

DRIVE YOUR PLOW OVER THE BONES OF THE DEAD - Context and discussion themes.

For Melikian Center reading group, at <https://asu.zoom.us/j/98076549674>

December 1, 2020, at 6 pm AZ time. Offered by Keith Brown and Anna Cichopek-Gajraj.

I write fiction, but it is never pure fabrication. When I write, I have to feel everything inside myself. I have to let all the living beings and objects that appear in the book go through me, everything that is human and beyond human, everything that is living and not endowed with life. I have to take a close look at each thing and person, with the greatest solemnity, and personify them inside myself, personalize them.

From “The Tender narrator,” 2018 Nobel Lecture, by Olga Tokarczuk, pp.23-24 -

<https://www.nobelprize.org/uploads/2019/12/tokarczuk-lecture-english-2.pdf>

When Olga Tokarczuk was awarded the 2018 Nobel Prize (in 2019), the ruling Law and Order party in Poland did not quite know how to react. As a vocal leftist and feminist (who is also vegetarian), Tokarczuk has been a target of right-wing criticism for some time.

You can read more about her background at:

<https://quillette.com/2019/10/11/olga-tokarczuk-polands-patriots-struggle-to-accept-the-nobel-prize/>

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/08/05/olga-tokarczucs-novels-against-nationalism>

Her Nobel Lecture offers a rich, historically-informed reflection on the ways in which the 24-hour news cycle has fragmented our attention spans and eroded our capacity to discern the interconnected nature of the world.

Drive your Plow over the Bones of the Dead was published in Polish in 2009, and in English translation in 2018. The narrator Janina is a retired schoolteacher, living in the Polish countryside where men who have mistreated animals keep dying mysterious deaths. From her study of astrology and William Blake, and her nostalgia for a familiar, natural world that is disappearing, she thinks she knows why.

Some questions to prompt our discussion.

- What feelings did the main character of Janina Duszejko engender in you? Why? At what point (if any) did you see her as an unreliable narrator?
- Emotions like Anger are centrally located in the narrative. Is the theory of anger convincing? Why/why not? What’s the role of capital letter naming?
- How do you interpret a role of William Blake’s poetry in the narrative?
- How are we to come to terms with centrality of pseudoscience (astrology) and a whole array of superstitions in the main character’s life; especially if we consider Duszejko an alter ego of Tokarczuk?
- Olga Tokarczuk considers her book to be a moral thriller. Is it? Does she succeed in this genre? Did it thrill or intrigue you or not? Why/why not? How about the “moral” aspect of the narrative?