

GLOBAL

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RIGHTS



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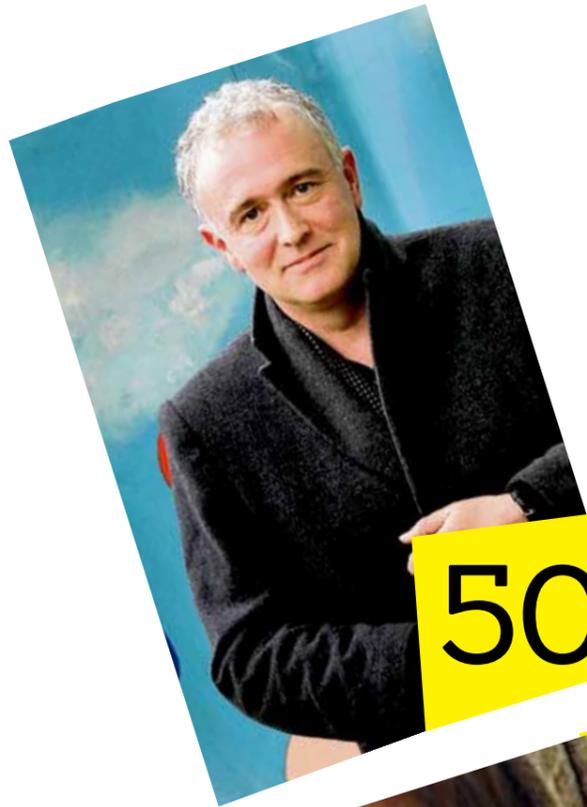
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Writers recreating our worlds

Keeping the promise made after the release of the first issue of Global Rights Magazine that was dedicated solely to interviews with writers and entitled "The Floor is Yours...", we now present these new conversations with the authors of novels and short stories. And as we do so, we cannot resist promising once again future monograph issues that may well explore other literary genres, poetry, journalism, biography ...

In this second instalment, 9 authors talk about their anxiety, the creative processes in the context in which they live, what they hope to achieve and their cultural influences. We could be tempted to take 9 as a magic or a special number, but beyond the esoteric, we simply left the microphone open again so that we could listen to the voices of people who write and work creatively and everyday invent literature.

If we were to emphasize something that brings together all the voices that resonate throughout this issue, although they do it in different ways and in different languages, we would perhaps emphasize passion. It is a passion to continue to write, to tell, to narrate and to communicate stories in the midst of an era where the immediate and the synthetic pre-

vails, tending to blur the important nuances and details that mark our daily lives and perceptions, this multiple vision that could allow us to understand and explore this enormous and varied set of people who are not "us". That's why we'll continue to propose this kind of exploration, this kind of journey similar to that of Alice through the mirror, that extraordinary novel of the 19th century, written by Lewis Carroll, which shows us everything upside down or from different perspectives.

Writing may seem like an unprofitable profession in these difficult and urgent times, but we discover, interview after interview, translation after translation, that writing knows no borders, does not confine itself to any language, any market or any individual interest, which is truly what the people who speak in this issue say and want they want to say, exposing themselves and laying claim to both a vital and intense desire to communicate what they feel, what moves them, and what our own eyes often fail to grasp at first glance. This alone is worth the effort we make.

In this age we find ourselves living, full of conflicts, wars, prejudices and crises of all kinds (nothing really different from any previous era) to know how to listen, to take an interest

in exploring other realities, to understand and accept those who live within the landscape of other languages, who practice different beliefs or have other customs, has become a value in itself, a simple human value we need to reclaim.

That is why we continue, and will continue, to question with curiosity the people who write and tell stories and share feelings. We don't have a preconceived roadmap: we are interested in languages, people, their cultures, and the many different contexts they inhabit, with a view to linking those who create with their real or potential readers to share interests and concerns out beyond any geographical, language, cultural or political distance.

We have already said there are 9 interviews, but surely some diligent reader will realize that there are actually 10. The reason for this is that there is one interview that we could say is really two, by the same author (and in this sense, we did interview 9 writers).

It seemed important to us why the 9 actually looked like 10. In the conversation that opens the magazine, the Kuwaiti writer Bothayna al-Essa speaks only about censorship. An ominous and threatening term that endures and

continues to be pervasive and we want to leave this too-real ghost that has haunted literature from the beginning of times well underlined in red (the favorite color of the censors).

The statements of principle put forward by Bothayna al-Essa are a gift of frankness and integrity in the midst of a daily difficult reality, an "I accuse" against blatant, structured and official censorship. But this issue appears to us as more complex. That is why we want to leave it open to discussion. There have always been different ways of limiting, censoring and conditioning both the content and the form of literature, depending on the cultural and historical traditions and the contexts in each place it is produced.

This 'nuance' of censorship has much to do with the economics or the means of distribution, with what is politically correct or considered acceptable, with the editorial positions dominated by big companies (which in turn are a part of larger global powers or entities), the truths that are "assumed" to be accepted often resulting in a complex and painful dilemma that conditions the option that writers are eventually forced to choose or adapt to.

If you read carefully you will see that in some



of the interviews this also seems to be a recurrent issue in certain regional contexts. We would wish to leave this wide open to be explored because we believe that mutual and active solidarity between narrators and readers in defense of freedom of speech is not only legitimate. It is indispensable.

The 9 'testimonies' we offer on this occasion include two authors from the diverse and rich Arabic literature, the already quoted Kuwaitian, Bothayna al-Essa and Palestinian Sonia Nimr; the Uruguayan writer and journalist Fernando Butazzoni (National Literature Laureate); Joseph O'Connor, perhaps the most well-known of the vital contemporary Irish literature; the interesting Italian writers Enrico Palandri and Gianfranco Bettin; two Kurdish authors, Dilawer Zeraq and Muharrem Erbey, criminalized for defending their identity and

their language in today's Turkey; and a very special writer because he has decided, based on his life as a guerrilla of the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia - People's Army), to make literature from within a civil war that seems now, after the Peace Agreement signed between the FARC and the Colombian Government really and finally destined to come to an end.

Nine different voices responding on this occasion in Spanish, English, Kurdish, Turkish, Arabic and Italian. Let's hope that their words offer thoughts and ideas that help us to shape and create our own opinions: opinions that, to be real, need more than the 142 characters that Twitter allows us.



Petra Prost, artist and illustrator/author, has given us the wonderful "paper boat" on the cover, "the kiss" that, like "books houses", appears inside. The theme of the cover illustration is dedicated to the right to citizenship and asylum as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948 and is part of an exhibition at the Resistance Museum in Turin (Italy).

The illustration "the journey" featured in the middle pages was published in "Mein großes Liederbuch" published by ArsEdition, which we thank for allowing us to reproduce it.

Interviews in this issue were possible thanks to a spider's web woven by Sawad Hussain, Marcia Lynx Qualey, José Miguel Arrugaeta and Orsola Casagrande. Sawad Hussain and Marcia Lynx Qualey also translated from Arabic to

English, Berna Ozgencil from Turkish / Kurdish to English, José Miguel Arrugaeta and Orsola Casagrande from/to English-Spanish-English and English-Italian-English.

Irish poet Seamas Carraher edited the English version of the magazine.

The layout is by Maider Varela Artesoro.

Photos have been donated by authors to the Global Rights archive and Enrico Palandri's photo is by Giorgia Fiorio.

Leading Kuwaiti writer on pushing back against a season of censorship

KUWAIT HAS BEEN AN OUTLIER AMONG ARAB BOOK FAIRS, WHICH ARE GENERALLY FREE OR FREER SPACES.

DESPITE THE COUNTRY'S VIBRANT AND OUTSPOKEN LITERARY COMMUNITY, SINCE 1998, CENSORSHIP HAS BALLOONED.

A SHORT PIECE IN THE GUARDIAN "IT'S LIKE THEY WERE SELLING HEROIN TO SCHOOLKIDS': CENSORSHIP HITS BOOKSELLERS AT KUWAIT BOOK FAIR," GIVES AN OVERVIEW.

BOTHAYNA AL-ESSA, ALTHOUGH A BEST-SELLING AUTHOR, IS ONLY AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH TRANSLATION IN THE MAGAZINE BANIPAL'S "KUWAIT" ISSUE.

THE AUTHOR IS ALSO A FIERY TWEETER AND ACTIVIST, AND CAN BE FOLLOWED AT @BOTHAYNA_ALESSA. /// Text: Marcia Lynx Qualey

BOTHAYNA AL-ESSA /// KUWAIT

I was recently at the 2016 Sharjah Book Fair and found that, as in other years, there might be books banned in stores in UAE, but they're available in the fair—and similarly elsewhere. There seems to be an unspoken agreement that Arab book fairs are a "free" space. Why not in Kuwait? That's right, many book fairs in the Gulf are now considered free zones, or nearly free at least. This gives organizers a chance to narrow the margins of censorship, to improve the relationship between books and readers, to

revive the literary scene and the intellectual and scientific culture to whatever extent possible. Recently, we've seen nearby fairs growing up with a number of participating publishers and titles, in Sharjah and Abu Dhabi (the Emirates), Muscat (Oman), Riyadh and Jeddah (Saudi Arabia), but the situation is different for Kuwait.

Kuwait has the highest margin of political freedom, and the irony is that this has led to a decline in freedom of expression. Democracy can turn

“In the past years, the Ministry of Information has committed a “literary massacre” against books published in Kuwait, and has banned many of the most important names on the literary scene

on her family, as the ability of militant, fanatical ideas to create political weight cannot be denied. It began in 1998, when Minister of Information Saud Nasser was questioned about four books (by Nasr Hamid Abu Zeid, Ghassan Kanafani, Nawal El Saadawi, and Adonis.) This led to the resignation of the government and a vote of no-confidence.

Since then, the cultural arena has become an ideal place to make political gains and settle political scores.

Kuwait's Publications Law, issued in 2006, allows the Deputy Minister of Information wide latitude to question books, but this censorship process doesn't entail any accountability. To contest a banned book one has to go through a painful and almost eternal

grievance process, which the Ministry of Information never takes seriously not to mention judges or juries. In the past years, the Ministry of Information has committed a “literary massacre” against books published in Kuwait, and has banned many of the most important names on the literary scene, including Saud Alsanousi, Abdullah al-Busais, Laila al-Othman, Mays al-Othman, Abdulwahab al-Hammadi, Dala Mufti, Sarah Mikemi, Arwa Qaqayan, and many others.

At first, we believed that parliament's hawkish bloc of deputies were to blame for the prevention of all these books. But it's unfair to blame them alone, as there is also the Council, which is called the “one-vote council,” which makes rulings that keep the Minister of Information safe from



any questioning, withdrawal of confidence, or accountability. The ban came in parallel with other “security” laws such as the laws monitoring the internet, genetic fingerprinting, and others.

What books are banned in the fair? Why your book?

It's hard to answer this question clearly, because of the Ministry of Information's secrecy around banned books and the reasons for banning them. One study about Kuwaiti book banings was conducted in 2010, and it reported that in 25 percent of the cases, novels were banned; 11 percent poetry; 10 percent for academic studies and research; 6 percent to criticism, memoirs, and biographies; 5 percent to heritage and history; 5 percent political. Twenty-nine percent of banned books aren't identified, but since the

founding of my bookshop and my work in the books sector, I can assure you that these works were literary and intellectual.

In the past six months, nearly 500 books have been submitted to the Ministry of Information. Within three months, the Committee met once and considered eleven books, with one being allowed. That tells us the extent to which this has become a ridiculous situation in Kuwait, where basics like permitting a book are the exception. Why ban books? There are several reasons mentioned in Article 21 of the Publications Act of 2006. The most important are the “maintenance of public order,” the “protection of sanctities” (God and the Emir) and the “preservation of public morals.” There are others who can decide reasons to



“Readers can’t buy my novel from bookstores in Kuwait; it’s sold under the table and exposes the the seller to danger, as though he were selling hash and heroin to schoolkids

As to the ban on my novel, *Wandering Maps*, it violated the “preservation of public morals” because of a scene that depicts child molestation. But other books were banned for more absurd reasons, such as the novel *The Taste of the Wolf* by Abdulallah al-Busais, which was prevented because of words like “thighs” and “pee” and words that you can find in classical Islamic works. Not to mention the ban on the comic novel *Mama Hissa’s Mice*, by Saud Alsanousi, which was accused of violating public order because of his predicting a sectarian war between Sunni and Shi’a in the near future. The recent novel by Abdulwahab al-Hammadi, which was banned, from the standpoint of the government undermines the opposition!

Why is it important to have free access to books at the fair? Can readers buy your book in Kuwaiti shops? Why is it important to have access to books? Because the Arab world is living in extreme times, and we are either amidst civil wars or factions or at the verge. Kuwait is not far from

what’s happening in Yemen or Iraq, and it hasn’t been long since the recent bombing of a Shiite shrine in Kuwait. We need books to refuge extremism and create dialogue, and we need to disagree without risking our futures and the future of our children. We need books because we need to see the world with our own eyes and not the eyes of the censor, because we must step away from being beneath the wing of the “guardian” and seek for ourselves.

Readers can’t buy my novel from bookstores in Kuwait; it’s sold under the table and exposes the seller to danger, as though he were selling hash and heroin to schoolkids.

What can writers do to change this situation of censorship?

The writer cannot be subject to the censor’s logic. What they want is to toss out the essential meaning of literature, which is to needle and create concern, and to put questions to the silence. Real literary work reveals a new aspect of existence, as Milan

ban books in addition to the Ministry of Information, such as the Ministry of Awqaf and Islamic Affairs (for religious books), and the Emir’s Council (for political books).

But the problem is not in the presence of books that fail to preserve public morals or criticize the sanctities. The problem is the broad interpretive powers of the censoring bodies. A book that addresses *Babylonian mythol-*

ogy, for example, is prohibited. *A Brief History of Time* by Stephen Hawking is forbidden.

This is not to mention writers like Nasr Hamed Abu Zeid and Mohamed Arkoun, most of the books about the renewal of religious discourse are suppressed, and at the same time their are fatwas passed legalizing harm to these authors and their expulsion from the religion.

“ We need a political bloc defending our freedoms. Until now, liberal and secular groups have been unable to organize and present a clear narrative

Kundera says, and this can only be achieved by making incursions into “the untold story”: politically, religiously, and socially. The role of art is to break taboos, and to submit to the censor’s logic means the domestication of art and giving up our role.

On a personal level, I find that the best novels are published in Lebanon and prevented in Kuwait, and I would not remove the paragraphs and lines that caused the prevention of my book. I’d prefer to be a source of embarrassment to the Ministry of Information than be subject to a censor’s scalpel.

You recently gave a speech in parliament about the banning of books. Can parliament change the situation of books? Who can change it?

That’s right. I delivered a speech in parliament that was a call for the Council and the government to settle their political accounts outside the cultural arena. We need a political bloc defending our freedoms. Until now, liberal and secular groups have been unable to organize and present a clear narrative. The solution is to

amend the Publications Law of 2006, and this can only happen through the parliament, and the parliament, as we already know, has been kidnapped by the religious.

Hope now lies in the efforts of Sout al Kuwait (Voice of Kuwait), a civil society currently lobbying with the Ministry of Information with hopes in working with them to improve the efficiency of their current book approval system. They have submitted a report including research and a list of 10 suggestions that would revamp and reform the current system.

There are some very strong established novelists in Kuwait ... Will censorship hurt young, new writers?

Yes, the bans hurt – they hurt the writer and the publisher and the bookshop owner and also the reader. For the writer, this causes both physical and moral harm. But no matter how they increase censorship in size or ferocity, I don’t think that even one of us will stop writing. You cannot be a writer and not write. Let the writing, here, stand as a form of resistance.



“

Being different and feeling
your “diversity” enable you to
easily adopt other diversities

”

DILAWER ZERAQ /// KURDISTAN

DILAWER ZERAQ WAS BORN IN AMED (DIYARBAKIR) IN 1965. AFTER GRADUATING FROM DICLE UNIVERSITY MATHEMATICS TEACHING DEPARTMENT, HE WORKED AS A MATHEMATICS TEACHER FOR NEARLY 30 YEARS. SINCE 1995 HE HAS BEEN WORKING ON KURDISH LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND LITERATURE. HIS WORKS MAINLY FOCUS ON KURDISH LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE AND TRANSLATION FROM TURKISH TO KURDISH. HE HAS PUBLISHED 3 SHORT STORY BOOKS, 3 NOVELS, 3 DICTIONARIES, SOCIOLOGICAL AND THEORETIC LITERATURE ANALYSIS AND TRANSLATION WORKS

/// Text: J.M. Arrugaeta - O. Casagrande

When did you start writing?

I started writing in Kurdish in 1995.

Did you ever think you could actually be only a writer?

Let's say this idea has always been part of my life. But since Kurdish literature is not very widespread nor it is in high demand within our society, I always had to do another job in order to sustain myself and get a living.

What are your influences, not just literary, but musical, cinematographic, cultural in general...

First of all, I can say that I was deeply influenced by the fabulous meaning variation and deepness of the Kurdish language, my mother tongue. Of course, Kurdish language itself is the main influence and a key component of indeed why I write. In addition, the diversity of Kurdish music influenced me as much as language itself especially because of its ability to transform sounds into words. On the other hand, the difference between the Kurdish culture and the other cultures in our lands, such as Turkish

and Arab cultures, made me focus more on this difference and work on its roots. This is also the reason why I published a Kurdish-Turkish dictionary of idioms, which consists of 18 thousand idioms, the result of a compilation work of some 20 years.

Can you tell us about your first book? How did you think of it? why did you chose this theme?

My first book is a short stories collection called Kakil (Essence) which I wrote during the difficult period between 1998 and 2001, and was published in 2002.

The book is made up of 9 stories centred on women and children. It deals with the ups and downs in the feelings and thoughts of people who were forced to move to the cities because they were been evacuated from their villages by the army, it tells of their problems, inhumane treatment and inner conflicts these people faced. They had to live in horrible conditions with economic problems in environments they did not know or were familiar with. What made me write this book was a need to tell these

“ I didn't write my trilogy with the idea of exposing a terrible reality, but rather with the idea and effort of making that reality a truth

events and the challenges and problems faced especially by women because of being women.

You then wrote a trilogy dedicated to forced disappearances, people disappeared by paramilitaries and State bodies. What made you decide to fictionalise such a terrible reality?

The Trilogy on the Disappeared is composed by the novels: *Şevên Winda Wêneyên Meçûl* (Lost Nights, Unknown Images), *Mirina Bêsî* (Shadowless Death), *Nexşên Li Giyan* (Embroideries on Soul). I didn't write them with the idea of exposing a terrible reality, but rather with the idea of making that reality become a truth. First of all, the very concept of "disappearance" is itself a source of pain which goes beyond the acute pain of having a close person ending up "missing". It is a pain felt for the disappeared who would not know about this nor would they feel such a pain. The disappeared person doesn't leave behind an "ordinary" death. This is an unacceptable death. It's what I call a "shadowless" death. I used the term "shadowless" because there is no cause of death and no one claims responsibility for this death. The killers are unknown or do not want to be known. Those who are alive are left coping with such a death and have no chance to "mourn" or come to term with this death, and therefore cannot

get over it.

The pain brought along with the disappearance is one that builds up in a "shadowless" place which has no place. In other words and in one sense, this is a pain containing a violence which is not reciprocated because it also contains the hope that the disappeared "could return or be found" at some stage. As this hope develops into a loss of hope day after day, the pain becomes part of the body and heart in which it finally settles. At that point, the term "disappeared" arises and stands up as a reality that "cannot be disappeared" anymore.

In the first book you speak of the Saturday's Mothers, in the second we found ourselves in the '90s, indeed at the time of Vedat Aydın's disappearance. Can you talk more in depth about these books?

As a civil society movement reclaiming rights, the Saturday's Mothers - wives, mothers, sisters and daughters of the disappeared - are the people who suffer most the kind of pain I was talking about earlier. They are not just relatives of the missing people, they are at the same time those who experience this pain for the absence in their hearts, souls and lives. These people are stronger than pain. Because they rejected the process of mourning and coming



to terms with death, they now experience a different type of pain. Refusing to mourn and to accept death makes the pain grow bigger at the same speed the hope that the disappeared "could return one day, could be found at some stage" grows smaller. Still, the heart and soul of these women were stronger than pain. Women dealt with the cause of the pain instead of carrying it inside themselves.

Furthermore, the Saturday's Mothers opened a new public space for the self-expression of Kurdish women, and a

separate struggle for their own existence was fought within this space.

The second novel of the trilogy, *Mirina Bêsî* (Shadowless Death), deals with the real life of Vedat Aydın, a Kurdish politician who was forcibly disappeared in the '90s. His body was found.

Vedat Aydın is indeed the shadow of the "anti-hero". In a way he is the contrary of the "shadowless death" I had mentioned before. The bodies of many of the disappeared people have yet to be found, while Vedat Aydın's body was found, and



buried. He was mourned and the process of accepting his death could go through. So in this second novel, the main theme is a journey from the struggle for democracy and freedom before the 12 September 1980 military coup to the 1990s. The second novel also deals with the process of awareness arousing in the Kurdish society after the 12 September coup until the late 1990s.

In the third novel - Nexşên Li Giyan (Embroideries on Soul) you address the sociopolitical change and transformation process up to the 2000 through four main characters, two boys and two girls who shared their childhood.

In this novel too, as in the other previous ones, I established a relation with the Saturday's Mothers and women and I told about the process of renewal, struggle and rights conquest they went through. In this third book, I tried to tell about women active in the struggle from the point of view of their lives, relations and methods of struggle. I tried to narrate the change, transformation and progress of Kurdish women not through "losses" but "victories".

You write in Kurdish, a forbidden language... What does it mean to you writing in Kurdish?

The meaning of writing in Kurdish is related to the sense of belonging to a language and culture. Belonging to a language, feeling a language and culture, feeling and seeing that the language and culture you belong to make you different from other people; this is what it means. In other words, being different and bearing, realizing and feeling the distinctive cultural characteristics you have, actually allows you to easily accept another diversity and to show positive approaches towards those diversities. For this reason, writing in Kurdish has actually placed me into a more democratic field, more progressive and stronger. In this sense, I have seen that the diversity of people is a richness. Of course, writing in a language that was banned and restricted for years but still found itself a sphere of life and freedom, has enriched and deepened this idea further.

How do you think older generations can pass through to younger generations the importance of learning and keeping the language alive?

In today's world, what is called learning a

Writing in Kurdish has actually placed me into a democratic field, more progressive and stronger

language is a discourse related to which language we are talking about. For sure, the way of learning one's mother tongue is almost the same for any language but the language learned by someone from his/her mother during childhood should be supported with systematic education in mother tongue, and it should be passed on to the next generation. Media, art and literature could provide various support in this regard but all the languages that are not supported by the State or in the education systematically lose strength till they become a bag of bones. All the other solutions and measures will remain as temporary solutions.

Did you suffer censorship for your work?

I have personally experienced no censorship in my writings and in the publication of my books so far.

How are your novels and stories distributed in Turkey? Are there translations of them?

My novels and story books are published by publishing houses that work in Kurdish, and they are distributed with restricted means. None of my books have been translated and published in other languages.

How is the "literary" reality in Kurdish organized? Meaning, Kurdish publishers, cultural magazines, classes of creative writings, cultural programmes

etc..

Apart from publications by publishing houses, the "literary" reality in the Kurdish language amounts to signing readings and panels, although limited. Most importantly, Kurdish authors and their works find the opportunity to meet with their readers at the book fairs, story days and Kurdish language days organized in recent years. Apart from that, some television channels run programmes on language and literature in which they introduce writers and their works to the audience.

The Democratic Autonomy gives the development of language and culture a special place. Culture, different cultures, is what makes a country reach. Yet Turkey is constantly repressing and denying cultural differences. What is the establishment so afraid of?

As a matter of fact, it is not a very easy thing to be aware that diversity actually enriches one who must therefore realize first of all that she/he is "different". Before everything else, realizing your difference is an education and a cultural process.

If a culture and life argues that every existing thing resembles itself, and that all languages derived from it - like the Sun Language Theory created for the Turkish language - and if it dares to boast about this without ever questioning its truth, it would be just ridiculous to expect this culture and such a system to be "democratic".

The situation in Turkey is basically this: the number of people “aware of their differences” is quite low in Turkey, which is why it is not really possible to speak about difference as a richness and less to expect that people experience this richness.

Especially from 1923 to early 2000s, people were systematically indoctrinated with the official ideology of the State by which everyone was the same. When artificial theories such as the Sun Language Theory were added to this, the idea that “everything and everyone is the same” took root and became established in Turkey.

Hence, the answer to the why Turkey fears diversity so much must be sought here, i.e. in the question “Is it a negative or a positive thing to be different in Turkey?”. The answer to this question is before everybody’s eyes, just look at the policy and actions of the Turkish State.

Going back to your writing, how is your creation process: how do you write? At home, outside, with music...

The process of creation is sometimes quite enjoyable, and sometimes very difficult and painful. This is actually related to what I am writing. I write all my works at home. While writing my novels and stories I feel the need to close myself to all the outside voices and sounds and I just listen to my inner voice. When I deal with a dictionary or translation work, it happens to be only classical western music that accompanies me.

And in terms of a story? Does a character come first? Or is it the plot to come first?

The plot and the characters cannot be considered separate for me. In every story and novel they grow and develop simultaneously. However, in some circumstances, the plot can influence the character or vice versa.

Do you feel part of a generation of Kurdish writers? Do Kurdish writers meet? Do they have a space to meet? An organization, a cultural, institution, like writers’ union or writers’ organization...

In 1992, the Kurdish language gained some freedom after years of ban. At that time a magazine called *Rewşen* began to be published. It lasted till the early 2000s. I wrote articles for this magazine between 1992 and 2002, and I called the writers who gathered around this magazine “*Rewşen* Generation”. I am considering myself a writer of this generation. Kurdish writers get together at some language and literary events. Meetings at organizations like book fairs and panel discussions also allow writers to meet and discuss their problems and wishes.

How would you define the Kurdish literary scene? Not just in North Kurdistan but in all four parts of Kurdistan?

As the Kurdish land is divided into four parts, the Kurdish language has also been torn apart. Literature from the areas where the Sorani dialect of Kurdish is spoken and written (South Kurdistan, northern Iraq) has remained virtually unknown for a long time.



We can say that, despite the problems, Kurdish literature is making a slow progress in every part of Kurdistan

Today, efforts are made to overcome this situation through interlinguistic translations between dialects. For this reason the current situation of Kurdish literature is the same as the situation of the Kurdish language. There is still not a lot of literature and works produced in different parts of Kurdistan. This is especially true in North Kurdistan (Turkish Kurdistan) where the Kurdish language is not yet fully recognized by the National Education system.

In short we can say that Kurdish literature is making very slow progress, nevertheless it is growing despite the limited resources and all the limitation in every part of Kurdistan.

Any interesting writers/books you would suggest?

I would certainly recommend the novels and stories written by Helîm Yûsiv, Sebrî Silêvanî, Şener Özmen and Eta Nehayî, and the poems of Berken Bereh.

How would you describe the literary scene in Turkey? Any exchange between Turkish and Kurdish writers?

Turkish literature in Turkey has reached a very high level. I am of the opinion that the same progress will also apply

to Kurdish literature when Kurdish becomes a language thought in schools. I regret to say that we do not have much exchange or close relation with Turkish writers.

This, I believe, is because writers in Turkish literature fail to show the skill of “being aware of the diversity” I have mentioned before. They do not seek to establish relationship with Kurdish writers over language and literature.

“

At the beginning I don't know
which story I will tell, but I
feel its body

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ENRICO PALANDRI /// ITALY

ENRICO PALANDRI WAS BORN IN VENICE IN 1956. HIS FATHER WAS A CAREER OFFICER AND ENRICO GREW UP IN SEVERAL CITIES UNTIL THE UNIVERSITY YEARS WHEN HE MOVED TO LONDON WHERE HE LIVED 23 YEARS BEFORE RETURNING TO VENICE. "I SHOULD SAY RATHER BEFORE COMING TO LIVE IN VENICE," HE POINTS OUT, "AS IT WAS NOT REALLY MY CITY BEFORE 2003." IN RECENT YEARS HE COMMUTES BETWEEN LONDON AND VENICE REGULARLY

/// Text: Orsola Casagrande

When and how did you start writing?

I've always written something since childhood. In my teens I wrote songs that I accompanied with guitar, then I began to write prose and poetry. Unfortunately, I sing much less now, or rather I sing in my mind when I'm writing. I still love songs, but it does not happen anymore, as it did when I was younger, that an evening ends singing songs. When I went to Bologna to study I started writing in a more structured way. Since then I have not really stopped, I've always had projects and every time I sit at the table, which happens almost every day, I always have something to write about, a project to work on, and even if I do not write, I have something in mind, an idea, I imagine it, I wait for it to take shape.

What are your literary and cultural references?

At the beginning, when I was 14, there were a lot of Bob Dylan and Joan Baez. As long as I remained an Italian boy I fed on a lot of American literature; moving to London meant instead an opening up of

things. I mean I took in in a better way our literature, from Dante to Tasso and Ariosto and above all Leopardi. But it also meant reading Proust, Tolstoy, so many great authors. I have also always read ancient Greek and Latin literature. From Virgil to Homer to Marcus Aurelius or Tacitus. As to music, things changed around the age of twenty: I first started listening to the Italian Opera, then chamber music. I ended up trying to play some music, first with violin, then with piano. So while with the guitar I play mostly songs, on the piano I learned about twenty pieces by Mozart, Beethoven, Bach. Having not done proper studies I don't understand all that I play, but this has allowed me to get a little closer to chamber music, to understand it better. I've always loved cinema, but its influence has always been less profound. I like Hitchcock movies or, in recent years, the Scandinavian cinematography, say of the last twenty years, especially Andersson and Ostlund. Unfortunately though when it comes to films that seemed so illuminating thirty years ago, like Tarkovskij's, I struggle to

understand what was so interesting to me then. I believe that because of the wideness of the text, which includes dialogues, images, music, costumes and so on, a film grabs your attention and generates passion at once. Nevertheless it also ages quicker because the songs appear dated, clothes out of fashion: just what had appealed to us with such immediacy, quickly appears foreign. It would happen the same with novels, I guess, if we could listen to the songs Flaubert was listening to or the manierism of Abbot Prevost, but we do not see them. We read of feelings that remain, or seem to remain, much more similar, generation after generation.

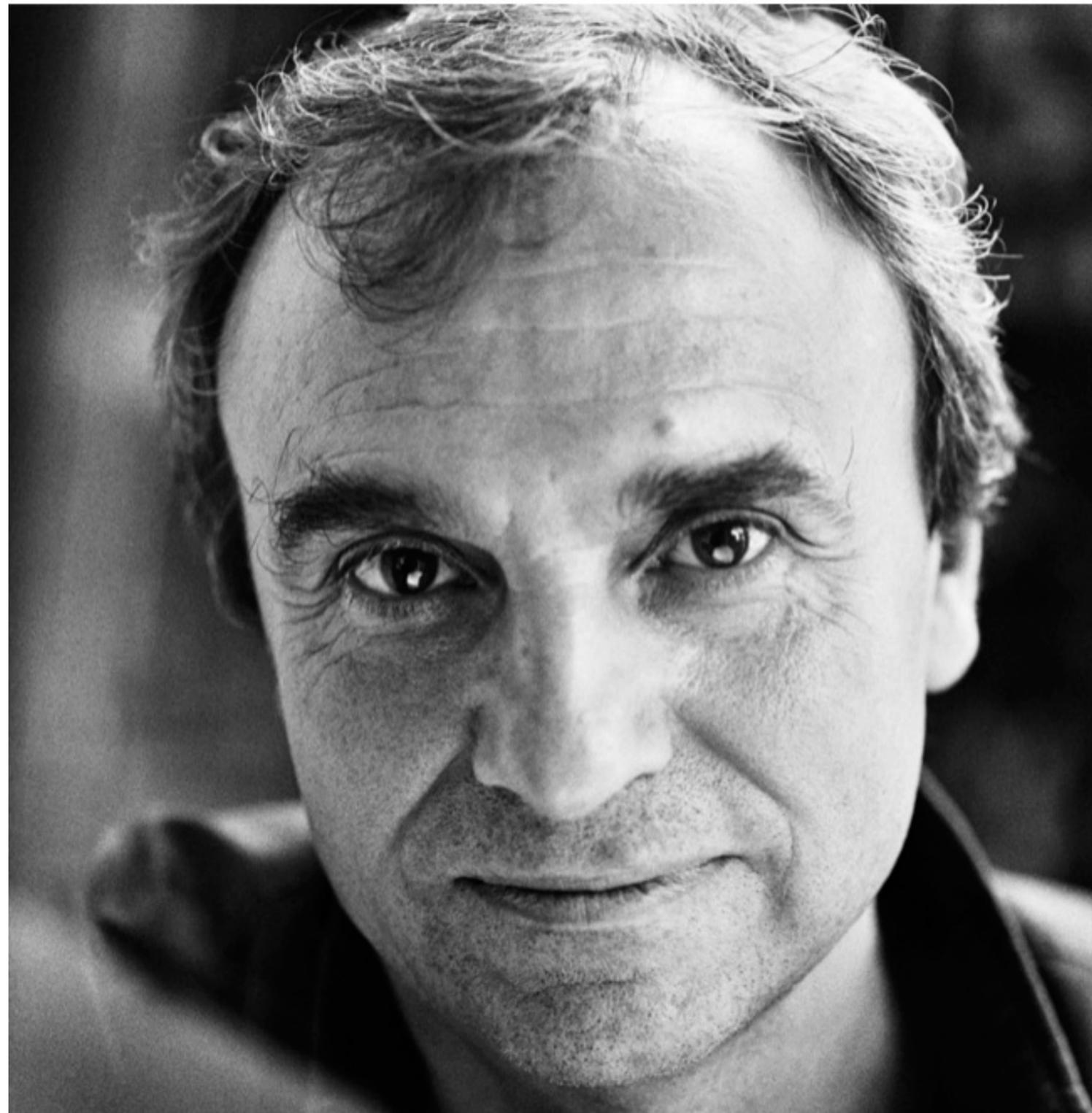
How do you choose the story to tell? Do characters come first? Can you describe your creative process

It all begins with a nucleus. For example, *nostalgia* (for *Le vie del ritorno*, or saying goodbye to youth for *Angela prende il volo*). I think about it without knowing exactly what story I will tell but I feel the consistency of it, its weight. I feel there is something worth exploring. In the case of *Le vie del ritorno* the book actually started with what is now the second chapter, in which the two protagonists speak on Skye Island and begin to investigate what it means to be foreign to each other. From there the other chapters were born, in a quite articulated way. In the end I built a frame. In the case of *Angela prende il volo*, on the contrary, I played with the material without writing much for a few months. Then one day I gave a lift to Ophelia Redpath (who made the cover of Feltrinelli) from Cambridge to London, and she told me about her father's death. I did not know her particularly well, but that story has somehow kick-

started the story I wanted to tell, which I then wrote quite quickly, in a couple of years - which is very little time for me. I think that every book writes itself once it has found the point from where it can flow to the surface. Sometimes it takes more effort.

The story, the plot, are important if they really are the way the nucleus needs to walk to develop itself, otherwise they risk being a superficial element that gives the feeling of a movement that does not really take place. Sometimes this has happened, not in the novels I published but in others I had to give up. As you move on you push your material, and you are pushed by it, until the shape it has taken can no longer be touched because it has grown apart from you. In this sense, the plot is more important than anything else because it is the real "narrator" in the novel.

Characters in the novel are usually friends, whom I love for some time. I try to address problems from their point of view. Some have a pretty real life model at the beginning. As you work on, however, this resemblance becomes less obvious, their connection is with the internal motivations of that character, his relationship with the circumstances and situations of the novel, and inevitably he ends up leaving behind the initial model. I would not say that there is a creative process that repeats itself: the only constant thing is work. Sitting down to write, which I do every day for one reason or another. Deciding that between all the things that happen, the time you spend earning yourself a living, trying to be present and available in the human relationships that make you the



person you are, it is necessary to defend a time (and a lot of time!) to give life to imaginary characters and stories you do not quite know where they will end up but who are asking you to work. Then every novel has its own sailing diary that would be complicated to explain, and probably not very interesting.

How important is language in your narrative?

In the novel it is a consequence of choices that are made more thoroughly. Semanticism is controversy among different territories, some unconscious, other conscious, some linked to historical and public events, and other very private. The nucleus I mentioned above is a semantic nucleus. Attached to this, while the discourse tries to develop, are the syntactic and lexical questions that ultimately become the voice of the book. I think it's my voice in the end, but getting there is a long and never completely satisfactory way. That is why I would say it is a consequence of many problems we had to face and to which we have tried to answer.

I think *Boccalone* and *I fratelli minori* are two important novels in many ways: on the one hand they tell about two different periods of Italian history, different and yet linked. *Boccalone* tells us about Bologna and Italy in the late 1970s, while *I fratelli minori* tells us of the "heirs" of those years, who also had to deal, somehow, with the disappointments of the previous generation. Can you tell us about the genesis of these two novels, also for readers who possibly have not read them *Boccalone* [the nickname of the protagonist. Ndr] recounts what happened to him in a year, the love story with Anna

and the crisis of the student movement. By telling it, he discovers forms, similarities, all that can emerge around the nucleus. An immediate and quite effective book.

I fratelli minori is obviously a more meditated book: it closes a long cycle in which I have spoken of uprooting. I have chosen three moments, in 1976, in 2003, and in an unspecified year after that. 1976 and 2003 were years of drought and the lack of water, the sense of suffocation, the need to return to life are the true thread uniting the different stories I tell. Overwhelming the characters is the feeling that others, the older brothers, both literal and metaphorical, have lived before us, for us, what was then hard to live. There are obviously no older brothers, in this sense. Water is denied to all people by something bigger, drought, in fact. But in the evolution of these characters, the older brother was also what prevented or in any way cluttered the relationship with the mother and father, intertwined intimacy, which was therefore clandestinely developed, not as a challenge to history but as an escape. I better stop here or I write another novel answering this question.

How would you define the state of health of Italian literature? Have you read anything interesting lately?

If we talk about novel, the Italian novel has lived an important post-war season when it suddenly found readers. This season has developed consistently, with various results throughout the following period. There have been genres, ranging from politics to sentimentalism, from mafia to political stories. This, I believe, is a rather healthy situation, even though I don't know the sales numbers. Whether

Only country with a good level of education and serious cultural investment can rely on democracy

there will be great writers coming out of this, posterity will tell. Certainly Shakespeare cannot be imagined without the Elizabeth theatre or Verdi without the Italian Opera having developed the way it did.

And what about publishers policy? Are they just betting on "safe" titles or is there someone who takes "risks"?

I think there is here a quite interesting scene, with many different vocations.

Literary and more in general cultural magazines have virtually disappeared. Why? Is it really a market problem?

Magazines are the voice of groups. Therefore they are often to be found in cities, where editorial committees meet and discuss on how to elaborate and propose a cultural and political discourse. I've been involved in some very nice experiences. Today I wouldn't know where to begin from. The friends I've made politics with and I have written with have kind of grown apart. I hear from them pretty regularly, or at least from some of them, half a dozen, but I don't know if making a magazine is what we would like. We will see, anything can be...

For years now Italy has not invested in

culture (nor education). What can we do to reverse this trend before it's too late? Or is it already too late?

Only a country with a good level of education and serious cultural investment can rely on democracy. If there is no efficient education system, we find ourselves with populist political leaders who can promise they won't make us pay taxes or other unrealistic things, to obtain consensus without being accountable for their choices. We are governed by sport teams and cheap music festivals, people talking rubbish at every political debate in order to delegitimize it.

Even in the digital world (blog, social network) there is not so much ferment in Italy, as opposed to Ireland, for instance, where new writers (say from 30 to 50 years old) are also active in the net as well as in a thousand initiatives, conferences, readings. Is culture considered something "elitist"?

I don't know. I'm a bit outside the age range you describe... It seems inevitable having to pay a price for Berlusconi's twenty years in which society has lost the ethical and progressive character, good or bad, that it had acquired after the war. In the classroom, however, I always find young smart people, thirsty

enrico palandri
BOCCALONE

storia vera piena di bugie



BOMPIANI

“It seems inevitable having to pay a price for Berlusconi’s twenty years in which society has lost the ethical and progressive character that it had acquired after the war”

for ethics and understanding, so I’m not pessimistic about Italy.

In a recent interview, Irish writer Paul Murray said he would like to see more political involvement. And he added: “It’s very hard to write about politics, and you are sort of not supposed to write about politics, but as George Orwell said: “Believing politics has no place in art is in itself a political statement”. And it seems a political statement a lot of people here seemed to have swallowed. A lot of the books coming out are set in the country, are actually quite nostalgic, they tell of an ideal country, not the real one of the banks, the crisis, the homeless”. What would you comment on this?

It seems to me he is right, but as I told you I don’t think you really decide what you will write. Everything is political, in a sense. It is born deeply and we are obviously made of that, even when we do not want it. Precisely because politics is so deeply a part of what we are I can’t stand propaganda, wanting to declare yourself through left or right common places for fear of being seen as traitor or to earn some easy progressist card. Each of us is political, living in circumstances that ask him to act with intelligence, humanity, respecting the principles.

What do you think of literary prizes? Uruguayan writer Ramiro Sanchiz told recently in an interview with GR magazine: “I don’t believe in prizes: more often, it seems to me, they actually impoverish the publishing environment. Under these circumstances, and because printing in Uruguay is expensive, publishers have to survive as businesses and this implies not taking risks, publishing sure things, conservative works, most of them forgettable or only justified by the fact that they won the prize”

I agree. Leo Longanesi said: it’s not enough not to win them, it’s necessary to not deserve them. Even the Nobel Prize to Bob Dylan is somehow grotesque from this point of view, as if he needed to bow to thank the master for the good mark he gave him. The violence of the prize is precisely in this assuming that someone can reward you. And who is this? Literature? The circle of charity ladies? The big left or big right? Tradition? The revolution?

Prizes are part of the editorial mechanism and part of the political one, it would be nice if we could leave them behind us, but for now it seems difficult.

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The chronicle of our times
must be written one and
a thousand times

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FERNANDO BUTAZZONI /// URUGUAY

FERNANDO BUTAZZONI WAS BORN IN MONTEVIDEO IN 1953. HE WAS A MILITANT OF THE TUPAMAROS GUERRILLA ORGANIZATION AND ALREADY IN EXILE HE PARTICIPATED AS AN INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEER TO THE SANDINISTA FRONT WHO SUCCEEDED IN DEFEATING SOMOZA'S DICTATORSHIP IN NICARAGUA IN 1979. HIS LITERARY CAREER BEGINS IN THIS SAME YEAR WITH THE PRIZE AWARDED BY CASA DE LAS AMERICAS OF CUBA. IN 2014 HE WON URUGUAY'S NATIONAL LITERATURE AWARD, BORTOLOMÉ HIDALGO, FOR HIS MONUMENTAL HISTORICAL NOVEL, LAS CENIZAS DEL CONDOR, (CONDOR'S ASHES). HE CURRENTLY RESIDES IN HIS HOMETOWN

/// Text: J.M.A. - O.C.

How were your childhood and youth?

I was born in Montevideo, at a time when this city was a big village, elegant and European, but still a village. My maternal grandfather was a vegetable seller and I remember going with him around the main streets of the capital. This memory could be a good summary of my childhood, a time full of material poverty, diversion and adventures. It was a wonderful time.

As for my youth, the fact is that I was arrested when I was 16 years old for attending a student demonstration. Beatings, tear gas, and jail. This made me see how things worked. I worked during the day and I was studying at night. I saw the injustices and I was a restless boy.

What were you reading back then?

When I was seven I became ill of hepatitis. At home we did not have a television - I don't even think there was one in the rest of Uruguay! - so I was given magazines and books for children. Here's how it started, with one of the books in the Robin Hood collection. I was quick: I read Defoe, Dickens, Hope. And then there was "Bomba, the Jungle Boy," which was a series of adventure books written by such a Roy Rockwood, who was actually the pseudonym of a publisher who was devoting himself to writing children's books. In this way, since I was a child, I also learned something about editorial business. But I'm grateful to this publisher, because from that moment on I never stopped reading and I think reading is one of the best oc-



cupations the human being can have.

Let's move forward to the years of your militancy, first in Tupamaros

My joining the MLN came in the middle of a climate of great political agitation in Uruguay, with repression on the streets, political prisoners, persecuted opponents, and in many cases murdered, and a government that listened only to itself. I was a kid and this government accused all of us of being a minority and being part of an international conspiracy to overthrow it, obviously with foreign aid and money. It was all false, but that was the envi-

ronment. Pacheco Areco was not technically a dictator, he was a despot, an authoritarian who manipulated the Constitution to his liking and pleasure. This is the origin of my tupamara militancy, which ended on March 15, 1985, the day when the last political prisoners of the dictatorship came out of prison.

And in Nicaragua, during the Sandinist Revolution?

Nicaragua has to do with a more mature and more responsible solidarity commitment. Nicaraguan tyranny was not only the oldest in America,

“The project of the lefts is going nowhere different from where the project of the right went: capitalism, more or less wild or civil, more or less humanitarian

but it was also the fiercest. It was something almost gothic: isolation cells, tortures, people thrown to lions. And let it be clear that it's not a metaphor: I've seen lions holes in El Chipote, the human bones. To overthrow this dictatorship, institutionalize this country again and convene general elections seemed to me a good fight manifesto.

What is the value of militancy today, in the broadest sense of the term?

The value of truth. This is one of the great problems we have had with militancy. It was the source of conflicts, divisions and struggles. There is no debate because there is no self-criticism. It happened among the European communist militants and is happening today among the Left militants in general in Latin America. There is no quality debate because there is no genuine collective approach to possible truths. There are analysis of reality, but truth is another thing. In many languages reality and truth are synonymous, but they should not be. The truth of facts is not

Aristotelian. Nietzsche wrote in one of his letters that “there are no facts but interpretations”. He exaggerated, however, it is a statement that serves to show that not everything is born and dies in Aristotle. Likewise not everything is born and dies in Marx. A communist society is an utopia because it is anti-dialectical: its coming would entail a freezing, an elimination of the conflict and social antagonisms that are the true engines of human history, just as Marx teaches.

Managua, July 19, 1979: The Sandinists take the capital. What do you remember about those days?

I remember the people's eyes, free and without fear. It was exciting to see all those people celebrating in the streets dancing and singing without fear. The city was devastated. There were still corpses on the streets, smoking barricades. There was no electricity or food. They had been four or five days of nightmare, but at the same time of great happiness. In the air, what you were breath-

ing was freedom. It's an unmistakable perfume, I remember it perfectly.

How do you assess the current situation in the region?

I assess it very critically. The project of the lefts is going nowhere different from where the project of the right went: capitalism, more or less wild or civil, more or less democratic, more or less humanitarian. In many cases, among other things, there are political processes and leaders who consider themselves to the leftwing, but who remind me very much of Jorge Pacheco Areco, who was far right. The Latin American left almost does not think. More than ideas what circulate are attempts, or a rather primary anti-imperialism, as enthusiastic as infantile.

The left seems incapable of producing real alternatives to a capitalism in structural crisis but still fierce...

I have a problem: I have always been left but dysfunctional, atypical, heterodox. In 1990 I strongly criticized the government of Cuba and the turn the Revolution had taken, which brought me some kind of condemnation from some part of the left. In 2003, when those who condemned me fired against Fidel Castro, I supported Cuba and this caused many right-wing intellectuals to attack me. Now, it's been years that I say that neither Ortega is Sandinist, nor in Ven-

euela there is a revolution. Everyone looks at me in a weird way. But yes, I believe that the left has not generated valid alternatives to capitalism. The Soviet project failed, the Cuban project failed, the only thing left to us is to rebuild an alternative, but this will take decades and will be the work of future generations, which we hope will learn from our mistakes.

When and why did you start writing?

I could not do anything else. I was exiled, in a sort of double exile: exiled in Cuba and, inside Cuba, I was "exiled" to Holguin, some 800 kilometers from Havana, where most of my fellow fighters were. So I told myself: let's begin to tell a few stories. I wrote some stories, I sent them to the Casa de las Americas Prize and won the lottery! I was awarded the Prize in 1979. Shortly afterward, I went to Nicaragua for the final offensive in the Southern Front.

What do you consider to be your cultural influences in general?

Casa de las Americas, in the first place. I was fortunate enough to work there for a couple of years in the early 1980s. It was like a bag of high cultural studies. There I met the cream of Latin American culture, I had a close relationship with many of the most important creators of that time, from Julio Le Parc to Cortazar. And I was very close to Fernandez

Retamar, who was a source of teaching and permanent diversion. There were also books, novels that marked me and then ballet. I was, and I'm, a great ballet fan, and from classical dance I learned a simple and strong thing that helped me a lot in my writing: beauty is a consequence of the proper functioning of a certain artistic mechanism. It is not the cause, but the consequence. Literature is the same: Borges' poetry is beautiful because it works perfectly. The same is true of "Hundred Years of Solitude" or "The Old Man and the Sea". On the other hand, I am also a deeply admirer of the founders of what was later called "New Journalism". These founders were Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Vasetti and Carlos Maria Gutierrez. The others, Capote, for example, came after. The real inventors of this mix between journalistic reportage and narrative fiction were those three.

How do you write?

Basically, everything that happens in my life between seven o'clock in the morning and five in the afternoon is work, even when I have some meetings or I go for a walk with my older grandchildren, or converse with Lucy, my wife, about this and that. This means that all that happens, in one way or another, ends up in the "pot", and is part of the soup. Then comes the writing that,

fortunately, is a process I don't know exactly how is produced. I never wanted to disassemble this apparatus, for fear of not being able to put it back together.

What are the most important elements in your writing?

Everything is related to everything. When a story does not work is because there is something that does not fit well in the mechanism. The story and the characters are almost two faces of the same coin: there is no one without the others. Then there is the tone, the palette with which you work. And the approach, which for me is very important. To put it in cinematic language, where do you have to put the camera? Accordingly, certain things will appear in the picture and others will not be seen. In a good story, almost nothing is described. It's there but is not told. It's the old Hemingway's iceberg theory. I don't like to confuse the reader with "various cameras". If there is a frame that works, fine. This is the one that stays. Clearly everything is literature, that is, words.

You have to choose the words carefully, because every word is sacred and has an extraordinary value. Books are ruined because the author has poorly chosen a few words. I always remember the phrase "presumptuous mice" in one of Faulkner's first novels. For god

There are many good women writers and some good men writers among young people. One of the problems that Uruguayan literature has is its endogamy

sake! It was Faulkner. Of course I read it after he had already been converted into a magnificent writer, and Nobel Prize. But in any case... a sentence like that ruins a story. Presumptuous mice? Who can think of writing such a terrible thing? Well, William Faulkner.

Do you feel part of a literary generation?

Yes, yes. But I don't know which one. It is not a matter of nationality or geography. There is a little bit of this, more a rebel spirit, more a feeling of belonging to the Latin American universe, more a way of conceiving literature, not just as a wonderful entertainment but also as a way of seeing and explaining the world we live in. It is a complicated generation to define and delimit, but it has to exist, no doubt.

How do you consider Uruguayan contemporary literature?

Younger people excite me. There are many good women writers and some good men writers among young people. One of the problems that Uruguayan

literature has is its endogamy. In this regard, I think we are a bit closed and we end up creating products with a series of tare that are the result of this endogamy: I read you and you read me. As Gelman wrote: "My god / how beautiful we were."

Let's talk about *Las Cenizas del Cóndor* (The Condor's Ashes). How does the idea of the book came about?

Just as I say in the book. I led and directed one of the most important journalistic programs of that time in Uruguay. Let's say I was a sort of a "star" of journalism. One day, a boy asked me for help. He told me he thought he was the son of desaparecidos. My only literary merit was journalistic: looking for and pulling the bundle with patience until I broke these twigs, which were in fact two. Because the boy who asked me for help at the end was not what he believed to be. Everything was different or even more messy. More amazing and more painful.

Ten years of work...



Yes because my sources took their time before accepting me, trusting and telling me their stories. Then I had to corroborate if what they had told me was true, and to do so I had to refer to another source, then to another and another. And the icing on the cake has been fitting in Katia Liejman's character in this story. It was not just about tracking it but also giving it plausibility, because, even to me, Katia's story, a KGB analyst missing in Buenos Aires, seemed unrealistic. But it was not.

This book presents an entire era, that of the Plan Cóndor, the connections between dictatorships. Why is it important to rebuild this period so hard

and violent?

The memory, the chronicle of our times must be written one and a thousand times. It has to be revised and written again. Every day new documents appear and this not only sheds light on some things, but also changes the approach. Let's say that until recently we were enlightened by the reality of the facts. Now we can cross this reality with the light of truth.

In the book there is an "Italian part", which has to do with Neo-fascism, with Gladio, with Borghese. How did you approach this Italian connection? Licio Gelli, the Italian factotum of Gladio, had many connections with Uruguay.

“ Selective oblivion is a natural tendency of society and people

Let's say they were intimate relationships. One of these relations points to one: Umberto Ortolani, his favorite banker, who lived in Uruguay. Gelli's son, among other things, is today Ambassador of Nicaragua to Uruguay... What do you think? And then there are the facts, the truth of the facts: Valerio Borghese met with Pinochet, Delle Chiaie was in Chile and Buenos Aires at that time. They were Gladio. I must point out that there is a lot of very important information on this, especially acts and resolutions of the Italian Parliament, the Belgian Parliament, and the justice of Rome. I had to read all of this material, flatly, also because the French is not my language. This is another reason why it took me so long to write the book: the resolutions. I must have read something like twelve or fourteen thousand pages of resolution. Now I've everything scanned and digitalised, otherwise Lucy kills me...

A book that is a novel and at the same time a detailed analysis and inquiry that manages to keep a constant tension...

We return to the three wonderful monsters: Garcia Marquez, Masetti and Gutierrez. Investigative journalism is, or can be, literature and this offers

some possibilities in terms of narrative. Already in 1984, when the first version of "El tigre y la neve" was done, you could see this idea. The journalist and fiction writer are the same person. They asked me: is this fiction? Is it a reportage? And the answer I feel to give is this: what does it matter? I love the novel label, but labels generally serve for little, except to avoid taking the wrong medicine.

Do you think there is a selective oblivion of that period? To what extent was justice served?

Selective oblivion is a natural tendency of society and people. In our case this tendency has been strengthened by a repeated sermon that for years intended to infuse fear. In any case, societies are not just governments, not just military, or just political parties. There are many factors that interact. In Uruguay we had two plebiscites to derogate from laws that provided impunity to human rights violators. Both times we lost. Justice has come down drop by drop, like reconciliation. There are hate professionals everywhere and they do not want any justice nor any reconciliation. But the lack of progress in justice is the responsibility of all Uruguayan society.

It is very convenient to blame "the military," when in reality all of us, one way or the other, must assume our responsibilities, action, omission, indolence or cowardice.

In this sense, Colombia is currently in the process of implementing a peace process where the concept of "reconciliation" is one of the crucial milestones for its success. To what extent would this process be different from those experienced in the south of the continent? The key thing is that many years have passed. Colombians face the experiences of Argentina, Uruguay, Chile ... Of the whole continent, almost. Every process is particular and I do not know in detail the Colombian one. But I, who fought in a war, I think peace is the most praiseworthy goal of all.

In a world where identity seems to be in a deep crisis, how to reclaim and re-define this concept? What is identity for you?

Identity is the ability and the possibility to be aware of who I am, wherever I find myself. It is a concept intimately related to freedom. Being free is to have identity. And having identity basically is to be free. I find every day more irrational the attempts to limit people's individual freedoms. This is my identity: freedom.

What do you feel about the current armed conflicts that seem to emphasize the destruction of cultures and the annihilation of minorities?

Well, my answer will necessarily be dysfunctional, because as I said, that's the way I am. An example is the Arab-Israeli conflict. It is true that Palestinians have

full rights to build a state, their state. At the same time it is true that Jews are a minority in the Middle East and have for decades faced wars of higher or lesser intensity whose declared goal is to erase them from the map. Personally I think the Jewish minority is entitled to exist and that we cannot allow Jewish culture to be persecuted or eliminated by a large majority of Muslim believers. It's just an example, but it shows the need to defend the weakest. It is clear that the present government of Israel is the worst thing that could happen to this area. Netanyahu is going around with a bucket of gas in the middle of a fire. But governments come and go (or at least, so it should be). Peoples, such as the Palestinians, Israelis, Syrians or Iraqis, are the ones who suffer the hegemonic demise. Defending minorities is to defend hood and sword all the different, not just those of my side. Defend sexually, intellectually different, those who say no, those who think differently.

What role can culture play in resolving conflicts?

I think it can play a role in conflict prevention. Culture is relation. It drive people close. unite. Ignorance, isolation, lack of relations, get people bitter and make it violent and worried. Culture is useful to the extent that it makes us think, something very rare nowadays. Just see the presidents we have: Trump, Putin, Rajoy, Maduro, Ortega... it seems the cast for "The Planet of the Monkeys". This list, which could be extended, is composed of presidents who in any case have been elected by citizens. It doesn't speak very well of us, voters and citizens.

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More than writing stories, I tell them

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SONIA NIMR /// PALESTINE

PALESTINIAN HISTORIAN, ACADEMIC, AND AWARD-WINNING AUTHOR DR. SONIA NIMR HAS WRITTEN MORE THAN A DOZEN CHILDREN'S AND YA BOOKS FOR CHILDREN, INCLUDING THE 2014 ETISALAT PRIZE FOR ARABIC CHILDREN'S LITERATURE-WINNING WONDROUS JOURNEYS IN STRANGE LANDS (RIHLAT AJEEBA FI AL-BILAD AL-GHAREEBA). HER GHADDAR THE GHOUL AND OTHER PALESTINIAN STORIES IS IN ENGLISH. WE MET DR NIMR AT EMIRATES LITFEST FOR A SERIES OF WORKSHOPS AND EVENTS

/// Text: Marcia Lynx Qualey



You began writing in an Israeli prison in the mid-1970s?

I wrote two stories when I was in Israeli prison, but both were confiscated. Then I thought, Ah! I could write children's books.

Why children?

I didn't know then. I just felt: This is what I want to write. I was 20 then.

Later, when I went to the British Museum, I wrote two stories in English, and they both are based on Palestinian folktales. They were not published [in English], so they were published in Arabic in 1996 by Tamer Institute.

And you know now, why you chose to write for children?

I turned 62 yesterday, but I am 16. I never tried to suppress the child inside me—I kept it always there. It pops up every now and then, in books and otherwise. I'm a professor at Birzeit University, and there again sometimes the child comes up in my lectures.

What's the relationship between you as a historian who has gathered oral histories, and you as an author of books for young people?

Oral history is my professional career, but I'm sure meeting people and listening to their stories must have affected me one way or another, although I did not collect stories.

You said, in a journal article, that folktales and traditional storytelling suffered a setback in the refugee camps.

After 1948, when people went to the camps, they needed different, realistic stories. Not because they don't like folktales. Because they wanted to revive the Palestine they lost. So these [folktales] were substituted by stories of how we left Palestine, the journey of suffering: how was our homeland, our home, our garden. It was a mix between oral history and the new stories



that people needed to transmit to the next generation.

You're bringing back folktales?

I can't pretend that I'm bringing them back because there are academics who have studied them in proper anthropological books.

As far as I'm concerned, I wanted to bring back folktales to the children in a new form. Having said that, the original ones are not always polite and they're not always politically correct. So what I'm trying to do is to rewrite the folktales—I keep the spirit, the magic, but at the same time I rewrite it...to be approved by librarians.

Are there red lines that hold you back?

No, not really. For one reason: Folktales in Palestine were not told for children, they were told for adults. The

old women who told stories never refrained from mentioning body parts, bodily functions. This doesn't hold me back, it just gives me the opportunity to reform the story.

If wanted to keep the story in its original form, I would put it in an anthropology book.

You do wonderful live storytelling. And in your books, you use techniques that seem to come from the world of oral storytelling.

In children's books I try to keep rhyme. Sometimes, I feel the music in the story gives the children more interest in the story. Not in the young adults, of course.

But definitely, rather than writing a story, I'm telling the story. It's storytelling rather than story-writing.

Both when you do children's and young adult?

Yes, both. When you read my books in Arabic, you're listening to a story, actually. This is how I like to write.

How do you feel the relationship between fos7a (Modern Standard Arabic) and 3ameya (colloquial, spoken Arabic) when you're writing books for children?

This was a big argument back in Palestine. Most of my children's books were written in colloquial. At the same time, they're not heavy colloquial. They're closer to the standard Arabic—but they are in colloquial. I thought if I want to write in rhyme, in colloquial, then I'm keeping the music and the magic. Children relate more to colloquial. Not because colloquial is better, but because standard Arabic, for some children, reminds them of...

School?

Schoolbooks. And they don't like schoolbooks, because they're boring. But then again it depends on the type of story I'm telling, because some of my books are not in colloquial but in standard Arabic.

Palestinian children's and YA literature is more vibrant a space than in most other Arab-majority countries. Why is that? Tamer Institute?

Not only Tamer Institute. For the past 20 years or so, we've realized how important it is to give a different literature to children. Think of it as part of the resistance. Well, it's not like it's my agenda to resist. But somehow it's in the background that we want to give them something different.

Life is bleak in Palestine under occupa-

tion. It's not a happy life. So children's writers try to make their stories not only vibrant, but also colorful, magical. To let the children know there are other worlds.

How can Arabic children's & YA literatures reach more audiences and become more accessible?

Actually, one thing I have to say for Tamer Institute is that they distribute children's books to all schools, even to Gaza.

Certainly not all countries have this. What difference does it make, having real children's literature in the schools, vs. just textbooks?

In the past 10 years, children have started to have book discussions, which is really nice. It gives you, as an author, feedback—usually honest feedback—from children. The whole idea of discussing books means that your opinion matters. And that makes them understand that children matter and their opinions matter.

Do prizes matter in developing more YA literature?

I'm not sure, actually. I have a new book out called *The Phoenix*. Since it was published two months ago, I've already had several meetings with children and young adults, at schools and libraries, to get their feedback and to discuss the book with them. For me, this is what matters.

Forget about the adults, because the adults have their own weird, cynical ideas. But young adults get the book the way you really want to say it.

You wouldn't write a book for adults?

Oh, I've been writing one, I haven't finished it yet. It's not exactly a novel, nor

is it a memoir. It's: How did I see Palestine as I was growing up. As I was growing up, Palestine changed, I changed. I'm trying to finish it. Chunks of it were published in journals.

Do you use your personal stories when writing for children?

No. My personal stories don't matter, actually. I want to tell them something different. But on the other hand, I'm sure that somehow, even when I write for young adults, I come up somehow, one way or the other: commenting on things, making a joke here and there, which is my personality.

What kind of feedback do you get from kids?

For example, last week, I was in Bethlehem. I had a book discussion at the Aida Refugee Camp.

So these kids were from a refugee camp, thirty of them. They were very excited to tell me what they thought of the book. They were disappointed about the ending, but then they were satisfied because I told them there are three parts, and this is not the end. Of course some of them had suggestions. Some of them were really good ideas.

Would you ever take advice from child readers?

Some of them I can't use. For example, if you have a bad wife or a bad stepmother, they want revenge. But

it doesn't work like this. But in other ideas, some of them I'm going to use in my next book.

Tell us?

For example, one girl said: You used djinn in the book. Why don't you talk about the world of the djinn? In the book it says the worlds of the humans and the djinn should be kept separate. And she said, But you're a writer, you can do both worlds. And I thought, Yes!

Are you going to write about the world of the djinn?

I might, actually.

Do you have advice for young writers?

Passion first. And foremost. And fun. If you don't have fun while writing, nobody will have fun reading. Apart from that, everybody can learn. But you need to have fun and you need to be passionate.

What are books you read as a child, a teenager?

Until I became a teenager, we did not have a bookshop or a library in my town. So when I was a little girl, my mother used to take me to Nablus, where she bought me books. I still remember the first book, and I was five. After that, I developed a passion for reading. Because we didn't have reading, I read anything that I had my hands on. Hugo, Dickens, Mahfouz.

“ I still remember the first book I read when I was five. After that, I developed a passion for reading

Do you have a favorite?

A writer is my favorite while I'm reading him or her.

What about distribution? Children's books are distributed well inside Palestine, but what about other countries?

It is a problem because, for example, I know this book won the Etisalat Prize (Rihlat Ajeeba fi al-Bilad al-Ghareeba), but I would to see people from Egypt, Morocco, or Saudi Arabia to read my books.

But they can't get hold of them.

They could be available. For example, in the Emirates, the Ministry of Education bought the book, and they want to distribute it in schools, with some editing. Now it's more polite.

Oh. There's an edited version for the schools?

I had to weigh it: accept the editing or not have the book read by a large number of students. So I agreed to it, although I don't find the editing necessary. I made this book for teenagers, which means you can't not talk about love. And they changed bar to a coffee shop, for example.

For example, she [the narrator] has to go and meet pirates. So if she's going to go and meet pirates, she has to go meet pirates in the pirates bar. There's no coffee shop for pirates.

It saddened me, actually, how they changed the book. But at least the main events are there, and I hope the girls will get the message that they can have the power to do anything once they set their mind to it.

Do you put a message into your book, or does it just come out that way?

No, no, it comes out. If I put a message, it becomes like a textbook.

There are many Arabic children's books with a message...

And I hate that. It's not my job to put the wisdom of my life into a book, nor to give advice. They have enough of that at school! It's good enough for me if they enjoyed it.

At the end of it, they must get something out of it. But I don't have a message to send. No, I have a story to tell.



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Language becomes most intensely meaningful when it has musicality

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JOSEPH O'CONNOR WAS BORN IN DUBLIN ON SEPTEMBER 20, 1963. HE IS MARRIED TO PLAYWRIGHT, SCREENWRITER AND NOVELIST, ANNE-MARIE CASEY, AND HAS TWO SONS. IN 2014 HE WAS APPOINTED FRANK MCCOURT PROFESSOR OF CREATIVE WRITING AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK. HE IS ALSO FOUNDER AND DIRECTOR OF THE UNIVERSITY OF LIMERICK MCCOURT CREATIVE WRITING SUMMER SCHOOL AT NYU. HE HAS GIVEN MANY SPOKEN WORD PERFORMANCES WITH MUSICIANS AND SINGERS, INCLUDING CAMILLE O'SULLIVAN, PAUL BRADY, GLENN HANSARD, ANDY IRVINE, EIMEAR QUINN, SAM AMIDON, CAOMHÍN Ó RAGHALLAIGH, THOMAS BARTLETT, MARTIN HAYES, SCULLION, AND THE CHIEFTAINS. THE DANCE SHOW, HEARTBEAT OF HOME, FOR WHICH HE WAS NARRATIVE AND LYRICS WRITER, PREMIERED IN DUBLIN IN SEPTEMBER 2013, TRANSFERRING TO CHINA, CANADA AND THE UNITED STATES. THE SONGS O'CONNOR WROTE WITH BRIAN BYRNE FOR THE SHOW ARE INCLUDED ON THE ACCLAIMED SOUNDTRACK ALBUM (DECCA/UNIVERSAL MUSIC), RECORDED BY ALYTH MCCORMACK, JESSICA SANCHEZ, JENCARLOS CANELA, LUCIA EVANS, TIEMPO LIBRE AND THE LONDON COMMUNITY GOSPEL CHOIR /// Text: O. C.

JOSEPH O'CONNOR /// IRELAND

First of all, can you briefly tell us a bit about yourself, your personal life, where did you grow up?

My parents, Sean O'Connor and Marie O'Grady, took an interest in fiction, poetry, theatre and music. My father was born in Francis Street, in one of the oldest parts of Dublin city, the Liberties. Several of the stories and songs of that independently-minded place have appeared in my fiction and other writings. My father's memoir, *Growing Up So High*, was published in 2013 and became an Irish bestseller. My sister, Dr Eimear O'Connor, is also a published author and scholar; her book about the Irish artist Sean Keating was published to wide acclaim in 2013. Our sister, Sinead O'Connor, is the internationally acclaimed singer and songwriter. Our younger brother Eoin works for Sony Music Ireland, and another brother, John, is a psychotherapist.

I attended University College Dublin from 1981 to 1986, where I studied Literature and History and wrote for student publications, also working part-time as a journalist, reviewer and researcher for *Magill* magazine and *The Sunday Tribune*.

What are your references in terms of literature?

As a child and as a teenager, I was fond of reading. My father had a passion for opera and Victorian poetry, and my mother admired the work of Oscar Wilde and Kate O'Brien. The house was full of books of many kinds; favourites included Brendan Behan, Flannery O'Connor, Sean O'Faolain, Liam O'Flaherty, Kingsley Amis, Yeats, James Plunkett, Patrick Kavanagh, Steinbeck, Hemingway, Graham Greene, Maupassant, old Penguins, the fairytales and folklore of Sinead de Valera, and the



“ Visiting Nicaragua while I was a student had quite a powerful influence on me ”

inexpensive editions of new Irish fiction then published by Poolbeg Press. Encountering JD Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* and John McGahern's collection of short stories *Getting Through*, both of which books I read when I was about seventeen, made me wish to be a novelist himself.

Your first short story, 'Last of the Mohicans' was published by Ciaran Carty, editor of the *Dublin Sunday Tribune's* New Irish Writing page, in 1989 and a second story, 'Ailsa',

was published some months subsequently. Then came your first novel

My first novel *Cowboys and Indians* was published in 1991 by Sinclair-Stevenson, London, and was followed, later the same year, by a collection of short stories, *True Believers*. *Cowboys and Indians* received warm reviews, became a number one bestseller in Ireland and was nominated in the First Novel category for the Whitbread Prize. The feature film, *Ailsa*, for which I wrote the script (based on my short story of that name in the collection

True Believers) was directed by Paddy Breathnach (director of the Cuban-based feature film *Viva!*) in 1992, winning several awards, including the San Sebastian Festival Prize. Breathnach has also directed two shorter films I had written, *A Stone of the Heart* (Cork Film Festival Prize) and *The Long Way Home*.

Your second novel, *Desperadoes*, drew on your experiences in revolutionary Nicaragua and was widely acclaimed. When did you go there?

Following the death of my mother in 1985 I took six months away from the university, during which I went to Nicaragua, reporting on the progress of the Sandinista revolution for various publications in Dublin. On my return to UCD I completed an MA in Anglo Irish Literature, writing a major thesis on the work of the 1930s Irish poet and socialist activist Charles Donnelly. I spent a year as a postgraduate at Oxford University before moving to South-East London, where I lived for the remainder of the 1980s. For a time I worked as a fundraiser for the British Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign.

Which Latin American writers have you read?

Visiting Nicaragua while I was a stu-

dent had quite a powerful influence on me. I love the work of Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Ruben Dario, and they led me back to Neruda, whose work I adore.

Back in February you came to Cuba to launch the Cuban edition of your novel *Star of the Sea* (2002) at the Havana Book Fair. The book has been published by *Arte y Literatura* and launched by the President of Ireland, Michael J Higgins. Tell us about this novel

It is a story set on a famine ship journeying from Liverpool, via Cobh in County Cork, to New York and it was a major departure from my previous writing. The novel uses ballads, letters and diary entries to tell its story and was influenced by Charles Dickens, George Eliot and *Wuthering Heights*, as well as by the novels of Toni Morrison, Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Peter Carey, and by music.

Star of the Sea was followed by *Redemption Falls*, acclaimed by *The Guardian* as 'a major work of modern fiction from an astonishingly accomplished writer' and by Ireland's *Sunday Tribune* as 'a masterpiece'. It is not a sequel as such, but we do find

in it some of the children of Star of the Sea

Indeed, *Redemption Falls* develops the multi-voiced narrative approach I had begun with *Star of the Sea*. The novel follows a number of the children of the Star of the Sea generation through the American Civil War and its aftermath. After that came *The Salesman*, a contemporary psychological thriller, and *Inishowen*, a love story set in Donegal, New York and Dublin. Then came *Ghost Light* in 2010, chosen as a 'Book of the Year' by, among others, Colm Toibin (*Daily Telegraph*), Roddy Doyle (*The Guardian*) and Eamon McCann (*The Belfast Telegraph*).

Ghost Light is a poignant love story moving from London in the 1950s to Ireland in the Edwardian era and theatrical New York in the 1910s. Its heroine, Molly Allgood, is based loosely on a real person: the Abbey Theatre actress who was for some years the lover and muse of the great Irish playwright John Synge. A shorter novel than *Desperadoes*, *Star of the Sea* or *Redemption Falls*, it follows Molly as she walks through London on a blustery day in 1952 on her way to a job at the BBC.

Packed with music and memories, balladry and yearning, it extends the themes that have been present in Joe's writing from the start – love, endurance, emigration, family, the joy sometimes found in the trivial event – and offers itself as an uplifting homage to the act of storytelling itself, the belief that the show must be played with courage to the close.

Your last work is a novel, *The Thrill of it All*, published in 2014 which be-

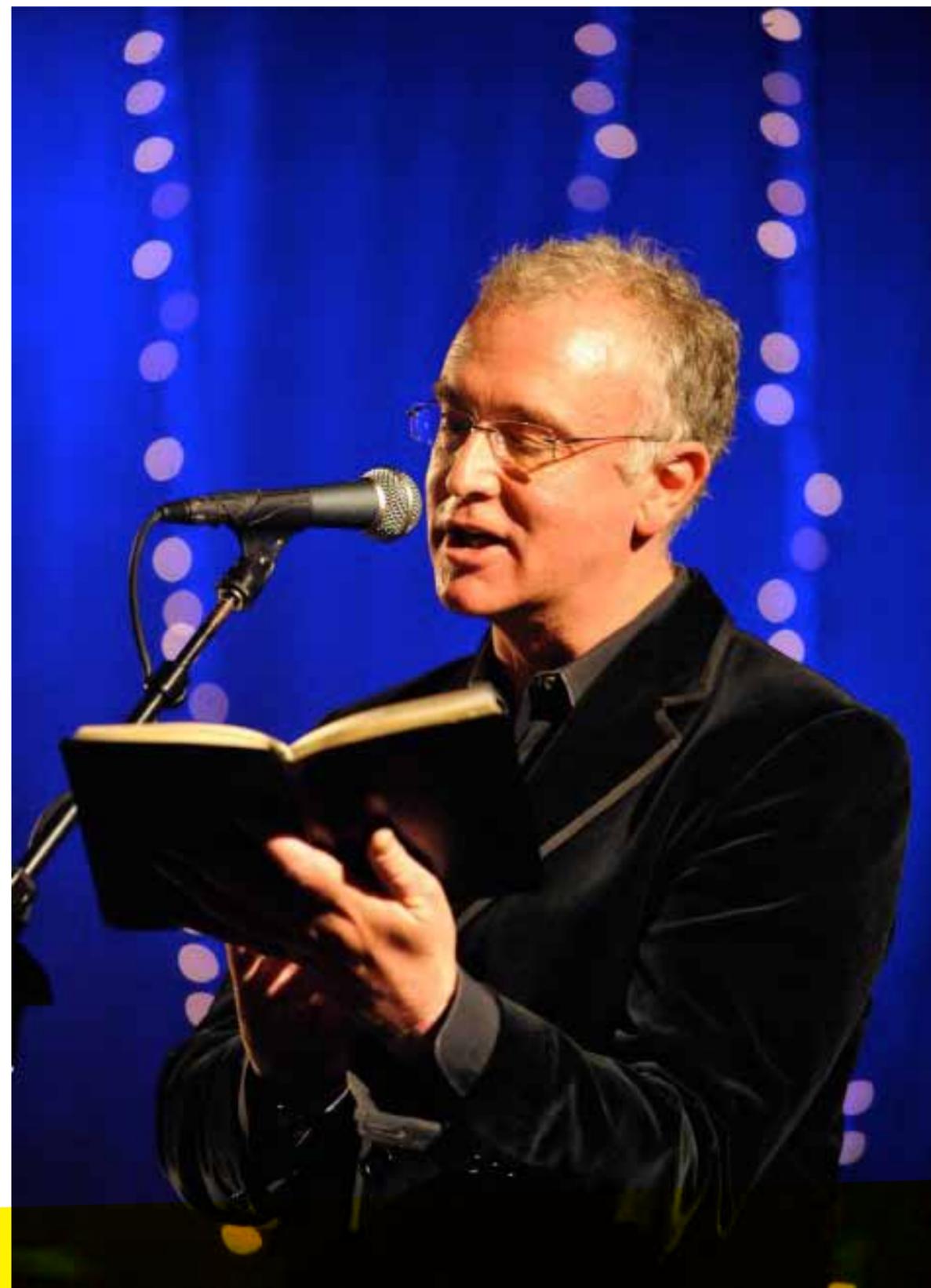
came an Irish bestseller and was shortlisted for the UK's Wodehouse Comic Novel of the Year Award and France's Rive Gauche Literary Prize. It's the story of the members of a band, how important is music for you?

To me, music is the highest art form, and language becomes most intensely meaningful when it has musicality. That's an important part of the Irish literary tradition. I always try to find the music of a novel or short story as I begin to write it. Words are sounds before they are anything else. So, we need to use sound, as well as meaning, to convey the atmosphere or texture of a story.

I think all art aspires to be music. When I work with my creative writing students, I tell them to try to consider their prose as a sort of performance. I believe in that. The novelist Toni Morrison once said a brilliant thing (in fact, to US President Bill Clinton): "When you are making a speech, the audience won't remember what you say. But they will remember how you made them feel." And I think something of that is there in great prose.

How do you feel about the great Irish writers? Did you ever feel a need to "bury" the fathers, so to say, or do you feel you follow that tradition?

I respect the tradition and I have come to greatly admire the work of James Joyce and Samuel Beckett in particular. But I do think it's important for all writers to find their own way. My teenage son finds me faintly ridiculous as a father, while still loving me, and I think that's an important balance! Joyce, when he's bad, is so very VERY





I still think many people in the South have a sort of amnesia about the North of Ireland

bad that he's almost unreadable. But when he's good, he is better than anyone else has ever been or ever will be.

The '90s were years of great turmoil in Ireland and more in general in Europe, how would you describe those years in Ireland? Your early books (I am thinking of True Believers and Cowboys and Indians for example) are very much '90s in this sense, characters, places, music.. can you describe a bit the scene then (artistically and politically), and the themes of your books?

I wasn't living in Ireland throughout most of the 90s – I was in London, then – but I do think of the decade as one of great change, indeed fundamental alteration in Irish life and politics. The election of a new-thinking President who was a woman, the introduction of legislation for civil divorce against the opposition of the catholic church, the beginnings of the Northern Ireland peace process and so on. It was an era in which old certainties were questioned radically, in my view a very good and healthy thing.

Also the '90s were years of perhaps greater connections among writers, artists, musicians, there was a cultural scene in Ireland (and elsewhere) which definitively marked the lives of many can you describe that?

There was certainly the arrival of a new generation of Irish novelists, short storywriters, poets and screenwriters who were unique in that they were (a) not influenced by each other and (b) not influenced by the generation immediately preceding them. They often wrote about the lives of Irish people in different countries, or the lives of people who were not Irish at all. They had little in common except a sort of restlessness, which I thought was marvellous. It was good to be starting to publish in this era.

Also again in the '90s things were moving in the North of Ireland, like in the Republic in the North a new group of writers (and musicians) emerged. Which relations would you have with them? And more in general with the situation in the North? I remember you telling me back then in the South there was a kind of "collective amnesia" when it comes to the North?

Yes, I still think many people in the South have a sort of amnesia about the North of Ireland. I feel an affinity with all writers from any part of the island of Ireland, and my stepmother, a Northern Irish Protestant, is a very dear person to me, and my editor, Geoff Mulligan, is from Belfast, but other than that I have no personal con-

nection with the North and hardly ever go there.

How do you feel is the relation with the North now?

Personally, I think of the North of Ireland as a different country. I have friends who feel very differently and who wish that Ireland were united, but I'm agnostic about it myself. I am not a nationalist. I think nationalism is a sort of foolishness.

You have written different novels, different in themes, setting: how does a novel come to you? do you think of a character first, or a plot? how do you write?

Anyone would expect me to have an answer to this question, but the honest truth is that I don't know! I guess I sort of start by realising that something is growing in my heart or my soul, or wherever you want to call it. My first response is always to ignore it and hope it will go away. And most of the time, thankfully, it does! But eight times, it hasn't, and I've had to write a novel.

And that is the most honest answer I can give. I write to find out what I think and feel about something, usually a character. I never set out with 'a theme'. I don't like that approach. I think you discover what the theme of a novel is after it's written.

The generation after yours - writers now in their thirties – seems to be quite prolific. How do you consider the literary scene now? What their themes, given they lived - as teenagers - the so called Celtic Tiger?

I think the younger generation of Irish writers is probably the finest genera-

tion ever. They are extraordinarily talented, hardworking, skilled, widely ranging. Writers like Donal Ryan, Colin Barrett, Claire Louise Bennett, Danielle McLoughlin, Sara Baume, Vanessa Ronan, Thomas Morris, Gavin Corbett, Lisa McLnerney. They are utterly brilliant. I don't think they have 'themes' so much as beautifully crafted sentences and resonating characters.

Is there still much Dublin in Irish literature?

Yes. Probably too much!

How much do you think the cultural policy of the Irish state helps what is certainly a prolific literary scene? And on the other hand, does this policy also imply some form of self-censorship or, to put it milder, self-control?

Historically, I think Irish governments have done significant work to support the arts, for example by permitting artists to pay a low amount of income tax on their creative earnings. That has helped several generations of writers and artists to make a living and support a family through creative work. And, we have a government organisation, Culture Ireland, which promotes Irish art and literature abroad. Also, the Irish Literature Exchange helps support the publication of Irish literature in other countries. And, often our diplomats have individually been extremely supportive and helpful to Irish literature abroad.

As for 'self-censorship', I don't see any of that going on, I am happy to say.

What are you working on at the moment?

I never answer this! I am superstitious!

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I always follow different leads when I write novels, essays or stories

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GIANFRANCO BETTIN /// ITALY

WRITER AND POLITICIAN, GIANFRANCO BETTIN HAS FOR MANY YEARS BEEN VICE-MAYOR OF THE CITY OF VENICE AND HEAD OF THE PEACE CENTER AND YOUTH POLICY. HE HAS BEEN A PROMOTER OF NUMEROUS CULTURAL ACTIVITIES THAT TOOK PLACE IN THE LITALIAN CITY SUCH AS THE FONDAMENTA LITERATURE FESTIVAL /// Text: O. C.

First of all, can you briefly introduce yourself and tell us when and how you started writing. What is the first memory of you writing?

I was born in Porto Marghera, in the municipality of Venice, in 1955. I have been writing ever since I learned to do it in school, but perhaps even before that: fantasy things, symbols or drawings that who knows what they meant. The first written thing I remember is a sort of fairy tale, imitation of a Russian tale I had read in one of the first books I've seen in my life (a collection of Russian fairy tales). I only know that I wrote it, though. I do not remember anything else, maybe there was snow and a fire, with a small magical and half-vagabond character.

Veneto is a complex region. Very Christian Democratic (except from some red spots), but also a region with important universities and many factories. It is the region of the so called northeastern "miracle" (and its decline), of the labor and political struggles of the left, the dark mysteries, the brutal "family" murders, the Brenta mafia ... There is much Veneto in your narrative. What aspects did you try to emphasize? How much being a sociologist on the one hand and a politician on the other influenced your choices in fiction?

My training in social and political science is certainly important and affects my way of writing, but, before that it affects my way of looking at things. It



is a mixture of analytic deciphering and intuitive understanding, which translates into sometimes suggestive and sometimes descriptive phrases. I hope they merge well... With this look on the world I have lived in, especially between Veneto and Marghera-Venice, I have always tried to grasp at the same time the dark, shadowy sides (hypocrisy, connivance and complicity with powers, sharing of prejudices, some latent racism, tolerance to politics even when regressive as long as they acqui-

esce to widespread selfish interests, the inability to put limits on deregulated, destructive, pervasive development, etc.) and the luminous aspects, which are present in large numbers (from landscape to cultural assets to the social and personal characters of many people that you can encounter).

You have been vice-mayor of the city of Venice for many years, an interesting and contradictory experiment of what "could" be an important labora-

tory for the Italian left. An old friend, 92 years old, who had an anarchist bookshop in Venice, told me about the enthusiastic encounters taking place in his library near the Frari. All the intellectuals and most important artists of the city had passed through it. Venice is the one of the Biennial of 1968, but also that of the bad choices of De Michelis... When and why Venice stopped focusing on being a political laboratory (which, inter alia, meant being at the same time an "intellectual" artistic city and a working city) preferring the quasi-Disneyland option?

In fact, two Venice have lived together for almost half a century. One was trying to abandon itself to modernity that brought easy profits, especially when it comes to tourist offerings, speculation and resources related to huge projects, like the Mose (with all the consequent corruption). The other Venice sought for different ways, depending on the people and the times. At a stage dating from the early 1990s to the beginning of the next decade, it also tried to be a political laboratory. At one point though it just couldn't make it anymore, giving in to more traditional and less innovative policy formulas, which we could call moderately centre-left and without audacity, without the ability to integrate political innovations and respond to the demands that local and national society produces. Paving so the way for a political regression of

the liberalist and selfish type currently in progress.

You were elected when basically this choice - Disneyland instead of political laboratory - was already under way. What do you think the Cacciari's governments lacked in order to reverse the course?

It was only partly a problem of city council. In reality, much of the fate of Venice depends on other powers, especially in the economic and competence spheres, on powers stronger than the City Council (Regional and National Government, Parliament) and External Authorities, such as the Port Authority, Water Magistrate, Superintendence etc. or other very powerful private subjects, such as the New Venice Consortium and the airport managing company or cruise companies. The City Council has nevertheless not been able to involve the city as a whole against the damages caused by these powers, nor has it been able to affect the ruthless cuts to local resources imposed by central governments and the further detachment of skills that has been produced over time. So, the biggest limit I see is indeed in this inability to integrate institutional initiative and administrative developments with a social dynamic, a path of participation and sharing of choices, which is a serious political limit.

Veneto, as we have already said, is a very complex region. You chose to

tell on one side the Veneto of the marginalised (*Qualcosa che brucia, Something Burning*), without overlooking the difficulty of telling even the darker Veneto, that of Pietro Maso for example, or a rejected but necessary immigration (necessary for the bosses). How do your books come around? How do you choose the story to tell? Do characters come first, or plot? Let's talk about your creative process.

Stories and characters that I decide to put on paper come from a rich set of notes, sometimes mental notes, which I keep in written form, or not, for a long time, observing reality or imagine developments in a creative, arbitrary way. If I write about real things, as in the narrative inquiry on Pietro Maso (a boy who, with some peers, killed his parents to dispose of the inheritance, a crime that shocked Italy in the early 1990s), I would keep a rigorous look at facts and data, and if I push further, I state that at that point of the story I imagine, but mostly I remain loyal to the reconstruction that I could do both with data and facts and by immersing me in places and situations, in the context even physical as well as cultural, where the story has taken place. Of course, in the novel I feel more free but, in this case, more tied to the effectiveness of the word, the choice of every single word and phrase and even point or comma and spacing. The novel is all there, it is made of these things, its credibility is born from this and not so much from the truthfulness of data and facts, as in the narrative inquiry on real events. I follow many leads while writing novels or essays or narrative investigations, I also nurse the subject for a very long time, holding a sort of literary mine to draw on. This allows me to always write about one thing or the other. Then, finally,

a story "calls me" more than others and then I dedicate myself to it, finish it and, in case, publish it.

How important is the language in your narrative?

As in any piece of writing, it is the most important thing of all.

You (intellectual and politician) have been creating an interesting cultural and literary space in Venice. In the '90s, you sponsored a series of interesting meetings with and for new Italian writers (I think of Tiziano Scarpa, Ferrucci but also the Turin bunch). Later on, you organised the Fondamenta Festival. Despite Berlusconi this was a country (and Venice was certainly a very lively city) that still produced good literature and generally good cinema, good culture and good music. But the 2000s the light kind of faded away, and now? Do you see light at the bottom of the tunnel?

This is for Venice the most difficult time for at least half a century. It does not mean that there are no ferments in many fields, including the cultural and even the political one, but to date they are ferments that do not find significant representation and certainly not within the government of the city. However, it may be that this favours a horizontal propagation, a more free, more selective, and therefore more powerful growth. That, in short, the ferments themselves bring some light ... despite everything. It is true, however, that the experiences of those years are unrepeatable, both because they have been overcome and because their genuine and fruitful search for new roads has finally opened those roads but has, for that very reason, extinguished them. This took us to a point from where we need to

“In the novel I feel more free but, in this case, more tied to the effectiveness of the word, the choice of every single word and phrase and even point or comma and spacing

go further. As for me, I do not see much difference between being an intellectual and being a political activist.

What are your "literary references" and more in general your cultural references?

In my formative mix there is a bit of everything, even though I think literary references prevail (Italian classics, some literatures: mostly Russian and American, then French, Iberian and English), comics (at the beginning Italian and American, then stripes and graphic novel) and cinema (Kubrick on all, then western, noir, science fiction, the latter also in literature). Music is often an indispensable corollary, although it is not always an inspirational source.

How would you define the state of health of Italian literature?

In recent years I would say good enough, many good authors have emerged, even original ones.

And the publishing house policy? Are they just pointing to "safe" titles or is there someone who takes "risks"?

Small publishers risk more, but they are also more and more in a difficult situation when it comes to get involved in a

market and distribution that points to the immediate success of the "safe", or allegedly such, title. It is less common to see a big publisher taking risks.

Literary and more in general cultural magazines are virtually disappeared. Why? Was it really a market problem?

It's a market problem, which means, a distribution problem, but it is also a problem of readership. Today, there is a more horizontal circulation of ideas, thanks to the network, faster, more efficient, and cheaper. This puts out the game magazines, or pushes it to become a web site, a blog etc., and in the end to abandon its paper format, even because of the cost and, often, the ineffectiveness of the format. Fortunately, this does not prevent the circulation of ideas. On the contrary.

Italy for years has not been investing in culture (nor education). What can be done to reverse this trend before it's too late? Or is it already too late?

It's not too late, but it's late. In addition to doing what we can with books, texts, websites, even magazines where they resist, etc., the decisive question is whether we are able to develop a political movement capable of changing the country's government and therefore

changing priorities, thus setting as priority education and culture (an issue, among other things, that could be a formidable economic opportunity for a country like Italy).

Even at the digital level (blogs, social networks) there is not a big ferment in Italy, Contrary to, for example, Ireland where new writers (say from 30 to 50 years old) are also active in the network as well as in a thousand initiatives, conferences, readings. Why do you think so? Is culture considered something "elitist"?

I don't really agree with that. In Italy the phenomenon is very widespread, in fact, sometimes I think too much (for all the pretension and the rubbish that this drags along). So, I would not say that culture is treated as "elitist". On the contrary, sometimes perhaps a bit of selectivity and "elitism", that is to say, a more rigorous screening of what is of value, would be even necessary, given the great amount of megalomaniacs, charlatans or worse that infest the net.

In a recent interview, Irish writer Paul Murray said he would like to see more political involvement. And he added: "It's very hard to write about politics, and you are sort of not supposed to write about politics, but as George Orwell said: "Believing politics has no place in art is in itself a political statement". And it seems a political statement a lot of people here seemed to

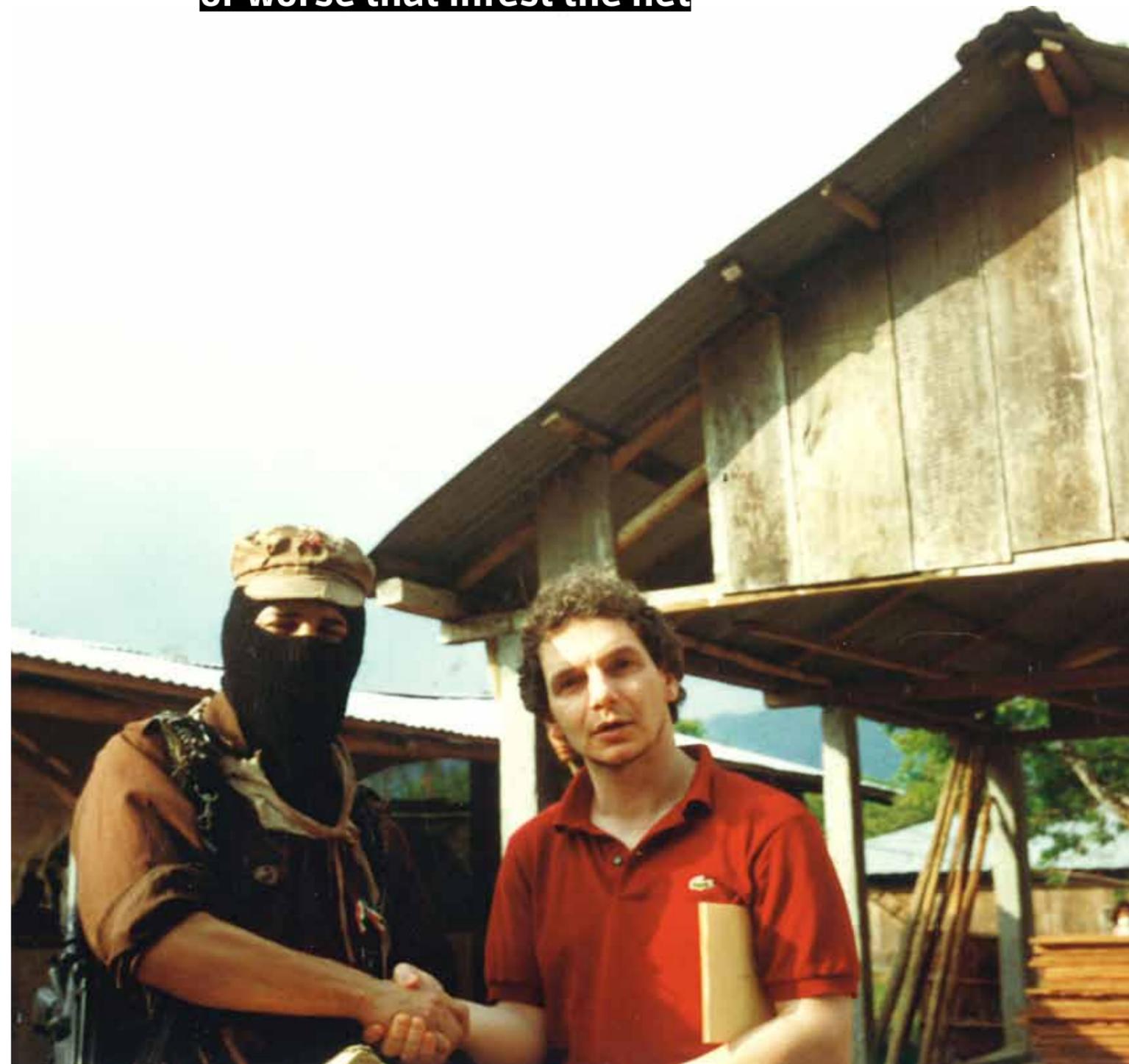
have swallowed. A lot of the books coming out are set in the country, are actually quite nostalgic, they tell of an ideal country, not the real one of the banks, the crisis, the homeless". What would you comment on this?

I think the value and importance of a book depend solely on how the book is written. Even when it talks about very weird facts or seemingly insignificant things it could still, because it's written in such a way, "break the frozen sea inside us" (Kafka, of course). It is not, in short, the theme, but how you deal with it that decides the value of a book (and even of its "politics").

Uruguayan writer Ramiro Sanchiz told recently in an interview with GR magazine: "I don't believe in prizes: more often, it seems to me, they actually impoverish the publishing environment. Under these circumstances, and because printing in Uruguay is expensive, publishers have to survive as businesses and this implies not taking risks, publishing sure things, conservative works, most of them forgettable or only justified by the fact that they won the prize". What do you think of literary prizes?

They are, like festivals, occasions like others to talk about some books, hoping that a good book will actually be awarded. I would not make a big problem of this.

“ Sometimes perhaps a bit of selectivity and “elitism”, that is to say, a more rigorous screening of what is valuable, would even be necessary, given the great amount of megalomaniacs, charlatans or worse that infest the net



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There are many stories waiting
to be told about our struggle

”

GABRIEL ANGEL /// COLOMBIA

GABRIEL ANGEL HAS BEEN FOR THIRTY YEARS A FARC-EP GUERRILLA. AT THE AGE OF FORTY HE DECIDED THAT HE HAD TO START WRITING LITERATURE IN ADDITION TO WRITING POLITICAL TEXTS. HIS WORK OFFERS GUERRILLAS AND PEASANTS AS WELL AS MILITARY AND PARAMILITARY PROTAGONISTS, AND REFLECTS STORIES TAKING PLACE IN THE MOST RURAL COLOMBIA, WHERE THE CIVIL WAR HAS REACHED A SPECIAL INTENSITY. HIS LITERATURE PROVIDE US WITH AN OPPORTUNITY TO SEE IN ANOTHER WAY AND UNDERSTAND THIS PHASE OF VIOLENCE THAT THE COLOMBIAN SOCIETY IS TRYING TO END TODAY /// Text: J.M.A. - O. C.

How was your literary vocation born?

It's difficult to say it accurately. I believe as a result of my love for literature as a young man. My parents were of rural origin, humble, I did not receive a love for letters from them. Even though I remember, and now I wonder why, my mother read a lot, often she stayed awoken till dawn reading in her bed. Maybe this has marked me. But it was friends of my family to initiate me to reading novels, and then high school. At some point, I would say when I was twenty, I thought I had to write. It was nice to read a lot, but from all these readings one also had to produce something, in a way. For many years I had this uneasiness, until I started to write with some seriousness when I was forty. I've been in guerrilla for about a dozen years, I had many things to tell.

How and why did you join the FARC-EP?

I was a militant founder of the Union Patriótica political movement, born after

the peace talks between the FARC and the Belisario Betancur government in 1985. I remember the enthusiasm and the idealism with which we devoted ourselves to this task, we were a group of young people, already professionals (I was a lawyer and I was 26 years old). I cultivated the illusion that for the first time the left could arrive to the Presidency during the first elections our force contested in 1986. We did not, the Liberal Party got ten times more votes than we did. Nevertheless, the vote for the left reached the highest levels in its history. Immediately after, however, the avalanche of murders came on top of the leadership and the militancy of the Patriotic Union. We were trapped in a corner, there was no other way to go.

Were you writing before your militant engagement? What is the difference in your literature before and after the decision to enter the guerrilla war?



I had written some poems and articles that I published in the local newspaper of the city where I was living at the time. In the FARC-EP I started writing articles for our newsletters and magazines. Then I was entrusted with the drafting of communications, documents and political declarations. All very rational and realistic. The passage to proper literature, so to speak, was marked by the creation of stories about guerrilla life which in turn were a tribute to our dead. I have always believed that the first documents were a duty of the organization, while the second writings, those of fiction, were the personal expression of our experiences.

In your writing political, social and human commitment is very clear. Do you believe that this may affect literary quality or otherwise gives it some added value?

Ever since I made the decision to write fiction, the first stories and the embryo of novels, I always made sure to avoid at all costs that they appeared as flyers, pamphlets, documents with a clear propaganda content. I wanted to do pure literature but to tell our historical and human story. I think I've succeeded. It has always been said that good literature and politics are not exactly allied, that when a political cause turns into literary plot, who loses is literature. I decided to accept this challenge, with the clear awareness that because of my content I would lose readers. I think ultimately it is about being as honest as possible. The rest, time will tell.

Tell us a little about the collection of stories just published and about *A Quemarropa* (In Cold Blood) and *Los Mensajeros del Diablo* (The Devil Messengers), your two novels

The Moon of the Attorney short stories have as their plot the guerrilla experi-

ence in Magdalena Medio, one of the regions most affected by the violence in Colombia. In them you can breathe the nostalgia for my time in the Sierra Nevada of Santa María, where I spent the first five years of guerrilla life. That's why I also published shortly after *Los Mensajeros of the Diablo*, the recreation of a real fact that occurred in the Sierra.

A Quemarropa, on the other hand, is part of the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the FARC in the Sierra, although I wrote it many years later when I was in the Eastern Bloc at the beginning of the so-called Patriot Plan in 2003. I already had an extensive vision of our struggle and for this reason the novel has a certain national breath, the integral war declaration by President Gaviria's. One blends the facts, blends them and adds the fiction, but basically the story is born of real people and situations.

Let's enter into your work a bit deeper, how is your narrative born? Starting from the characters, from the concrete stories?

I would say that in a given moment, I feel the urge, the need of telling a certain interesting episode of guerrilla life, an experience that gathers in itself several facets of the human and political nature of our struggle. Something that really happened. So I let the idea mature a few months, or even years, until suddenly a light turns on in my head, you have to do so, you have to tell it this way, integrating this into that, contextualising it in this way .. Then I start write the story and I will not stop until I consider it finished. It can be a work of months, years even. As I write the story, it is enriched, characters begin to demand greater presence. But this happen while working, does not exactly match a predetermined plan. Let's say I do not build characters or dilem-

mas, I tell the story of people I've met and the dilemmas in which they've been involved. They are people and facts I've known closely. It is always necessary to introduce fiction, to fill some voids. Unless you are writing a chronicle, something that seduces me greatly, almost an exact journalistic story of what you have known directly or that we have been told. Unfortunately, in this struggle you come into contact with great narrators of stories, only that unfortunately they do not have enough ability to sit and write. If they did, we would have nothing to do. In a sense one is a parasite, feeding of what others have experienced and suffered. And you gets applause for that. Is it right?

What are your literary influences?

Surely there are many. But I have tried consciously to do what I feel, as I feel it, without letting the way others do things influence me. I would say that after spending twenty-five years reading novels and stories of the most diverse authors, something of all this helps creating a style and a way of telling things. I have always felt that great authors always do it much better, so it's not worth imitating them. You will never be like them. I think that with a lot of humility and being receptive to criticisms and comments you can be able to create something that others did not do. Then one begins to recognize himself as a creator.

What about other non-literary elements that matter in your writing?
Music, nature...

Everything is literary, absolutely everything. What you write is a reflection of the real world that is the plan of events of all kinds. In my opinion what you cannot be, is being extremely ambitious and introducing too many things into a book. I have always tried hard to make sure that what I write is not boring, doesn't make the reader fall asleep, or lazy to go ahead. So I try to tell only what I find necessary for the story, there are many things that remain in the air that might have been used, but it is necessary to avoid at all costs the saturation of the reader. There are many, too many books and events in the world, it is not about introducing them all into your own. The important thing is to say something new, or at least try to say it differently and pleasantly.

How would you define the Colombian literary scene? What authors do you consider interesting?

I have to confess something that might sound like a heresy or ignorance. I've been almost thirty years in the jungle, in the midst of an armed struggle. Even though you always carry a book in your backpack and you are reading something, you do not always read in a systematic manner on a topic or subject. We move from one subject to another, say from a book about neo-liberal capitalism to one on Simon Bolivar or from a book by Garcia Marquez or Vargas Llosa to an essay on the intelligence of the fight or the discrimination of women. I did not succeed in following the contemporary literature of my country seriously. So I prefer not to talk about topics that I do not know well.



Your personal and narrative experience shows that reality is more imaginative than fiction?

You can design and weave the most interesting plot in the world, but this will always be the product of your mind, of what you want to do with your story. Reality is different, incredibly surprising, most of the times unexpected. I remember once in the middle of a large military operation against a Front of the Magdalena Medio I was part of, the Commander of the Front commented on the incredible speed with which things change in war. You are safe and protected when suddenly there is an assault or a confrontation with the enemy and then your life is altered completely. Your great friend or partner is dead, we carry wounded people and the enemy is on your back, trying to destroy you. Five minutes earlier, no one imagined that all this was about to happen. The same way you cannot imagine how you will come alive out of what is happening. And once this is over, you see yourself there telling what happened with other comrades,

maybe laughing about this episode. Definitely, yes, reality is amazingly varied and full of novelty.

I imagine that the "politically incorrect" content of your literature makes it difficult to publish

Indeed, so it is. No one wants his publishing house to stand out. As clandestinely as possible you may do it, publishing and distributing a forbidden book involve many people and not all can be trusted, politically speaking. The risk exists, no one wants to end up in jail or see his business vanish because of a bomb at midnight. Perhaps there is nothing more innocent than literature, but if the regime decides to persecute it, the issue becomes delicate. Colombia is curious: paramilitary leaders like Carlos Castaño and other criminals publish their memoirs through third parties in a legal manner, and no one in power thinks they have to persecute authors or publishers for the spreading of perverse ideologies. However, treatment is not the same when it comes to revolu-

tionary insurgents. With these they are usually relentless.

In your literature, a part from guerrillas, there is a very lively recreation of peasant reality and even of the "enemy", paramilitary and military. How do you penetrate into this imagery?

The guerrillas and the campesinos are the living source of my narratives, it is about them that I write. But these guerrillas and peasants have an enemy on their back all the time, always attacking them. This allows them to know this enemy, in its permanent acting, it allows to know its values, criteria, motivations. The enemy soldiers speak with the peasants, tell of their anger, resentment, bitterness. That's why you end up knowing how they think.

Do your comrades read your works? Do they criticise you, make suggestions, comments?

Nothing gives me more joy than meeting with guerrillas of far-reaching places, as it happened in September 2016 during the X Guerrilla Conference in the Yara's Savannah, and listen to them telling me that they read my novels, stories, chronicles and articles. There are those who have downloaded them from the internet, those who have printed them in the fields and made booklets, those who read them in cultural or other meetings. The guerrillas are excited to know that someone tells their lives, especially when he does it from a guerrilla perspective, which is really scarce. All those who write about guerrillas, even with the best intentions, make it out, without sufficient knowledge of the reality of a struggle of so many years with its characteristics. The guerrilla always finds something they don't like, which is not well

reported, which they find incorrect. When the writer is from the inside, the reader thinks he is actually looking into a mirror. That is why they are grateful and applaud these efforts. Few or none criticizes me, in fact, they stimulate me to continue writing and to write more.

In guerrilla one asks for food, first aid equipments...Did you also ask for books?

War is tough and difficult. There is a FARC-EP disposition that orders each guerrilla to bring a book into their backpack so that each unit has a small mobile library with it. There are political and educational secretaries who are tasked with checking that this provision is respected and who control personal readings. But sometimes times are hard and heavy, bitter, in the midst of a fight and it happens that with so much weight to carry on the shoulder books actually turn into an extra weight, and it is preferable to leave them somewhere to make room for explosives, or other things. As much as irrational it may seem, the time comes when one can not criticize this behaviour. There were times when one went from unit to unit begging for a book and didn't find a single one. Also a book is read in a few days and then becomes a burden. If nobody wants to carry it, it ends up being abandoned. All this is lived in a war. There are times when talking about books is not appropriate. Lessons are learned from all this. Then it is best to observe with the purpose of writing afterwards. I believe that it is also in this way that one becomes a writer. In the desperation of having nothing to read.

Media groups underestimate left-wing literature by accusing it of being

marked by a certain intentionality...

I would say that contempt rather than underestimation is not so much because it is a committed literature but rather because it is committed to a cause that is openly against the class interests of the people in power. The big media of communication, in general large monopolistic corporations, are today the main bodies delivering the dominant ideology and culture. When the media judges that this is good and that is bad, when they back or condemn a work, they are motivated by the closed defense of a system that incredibly favours their masters. Being revolutionary is not something that deserves applause. It's something to ridicule and detest. They want people to think that way, for this they exist. They are part of the reality we have to face. But one day this will change.

Some say that literature and culture may not change the world but they can help to make awareness growing. How do you think they can contribute to building peace and a new Colombian society.

Actually, I think that if literature helps to make the world better and to create conscience then there is no doubt that it is also transforming it. A literary work can help many people to open their eyes, to motivate them to think. And someone thinking can end up intervening in the reality and transforming it. Or at least can induce others to do it. I think the same applies to other cultural expressions. There is nothing that radically changes the world, it has never been seen. We want to see radical changes in a short time, in a few years, a few decades if we are very patient. But in the long run, everything is a process, a long road full of obstacles. Did the Bible or the Communist Manifesto change the

world? Even the discovery or invasion of America had to wait centuries before we could actually see its consequences. The October Revolution in Russia believed that it would radically transform the world, and one hundred years later we see that it has not changed as much as it hoped to change. Everything is like a drop of water on an immense rock, one day it will end up breaking it apart, but we do not know how many millions of years it will be needed for this to happen. And then there are the points of view. Small changes lead to major ones. It's important to leave a footprint in the world even though in five years nobody will be able to tell exactly who owned the foot that walked on this earth before it became rock in the centuries. This is the long experience of humanity. A novel or story will not achieve peace in Colombia but will be a brick in its construction.

Can you tell us what are you currently working on? And given that we are, in Colombia, in the phase of the construction of peace, which themes and characters would you like to explore in the future?

I have a project for a novel that is in its final stage. I am slowly maturing the last chapter. The victory of the No camp in the plebiscite [on 2 October 2016, when the majority of Colombians say No to the Peace Agreement. Ndr] forced me to wait a little longer. In addition to that I write for the FARC-EP, for the cause of peace, articles, chronicles and many other texts in which my name does not even appear! As for what I would like to explore, let's say that, in times of peace, I think there are a lot of things to tell about our struggle. Peace will be an incredible opportunity.

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I am a Kurdish writer. I get my
 inspiration from the culture and
 lands of Kurdistan

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Muharrem Erbey is a lawyer, writer and human rights activist. He lives in the ancient city of Amed (Diyarbakır) that with its million and a half citizens is considered the capital of North Kurdistan (the part of Kurdistan lying in Turkey). Erbey is a well known intellectual in this vibrant and lively city. He worked in the Human Rights Association (IHD) administration with current HDP (People's Democratic Party) Selahattin Demirtas (currently in prison) and former mayor of Diyarbakır Osman Baydemir. He worked actively in the children's rights commission. In May 2002, Selahattin Demirtas became IHD Branch Chair and Erbey became IHD Diyarbakır Branch Secretary. Erbey's work in the IHD is related to the discovery and excavation of many mass graves where PKK guerrillas had been buried in the '90s. Erbey was arrested in December 2009 on charges of membership of a terrorist organization in the KCK Main Case, the so called "political genocide case" launched against Kurd institutions. He was released from prison after 4 and half years. /// Text: J.M.A. - O. C.

MUHARREM ERBEY /// KURDISTAN

Let's begin with a short presentation of yourself (when and where were you born, studies etc.)

I was born on 23 June 1969 in Hazro, Diyarbakır. My father Selhaddin is a retired worker of the Highways Directorate. My mother Fatma was a housewife, she died of cancer in 1997. There are 8 children in the family, 6 boys and 2 girls. I finished high school in Diyarbakır. Since I was 10, I have worked selling water, sweets, bagels in the streets, shining shoes and as an apprentice in the coffee shops and barber shops. In short, I learned about life working in the streets. Since I was little, I made many pencil drawings. Then I was moved by the Kurdish tales I heard and started to

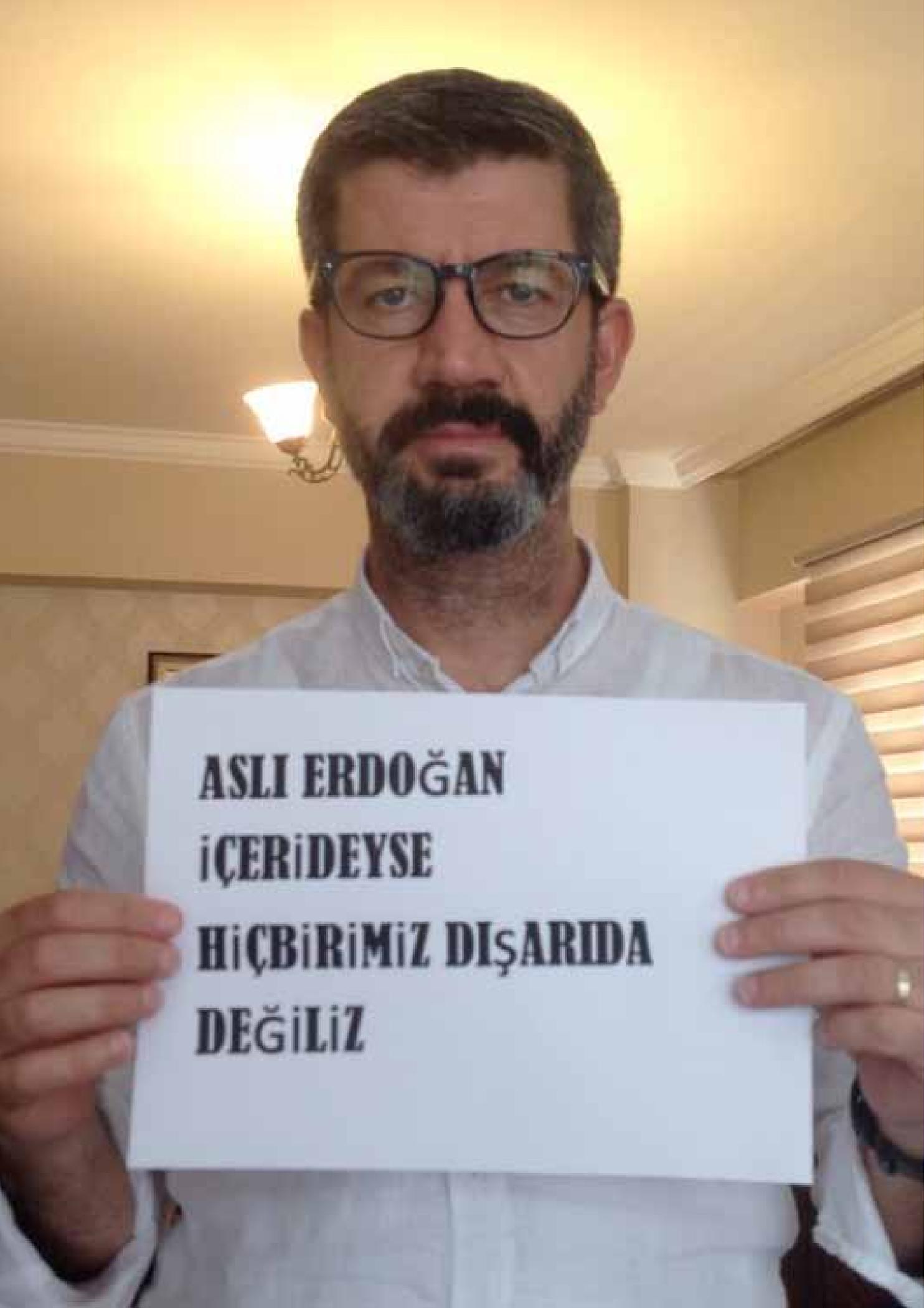
write stories after 1981. A story I wrote in 1981 won the first prize in a children's competition. I received 75 liras. I was over the moon.

Did you ever think you could actually be only a writer?

Yes. Actually, I just want to write, to isolate myself and just put whatever comes up to me to paper. With incredible passion. But being a dissident Kurd, being on the side of democracy and human rights put everything else on hold.

What are your influences, not just literary, but musical, cinematographic, cultural...

Kurdish legends, tales, the pains of the



“ Many people were arrested, attacked and murdered for speaking Kurdish, or listening to music in Kurdish, or writing in Kurdish ”

sorrow lands I live in. The tragedies, the spirit of resistance and insurgency, the constant fight with the State, the need to be in separate ends, never being accepted by the State, this feeling of being the bastard child, the expectation and the pressure trying to force us into a Turkishness which does not belong to us, the songs of dengbejs filled with heroism and pain. But the main influence was my grandmother Hezime who told me the tales, and the Kurdish tales are indeed my muse.

Can you tell us about your first book? How did you think of it? why did you chose this theme?

My first book, *The Lost Pedigree*, was published in 2004 by Bajar publishing. The second edition was published by Agora publishing in 2006. I was joyous. It was incredible. Having books published was a privilege, it was like a confirmation that I was indeed a writer. Then I started dreaming of other books. *The Lost Pedigree* is about our own stories. I wrote about what the Kurds sought, instead of what the Kurds lived through. Life is

a search, and in my first book I wrote the stories of people who searched for things they had lost.

You write in Kurdish, a forbidden language...what does it mean to you writing in Kurdish?

I actually couldn't write in Kurdish, because it was a banned language. I couldn't study it. I could only speak it at home, in secret. As Turkish is compulsory in public offices, in education, trade, etc. we have to speak and write in Turkish. I had to write in Turkish instead of my own language. I always saw this as an imposition. But unfortunately later in the years I couldn't revert to Kurdish.

How do you think older generations can pass through to younger ones the importance of learning and keeping the language alive?

Unless the children listen to the language in fairy tales and stories, see their language taught in schools, used in the cultural and social fields, they will not be able to learn that language. Their mind rejects it.



Everybody should be able to be different and equal, and free

Did you suffer censorship for your work?

Yes, I did. The Kurdish-Turkish anthology I prepared in 2004 was published by Diyarbakır Metropolitan Municipality, and the then mayor was put on trial for that. When I was arrested, the indictment was mostly about press statements and speeches I had made in Kurdish.

How is organised the “literary” reality in Kurdish? are there Kurdish publishers, cultural magazines, classes of creative writings, cultural programmes...

The language of the Kurds was banned for a long time. You could only speak it. We lived through years when people faced prison for speaking that language, they were excluded from the public space, ignored and humiliated. We still are. So many people were arrested, attacked and murdered for speaking Kurdish, or listening to music in Kurdish, or for writing in Kurdish. By the end of the 1990's, Kurdish publishers were founded in Turkey: Avesta, Aram, Lis, War. Their number increased. But some of them had to close because there were

not many readers. Magazines were launched and were closed because of lawsuits, investigations, pressure and lack of interest. Now there are very few of them. They are facing extinction as a result of the recent new wave of pressure on Kurdish cultural institutions, Kurdish theater companies, Kurdish art institutions, Kurdish publications.

The Democratic Autonomy gives to language and culture a special place. Culture, and different cultures, is what makes a country reach. Yet Turkey is constantly repressing and denying cultural differences. What is the establishment so afraid of?

Turkey fears change, a democratic administration, keeping up with the times and development. And as the fear continues, the problems increase. The insistence for a centralized administration even though the local administration model is more democratic, humane, contemporary and profitable doesn't solve the problems. It actually create new ones. The Kurds, one of the oldest autoctonous peoples of Mesopotamia, want a system that has been gen-

erally accepted throughout the world, autonomy, and one that was actually implemented in Seljuk and Ottoman times. During Atatürk's rule, the democratic system included in the first constitution played an important role in the solution of problems. Turkey fears fragmentation, and yet its policies favour precisely that. Polarizing, discriminatory narratives divide the society in two. Everybody should be able to be different and equal, and free. Different identities and cultures should be recognized by the government. Or the tensions will actually grow.

Going back to your writing, how do you write? At home, outside, with music...

I write at home. But I will have taken notes before sit and write. I accumulate things. Sometimes I have a thought in my head, and I say "I will write it down later". Then I'm sad for hours because of course I forget what it was. The words and sentences I forget and lose feel like living beings I have killed. I do listen to music while I write. Classical and ethnic music. It's impossible for me to write before I have emptied my head. When I get home I lay down for a couple of hours. When I wake up, everybody else is already asleep.

Life is kind in slow-motion, nobody is around. In this quiet dimension of life, words emerge. If I hadn't buried myself in writing, I would never actually adapt-

ed to life. I take refuge in the night. I can write in darkness, in total abandonment, in the nightmares of those asleep, in this nocturnal world, in the pitch black world of others. Sometimes I need to get a motivation before starting to write. Then I visit Shahrazad from *A Thousand And One Nights* and listen to a few of her stories, or I read a couple of sentences from *One Hundred Years Of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marques or *The God Of Small Things* by Arundhati Roy.

And in terms of a story? Does a character come first? Or is it the plot to come first?

The plot always intrigued me. I don't believe in heroes. My characters are insignificant. The story, the plot is what's alive, filled with blood. I am taken through the tales. The Kurdish tales, the best examples of oral literature. From them I get inspiration, they are always present in my life.

Sometimes I meet some people and I place them in my novels, in my stories as I see them. I take them by the hand and literally push them into my story. Sometimes they don't want to come. Then I play tricks on them, I set up traps and lock them in my story, throw the key into the ocean and leave Ifrits from *A Thousand and One Nights* to the door. A story has some kind of lesson in the end. Lived experience is more valuable. Abstract moral criteria don't appeal to

“Kurdish literature survived thanks to oral literature

people. But a conceited king, a spoiled princess, a merchant with a lust for profit have always been intriguing.

Do you feel part of a generation of Kurdish writers? Do Kurdish writers meet? Do they have a space to meet? An organization, a cultural, institution...

I see myself as a Kurdish writer. I am fed by the culture and the lands of Kurdistan. The setting of my books are the Kurdish lands and the heroes are the Kurds. But as I said earlier I'm not really proficient in written Kurdish. I didn't grow up in the village, I was unable to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the rich Kurdish language because I grew up in the city. I write because I love literature, because writing is more important to me than anything else.

I know all the Kurdish writers and publishers. I am in permanent contact with the Kurdish Writers Association and the Kurdish PEN. Kurdish institutions face a diverse range of issues. Financial hardships, lack of readership, visible and invisible pressures, distribution issues,

lack of advertising and promotion, etc... There is, I'm sorry to say, a lack of interest in Kurdish literature.

How would you define the Kurdish literary scene? Not just in north Kurdistan but in all four parts of Kurdistan?

Kurdish literature survived thanks to oral literature. There have been a handful of new works produced in the last century. Most of the books were published in the Soviet Union and Europe because of the oppression Kurds were subjected to.

After the 1990's, Kurdish publications and books began to be published in Bashur (or South Kurdistan, in Northern Iraq) and in Bakur (or North Kurdistan, in the South East of Turkey) as a result of the struggle waged by the Kurds. Newspapers and magazines were published there and enjoyed some success. Literature did blossom in Syria, even though there was a huge oppression there. Iran as well, is a very oppressive regime, and Kurdish literature couldn't really flourish there.



Any interesting writers and books you would suggest?

There are important names in Kurdish literature. But so few novels, short stories and poems have been translated into other languages. Ahmed Xani was a great writer and thinker. Piremerd was the Anton Chekhov of Kurds. Erep

Shemo was a great novelist who wrote the first novel in the Soviets. Cigerxwin was a great poet who lived in the South. Mehmed Uzun was an important cornerstone in the modern Kurdish novel. There are so many successful young writers and poets, like Selim Temo and Şener Özmen.

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Writing for me is experimenting,
trying to answer questions.
And to make them

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BOTHAYNA AL-ESSA /// KUWAIT

BOTHAYNA AL-ESSA IS A BEST-SELLING KUWAITI AUTHOR, BORN ON 3 SEPTEMBER, 1982. SHE HAS PUBLISHED SEVEN NOVELS AND ONE COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES. SHE HAS BEEN AWARDED MANY NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL PRIZES FOR HER WORK, INCLUDING BEING LONGLISTED FOR THE 2013 SHEIKH ZAYED BOOK AWARD. SHE IS THE FOUNDER OF THE LITERARY PLATFORM TAKWEEN, THE FIRST OF ITS KIND IN KUWAIT, WHICH HELPS ASPIRING WRITERS

/// Text: Sawad Hussain

Music, painting, dancing are all forms of art and self-expression. Why writing?

I don't think I had a say in the matter of me writing or not. Writing is the way in which I can express myself fully. My relationship with the words is more than any other form of expression. I think it's also a matter of how I was brought up. As a child, I studied the Quran and memorized it. There were certain public opinions that were against the other forms of expression. So writing was the only one that hadn't been declared taboo.

Also, I like the sounds, the letters themselves. I like the strange energy that comes from fusing one letter with the next, one word with the next.

What do you consider your greatest achievement as a writer?

I think the life of a writer is one of continuous attempts. There is always something that we learn, something we achieve and something we fail at. But to be honest I don't treat the act of writing with the logic of success and failure. I don't want to see it from this perspective. For me, it's about experimentation and making attempts, to



answer questions and to pose them. That's it. If we follow this logic, then every book hits the target that it's meant to.

What was your aim in writing *I Grew Up and Forgot How to Forget*?

The goal of this book was to lay bare the reality of oppression, especially the oppression of women. I think in my previous works I would go in circles around this topic, but I was scared to broach it with this level of clarity and transparency. Maybe simply because we as women don't like to portray ourselves as the perpetual victim or the oppressed female. In this novel I decided to go directly to the heart of the matter that was nagging at me.

What was your family's reaction to the book?

My family isn't really into literature. They're more interested in business. Since the beginning, it's not just with this book, but rarely there's a book

that my family reads the whole way through. My mom and my sister are the only ones who read my work from my household. Their feedback was really positive.

You've established Takween, a performance space, bookshop, and a school for budding writers. What advice do you give them?

I always advise them to do four things. The first thing is to read. It's impossible to be an authentic writer without being a serious reader. Even for us to write one word, we have to have read hundreds before that.

The second thing is to interact with writing like a muscle that needs to be exercised and strengthened. One has to engage in writing exercises on a continuous basis. Even if they're just simple exercises, they'll keep us 'fit' as writers. And they'll help us develop our tools as writers.

“The way the world works, it's designed such that we're transformed into consumers, and it consumes the individual by making them into a consumer”

The third thing is that we need solitude to create. The way the world works -- it's designed such that we're transformed into consumers, and it consumes the individual by making them into a consumer. By entering into this cycle, we lose ourselves and the true voice we hear in our heads when we experience setbacks in this world. It's upon the writer -- all of us actually, not just writers -- but writers in particular to go up against this way of life.

The final thing is that we need a lot of dialogue. To hear other perspectives and opinions. I learn from reading, but certainly I learn a lot more when I discuss with someone what I've read.

Which of your novels do you hold dearest?

Maps of Wandering. I think because I matured whilst writing it, as a writer, technically, and as a person. I jumped outside of the usual concerns of a Gulf woman. The subject matter itself -- there was a lot of challenge and enjoyment in it.

Two of your novels are currently being looked at by different publishing houses to be translated into English. What is your opinion on the act of translation?

I look at translation as a way of reaching readers that I didn't originally intend to communicate with. Maybe they don't belong to this region, don't share the same issues, don't share the same religion, but it'll be interesting for me to see how these new readers receive my stories.

What are you writing now?

I'm working on a novel. But I'm yet to finish it.

Is the style of the novel similar to your previous ones?

The style is closer to *Maps of Wandering* than my other novels. It should be published later this year from the same publishing house. It delves into the current political climate in Kuwait and how this is reflected in our households and everyday lives.

What are you reading at the moment?

I'm reading Mansoura Ez Eldin's *Emer-*

“What really scares me is that one day I won't be able to write. Because of this fear, I always find time, even if it's just one hour.”

ald Mountain. We had a shared panel where we got to know each other, and we thought it'd be a good idea to read each other's books.

Do you have a routine when you write?

I have a routine when I write, but it differs from novel to novel. So for *Maps of Wandering*, I used to write in the mornings until nighttime. With the novel I'm working on right now, I find myself in the bookstore of Takween every morning. So because I have work in the morning, and my children to take care of when they come back from school, with homework and so on, most of the time I start writing from 8pm until midnight.

How do you find the time to write?

You're a mother, you have *Takween*... It's a matter of being organized. It's not an issue of not having enough time. Just being organized. I've written in worse conditions where there were more demands on my time. What really scares me is that one day I won't be able to write. Because of this fear, I always find time, even if it's just one

hour, to write. If I don't write, it has an impact on my life, my temperament.

Do you feel relaxed when you write?

It's tiring and relaxing at the same time!

When you're done with your first draft, do you show it to anyone? If so, who?

Yes, definitely, at least five people. For *Maps of Wandering*, I shared the drafts with a number of people. For example, I gave it to Mohammed Hassan Alwan because in the novel there are some sections from his hometown in Saudi Arabia. Some of the reviewers were my friends and others were writers whose opinion I value, whom I approached to take a look at my work.

Do you end up making edits based on their recommendations?

Yes of course. If it will make the book better, I am more than open to making edits.

Note: This interview took place in Arabic and was translated by Sawad Hus-sain.



Biographies

Bothayna al-Essa

is a best-selling Kuwaiti author, born on 3 September, 1982. She has published seven novels and one collection of short stories. She has been awarded many national and international prizes for her work, including being longlisted for the 2013 Sheikh Zayed Book Award. She is the founder of the literary platform Takween, the first of its kind in Kuwait, which helps aspiring writers.

Dilawer Zeraq

was born in Diyarbakır in 1965. Since 1995 he has been working on Kurdish language, culture and literature. He has published 3 short story books, 3 novels, 3 dictionaries, sociological and theoretic literature analysis and translation works.

Enrico Palandri

was born in Venice in 1956. His father was a career officer and Enrico grew up in several cities until the university years when he moved to London where he lived 23 years before returning to Venice.

Fernando Butazzoni

was born in Montevideo in 1953. He was a militant of the Tupamaros guerrilla organization and already in exile he participated as an international volunteer to the Sandinista Front who succeeded in defeating Somoza's dictatorship in Nicaragua in 1979. His literary career begins in this same year with the Prize awarded by Casa de las Americas of Cuba. In 2014 he won Uruguay's National Literature Award, Bortolomé Hidalgo, for his monumental historical novel, *Las Cenizas del Condor*, (Condor's Ashes).

Gabriel Angel

has been for thirty years a FARC-EP guerilla. His literary work offers guerrillas and peasants as well as military and paramilitary protagonists, and reflects stories taking place in the most rural Colombia, where the civil war has reached a special intensity.

Gianfranco Bettin

was born in Porto Marghera, in the municipality of Venice, in 1955. Writer and politician, Gianfranco Bettin has for many years been vice-mayor of the city of Venice. He has been a promoter of numerous cultural activities that took place in the Italian city such as the *Fondamenta Literature Festival*.

Joseph O'Connor

was born in Dublin on September 20, 1963. He is married to playwright, screenwriter and novelist, Anne-Marie Casey, and has two sons. In 2014 he was appointed Frank McCourt Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Limerick. He is also Founder and Director of the University of Limerick McCourt Creative Writing Summer School at NYU.

Muharrem Erbey

was born in June 23, 1969 in Hazro, Diyarbakır. He is a lawyer, writer and human rights activist. He lives in the ancient city of Diyarbakır that with its million and a half citizens is considered the capital of North Kurdistan (the part of Kurdistan lying in Turkey).

Sonia Nimr

Palestinian historian, academic, and award-winning author Dr. Sonia Nimr has written more than a dozen children's and YA books for children, including the 2014 Etisalat Prize for Arabic Children's Literature-winning *Wondrous Journeys in Strange Lands* (Rihlat Ajeeba fi al-Bilad al-Ghareeba). Her *Ghaddar the Ghoul and Other Palestinian Stories* is in English.

Sawad Hussain

is an Arabic translator and litterateur. She holds a MA in Modern Arabic Literature from SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies, London). She regularly critiques Arabic literature in translation. She is passionate about all things related to Arab culture, history and literature. Her most recent translation is a Jordanian sci-fi novel to be published in late 2017.

Marcia Lynx Qualey

She is the founding editor of ArabLit (www.arablit.org), an eight-year-old online magazine and multi-use resource, winner of the 2017 "Literary Translation Initiative" award at the London Book Fair. She writes, edits, and translates for a variety of newspapers and magazines, and also works as a consultant for Arabic literature projects, including *Kitab Sawti* and the Library of Arabic Literature. She is also a contributor to the forthcoming MLA volume, *Teaching Modern Arabic Literature in Translation*.

Petra Probst

Artist and books illustrator/author. She lives and work between Germany and Italy. Her artistic research brings her around Italy and abroad. In Genoa, in 2014, she has worked at the project "Oltre il buio-il teorema di Bavcar" at Villa Piaggio/Contemporary Art. In 2016 she has participated to the exhibition "Touch of Water" at Rapallo Castle. In 2017 at the MuMA of Genoa she was a curator together with Flavio Tiberti of the project dedicated to the Mediterranean Sea, "ROVI DI MARE Visioni di un orizzonte in bilico". She specialises in dance/movement therapy and in art techniques therapy. She has published books for children in many countries and at the moment she is working with the Goethe Institut of Turin on a theater and art project involving young refugees. www.petraprobst.com

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PALESTINE, IRELAND,
KUWAIT, COLOMBIA,
ITALY, KURDISTAN
AND URUGUAY

