



# Book World Prague '21

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Prague Exhibition  
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26th International Book Fair  
and Literary Festival





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# I Like Mixing People and Places

**DAVID MITCHELL** counted among this year's Book World star guests. When he sat down on the imaginary couch in the park next to the Industrial Palace, the auditorium was filled to the last place.

"I am quite old now, past fifty, and I've never been to Prague before. This is my first time here. I tried to see everything I could – the Jewish cemetery, the Old Town, Wenceslas Square. I also paid a visit to the National Museum. Every morning I went for a walk, enjoying the sights. I'm afraid there are still many places I have missed. I will have to come back one day," David Mitchell said at the start of the debate, moderated by Anna Luňáková. The author's natural charm quickly won everyone over. His manner was amicable, he laughed and joked, asking himself questions rather than answering the ones he was given. He let himself be momentarily distracted by the sound of a passing tram, which reminded him of Brian Eno's music, or a child's cry. Everything he sees, he said, can become a source of inspiration. "I don't usually draw inspiration from cities as such, but rather from countries as a whole. I must say, though, that London, where I used to live, influenced me immensely. Its double-decker buses, its coffee houses... Now I live in Ireland, in Cork, and I also want to write a book about it," he disclosed some of his plans. In the nineties, Mitchell had lived for some time in Japan, and considers the sojourn a landmark in his writing. "Back then I was very young, still at the beginning. It was before the internet and TV was in Japanese only, which meant there was nothing else left for me to do but write. I wanted to learn Japanese, but gave up eventually," he laughs. The next question was about his 1999 novel



David Mitchell

*Ghostwritten*, published in Czech in 2005. Its main source of inspiration was the butterfly effect. "I was fascinated by it then, and I am still fascinated today. Who wouldn't be? Reality is relative, interactive. Reality is the Matrix. Who can tell what is real? I like thinking about these things," he explained. He delved even further into the topic with his answer to the next question on whether or not he believes in destiny. "What do we mean by destiny? Is it the same as asking about the existence of God? These are the questions we all ask ourselves." He admitted his longstanding penchant for creating imaginary worlds: "Even as a child I loved Tolkien, the Grimm brothers, I always had quite a rich imagination." He enjoyed writing *Cloud Atlas*, his most famous work, which was also adapted for the screen with numerous Hollywood stars, for its imaginative plot and characters. "I like intertextuality – the

mixing of characters and places. I let my characters appear and vanish again, sometimes across several books. Some of them feature in a number of books of mine. They may just quickly pass through one, but in another they are given more space, and already feel like old acquaintances. Homer or Shakespeare also used the same characters or places in their works." David Mitchell is the author of a total of nine books, one is currently being written and one of his novels will only be available to read in the year 2114. It is a part of the Future Library project, in which various writers participate with their works, knowing they will not be published until the next century. "It is quite fascinating. Nobody knows what books will look like by then, what their existence will be like or if they will be alive at all," he mused.

In the ensuing debate he said that he considers himself a minimalist and a maximalist in an equal measure, and tries to strike a balance between the two. He strives to say as much as he can, but using the most economic means, trying to make the plot denser rather than creating excessively sized volumes. Mitchell also revealed that he used to write down his dreams, which were very eventful especially in his childhood, but now he is much more interested in the dreams of other people. He also likes to listen to words in foreign languages, trying to figure out their meaning. He concluded by paying tribute to the interpreters for bearing with his frequent digressions, laughter and numerous other obstructions to the smooth running of the debate. But both the interpreters and the audience were quick to forgive him for this. David Mitchell's "rebelliousness" proved highly original and entertaining – much like his books.

## Are Novels Still Alive?

Have novels become obsolete? Is it an outdated form without a future? Why are young authors not attracted to it? **SANDRO VERONESI**, a celebrated Italian novelist, essayist and journalist, has been looking for answers.

The author of five novels and laureate of numerous literary awards, known to Czech readers, among other, for his book *Il colibrì* published by Odeon as *Kolibřík*, certainly knows what he is talking about when he says that novels are a difficult yet beautiful field. His experience is first-hand. According to Veronesi, the feeling of having mastered the art and emerging victorious is without an equal. However, young authors do not exactly embrace the form, despite the fact that they can use computers, which makes writing much easier than it used to be. "I started writing on a typewriter, when I really had to ponder each word carefully. You couldn't simply erase it like you can now. It taught me to work with words, to think about them. It wasn't easy but it had its charm. I'm happy that my writing was formed back in those days," Sandro said. He also recalled that in the days when writers wrote by hand and would then do the editing, these proof sheets would also sometimes be printed. They were a work of art in their own right. "Today, words are free, we can change every-

thing just like that, but has writing become any better? I'm not sure. If someone offered me to be born a few years later, into the computer era, I would say no. I don't envy my younger colleagues, because they missed the end of the century, which was beautiful, with some outstanding authors and creative atmosphere. They didn't get to meet, among other, Alberto Moravia. I'm happy to have experienced novel's golden age." Veronesi also offered his take on the history of the novel in Italy. "We only had a handful of great novelists. We have a rich tradition of prose and poetry, but not that many novelists. We have some great authors who actually refused to write novels. But above all this looms Alberto Moravia, the outstanding representative of the tradition of the novel." Even though Moravia was an idol for the Italians, in the sixties Italy's writers held a serious discussion about getting rid of the novel for its obsolescence. "It's interesting to note that in, say, South America, no such crisis of the novel was ever experienced. It was the time of Gabriel García Márquez or Mario Vargas Llosa, who proved that novels can be fresh and modern. They were very good at it," he explained. "I mean, novel cannot just be discontinued, it is a monument of sorts," he added, saying that the genre certainly does not belong in the past.



Sandro Veronesi

His own critically acclaimed novels, which are also widely read, are a proof of that. "All you have to do is figure out how to write a novel. Getting rid of it altogether would amount to sabotage. I personally consider novels to be the highest form of prose. It has by no means outlived itself. As long as writers keep coming up with great novels, the genre will live. And yes, it is not an easy undertaking – writing a good novel can take between three to four years – but I dare say that in the end it's worth it, that it is a true work of art. A truly royal art!"

# Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie: “It’s easy having disdain for a topic you know little about.”

Due to a delayed flight, the Nigerian writer **CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE** arrived late but smiling at Book World 2021. There was a long queue winding from the Host publishers stand – many readers waited for an autograph of the author whose voice is being listened to worldwide. Later, at the alternative venue of Airship Gulliver, Adichie would address issues of race, the state of the society in the US and Nigeria, and also feminism. And, in an unexpected twist, she had some questions for the audience.

The writer, who hails from two homes – one in Nigeria, the other in the US – was very straightforward on the topic of American politics: “The story of *Americanah* unfolds in the midst of hopes for Obama’s presidential election. These hopes were crushed by the one who came after him. I think many people saw Obama as some kind of a saviour who would set everything right. But this was not within his powers. For me, his terms in office served as an important symbol. Symbols hold a lot of



Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

substance for me. I think Biden has a chance of pushing through some changes, while in Obama’s case many people simply focused on blocking whatever proposals he, as a black man, would put forward. I don’t think Biden is perfect. But as for the one who came before him, it was like giving car keys to a toddler.

Now at least there’s an adult in the office. It isn’t perfect, but he’s an adult.”

Adichie returned to issues of race several times during the debate. The first time she had felt as a black woman, she said, was after her arrival in the US. She herself had to do a lot of research on the American version of racism. “I think what America needs is for normal people to learn more about African American history. If you don’t understand something, if you don’t know it, it’s very easy not to care or even to despise it. It is precisely this ignorance on the part of a great number of people that makes conversation about racial issues so difficult in the US,” Adichie explained.

The Nigerian author also offered a look at the reality of African literature. She likened her country to a glorified ghetto. “When people read literature from Africa, more often than not it’s to show that they are interested in the poor. They want to show their goodness. This never happens with Western literature,” Adichie noted. She also described how, upon her arrival in the US, she realised that she had a random privilege. “I am a native speaker of English, which is currently the world’s universal language. This brings many advantages. It makes me a part of the body of literature written in English. But I do realise that this really is just a coincidence – we had been colonised by the British. If I were born just a relatively short distance away, everything could have been different. On the other hand, it is one of the few privileges we have,” concluded the author.

Next Adichie described the thorny path leading to the publication of her first book and, eventually, her worldwide acclaim. She recalled the refusal from one American publishing house, which took the form of the word NO! written in large letters across the entire title page of her manuscript. According to her own words, *Americanah*’s breakthrough could partially be attributed to the fact that some of the narrative is set in the US.

Then the debate took a turn towards feminism. “What is it that we can do for little girls? We can become their mentors or join organisations that do commendable work. I do have a problem with the endless repetition of the phrase ‘girl power’. We are telling girls to use their power, and if they do, immediately they face consequences. I personally feel more alone fighting sexism than I do fighting racism. When it comes to sexism, even people close to me are doubtful sometimes. They think I’m being oversensitive, that I exaggerate, they ask for evidence. This is never the case with racism,” she described her personal experience. Adichie also said that in Nigeria her feminist stance often faces staunch opposition. Nonetheless, her books have made it to the list of compulsory school literature. “In Lagos the traffic is terrible and often merchandise is sold right in the middle of it. And some of these vendors sell my books, which is a real honour for me,” says the Nigerian author with a smile.

And her question for the audience? Name three things that should change for women in the Czech Republic. What would your answer be?

## Jack Fairweather Brought to Light the Incredible Story of a Polish Hero

The name Witold Pilecki causes quite a stir in Poland nowadays, but some twenty years ago it was hardly known. **JACK FAIRWEATHER**, American writer of Welsh descent, came to Book World to present a story of unbelievable personal courage. Telling the tale of the man who let himself be imprisoned in Auschwitz in order to gather information for the Allies, the author seemed visibly moved at times.

*The Volunteer* was published in 2020 and at first glance seemed to join ranks with the many other books describing the atrocities of the holocaust. Nonetheless, this book is different in many respects. Jack Fairweather is a seasoned war correspondent and the experience shows in his narration. Writing the story of Witold Pilecki, he drew on his rich journalistic background to portray a normal man who, when confronted with events of historical significance, undertook the most daunting tasks. The book received the prestigious Costa Award in the United Kingdom.

“Were it not for the war, he would probably have lived like any other Pole. He was a normal man with a wife and small children, working on his farm. Thanks to him I realised that under exceptional circumstances, everybody is capable of incredible things,” describes Fairweather.

When the war broke out, Witold Pilecki joined the resistance movement. At a time when the word holocaust was virtually unknown and the concentration camps were only beginning to transform into death factories, he decided to let himself be imprisoned in Auschwitz to inform the world about the Nazi plans. When his resistance cell was looking for a volunteer to undertake this mission, he raised his hand. In Auschwitz he managed to get reports out and eventually even escaped from the camp.



Jack Fairweather

Fairweather discovered Pilecki’s reports in a London archive. “His information had changed nothing. He repeatedly requested that the Allies bomb Auschwitz with him in it. He didn’t want more places like these to come into existence that would allow the Nazis to keep getting better at committing atrocities. He simply wanted it stopped at any cost,” the author describes.

The requested strike never took place. Jack Fairweather has a simple explanation: “The Allies plainly refused to believe that the Germans would be capable of such things. Pilecki’s reports looked even less and less credible as time passed. Actually, he himself found it hard to comprehend the horrors that were taking place at Auschwitz.”

Witold Pilecki survived the war but his life was still cut short by a malevolent regime. He was hanged in 1948 following a political trial, and the communists kept his story a secret. “Witold died thinking he changed nothing. I would like to let him know that he hadn’t let anyone down,” Jack Fairweather added. The author also said that his book was being adapted into a film.

# Authors From Belarus in Distress

Literature in Belarus is becoming engulfed in circumstances reminiscent of pre-1989 Czechoslovakia. Artists are no longer free to create. Belarusian authors **DMITRY STRONTSEV**, **SIARHEI PRYLUCKI** and **ANDREI KHADANOVICH** are experiencing this first-hand.

Dmitry Strontsev belongs to Belarus' underground scene. He has written several books of poetry and is a member of the International PEN of Belarus, the Association of Belarusian Writers, and laureate of several prizes. Today he counts among the most prominent members of Minsk's cultural dissent. "Before the breakup of the Soviet Union, dissenters were quite active in Minsk. When I got in touch with them, I found answers to why things were the way they were. I could read banned literature and works of philosophy. After the fall of the Soviet Union, it looked like no dissent will be needed anymore, but a few years later Lukashenko came to power in Belarus and everything is the same again," says Strontsev about the current situation in Belarus. Freedom of speech only exists on paper and Dmitry, who was very active in the nineties in the public-service television, is no longer allowed on the screen. He has also lost his publishing licence and can only publish samizdat literature now, despite all the dangers involved. Everybody who dares oppose the government of Belarus runs a considerable risk. "They are closing down the PEN centre in Belarus and the Writers' Association. The literary community, and with it our entire culture, is stranded at a very painful place. Nowadays everybody has to decide if they stay in Belarus or leave the country," Strontsev underlines the seriousness of the situation. As far as he is concerned, the dilemma is solved – he has been with the dissent for a long time now and it will not change. "Recently I was editing a three-volume book by a Belarusian author and I had to do all the work in the forest for a full month, because I wasn't safe at home. If we want to



Meeting with Belarusian Authors

keep working, we have to go underground, but it is not an easy decision to make. We are at risk both physically and mentally," Dmitry said, adding that he is experiencing constant mental exhaustion and suffers from panic attacks. He has also witnessed physical violence when he was thrown in jail, having protested against the rigged presidential elections. "All thinkable rules that apply to these institutions are being breached, nothing is observed. Cells for four people can hold up to sixteen persons, with no access to hygiene, no bedclothes, no walks outside. The situation stands comparison to concentration camps. The pressure is such that the inmates sometimes testify against themselves. What do you think they must be facing to do such a thing?!" Dmitry Strontsev has approached the UN and other globally significant institutions with an appeal to open their eyes and realise that the situation in Belarus is truly grave.

The second part of the debate was dedicated to the efforts of Belarusian authors to keep alive a language that was suppressed during the Soviet Union in favour of Russian. "After the change of regime, there came an effort to

revive the Belarusian language and push Russian to the background," the exiled Belarusian author Siarhei Prylucki says. "Actually we don't remember a time when Belarusian would not be oppressed by Russian. But we see the situation in some other countries, such as Estonia, Lithuania or Latvia, where the language has been preserved, and these examples can be followed. I hope this will also be possible in our country," added another author from Belarus, poet and translator Andrei Khadanovich. "If the regime would let us work, we would be able to tackle the language issue. We hope for a wise state policy that would support Belarusian," added Khadanovich and the debate once again veered towards the political situation in Belarus, which casts a shadow over the entire cultural community. "Some of the things the government asks us to do are in direct contradiction of freedom. I would like to emphasise the importance of the activities of international organisations, for example writers' associations. That's what we need right now in Belarus," Dmitry Strontsev concluded the debate. Belarus is calling for help – do we hear it?

## Writing Can Be Almost Schizophrenic

Two bestselling authors, **RADKA DENEMAR-KOVÁ** and **MURIEL BARBERY**, met at Book World to talk about how they got started in literature, their inspirations and love of books.

Muriel Barbery is a French author whose first novel, *The Gourmet Rhapsody*, came as a surprise in 2000 and was translated into a dozen foreign languages. Her next book, *The Elegance of the Hedgehog*, was published to similar acclaim and adapted into a film. Her Czech colleague Radka Denemarková has for many years counted among the most respected Czech writers. She is the laureate of numerous awards and books with her name quickly disappear off the bookstore shelves.

At the start of their encounter, both authors looked at their past, musing over why they started writing, and if there had been any one book they could trace this motivation back to. "I don't have a single book that would have set me on the course to become a writer. When I was little, I would read a lot. But I do remember the book *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, its

charming old French, and I know that it was then that I had fallen in love with literature," Muriel Barbery recalls. "I always experienced the world through words. I'd be writing something down all the time and I thought this was what everybody was doing. Only later did I find out that it doesn't work like this, that it's actually talent," Radka Denemarková offered a piece of her own past. "During adolescence, for example, I enjoyed reading books for adults, because it gave me a clearer picture of their world and of what I could expect in life."

Another question to both authors was if they still find the time to read today. "I call myself a gluttonous reader, interested in all kinds of texts. The down side is that sometimes I get the feeling that everything has been written already. But then I calm myself, thinking that every era brings something new that is worth capturing," said the Czech author with a smile. Her French colleague offered her favourite quote from an American author: "It is suspicious when a writer writes more than he reads. I absolutely agree with that. I need to read."

Both authors also agreed that when they write, it feels like living alongside their characters. "The book *Money from Hitler* took three years to write and all that time the story was a part of my life. Sometimes one becomes almost schizophrenic. The world of literature is, in fact, a parallel world," said Radka Denemarková. "It is interesting to observe how writers project themselves into their characters, who are like a metamorphosis of their egos," Muriel added.

Both Denemarková and Barbery were also influenced by having lived abroad for some time. It was China in Radka Denemarková's case, and Japan for Muriel Barbery. Even Radka Denemarková's new novel draws inspiration from another country, this time Taiwan. "But I won't say anything more just now. It might jeopardise my intimate relationship with the text." Muriel also heads abroad in her next novel, and she too refused to disclose any details. We will have to wait for the books to be published to find out.

# We Should Not Rewrite History

The Czech-French debate, featuring **ALENA MORNŠTAJNOVÁ** and **LAURENT BINET**, took place in front of a filled auditorium. It was not only their novels that were at the centre of the discussion, but also inspiration and history.

The two amicable novelists have more in common than might be obvious at first glance. They both published books on historical topics and both tried to alter history a bit. "I don't really write historical novels, I just build my stories on historical events. My books are always based on relationships, which may be unfolding at some point in history but I approach them from today's perspective. None of us can fully empathise with a person living in a certain historical period unless we have experienced it ourselves. That's why I am interested in what was happening at the time, because social events form the lives of my characters," Alena Mornštajnová explained. Laurent Binet delved even deeper into historical books and documents, since his novel **HHhH**, dealing with the assassination of Reinhard Heydrich, was largely based on facts. Binet's other novel, **Civilisations**, also draws its inspiration from history but in an entirely different way. Here the author asks himself what would happen had history taken a different course. "Even as I was writing **HHhH** I was wondering what events would have ensued if the Munich Agreement came to a different result, or if Hitler had really been assassinated. This thinking led me to writing **Civilisations**. **HHhH** was looking for historical facts, a narrative of what had happened. What I found fascinating in **Civilisations** was the possibility of multiple worlds." Alena



Mornštajnová used a similar approach in her own novel *Listopád*. The plot is set in a period after the year 1989, in which not only had democracy not materialised, but the regime actually strengthened its hold. She admitted that not everybody was happy with her attempting this particular twist of history. "Even before the book was published I began receiving letters disputing a certain interpretation of the pre-November revolution period. One miner wrote to me that he could travel under socialism, that he went to Cuba, which means it's not true that the borders were closed. Everybody has a slightly different perspective of that time. But majority of people wrote that it reminded them of the atmosphere of fear, which is good, because we shouldn't forget that. Apparently it also helped some young people understand

better why their parents were unable to stand up to the regime, that it really wasn't that easy." Laurent Binet continued by noting the suppression of certain historical events today. "When you were toppling the statues of Lenin and Stalin here, it was the same as today's toppling of statues of the colonisers in Latin America. There is nothing really wrong with that, I would even understand getting rid of a statue of Christopher Columbus, but what I really can't stand is pretending that he never existed, that there was no colonisation, that none of this has ever happened. We cannot change history – these things simply happened." He also remarked on efforts to alter history in the past, which may not have been as radical as they are today. "In the US they wanted Agatha Christie to change the title of her novel *Ten Little Niggers*. This was actually at a time when the country still had racial segregation. But Agatha was no racist, and you know what, even if she was, then we should know about it and preserve that knowledge. We must not falsify the truth!"

The topic of inspiration was a bit lighter and both authors admitted that instead of looking for things to write about they let themselves be influenced by what takes place around them. "It's always some kind of coincidence. When I was thinking about writing *Civilisations*, I was invited to a book fair in Lima, where I became interested in the history of the Incas. Had I not been invited to Mexico, maybe my book would have been about the Aztecs," Laurent Binet said, smiling. Alena Mornštajnová revealed that sometimes writing one book brings an idea for the next. "When I was writing *Hana*, I got some ideas that later developed into the text of *Silent Years*."

Both authors also lauded the work of the translators, who often have a difficult job with their texts. "Sometimes I write something and immediately think how much work this will be for the translator. I keep in contact with them and when they need something explained, I am happy to help," says Laurent Binet. "I don't make any footnotes while writing that would help explain certain things in my book to a potential translator, but same as Laurent I am ready to consult everything with them," concluded Alena Mornštajnová, adding that while Laurent Binet's books have already appeared in Czech, she is still awaiting her first French translation. But the good news is that it is already under way.

## Irene Solà's Story Is Told in the Voice of the Clouds, Mountains and Mushrooms

She was born in a small village in Catalonia. Then she travelled the world and eventually gained acclaim with a story set in a village that looks just like the one she grew up in. Young writer and artist **IRENE SOLÀ'S** book ***I Sing and the Mountain Dances*** has won the European Union Prize for Literature.

At the centre of the story stands the tragic death of a father and daughter. The narrative is taken up by various characters. Solà uses the perspective of the clouds and the mountains, forest animals and mushrooms, but also spirits and people who lived in the very same place hundreds of years ago. In her book, the author also makes use of motifs inspired by folklore. "I wrote both my novels in London, but neither of them is set in a big city. That doesn't mean they don't tell universal stories. In the case of the book *I Sing and the Mountain Dances* I tried to imagine the multitude of stories that must have occurred in a single place," the author added.

The resulting work is a mosaic of voices and points of view. "I wanted to deal with the topic of violence and death. The diverse narrators helped me to view death differently. And once you change your point of view, suddenly many things look different," the young author from Catalonia added.



Besides literature, Irene Solà also studied fine arts and the book features her own drawings. She admits that fine arts have also influenced the way she writes. She begins by asking herself what makes her curious and how far she wants to go in exploring these topics. Only then do these thoughts give rise to characters and narrative structure.

*I Sing and the Mountain Dances* is an onomatopoeic work, excerpts of which have been translated by the Hispanicist Jaroslava Marešová. The book is yet to find a Czech publisher. We can only hope that somebody will take up this challenge and that Czech readers will also gain access to Irene Solà's highly original literary style.

## Dictators Are Terrifying by What They Have in Common with Us, Says Author of the Book “How to Feed a Dictator”



WITOLD SZABLÓWSKI'S book *How to Feed a Dictator* has caused quite a stir in Poland. It quickly became a bestseller, but some media criticised it strongly. How dare Szablowski humanises monsters?! many journalists would ask. “What makes dictators most terrifying is how much they have in common with us in terms of everyday living,” the author replies.

Witold Szablowski is no stranger to cooking. Having successfully finished his studies, he spent some time earning a living as a chef in Copenhagen. “It is a fascinating world and cooks are interesting people. I looked for a way in which I could revisit this theme. And then I watched a Slovak film in which marshal Tito’s chef makes a brief appearance. At that moment I knew – this is it!” he describes the beginning of his journey into the kitchens of dictators.

Szablowski made himself a map highlighting both past and present dictatorships, and looked for people he found interesting. “Dictators have not come from outer space. They are people like us. They were raised among us, we sustain and feed them. One moment they caress a child or eat a soup, only to end the

lives of many people the next. That is truly horrifying,” Witold Szablowski adds.

Using dictators’ kitchens, the Polish author shows both the normalcy and the bestiality of the people who shaped history all around the world. “It is not easy to interview dictators’ chefs. They know how to keep a secret. Saddam Hussein’s personal chef only told his wife who he was working for after seven years of service. It was written in his contract that if he reveals anything, he’ll be hanged. The chef of the Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha took up the position after his predecessor was shot because Hoxha disliked a soup he had made. This man cooked for Hoxha for seventeen years. The dictator has been dead for thirty five years but he is still afraid of him,” adds the author. Pol Pot’s chef had an entirely different view of her employer. “Maybe it was the Stockholm syndrome, but she kept repeating that he had meant well with everyone,” describes Szablowski. The author finds some symbolism in the fact that this particular woman died of stomach cancer.

Desire for his favourite dish is also said to have spelled the end of Saddam Hussein. “He could do without the opulence, but he just couldn’t resist the masgouf dish made from a type of carp that only lives in Iraq. The Americans placed guards at around twenty Iraqi hatcheries and the carp had led them straight to Hussein’s hiding place,” reveals the reporter.

Szablowski gained the chefs’ trust step by step. The first day he would not mention the dictator at all, and instead he would spend time with the chefs in their kitchen, assisting them in their work. This proved to be the best method of gaining the most interesting information. Witold Szablowski worked on his book for three years.

## Pénélope Bagieu: “Begging for a change politely in the corner won’t bring any results.”

“Comics is the most intimate way of telling a story,” the French artist **PÉNÉLOPE BAGIEU** said at the beginning of the debate. In 2019, her two-part graphic novel *Culottées* (Brazen) received the Eisner Award for best foreign book. It was translated into 17 languages and is now also being published in Czech under the title *Nebojsy*.

“I wanted to tell stories of women who inspire. What I was after was courage rather than achievements of individual women,” said the author. Her book includes, for example, the story of Hedy Lamarr, who starred in Gustav Machaty’s famous 1932 film *Ecstasy* and captivated Hollywood. “She was truly beautiful, which is why everybody expected her to be stupid. When she died all the obituaries focused on her looks. But Hedy was a genius. In her kitchen she invented the basics of wi-fi,” Bagieu added.

According to her own words, the French artist admires the new generation of emerging female artists. “I can see a big difference between their generation and mine. When we were starting out, we wanted to keep away from the girly stuff. All the time we were try-

ing to prove something. The young women artists of today couldn’t care less about this approach. They never apologise for who they are and what they create. They simply do things their own way. I find the questions they are asking themselves quite intriguing. If you ask me, the best novels come from them,” believes the author. She also said it was her impression that the number of female authors of comic books is on the rise. According to Bagieu, the change must be pushed through assertively – silently begging for a change somewhere in the corner will not bring about any transformation.

Bagieu also revealed how she is doing her bit to help raise the emerging generation of artists. She personally responds to letters from her readers, many of which are from children and include original comic strips. “I get a lot of mail from young girls. And I enjoy replying to these letters. Mail is very important for children. When you are little, you don’t get any letters, even though you hope for some. There is a lot of stuff in the mailbox, but most of it is just bills for the parents. So that’s another reason I like to exchange letters with children. With

## The Jiří Theiner Award Heads to South Korea

The Book World book fair played host to the 10th annual Jiří Theiner Award ceremony. This time, the prize’s winner comes from South Korea.

The award takes its name from the exile editor-in-chief of Index on Censorship Jiří Theiner and is bestowed upon a living person or a still-active institution from abroad, contributing substantially to the dissemination and promotion of Czech culture around the world. This year’s winner is the Korean bohemianist **KYUCHIN KIM**. Unfortunately, the laureate was unable to attend the ceremony in person because of Covid travel restriction. Thanks to modern technologies, however, he was present online. At least for a little while the audience could feel like there was hardly any distance between South Korea and Prague. And this is exactly what Kyuchin Kim is trying to achieve through his work. His translations of Czech authors – Čapek, Kundera, Lustig, Škvorecký or Havel – as well as his many studies and articles on the Czech language and the Czech Republic, enable readers in South Korea to acquaint themselves with our country in detail, despite the geographical distance. In the short online interview with the laureate, conducted by the award ceremony’s host David Vaughan, Kyuchin Kim said, among other, that Czech literature is very popular in South Korea and that it is currently being taken up by close to a hundred university students. The popularity of Czech studies in the academic circles can also be credited to this year’s winner of the prize, proving him a worthy laureate indeed. The award was accepted from Pavel Theiner by the Book World Prague’s director Radovan Auer on behalf of Kyuchin Kim. Auer promised to pass it on to its rightful owner either in Seoul or in Prague.



four or five of them we have already become regular pen pals.”

Pénélope Bagieu is currently preparing her autobiography. “It is more like little pieces of my life. I am not old enough yet for an autobiography. But I am past 40, which is a bit of a milestone, and I’ve had some therapy, so I do feel the need to make a summary of a few things. Writing one’s own biography is not an easy matter. Especially women often say to themselves that it is not worth the effort, and who’d want to read it anyway?! But in my opinion, if your story is honest, it will find its readers,” she added. When asked if she was planning another volume of *Brazen*, this time about boys, she said that such a book no doubt already exists. “There are so many stories that we must tell from a less familiar point of view, for example the female one,” she concluded.