

Awardee: Dževad Karahasan, writer, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Dževad Karahasan is the most significant present-day Bosnian writer. Using his literary voice for dialogue, mediation, and conflict resolution, Karahasan has reached beyond the borders of Bosnia and Herzegovina; a country that, after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the war, is still struggling for inner cohesion and a place in the European community. Dževad Karahasan is being awarded the Goethe Medal for his role as a builder of bridges between German-speaking countries and Bosnia and Herzegovina and for his commitment to European understanding.

“I am a writer; my job is to understand, not to judge,” says Dževad Karahasan of himself. Today Karahasan lives and works in Bosnia and Herzegovina and in Austria. The virtuosic storyteller is acknowledged in the linguistics, literature, and cultures of both regions and has received a number of awards. His strong ties to the German language began in 1993 when Karahasan left embattled Sarajevo to live in a number of cities in Germany and Austria. Karahasan’s novels *The Eastern Divan* and *Exodus from a City* as well as his plays and radio dramas advocate tolerance and unite the traditional and the modern as well as the orient and occident. Karahasan attempts to convey understanding of the complicated circumstances in Bosnia and Herzegovina, creating trust and points of contact for dialogue with Germany. He criticizes the political failings during the post-Yugoslavian transformation in his homeland and advocates open dealings with the region’s dark past.

Dževad Karahasan was born in Duvno, Yugoslavia, today in Bosnia and Herzegovina, in 1953. He grew up in the Islamic tradition and calls himself a Muslim; he describes his relationship with religion as follows: “I am a Muslim, I love the Catholic culture, I know and like the Orthodox culture, I admire Jewish mysticism – hence, culturally, I am very impure.” (*der Freitag*, 26.03.2004)

After his studies in dramatics and comparative literature in Sarajevo he earned his doctorate in Zagreb. Karahasan then worked as a dramaturge at the National Theatre in Zenica, later as an editor of the literature and art journal *Odjek* in Sarajevo, as editor-in-chief of the literary journal *Izraz* and as a lecturer of dramaturgy and theatre history at the Academy of Performing Arts of the University of Sarajevo. Since 1997 he has lived in Graz and Sarajevo. He entered the literary stage in 1980 with his volume of short stories *Kraljevske legende* (1996; English *King’s Legends*), but Karahasan became known through novels like *Istočni diwan*, (1989; English *The Eastern Divan*) and his much-translated *Dnevnik selidbe* (1993; English *Exodus from a City*), which describes the siege of Sarajevo during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992 and for which he received the 1994 Charles Veillon European Essay Prize. His works artfully merge poetry and philosophy, the traditional and the modern, and orient and occident. Karahasan also writes short stories and essays such as *Knjiga vrtova* (2002; English *The Book of Gardens*), plays and radio dramas and regularly contributes articles to European journals such as *Lettre Internationale*, *Kursbuch*, *MicroMega* and *Les Temps Modernes*.

Quotes by Dževad Karahasan

"Literature is the highest form of knowledge, for it shows that it is not important to reach the goal, but is infinitely important to look at this goal from all sides, to grasp it, and to unravel why one wanted to reach it. (...) The end does not justify the means. It emerges from the means, is decided by the means, and is responsible for its attributes. Literature reminds us of that. Today, it is sadly all that does." (From the acceptance speech at the awarding of the 2004 Leipzig Book Prize for European Relations)

"I am a writer; my job is to understand, not to judge." (Interview in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, March 2006)

"I would like to possess all the books in the world." (Before the war, Karahasan's library contained 30,000 volumes. His home was occupied by persons whose homes were destroyed, who burned as fuel or sold a large part of the books.) "The wall of shelves in the living room is loosely populated again, but there is still plenty of room." (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2008)

"Communication is not measurable; its trait is that it is as free and individual as life itself. The more individual the communication partners are, the more rich in content and artistic their communication is and the more general and therefore predictable the conversation, the more artificial and pretentious the communication is (...). Please, polemicize with one another!" (*Leipzig Almanach*, 2002)

Quotes about Dževad Karahasan

"...yet we should not underestimate the literary roguishness of storyteller Dževad Karahasan. The wells from which he draws are deep, yet, in a humanitarian way, he is as shrewd as they come – both history and philosophy, both mysticism and irony." (Andreas Breitenstein, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, June 2007)

"In *The Night Council* Dževad Karahasan searches for the dead of the Balkan – and finds life." (Helmut Böttiger, *Die ZEIT*, March 2006)

"The first-person narrator Karahasan tells about himself by, like a genie in *A Thousand and One Nights*, ceaselessly moving to alternating settings –temples, market squares, bedrooms, streets – and attempting to eavesdrop on the meaning of the literary forms he encounters there." (Lothar Müller, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, June 2010)

"In Germany and France, the writer of European distinction is a constant. As professor at the Academy of Performing Arts, as director, as essayist and novelist, the wilful Muslim is a figure with many facets: adept on the international floor, he knows how to submerge himself anytime in his city as a man of the street. In his light-grey eyes a fire burns, which he stresses in gestures with the passion of a man of the theatre. He hardly speaks without using his body, and even if his German has the inevitable accent, his grammar surpasses that of many a native speaker. As suits a wanderer between orient and occident, he dreams

of the best of all possible worlds with ingredients from east and west.” (Hannes Hintermeier, *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 2008)

About Reports from the Dark World:

Karahasan’s *Reports* are “meandering walks through human all-too-humanness, war, love and contempt, yearning for reconciliation and outbreak.” (*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, September 2007)

“You don’t know Dževad Karahasan? That doesn’t matter; he wouldn’t resent it, for he is not among the conceited authors of this world. I was one of his students for two years and learned that Karahasan is only disappointed when he as a person – not as a citizen of Sarajevo, as a professor of dramaturgy, or as a man of letters – encounters a partner in dialogue who remains silent.” (Dajana Bajkovic, *Leipzig Almanach*, 2002)

About The Shadows of the Cities:

“Playing is permitted; window dressing is frowned upon. In his modest thoroughness, Karahasan produces nothing less than opening the eyes of the reader.” (*Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, July 2010)

Bibliography

Publications in German:

Tagebuch der Aussiedlung. Wieser, Klagenfurt, 1994

Der östliche Divan. Wieser, Klagenfurt, 1994

Al-Mukaffa, Arbos, Klagenfurt, 1994 (Play, partial dramatization of the novel *The Eastern Divan*)

Schaharijars Ring. Rowohlt, Berlin, 1997

Sara und Serafina. Rowohlt, Berlin, 2000

Das Buch der Gärten. Insel, Frankfurt a.M., 2002

Der nächtliche Rat. Insel, Frankfurt a.M., 2006

Berichte aus der dunklen Welt. Insel, Frankfurt a.M., 2007

Die Schatten der Städte. Insel, Frankfurt a.M., 2010 (Essays)

Numerous other publications in the Bosnian, Croat, Serb languages:

Kazaliste i kritika. Svjetlost. Sarajevo, 1980

Kraljevske legende. Proza. Veselin Masleša. Sarajevo, 1980

Kralju ipak ne sviđa se gluma. Drama. Sarajevo, 1983

Strašno je vani. Drama. Sarajevo, 1984

O jeziku i strahu. Sarajevo, 1987

Model u dramaturgiji. Omladinski centar. Zagreb, 1988

Istocni diwan. Svjetlost. Sarajevo, 1989

Misionari. Dvije komedije. Svjetlost. Sarajevo, 1989

Stidna žitija. Roman. Bratstvo-Jedinstvo. Novi Sad, 1989

Stid nedjeljom. August Cesarec. Zagreb, 1991

Kuća za umorne. August Cesarec, Zagreb, 1993

Dnevnik selidbe. Duriex, Zagreb, 1993
Šahrijarov prsten. Bosanska riječ, Sarajevo, 1996
Knjiga vrtova. Zagreb, 2002
Izvještaji iz tamnog vilajeta. Profil, Zagreb, 2007
Noćno vijeće. Connectum, Sarajevo, 2009
Sarajevo: četiri godišnja doba. Connectum, Sarajevo, 2011

Awards

1994 Prix européen de l'essai Charles Veillon (Charles Veillon European Essay Prize) for his novel *Dnevnik selidbe* (English: *Exodus from a City*, 1993)
1999 Herder Prize for his articles in European journals such as *Lettre Internationale*, *Kursbuch*, *MicroMega* and *Les Temps Modernes*
2004 Leipzig Book Prize for European Relations for the volume of essays *The Book of Gardens*
2012 Tribute from the Heinrich-Heine-Gesellschaft