



International Fiction Book Club

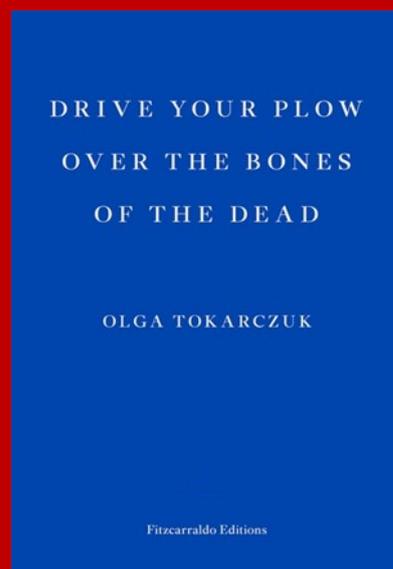
Olga Tokarczuk – *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*
Monday 18 May 2020

The second meeting of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club was held by Zoom on Monday 18 May. We discussed Nobel Laureate Olga Tokarczuk's intriguing "crime" novel *Drive Your Plow over the Bones of the Dead*, translated from the Polish by Antonia Lloyd-Jones, published in paperback and as an eBook by Fitzcarraldo Editions.

About the Book

Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead is an intriguing *noir* novel by the Nobel Laureate and Man Booker-International Prize-winner Olga Tokarczuk. In a remote Polish village, Janina Duszejko, an eccentric and reclusive woman in her sixties, who prefers the company of animals, believes in the stars and loves the poetry of William Blake, recounts the events surrounding the disappearance of her two dogs. But when members of the local hunting club are found murdered, she becomes involved in the investigation.

In 2017, eight years after the novel was first published, it was filmed by Agnieszka Holland as *Spoor* and caused a genuine political uproar in Tokarczuk's native Poland.



We chose this book because it is highly entertaining and unusual – an existential, environmental and political novel presented as a piece of *noir* fiction told in the voice of its main character. It is a fascinating and complex novel, so we were very glad that Olga Tokarczuk's translator, Antonia Lloyd-Jones, could join us to explain some of the background, to talk about the challenges of translation and to share her detailed knowledge of the author's work.

Everyone enjoyed the book enormously, and if you haven't read it yet we hope you will. An edited transcript of our discussion with Antonia Lloyd-Jones follows.



Photograph of Olga Tokarczuk by Jacek Kołodziejcki

Bill Hi Antonia, we're very glad that you could join us this evening by Zoom, and I hope you'll be able to come to Lancaster in person, perhaps with Olga Tokarczuk, in the future. We have about 6 or 7 questions for you and we'll start straight in.

Antonia Hi, everyone.

Stephen Hi Antonia. We all loved the novel, and we loved the translation as well.

So coming on the back of it being in a certain sense a crime novel, how much of a challenge was it for you as a translator to tackle all of the themes, the astrology, William Blake, the environmental issues, the problems of religious power, the animal rights versus human rights, the humour – to bring all that in?

Antonia All those things are more up my street than crime. I translate another crime writer who writes wonderful racy thriller-type murder mysteries, but in this book, the crime genre is obviously being used for a purpose. Olga Tokarczuk wrote this book when crime literature was having a big revival in Poland, partly on the back of the success of Scandinavian noir, and a number of writers who are not crime writers as such decided to try their hand at it. It's more of a pastiche of a crime novel than an actual crime novel. I've noticed that to some extent it has been marketed as crime, but the people who read it expecting it to be a typical crime novel can be disappointed and baffled because there's all this other stuff going on.

You mentioned a whole list of different things. The astrology was a bit of a challenge, but it was for Olga too – she consulted an expert in Polish. And then I asked Fitzcarraldo to have my English version checked because I don't know much about astrology and the vocabulary is specific. I did some research on the internet and turned out to have got it right. The one complaint I hear about the book is that there is too much astrology, and that may be true. In fact, the crime was probably the least familiar aspect for me.

Chris My thought was along similar lines. I was quite surprised at how many different themes there are in the novel outside the basic plot. Do they actually reflect Olga's own political interests that she pursues in her own life apart from her writing?

Antonia To some extent. She is interested in how animals are treated. In Poland they have quite a lot of hunting that isn't to satisfy a basic need for food in remote places, it's purely to satisfy macho types who like blasting away at animals. She's very much against that and wanted to make that point, but also to use hunting as a metaphor for a patriarchal society.

‘a protestor in one of the big cities turned up with a great big placard that said: *Janina Duszejko wouldn't like it.*’

And, yes, there are some things in there that she definitely believes in very strongly, such as the way certain people are marginalised, such as women of a certain age. At the same time, I don't believe she would ever think it acceptable to take it to such an extreme degree as her somewhat psychologically unbalanced main character Janina Duszejko does. There was a funny incident during some protests in Poland against changes in the hunting law that extended the possibilities for hunting on private land, when a protestor in one of the big cities turned up with a great big placard that said: *‘Janina Duszejko wouldn't like it.’*

Olga was amused because it meant her fictional character had become a sort of brand. We had discussed changing some of the names in the book, but we decided to leave that one alone on the principle that Janina Duszejko had become recognisable.

Margaret I have a question about the tone. It's quite an odd and distinct voice and I wanted to ask whether it is as odd and strange in Polish as it comes over in English, whether it's like her other work and whether it's like anything else in Polish? Or is it really one of a kind?

Antonia It's a very good question, and it relates to the other two questions you've asked, because this is a book with a very strong narrator's voice. When the book was published in Poland I attended a public event where Olga said that she finds writing in the first person easier, because once you've found the right voice you just stick with it all the way through. And it's the same for me as a translator. That voice brings everything together in this strange person's head, but you're never quite sure how much she's showing you or telling you. Everything is filtered through her rather weird mind. And I was terribly conscious when I was translating the book that everything hinges on this narrator's voice, and that in Polish she does sound bizarre.

'She's like Stanley Kubrick – she never does the same thing twice'

Every book that Olga writes is entirely different. She's like Stanley Kubrick – she never does the same thing twice. She has an extraordinary talent for not repeating herself, and this book is quite distinct, within her work and within Polish literature.

When I was working on it, there came a point when I thought I had finished my translation. But then I decided to have another look at it and I realised it was too stylised in English. Although in English literature we're used to rather eccentric characters, I felt that she was too annoying. It's very important for the reader to like her. So I went right through the whole thing again to rein her in a bit, and to make the voice just a little less off the wall. I wanted people to like her enough to keep reading, and to end up being complicit with her, which I think is crucial to the success of the book.

Jo Well, first of all I want to agree with that, because we really warmed to her straight away and we kept on liking her throughout –

Antonia Even though she tops several people in a violent way?!

Jo Yes, yes. *(Laughs.)* I had a couple of questions. We loved the nicknames that Janina has for all her friends and associates and we were wondering if there was any hidden meaning in there and also about the use of capitalisation, the odd little words that had capital letters at the beginning. I think it was all the animals had a capital letter. Was there any significance to it and was it like that in the original?

Antonia It is like that in the original. It's not entirely consistent. It's a sort of nod to William Blake. All the mottos at the beginnings of the chapters are from Blake, and the eccentric use of capitals adds an eighteenth-century touch. The capitals are mostly used for animated things: animals, for instance, have capital letters, but if you look closely you'll see that policemen don't. *(Laughter.)*

So there's obviously a sort of batty logic to it. Certain emotions have capital letters too – Anger, for instance – and some of the celestial bodies have capitals, so it does tell you something about what matters to her, but it's an eccentric thing.

Kate I was wondering whether you had to make many adjustments and interpretations to take account of the British sense of humour when you were translating?

Antonia As I mentioned, there was a point when I'd translated the whole book and started reviewing my work from the English-linguaged perspective. I knew it would be coming out in Britain, the US, Australia and New Zealand – the whole English-speaking world, and something in me tried to pinpoint how English-language readers' sensibilities are different from Polish ones. In particular it was to do with eccentricity, which is especially familiar to the British, isn't it! (*Laughter.*)

That's why I wanted to avoid the risk of making her pure caricature. In Polish she's a little bit more caricature than she is in English, I think. I'm not entirely sure. I keep asking myself this question, but, yes, I did have to think about the British mentality and what we're used to.



Antonia Lloyd-Jones

About the funny names, before I forget. They are, of course, the names that Janina Duszejko makes up for the other characters in Polish, but I made Dyzio, for instance, 'Dizzy'. His name is Dionizy, which means 'Dionysus', and 'Dyzio' is the standard diminutive for it. The English equivalent is 'Denis', which is not as romantic as Dionysus by a long stretch of the imagination! But I thought 'Dizzy' was perfect somehow. That diminutive suggested 'Dizzy' and it fitted so well.

'Oddball' was a bit harder. I wanted to call him 'Maladroit' at first, but Olga didn't like that. He's called 'Matoga' in Polish, which is a very strange dialect word meaning a quarrelsome person. And then there's a character called Wnętrzak, of whom Janina says she didn't have to make up a name for him because his real name fitted him perfectly. And I called him 'Innerd' because *wnętrze* means entrails or intestines. I wanted something that sounded credible as a name, but of course it's not credible as a Polish name, so I cheated a little bit, but I seem to have got away with it.

Sam I liked the way you created the name 'Dizzy' based on the same principle that Olga created the names of her characters. My question is about the film version of the book and the controversy it created in Poland. I can sense some of the reasons why, but wondered if you could tell us a bit about what had made it so controversial in Poland?

Antonia *Pokot* (Spoor), as the film was called, came out in 2017, eight years after the book. The director, Agnieszka Holland, is a very political character and does have her fists raised at the ruling party. So, it's a more political work of art than the book is. It's a good film, and I like it, but knowing the book so well I have some problems with the film.

As we've said, the central character is crucial to the book, but of course in a film version the camera is turned on her instead of being inside her, so it cannot be the same thing.

Olga co-wrote the script with Agnieszka Holland, but they changed a lot of things. For instance, in the film Dizzy is epileptic, Good News is being exploited in a brothel by Innerd and has a vulnerable little brother she's trying to save, so other poignant and awful things have been added.



A scene from *Pokot* (Spoor, 2017), directed by Agnieszka Holland.

The film is different to the book and it was bound to stir things up a bit. Unlike the novel, it came out at a time when the issue of hunting and its association with the kind of conservative, Catholic, deeply patriarchal attitude represented by Poland's ruling Law and Justice party was very much in the news, and there were a lot of protests happening about it and other things as well. So it was really the timing, and Olga has said that it's ironical that this book has become more politically significant since it was written, which is now eleven years ago.

Bénédicte In a way you've already answered my question because it was about whether there was any continuity in the work of Olga Tokarczuk. You've said that she never does the same thing twice. But in terms of images or writing style there must be some continuity.

Antonia Of course. Her great skill is that she's a brilliant storyteller. She has certain influences that I see echoed in her work. She loves fairy tales, legends and mythology. She read a huge amount as a child. Her father ran the school library in a small town, so she absorbed all sorts of wonderful literature from very early on. She's incredibly well read.

I translated a lovely autobiographical essay the other day for her for the Nobel Foundation – I'm hoping they're going to publish it soon on their website because it gives fascinating insight into the influences and inspirations in her work.

I often find echoes of the European fairy-tale tradition in her work. She wrote a novel called *Primeval and Other Times*, which tells the history of a village at the very centre of Europe, at least that's the idea behind it, but it's told in a fairy-tale convention. So each section is called 'The Time of ...', followed either by one of the characters' names or an object or an animal – all sorts of things feature as the main protagonist of each section. When I was translating it, I realised that the right tone for that book was to be found in fables and legends.

'Her father ran the school library in a small town, so she absorbed all sorts of wonderful literature from very early on.'

Now Olga's 1,000-page historical epic, *The Books of Jacob*, translated by Jennifer Croft, who translated *Flights*, will be coming out in English next year, which took her eight years to write. It's the product of a very strong interest in and affinity with the history of central and eastern Europe

– all those changing borders, all those migrating peoples, all those cross-fertilisations of cultures, religions and nationalities – are common themes in her work, though they come out in completely different ways in each book. She loves ripping apart the conventional style of the novel and coming at it from a completely different angle.

Bill One last question, if we may. Can you tell us what's coming next and what you are translating next?

Antonia The next one to be published in my translation will be an illustrated children's book called *The Lost Soul*, which is coming out with TriangleSquare, an imprint of Seven Stories in New York. Olga's text is only about 600 words, and the story is largely told through beautiful drawings by Joanna Concejo, yet it's more of an adult book than a children's book.

'She loves ripping apart the conventional style of the novel and coming at it from a completely different angle.'

But *The Books of Jacob* is her important historical novel that's coming out in the spring of 2021. It's a major epic about eighteenth-century eastern and central Europe, based on the true historical story of a break-away sect of Jews led by a man called Jakub Frank, who declared himself the Messiah; they became Christians and wanted to get themselves accepted by Rome. It's an enormously complex work.

Bill It sounds wonderful. And what's next for you?

Antonia Recently, Jennifer Croft and I jointly translated her Nobel lecture and now her publisher in Poland is putting together a book of her essays, including some very significant pieces, such as a wonderful essay about how she came up with the character of Janina Duszejko. So Jennifer and I are hoping that in due course we'll be able to translate this book of her essays for publication in English.

We've also translated a number of her stories, which have appeared in journals, and we're hoping these will be collected into one book. There are the two earlier novels that I translated, *Primeval and Other Times* and *House of Day, House of Night*, both of which it would be nice to see reissued.

And there are two novels in her backlist that I absolutely love and dream of translating, one of which, called *Anna In in the Catacombs* is a sort of cyberpunk retelling of the Sumerian myth of the goddess Inanna. The other novel is called *Final Stories* which is told in three parts, each with a different female heroine: the woman in the first part is the daughter of the woman in the second part and the mother of the woman in the third part. So they're related, but their stories are quite separate. It's a very sad book. It's about death. And Olga finds that book rather difficult to go back to. But I think it's one of her greatest.

Bill Fantastic! What a lot to look forward to. And now we should let you go.

Antonia Thanks for having me, and by the way you're very lucky the cat didn't photobomb the session, she just sat purring throughout. Thanks everybody. Goodbye!

Antonia Lloyd-Jones is a prizewinning translator from Polish, and recipient of the 2018 Transatlantyk award for the most outstanding promoter of Polish literature abroad. She is a long-term translator of Nobel Prize in Literature laureate Olga Tokarczuk, and her translation of Tokarczuk's *Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead* was shortlisted for the Booker International Prize for Fiction in 2018. Other recent published translations include Żanna Słoniowska's *The House with the Stained-Glass Window* (Maclehose Press, 2018), and *Mrs Mohr Goes Missing* by Maryla Szymiczkowa, pseudonym of authorial duo Jacek Dehnel and Piotr Tarczynski (Oneworld Books, 2019). She also works as a mentor for emerging translators and has served as co-chair of the Translators Association.

Bill Swainson is a freelance editor and literary consultant, a trustee of Litfest and, with Sam O'Donoghue of DeLC at Lancaster University, convenor of the Litfest International Fiction Book Club.

Next Meeting

The next book to be discussed at the Litfest International Fiction Book Club on **Monday 15 June** at **6.30pm** is a tale of four jilted lovers, each hoping that a mysterious café will allow them to travel back in time to confront the lover who left them. *Before the Coffee Gets Cold* by Toshikazu Kawaguchi, is translated from the Japanese by Geoffrey Trousselot, and published in paperback and eBook by Picador.

If you would like to register to join the Litfest International Fiction Book club, please email Bill Swainson at litfestbill@gmail.com.

