of social criticism of the crisis, and how Europe arrived at it. Take the fates suffered by his friends Xavier, and Almodovar, as examples.

Xavier has been locked inside his house for over a dozen years, suffering from a severe case of depression, brought on by the failure of a mutual aid (a philosophy of voluntary assistance rooted in Anarchism) website he created, to take off. Almodovar, conversely, is arrested for trying to improve his life. Their situations are exaggerated, obviously but extremely poignant. One

cannot get over the limits of their own utopianism, and the other is prohibited from taking the initiative to get on with their life.

The limitations these characters are forced to live with communicates the profound immobility Europeans have felt over the last seven years, and which, for many who live in the south, remains a constant. There are so few opportunities for personal advancement that they fear punishment for trying to anything about it, whatsoever. No wonder so many Greeks, for example find it reasonable to support parties like Syriza, on the left, and French, the National Front, on the right. *Average Happiness Index* unlocks the psychology behind this attraction, even though it doesn't tackle it directly.

One of the novel's most endearing qualities is its satirization of our obsession with statistics, and how they're used by economists, and politicians, to determine happiness. It's a decidedly anti-technocratic reproach, one which seems especially suited to the sorts of criticisms leveled at the EU, when both conservatives and leftists, speak of its excessive bureaucracy. It's not that numbers don't matter. They do. But, quite often, as Machado insinuates, we forget the human stories that lie beneath them.

## Capturing the refugee experience

Regional literary awards are like any other cultural event. Books get recognized as much for how they capture the local, as they get hailed for being works of art.

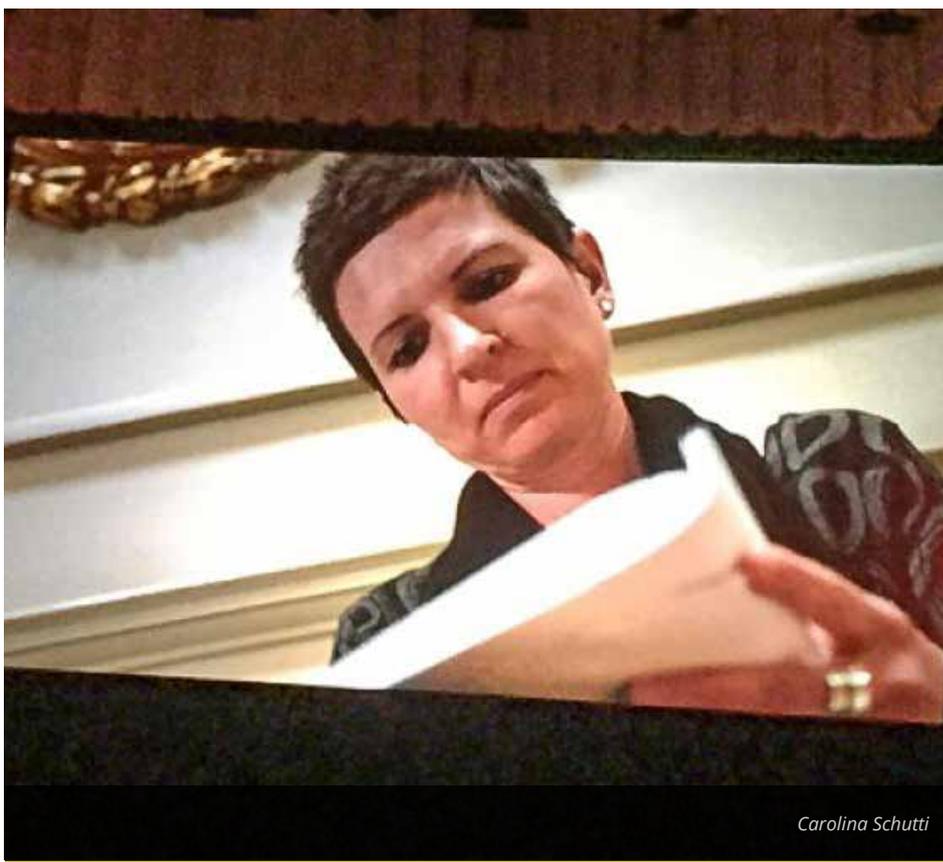
Few would argue that the European Union Prize for Literature is an exception to this rule. The fact that it's European ought to be a dead give away.

In fact, that is one of the best things about the annual event. It provides a rare opportunity to enter the conversations Europeans continually conduct amongst themselves about what it is that marks them, both collectively, as well as individually.

The selections for the 2015 awards are no exception. Take the award granted to novelist Carolina Schutti, by the Austrian jury, as an example, for her 2012 novel, *Einmal muss ich über weiches Gras gelaufen sein* (Once I must have trodden soft grass).

A highly personal meditation about being displaced, the book tells the story of a Belarussian girl who loses her mother, and goes to live with her aunt, in an unnamed, poor rural village. Maja, the protagonist, struggles to figure out where she came from, to no avail. Eventually, she is befriended by an elderly man named Marek, who speaks a language she doesn't understand.

Marek makes Maja feel at home for the first time in her exile, and she begins to find her place in her new world, despite the ambiguity of her past. It's not an unfamiliar narrative for refugees and asylum seekers, experiencing the shock of the new. But it is one that is in its own way disconcerting to encounter amongst Europeans themselves, who would be loathe to admit that are as alienated and ignorant about their past



Carolina Schutti

as Maja.

It is no accident that Maja is from Belarus. Few territories of the former USSR continue to live on as retro authoritarian states in today's Europe, despite Russia's pretend democracy, and Vladimir Putin's nostalgia for the Communist era. Maja cannot remember where she comes from precisely because she's had to repress it, in order to leave. How else might one escape? Especially a child.

The refugee's plight is its own metaphor, entirely in dialogue with the feeling of alienation that persons fleeing the wreckage of the Communist era in Eastern Europe often feel in the West, not to mention refugees from other parts of the world, washing up on Europe's shores, today. They have equally strong reasons to draw blanks on their past, and to find their new European home alien and unrecognizable, which are as traumatic as the Stalinist legacy.

Schutti's achievement is in being able to give voice to both of these experiences simultaneously. In doing so, her novel, manages to express exactly what it feels like to be an outsider in

today's Europe: An immigrant, an asylum seeker, someone for whom Europe is both a destination and a home, that is difficult to make sense of.

This isn't what one would immediately recognise as an archetypal expression of Europeanness. It bears none of the historic hallmarks of a fixed cultural identity that has had centuries to cultivate its particularity. However, it does have repeat precedents, throughout the continent's history, which frequently get forgotten. *Once I must have trodden soft grass* is a reminder of that history's continuity into the present, and its place in European identity and culture.

Leave it to an Austrian fiction writer, living in country that has always been a border state between empires and civilizations, to help distill this experience, for so many potential perspectives. In an era that increasingly resembles the years immediately following both WWI and WWII, when the continent was awash with displaced persons, Carolina Schutti's novel stands as a necessary reminder. Refugees are Europeans, too.

## 'Fictional' Europe

Impotence is everywhere. Few literary cultures have been able to capture the feeling of being powerless, in as local a dialect, as Irish fiction writers.



Donal Ryan

Listening to novelist Donal Ryan read from *Spinning Heart* at the 2015 European Union Prize for Literature award ceremony, one could not help but think of James Joyce. Not so much in terms of the music of his prose, as its accessibility, in all of his Irishness, to a foreign reader like myself.

I got it, without ever having been to Ireland. The key? Ryan was communicating something about Europe, as well, something so profoundly central to European identity and culture, as much as he was explaining his homeland. The two feel inseparable, albeit indistinguishable from the local in his writing. The subject: being ethically stuck, mired in a form of moral inertia, in a community confronted by a crime that it cannot make heads or tails out of, or take any responsibility for. Sound familiar?

Few motifs scream Europe more than stasis, of being frozen while the rest of the world moves forward, whether it be through technological or economic breakthroughs, or experiments in cultural mores. Particularly when Europeans speak of themselves cultural, in comparison to

America, with its willingness to take chances, and its overwhelming cultural diversity. Europe, or so it seems, will always be behind.

But what *Spinning Heart* is trying to convey goes beyond the issue of speed, in the conventional sense that such comparisons convey. It has an ethical lesson to impart, one which is central to the belief, in countries like the United States, that Europe has enormous difficulty engaging in moral inventory, in judging itself for its failings, and its transgressions, and taking action to rectify them. On the 20th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre, (at the time of this article's writing) its impossible to not remember such events, and be reminded of Europe's inaction at that time.

*Spinning Heart* captures the tension that links such events, in the context a country that has, like many of its immediate neighbors, sought to recover from the economic crisis of the last seven years, and modernise itself, economically, politically, and culturally. Almost every step forward, or so it seems, is also a step back, in works like these. Ryan's characters know something else is out there, but they can't bring themselves to go there. In that sense, they are exemplary Europeans, as much as they are also Irish.

Like all good fiction, it's impossible to not hypothesize such connections, outside of *Spinning Heart's* immediate national context. It is not as though an Irish reading would not hypothesise the same potential connections. It just depends on the amount of time one lingers with a work of fiction like this, and treats it as something more than just adult entertainment, or a national monograph. That's perhaps the main thing we take away from having to discover novels like *Spinning Heart*, in a European context, far away from their immediate home turf.

By reading these books as European works first, through events

which inevitably contextualise them geographically, such as the annual European Union Prize for Literature, readers inevitably connect to their European value, as much as their Irish significance. That's perhaps the best thing one can derive from annual awards events, and why they serve such an important cultural function. They may be about highlighting local writing, but they are also about redefining the local. I can't think of a better way to communicate Europe, writ large.

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