

## **Laudatory Speech for Paweł Piotr Reszka by Jury Chairman Maciej Zaremba Bielawski**

### **A Lesson in Trust**

In this world of too much happening and too many words, we have chosen to reward an author who exercises self-restraint with his language. We have chosen to reward a book that deliberately stays low-key and modest in terms of content.

In this age of emotional chaos, we reward a writer's ability to stay focused.

In the face of all-pervading aggression, we reward empathy.

In a world where people are outdoing one another commenting about what happens around them, we reward a person's ability to listen to what others have to say.

The people at the center of Paweł Piotr Reszka's stories include a man who is a six-time murderer and a woman who is a five-time killer. There is also a priest committed to driving Satan out of children and another priest who has undertaken to show the love of God to novice nuns in the missionary position. There is a teenager who lived with an Internet avatar for six years until he stabbed it "to death" in fury with a knife. And there's a man named Krzysztof who cannot understand why some people are unnerved by his roaring lions. Finally, there is the man by the name of Tadeusz who has rediscovered the world since he started taking baths.

A freak show? A portrait of small-town Poland? Neither. Paweł Piotr Reszka shows little interest in the grotesque. Nor does he seem to be particularly keen on exploring the intricacies of small-town Poland. Though he is based in the country's eastern Lublin region, an area widely seen as less fortunate and less privileged than other regions, where some topics (such as houses without

bathrooms, clergy without conscience, and villages without memory) seem unavoidable, most of the stories in this book could have easily been set anywhere: Naples or New York, last fall or a hundred years ago. This is precisely what makes Reszka's stories unique and timeless. Like the compact story of a woman named Janina who cannot live without Catholic Radio Maryja. Years if not centuries from now this story will be as compelling to readers as it is today.

*Diabeł i tabliczka czekolady* (The Devil and a Bar of Chocolate) is an elaborate compilation of 15 earlier pieces by Reszka and 12 new texts. The latter take the form of terse statements. We have no way of knowing how they originated. We may suspect that they were created in the same way as the polyphonic writings of the Nobel Prize-winning Belarusian journalist Svetlana Alexievich. They conjure up the idea of a long conversation, or actually several conversations, from which the reporter distills what he deems to be the most important. One Miguel from Angola, who finds himself in Lublin by a fluke of fate, says, "I have learned to pretend I'm dumb as a rock and try not to get upset, and I'm very happy here." Another figure, a woman identified as Zofia P., begins her line in the following way, "I'm happy and I live among happy people. My husband hanged himself in 1983."

These brief texts (most of them no more than a page) are true masterpieces that border on poetry. Touching, intriguing, with an air of uneasy mystery around them. But this is nonetheless literary reportage of the first order, true to its protagonists: it captures their language and their way of thinking. Sometimes we can even hear the shortness of breath. And in some inexplicable way these miniatures, interspersed with traditional reports, cause sparks to fly between the texts. A fine example of how literature cannot be really separated from electricity. And from music.

Let us stop short of saying what Reszka's reports tell us because this would be betraying his aesthetics in a sense. In terms of their meaning and depth, his pieces are not about intriguing or shocking facts (which abound), but about the feelings they awaken in those featured in his stories. And these feelings are expressed literally in first-person narrative with no additional commentary. Clearly, Paweł Piotr Reszka thinks highly of his readers when it comes to their intelligence and sense of humor.

Inevitably, the biblical word "meekness" comes to mind in the context of this specific kind of withdrawal. In the Sermon on the Mount, we hear, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth." This is not about modest silence, but about respect for the mystery of the freedom of our neighbors.

This beautiful and wise book is a display of extraordinary inquisitiveness, emotional intelligence and discipline of style. Let us also say that it is an exercise in trust. Those interested will find truly disturbing food for thought in these stories. How is it that in a country that prides itself on being the bedrock of Christianity, people are afraid to go public with their good deeds? This is because they are afraid no one will believe their good deeds are out of love for their neighbors. They fear that most members of the public will think their ulterior motive is money.

For the second time in the history of the award, we are rewarding a book that is largely a collection of earlier pieces published in a daily newspaper (over the course of nine years in this case). A collection of what can be described as ad hoc reports. This confirms the old truth that there is no better school of journalism for a reporter than the reader on a suburban commuter train, combined with the nitpicking editor and space constraints.

Let us be grateful to Paweł Piotr Reszka for being such a patient and attentive listener. An ability to listen is what seems to be the main instrument of

sympathy and solidarity in his stories. At the same time, it shows just how expressive the Polish language can be in the mouths of ordinary people.

If the people featured in Reszka's book sometimes arouse laughter, this is because they surprise us, not because they are laughable. And when they arouse sympathy, it is sympathy mixed with humility and admiration—that a person so harshly experienced by fate can still muster so much strength and hope.

Evidently, the Sermon on the Mount, the very essence of Christianity, is also a recipe for top-notch literary reportage.

*Maciej Zaremba Bielawski*