

JAN MICHALSKI PRIZE FOR LITERATURE 16 NOVEMBER 2011

SPEECH BY VERA MICHALSKI-HOFFMANN

Ladies, Gentlemen, friends,

As President of the Jan Michalski Foundation, I am delighted to be able to welcome friends, authors, representatives of cultural circles and the press, the members of the Jury and the winner of the second Jan Michalski Prize for Literature.

I would once again like to thank the publisher *Noir sur Blanc* for its hospitality. This year we are again presenting the prize in Lausanne. But I can assure you that next year we will be able to present it in the Library of the *Maison de l'écriture* in Montricher, in a Library that is destined to play host to literature from the world over.

Before revealing the name that you are all waiting for, I would like to briefly review the fledgling history of the Jan Michalski Prize. The Prize, awarded by the Jan Michalski Foundation, is intentionally international in its calling.

It is intended to differ from other prizes through its interest in all literary genres and in all the world's languages. Only the members of the Jury, who are multilingual and of differing fields of interest, may propose two books each. They therefore fulfil the function of veritable scouts, ready to identify books that are out of the ordinary, whatever their language of origin. I would like to thank them for their commitment, despite the often considerable distances involved.

They are all here today, with the exception of Ilija Trojanow, even though, of course, we still deeply regret the absence of Jorge Semprun, who died earlier this year and who, despite his fragile health, joined in our discussions from Paris. I wish to give particular thanks to Nuruddin Farah, who has come specially from Minneapolis, where he is currently teaching, to be with us for a few hours. He contributes his global interest in the literature of the world, his breadth of knowledge and his humanism. His participation in the award of the Prize has been a real headache to organize, but we are delighted to have him with us.

I would like to thank : Fabienne Verdier, who brings her precious artistic sensitivity to our discussions; Georges Nivat, whose immense literary culture focussed on Russia significantly enriches our debates; Włodzimierz Bolecki, with his fundamental knowledge of contemporary European literature; and Ilija Trojanow who, despite all the literary salons and congresses that he attends and organizes, still finds the time to unearth talent.

The Jury changes and is renewed every three years. We are therefore delighted to be able to welcome, as of 1 January next, Yannick Haenel and Isabel Hilton, a journalist and English author specializing in China.

Our shortlist, drawn up by the Jury at its second meeting less than a month ago, consists of the following three novels, in alphabetical order :

György Dragomán

The White King

Sjón

The Blue Fox

Miguel Syjuco

Ilustrado

These three remarkable books effectively illustrate the ambitions of our prize. They are written, respectively, in Hungarian, Icelandic (by Björk's lyricist) and English by a Filipino author. In the case of György Dragomán and Sjón, they are by well-known authors, while *Ilustrado* is Miguel Syjuco's first novel. This also shows that the Prize is free in its choices and does not wish to specialize in any specific region or field, such as first novels or the European novel.

I don't want to make you wait any longer. I am therefore very happy to be able to announce that the winner of the 2011 Jan Michalski Prize for Literature is György Dragomán for his novel *The White King*, published by Gallimard. György was born in Transylvania, and therefore in Romania, and I give him my heartfelt congratulations. I would just like to say a couple of words about what appealed to me personally in this book, before reading out the elogy by Ilija Trojanow in praise of his "protégé", if I may put it that way. During the following reading, you will see that *The White King* has touched us in particular by its originality of tone as, for the first time, I believe, it describes the oppression of a dictatorship (that of Ceaucescu in the present case) through the eyes of a child. It is a great book on fear, and also on how to cope with it through hope and imagination.

It is now my pleasure to present the prize to György Dragomán.

The prize is traditionally accompanied by a work of art produced by a well-known artist especially for the occasion. Last year, the winner received a work by Olivier Estoppey. This year, in tribute to Olivier O. Olivier, who has recently passed away and whom we loved dearly, we have decided to present the winner with a canvass by this philosophical painter who specialized in the abstract, derision and the troubling.

I leave the floor to Claudine Martin, his wife.

Vera Michalski-Hoffmann
President of the Jury