

## Poland's Olga Tokarczuk: Perpetual motion literature

**O**lga Tokarczuk, considered the most talented Polish novelist of her generation, has a string of best-sellers to her name and a style that blends the real with the mystical. A vegetarian and environmentalist with long, dark dreadlocks, the 57-year-old writer is also a political activist who does not shy away from criticizing Poland's right-wing Law and Justice (PiS) government. She received death threats in 2015 after telling state media that an open and tolerant Poland was a myth. Her publishers assigned her a security detail for a week.

Her books portray a polychromatic world perpetually in motion, with characters' traits intermingled and language that is both precise and poetic. "I don't have a clear biography of my own that I could recount in an interesting way. I'm made up of the characters that I pulled out of my head, that I invented," Tokarczuk said in an interview with The Polish Book Institute. "I'm made up of all of them. I have a huge, multi-frame biography."

Tokarczuk has written more than a dozen books and won numerous honours, including Britain's Man Booker International Prize last year and Poland's most prestigious Nike Literary Award twice. Her books have been turned into plays and films and translated into more than 25 languages, including Catalan, Hindi and Japanese.

### Mystic

Born on January 29, 1962, in the western town of Sulechów, Tokarczuk studied psy-

chology at the University of Warsaw. She worked as a therapist for a few years in the western city of Wałbrzych and published a collection of poems before taking a stab at prose. Following the success of her early books, she turned to writing full time and settled in the Sudety mountains near the Czech border.

The mother of one is an animal lover with a keen interest in astrology and psychoanalyst Carl Jung. "She's a mystic in constant search of the truth, a truth that can only be perceived on the move, by transcending borders," said Kinga Dunin, a friend and fellow writer. "All set forms, institutions and language are death," Dunin told AFP.

### Spanning borders

Tokarczuk's first novel, "The Journey of the People of the Book," released in 1993, chronicles a failed expedition to find a mysterious book. She won the Booker International Prize along with her translator Jennifer Croft for her 2007 novel "Flights", whose English version came out in 2017. The book was praised for its "series of startling juxtapositions (as Tokarczuk) flies us through a galaxy of departures and arrivals, stories and digressions, all the while exploring matters close to the contemporary and human predicament".

Her 900-page "The Books of Jacob" spans seven countries, three religions and five languages, tracing the little-known history of Frankism, a Jewish messianic sect that sprang up in Poland in the 18th century. Released in 2014, its pages are numbered in reverse in the style of Hebrew books. It became both an award-winning bestseller and the target of harsh criticism from nationalist circles in Poland.

Tokarczuk also co-wrote the screenplay for the Polish crime film "Spoor", which won the Alfred Bauer Prize for a work of particular innovation at the Berlin film festival in 2017. "Spoor" was also selected as Poland's entry for the best foreign language film at the 2018 Oscars. When not travelling, Tokarczuk divides her time between an apartment in Poland's western city of Wrocław and her mountain home.—AFP

Polish author  
Olga Tokarczuk

## Peter Handke: Avant-garde writer, Nobel critic

**A**ustrian Peter Handke, one of the most original German-language writers alive, once used his famously sharp tongue to call for the Nobel Prize in Literature to be abolished. The prize brings its winner "false canonization" along with "one moment of attention (and) six pages in the newspaper," the novelist, playwright, poet and translator told Austrian media in 2014. It was not the first time that Handke had shown himself to be an iconoclast. He has described Thomas Mann, a giant of German literature and a 1929 Nobel laureate, as a "terribly bad writer" churning out "condescending, snotty-nosed prose".

But what really appalled many peers and fans was his attendance at former Serbian president Slobodan Milosevic's funeral, and his sympathy for the Serbs in the 1990s Yugoslav wars. Handke was born in Griffen in southern Austria during World War II on December 6, 1942 to a German soldier father and a mother from Austria's Slovenian minority. After a few early years in Communist East Berlin, Handke grew up back in Austria, and first discovered his love of writing while contributing to the magazine of his hated Catholic boarding school.

He burst onto the literary scene in 1966 with his novel "The Hornets" and with a play, "Offending the Audience", in which four actors dissect the nature of theatre and then turn on the audience. That success led him to kiss goodbye to his law studies and write full-time. He has never looked back, leading a peripatetic existence and writing prolifically.

### Cult classics

Notable works include "Short Letter, Long Farewell", the poetry collection "The Innerworld of the Outerworld of the Innerworld" and "A Sorrow Beyond Dreams" about his mother, who killed herself in 1971. He has also been no slouch in film-making, cooperating several times with German director and close friend Wim Wenders. Many of their works explore themes such as loneliness and mortality. In 1972, Wenders adapted Handke's novel "The Goalkeeper's Fear of the Penalty" about a goalie who is sent off during a match and later commits a murder.

The pair also worked together in the 1987 cult classic "Wings of Desire", about a pair of angels roaming Berlin. In the 1990s Handke emerged as a vocal defender of the Serbs in the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia, even comparing them to the Jews under the Nazis, a remark he later retracted. His 1996 travelogue "A Journey to the Rivers: Justice for Serbia", caused a storm, and in 1999 he returned Germany's prestigious Buechner prize in protest at NATO's bombing of Belgrade.



Austrian novelist and playwright Peter Handke

### An indignity

At the 2006 funeral of Milosevic—who died while on trial for crimes against humanity, and who wanted Handke to testify in his defence—the writer made a speech in front of thousands of mourners. Some stood up for Handke, including Nobel-winning compatriot Elfriede Jelinek. But many others, from Susan Sontag to Salman Rushdie, lined up to lambast him. German poet and essayist Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, noting Handke's 1960s firebrand past, said it was "a paradox that the remnants of the peace movement are running around with supporters of mass murder".

In 2006 an outcry forced him to reject another German prize—the Heinrich Heine award—and the Comedie-Francaise theatre in Paris refused to put on one of his plays. And when, in 2014, he came to collect the Ibsen prize in Norway, he was greeted with demonstrators chanting "fascist" and holding "Genocide-denier" placards. "What an indignity!" Handke told the Austria Press Agency afterwards. "Not for me, but for the seriousness of writing." But despite it all, at 76 and with a mane of grey hair, Handke remains active.

His play, "The Innocent, Me and the Unknown Woman by the Side of the Road", premiered at Vienna's hallowed Burgtheater in February 2016, while later that year a Wenders-Handke creation, "The Beautiful Days of Aranjuez", competed at the Venice Film Festival. "Without him I would perhaps have become a painter," Wenders said. — AFP