

Poles apart

Olga Tokarczuk claims her place among the greats of Polish letters with House of Day, House of Night





Buy House of Day, House of Night at [Amazon.co.uk](https://www.amazon.co.uk)

Philip Marsden

Sunday 20 October 2002

15.40 BST

House of Day, House of Night

by Olga Tokarczuk

translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones

Granta £12, pp256

What other nation can boast two living Nobel laureates - Wislawa Szymborska and Czeslaw Milosz - and, in the late Zbigniew Herbert, a poet at least their equal? Add to these Ryszard Kapuscinski, Slawomir Mrozek and Pawel Huelle and the debt we owe to Polish letters becomes clear. It's a distinctive list that draws on a powerful collective faith and an irony that often seems the only sane approach to the cruel joke of Polish history.

With House of Day, House of Night, her first full-length work here, Olga Tokarczuk can rightfully take her place among these writers. It is not so much a novel as a collection of linked short narratives, found stories, hagiography and incidental observations and is a delight to read - wonderfully inventive and by turns comic, tragic and wise.

The narrator arrives to live with her husband, R, in a small village in the west of Poland. In no particular order she pieces together the stories of the local community and the wider history that informs them.

This being Poland, the village's history is by no means straightforward. It is just yards from the Czech border. Villagers can hear Czech discos; are watched by Czech border guards; the short cut into town takes them through Czech territory. But the people are not indigenous. They are Poles who, after the war, left the old Polish lands of the east - the newly Sovietised

territories of Belorussia and Lithuania - and took up residence in the west, occupying houses that had just been vacated by Germans fleeing to the new borders of post-Nazi Germany.

These absent Germans make up one of the many recurring motifs of the book. Their hastily buried chattels are frequently dug up in the forest or the fields; as frail visitors they keep turning up to see their native land again before they die (in one case, as they die).

Tokarczuk's most successful sections are the quick, invariably unhappy portraits that help make up the local mythology. Marek Marek was a drunk who discovered he had shared his body with a terrified bird; after a few botched attempts, he hangs himself. Franz Frost had nightmares transmitted to him from a newly-discovered planet; to protect himself he carved a hat from ash wood; come the war, he refused to swap the hat for a helmet and was killed. His son died from eating a poisoned mushroom and the story of the Frosts ends, as do several others, with a recipe for preparing supposedly toxic amanitas.

If this sounds fanciful, it is not. Tokarczuk's prose is simple and unadorned. She tells her stories with a natural fluency that easily accommodates the hopes, drudgery and absurdities of the world she is describing. Real lives mingle with the imagined, dreams with day, past with present in an entirely plausible way. A lot of nasty things happen and many people die but the tone is by no means gloomy in tone. As Marta, the voice of folk wisdom in the book, points out: 'If death were nothing but bad, people would stop dying immediately.' House of Day, House of Night opens its doors on a very fresh and vibrant Polish talent.

Since you're here ...

... we've got a small favour to ask. More people are reading the Guardian than ever, but far fewer are paying for it. Advertising revenues across the media are falling fast. And unlike many news organisations, we haven't put up a paywall - we want to keep our journalism as open as we can. So you can see why we need to ask for your help. The Guardian's independent, investigative journalism takes a lot of time, money and hard work to produce. But we do it because we believe our perspective matters - because it might well be your perspective, too.

If everyone who reads our reporting, who likes it, helps to support it, our future would be much more secure.

Become a supporter

Make a contribution

Topics

BooksThe Observer

International Dublin Literary AwardAwards and prizesreviews