

## LAUDATIO FOR ZERUYA SHALEV BY JUL, MEMBER OF THE JURY

Pain. That's pretty much the word that came to mind when the Jan Michalski Prize office asked me to write a speech for the official presentation of the 2019 award: as everyone knows, the *laudatio* can be as painful for the person pronouncing it as for the people on the receiving end, so I'll try to be brief and to the point...

I don't know about you, but personally I love reading women's magazines, especially *ELLE*. I only had brothers at home, and my mother was a committed, card-carrying union activist and Communist, so I discovered the genre relatively late. I especially loved the regular feature called 'My Story' or similar, in which the journalists would invent a reader's 'true story' from start to finish, and pass it off as genuine: typically, stories of love, or fleeting passion, or infidelity and dysfunctional families. The kind of thing everybody can easily identify with. When the fleeting pleasure of reading the article was over, we would forget all about it until the next week, and another moment of 'soft', voyeuristic distraction.

When Zeruya Shalev's novel came into my hands I hesitated to begin reading what I assumed would be yet another 'true story' and, what was more, one a great deal longer than those I found in the pages of *ELLE*. Imagine 250 pages about the travails of a head teacher in a failing marriage, unsure whether to throw herself into the arms of her first love, now a renowned doctor. Whatever the equivalent of 'Barbara Cartland' might be in Hebrew, I was sure this was it. And so, it was thanks to the friend who recommended it – whose advice is usually sound, and who knew I would never forgive her if she was playing a joke on me – that I stepped into the pages of this book, dragging my heels.

You will not be surprised to learn that the miracle quickly worked its magic: a vague, attentive interest turned to outright curiosity and finally, an engrossing emotional experience. After two chapters, we were truly in the realm of literature, where nothing is 'high' nor 'low', where the depths are infinite and time is thick like cream. A land from which no traveller returns untouched, and always having grown a little taller.

Because *Pain* is not at all what we imagine. Beginning with the title: we expect a classic melodrama but discover a comedy. 'Pain' is the name under which the book's main protagonist lists the phone number of her ex-lover. Every time he tries to call, the word 'Pain' appears on her screen!

Next, the background: the husband, the children, a lover, and an elevator that open directly into the apartment. The perfect ingredients for a Jewish-style vaudeville romp. And certainly, the situations and zingers fly, but there is such intelligence in the author's gaze and the personalities that fill the pages of the book, that already the novel belongs to another dimension.

At the physical level, first and foremost. Seldom does one come across a novel that evokes the smells, skin and touch of its characters so wholeheartedly: this carnal empathy is one of Zeruya Shalev's unique qualities. At the molecular level, the dramaturgy is spot-on, something which is all the more valuable in our aseptified era. It unfolds with impressive accuracy, and occasional, astounding violence, like the scene in which Iris, the central character in *Pain*, whose family have been quietly vegetarian for decades, meets her lover for an assignation in an Arab restaurant out in the sticks, and the lover kisses her passionately and forces a chewed bolus of meat into her mouth as he does so!

There's a phrase of Jacques Lacan's that I like very much. As always, you can interpret it every which way: 'Reality is when we knock into things.' In this sense, Zeruya Shalev's novel truly 'gets to grips' with reality, because people knock into things a whole lot. People get scratched crawling through a hedge to spy on their first love in his underwear; they knock their face when they trip and go flying on the sidewalk, not to mention the bomb attack that starts everything off, the force of which throws the main character out of their car one schoolday morning...

The author's finesse in this regard is of course reflected in the characters' personal relationships: the x-ray vision she brings to the staging of people's contradictory thoughts and feelings, and that curious balance of predictability and unpredictability that is the essence of Zeruya Shalev's style.

But there's more to this novel than the touching portrait of a woman whose life has been turned upside down, the children adrift from their own destiny, or the husband stewing quietly in his luke-warm solitude: there is, too, the portrait of an entire country, very much alive, and whose true face we have never seen.

These people live in an apartment on the outskirts of Jerusalem, on the top floor... But from up there they don't have the good view, the one that looks out over the Dead Sea. What's the point of living in Jerusalem if you don't have the 'right' view, bemoans the young daughter of the household.

Zeruya Shalev's novel is like that apartment: it doesn't face in the 'right' direction. This literary window opens not onto the familiar, common territory of Israeli literature, but onto a whole other landscape, laid out before our eyes. Not that the familiar, expected themes are neglected: there's the army, the bombings, the different communities, the rivalry between Jerusalem and Tel Aviv... But all viewed from a different angle.

Israel's tortured relationship with Europe is noticeably absent, however: the husband is an Iraqi Jew, the mother who goes off the rails lives with an Indian

who calls her 'mama', the daughter is drowning in Orientalist spirituality... The Israel of *Pain* looks elsewhere, the better to submit to our gaze.

As readers of this story of love and family relationships, we look again at the things we thought we knew – at a country, and a society that the media and prevailing ideologies seemed to have fixed for all time.

The impressive reception this novel has enjoyed – along with Zeruya Shalev's other books – in Israel and around the world, is a reassuring measure of the greatness of a truly contemporary author. An author who is all the more alive for having walked with death. A poet whose words have created a world in which bodies and souls are no longer taken for granted.

We salute the power of a book that makes so much literature out of a subject so everyday and universal: 'Woman, 50, in failing marriage and emptying nest, seeks first love. Write c/o this newspaper.' The canvas of small ads sweeps us along in its music, changing forever our vision of a world we thought we knew.

Dear Madam Shalev, the Jan Michalski Prize has always recognised original, marginal voices that wake up our sluggish souls, mired in their luke-warm habits and conventions, through the alchemy of translation (and here I thank Laurence Sendrowicz, whose soaring talent has made your text available to us in French). It happens that – quite apart from the pleasure, today, of gathering to honour you in this strangest and most inspiring of places – the prize has recently acquired a whole new dimension. It may not have escaped your notice that the author recognised here before you for her work *The Books of Jacob*, a certain Olga Tokarczuk, has found favour with another eminent jury...

I don't know whether the other members of our cosmopolitan jury will agree, but it seems to me that the Jan Michalski Prize could quite legitimately lay claim to the title of 'incubator for the Nobel Prize for Literature', the better to extend the reputation and influence of our gathering even further.

Zeruya Shalev, I don't know whether you speak French, but if you have tried to learn it recently, you might like to turn your attention to Swedish, in the years ahead. As they say in Stockholm: 'Gratulerar, tack och bravo för ert arbete!' (Congratulations, thank you and bravo for your work!).

Jul (Julien Berjeaut)