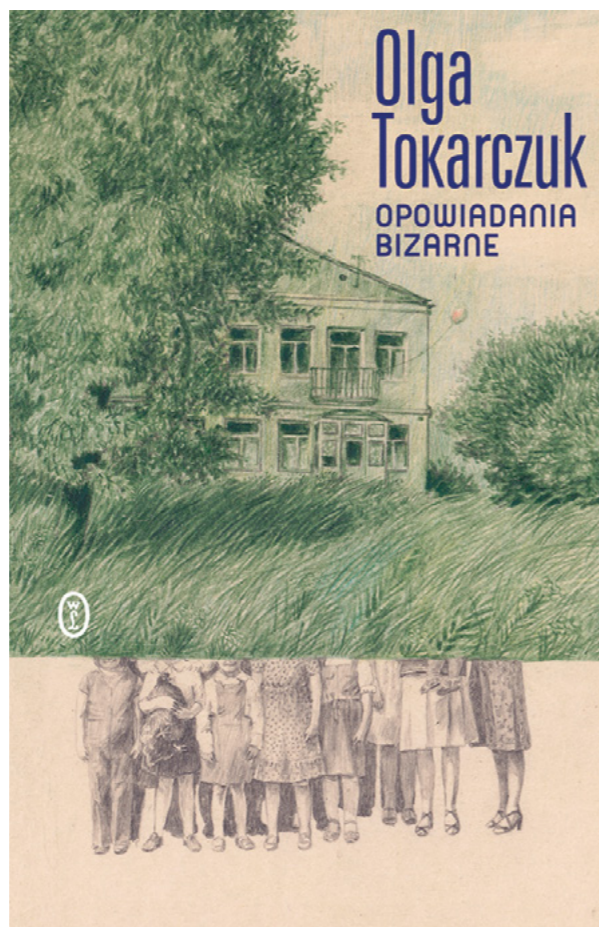


Tales of the Bizarre

A new book by one of the most acclaimed and popular Polish writers



BY THE MAN BOOKER INTERNATIONAL PRIZE 2018 WINNER

Olga Tokarczuk became the first Pole to win the international edition of the Booker Prize, which only attested to her position in Polish literature, and *Opowiadania bizardne* [*Tales of the Bizarre*], published at the same time, confirms her writing class. “Bizarre” is not a word from the Polish dictionary, as the writer Polonised the French “bizarre”, meaning “strange”.

By principle, even if it is the surrounding world Tokarczuk speaks about, she puts some surprising elements into it, such as in *Preserves*, where the hero finds marinated laces in a jar. Firstly, it is a realistic story about an alcoholic and a loser who tortured his mother all his life, secondly, it is a moving study of the fall, and thirdly one has to ask if it is not a postponed murder, or just the effect of madness?

It is in such stories from the boundary of realism and surrealism (sometimes even in the style of Edgar Allan Poe) that the writer is at her best. When she takes up a historical theme, the effect is also splendid. *Green Children*, set in the 17th century somewhere

in Volhynia during the Swedish Deluge, is additional proof that the writer is wonderful when speaking about topics that relate to Poland's past. The tale of King John II Casimir's court physician is at the same time a beautiful contemporary fairy tale and a great examination of the relationship between man and nature.

Tokarczuk is also magnificent when she reaches for topics that touch on metaphysics, for example in *Passenger*, which opens the book. This is one of those stories that can happen to any of us because everyone knows childish fears that become reality. *Seams* is surprising as the hero's transformation begins when he notices seams on his socks that have never been seen before.

This is the strength of *Tales of the Bizarre* by Olga Tokarczuk. Thanks to them, we can spot the unseen seams of the world.

Mariusz Cieślík, translated by Katarzyna Popowicz

The plane arrived over Zurich when it was supposed to, but for a long time it was obliged to circle the city, since snow had covered the airport, and we had to wait until the slow yet so effective machines had managed to clear it. Just as it landed, the snow clouds parted, and against the orange blazing sky there were contrails in tangles that transformed the firmament into a giant grid – almost as though God were extending an invitation to play a round of tic-tac-toe.

The driver who was supposed to pick me up and who was waiting with my last name written out on the lid of a cardboard shoebox, was quick to state the facts: “I’m supposed to take you to the pension – the road up to the Institute is completely snowed under. We won’t make it there.”

But his dialect was so strange I could barely understand him. I also felt like I had missed something. It was May, after all, the eighth of May.

“The world’s turned on its head. Just take a look at that.” He placed my luggage in the car and then pointed to the darkening sky. “I’ve heard they’re poisoning us with it, airplane fumes altering our subconscious.”

I nodded. The grated horizon really did trigger a sense. We reached our destination late at night, traffic jams everywhere, cars’ wheels spinning in place, all of us moving at a snail’s pace – at best – in the wet snow. Gray slush accumulated along the roadsides. In town the snowplows were in full force, but further along, in the mountains, which we began to climb, very carefully, it turned out there was no one clearing the roads. My driver clung to the steering wheel, leaning in; his ample aquiline nose pointed out our direction like the bow of a ship pulling us through a murky sea towards some port.

The reason I was here was that I’d signed a contract to come. I was supposed to administer a test to a group of teenagers. It was a test I had come up with myself, and for more than thirty years, it had remained the only one of its kind, enjoying considerable renown among my fellow developmental psychologists.

The honorarium they had offered me was very large. When I saw it in the agreement, I was sure they had made a mistake. I was also bound, however, by the strictest secrecy. The company that was conducting the test had its headquarters in Zurich, but I hadn’t recognized its name. I can’t say it was only the money that had convinced me. There were other reasons, too. I got a shock when I found out that the “pension” my driver had mentioned was in fact a few guest rooms in a dark ancient convent at the base of the mountain.

From the short story *All Saints’ Mountain*,

translated by Jennifer Croft

Extended English sample available (office@bookinstitute.pl)



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Novels published

Podróż ludzi Księgi, 1993

E. E., 1995

Prawiek i inne czasy [Primeval and Other Times], 1996

Dom dzienny, dom nocny [House of Day, House of Night], 1998

Ostatnie historie, 2004

Anna In w grobowcach świata, 2006

Bieguni [Flights], 2007

Prowadź swój pług przez kości umarłych [Drive Your Plow Over the Bones of the Dead], 2009

– adapted into a film by Agnieszka Holland

Księgi Jakubowe [The Books of Jacob], 2014

– 150,000 copies sold

Foreign language translations

Armenia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Catalonia, China, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, India, Israel, Hungary, Italy, Japan, Lithuania, Macedonia, Mexico, Norway, Netherlands, Romania, Russia, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Switzerland, Sweden, Taiwan, Turkey, Ukraine, UK, USA

Selected awards

Kościelski Foundation Award (1997)

Polityka's Passport Award (1997)

Brücke Berlin Preis (2002)

International IMPAC Dublin Literary Award (2004) – nomination
Nike Literary Award (2008, 2015; nomination in 1997, 1999, 2002, 2010; three-time winner of Readers' Choice Award)

Angelus Central European Literary Award (2015) – nomination
Man Booker International Prize (2018)

New Academy Prize in Literature (2018) – longlisted