

JAN MICHALSKI PRIZE FOR LITERATURE 22 NOVEMBER 2012

SPEECH BY VERA MICHALSKI-HOFFMANN

Dear Friends,

Welcome to the 3rd ceremony of The Jan Michalski Prize, the first one in *Bois Désert*, the future home of the foundation. We are offering you the best possible welcome considering that this is still a building site, and we hope that you will excuse us. We will undertake to keep in mind people who are standing.

We have assembled here in the library, which we have just finished varnishing today.

We welcome the members of the jury present here, and also extend our welcome to Yannick Haenel, who is not here today, and who, this year, for health reasons did not participate in our discussions, but who remains a member of the jury.

First, just a few words about the organisation of this « *ceremony* », although it so lacks in any sort of pomp, that it would be better to call it a celebration or a party.

After a few words of introduction, I will announce our winner. Each member of the jury will say something briefly in the language of their choice. Martial Lederer will present a drawing, created especially for this occasion and the laureate will read from the winning book.

We will conclude with a cocktail prepared by Benoît Violier, whom I congratulate for his recent achievement of receiving the third Michelin star.

As I said before, we are here, in the library, the heart of the *Maison de l'Écriture*. It is still empty, but thanks to the work of Guillaume, our librarian, soon to be joined by a second librarian, the bookshelves will be filling fast.

It is a great joy for me to see this first building ready opening like a treasure store at this announcement of the prize more than ten years after the death of Jan Michalski. Our cultural utopia is becoming a reality. But we still have some way to go as one of the other central ideas, retreats for writers, are yet to be started.

Our gathering today differs from the two previous gatherings in several ways.

The location, I already mentioned. But also our laureate is not here, nor is their agent. So your attempts to scrutinise the room in search of an unknown winner are in vain !

We have reserved a surprise for you : we will show two films featuring our laureate. Also new this time in stark contrast to the last two years, the jury has unanimously decided to only keep non-fiction titles within its final shortlist of three books.

We are rewarding this year a book which in our publishing jargon is called a work of non-fiction. But I would like to reassure you that our betrayal of fiction is only temporary and we will soon find the world of imagination again.

That is why our prize's main characteristic is its independence. The jury refuses to think in any categories or literary genres which are more or less worthy of interest. Our prize is original because it is international and multilingual. Briefly, our horizons are as open and wide as is the horizon here in Montricher, when not enveloped by fog.

The laureate of Jan Michalski Prize 2012 is a woman, our first winning female.

Julia Lovell, British historian and translator from the Chinese is awarded the prize for her book, ***The Opium War : Drugs, Dreams and the Making of China***, an essential book which explores the importance of this Chinese national war. We will hear her soon and you will understand why she is not here with us. I asked Isabel Hilton, who drew the attention of the jury to this title to introduce this book and its importance.

Vera Michalski-Hoffmann
President of the jury