

Olga Tokarczuk – Biographical Paper

Olga Tokarczuk won the 2018 Nobel Prize in literature “for a narrative imagination that with encyclopedic passion represents the crossing of boundaries as a form of life.”

To create this biographical paper I used Wikipedia, “which I admire and support “ - that’s a quote from Tokarczuk which I wholeheartedly identify with!

As a Nobel Prize winner, there is wealth of information on Tokarczuk on the Nobel Prize web site. I used her biographical essay, prize acceptance speech, lecture and interview.

In her beautifully written biographical essay, Tokarczuk shares her opinion about writers’ biographical essays:

“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.... 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... 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.”

To me, Tokarczuk's life is anything but boring...

According to Wikipedia, “Tokarczuk is a leftist, an atheist, and a feminist. She has been criticized by some nationalist groups in Poland as unpatriotic, anti-Christian and a promoter of eco-terrorism.”

She was born in Poland in 1962, first of two children of parents who were both teachers with strong social commitment. The parents worked with underprivileged children.

Tokarczuk is careful to note that her childhood was not shaped by TV, which was non-existent at that time in Poland. Telephones were rare, and there were hardly any private cars, which made every journey a major expedition. Food was always the same yet locally produced. Lemons were a luxury and Bananas unknown.

Tokarczuk says she’s always loved to be on her own, and felt all right in her own company.

Her early memories from kindergarten include being forced to take a nap in the middle of the day and climbing on a tree to evade the company of the other children. But she had lots of freedom which today would be unimaginable: Going to classes taught by her parents, taking part in every school activity such as choir practice and dance group rehearsals, stage shows, outings and evening assemblies.

“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.”

She was brought up among books and taught herself to read though she can’t remember when.

Encyclopedias were her favorite literary genre throughout childhood. At age 9 she discovered fiction, through reading a book about Greek mythology. She obsessed about these stories for three years, learning every detail and comparing the stories to each other. When Tokarczuk writes she gets into a state of being mentally possessed by an idea, something she attributes to this early obsession.

As terrible as Communism was in Poland, it did create an impressive network of public libraries, to which Tokarczuk feels she owes a great deal. She read all the books at home, one bookcase at a time. From there she has been relying on libraries, until the recent advent of digital books which can be read on a smart phone.

Her favorites were anthologies of fairytales from various cultures around the world, which were readily published at the time, because the socialist regime believed implicitly in internationalism and the community of all nations. She was fascinated by the “unpredictability of a free, unrestricted imagination.”

“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. ”

From there Tokarczuk discovered Science Fiction, starting with Russian authors and ending up with Philip K Dick. She read Sci Fi for the next 10 years of her life.

She started, but did not finish, her first novel at age 12. She is not a great fan of poetry with the exception of T S Elliot, who was her motivation to study English. By the time she finished elementary school Tokarczuk realized that literature is not just pleasure. It opens entire worlds. The people she read about were as real to her as the people physically around her.

“Traveling 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.”

High School “was the time of my greatest literary discoveries and my most intensive literary endeavors. Never since have I read as much as I did in my four years at high school.”

And after all this literature reading Tokarczuk decided to study something else.

from her beautiful Nobel Prize acceptance speech:

“I am ... honored to be receiving this award alongside the world’s most outstanding representatives of science. We think there’s a vast, gaping hole separating scientists and artists, but it’s simply not true. I find exploring disciplines other than my own to be an extremely inspiring source of the best ideas. “

She started college in August 1980, just as the Polish anti-communist revolution began. “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.” During this time, Tokarczuk volunteered to help people in need, since she thought this was more important than studying.

She chose psychology after reading Freud, and says that working with her patients changed her.

“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... 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. ”

“psychology taught me very many important things... the most important one [is] that every single human being is the source of a novel, it’s a source of many stories.“

Tokarczuk lives close to the Czech border, in a place similar to the village our book takes place in. She says that moving to the countryside was most influential on her work as a writer. This is the place

where she finds the inner-silence necessary for her writing.

“I write fiction, but it is never pure fabrication. When I write, I have to feel everything inside myself.” The most funny and mysterious part of her writing is creating characters. “ it looks rather like those characters are coming from outside to my story, so, they are already existing somewhere ... I can hear what they are talking between each other or when they are talking to me... 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’ve learned from them. Sometimes they surprise me because of some things I didn’t know about them, so, it’s really very mysterious. “

Tokarczuk’s advice to aspiring writers is “Read and read. A thousand pages for each page written.” In addition to the Nobel Prize Tokarczuk won numerous literary awards both in and outside Poland, including the Man Booker prize. Her most famous book – *The Book of Jacob* – a 1,000 page epic historical novel, was compared to *War and Peace* and declared “a work of genius” by the *The Times* literary critic. Tokarczuk's books were translated to 37 languages.

Her activism does not express itself in fiery speeches (she is too nervous for that) or public fights. She expresses her ideas in the stories she writes, and moves people to action. Many people told her they became vegetarian after reading *Drive your plow over the bones of the dead*.

My Polish speaking mother attended a recent lecture given by Tokarczuk in Israel, in Polish. My mother reports that the author was wearing simple cloths and had dreadlocks. She acted down to earth, was warm and smiled a lot. Tokarczuk said she comes to Israel often, and whenever the plane lands in Tel Aviv she feels deep relief and happiness that the country exists. She spoke about her hope for a more tolerant and accepting world. When an audience member asked her how could Poland have agreed to accept one million Ukrainian refugees after the horrible atrocities Ukrainians inflicted on the Poles during WWII, she said, with a big smile: “Yes! That is the world I am hoping for.”

Sources:

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