

The Kingdom

The reality Twardoch has created is a vortex of dark urges, a world full of violence and cruelty



A BESTSELLER BY ONE OF THE MOST TRANSLATED POLISH AUTHORS

The *Kingdom* is a narrative and thematic continuation of 2016's *The King*. Twardoch's previous novel took place in pre-war Warsaw, and its main character was the titular king of that period's criminal underworld, the Jewish boxer and killer Jakub Szapiro. The plot of *The Kingdom* picks up where these pre-war gangsters' first episode left off, that is, in August 1937. In the new novel, we learn Szapiro has in fact abandoned his desire to depart for Palestine, remained in Warsaw, and shared the cruel fate of the Jewish community under the Nazi occupation. *The Kingdom* covers events from 1937 to 1945.

Unlike his wife and two sons, Szapiro has managed to escape from the Warsaw ghetto. He's gone into hiding, remaining under the care of his former lover, Ryfka Kij. Jakub is a shadow of his former self – he exists in numbness and apathy, and in fact doesn't speak. The author therefore has bequeathed the role of one of his two narrators to Ryfka herself. The second storyteller

is one of Jakub's sons, Dawid, who has managed to escape from a transport of Jews headed for a death camp. The story is developed as the interwoven accounts of these two characters.

We must be aware that Twardoch's work is not a typical historical novel on the condition of Polish Jews during the Holocaust. Of course, the author has included a large amount of historical information, and has fairly faithfully reconstructed the period's atmospheres and situations. However, he is fundamentally interested in the human condition in its broader dimension. Twardoch presents himself as a radical pessimist attached to a nihilistic view of the world. The reality he has created – both in *The King* and *The Kingdom* – is a vortex of dark urges, a world full of violence and cruelty. The conditions of the occupation only reinforce that black vision, but do not in the least determine it.

Dariusz Nowacki, translated by Sean Gaspar Bye

In cold, in darkness, in unceasing terror. In cold, in darkness, in unceasing terror – I, a night animal. Through the dark days I'm curled up in my burrow, grey as the walls of the hollows concealing me, in dark night I go out for my prey, scrape what's left of the meat from the skeleton of the dead city, gnaw at its frozen carcass. I flit between concrete rocks, down canyons of streets, I dash lightly across piles of rubble, not leaving a trace, nearly invisible, noiseless and grey, I have a stinger in my pocket, I hunt, and then I return and like a mother I feed the one I loved, I curl up beside him, I warm him with what's left of the heat I still have in my body, I warm him like a mother. My whole life I've loved a bad man.

I warm him and feed him, then I go out again, and he stays, in the dark.

I remember back now and I remember back then, in cold, darkness, terror, how he sat at my place, he sits, a few years earlier, in another world, still in my brothel on the corner of Pius XI and Koszykowa Streets, after not in fact going to Palestine in 1937, he and that wife of his. After coming back. After the plane turned around.

So he sat at my place, I remember, he sits naked, he sat on the bed, he rested his elbow on his knee, his head on his hands. At first he said nothing. Then he drank. He drinks. Then he cried. Then he bashed his fist into the wall until he broke the bones in his right hand, bloodied the wall, but kept bashing away, too drunk to feel the pain of bones broken not for the first time nor the last, since everything hurt except his body, I don't know whether to call it the heart, the soul, after all humans don't have souls, and the heart is only a muscle, but there's something inside, something that's not the body but is human, or belongs to a human, or a human belongs to what's inside, and that's what was hurting him, and to drown out that pain he broke his metacarpus bashing the wall, I called a doctor, the doctor came, examined his hand, he had to go to the hospital, the doctor x-rayed it, set it, put it in a cast, did everything necessary and before long Jakub went back and went on drinking, with his hand in a cast, and then lost consciousness and lay in bed, naked and unconscious of anything.

I love a bad man, I thought then, looking at his body, at his navy-blue tattoos and muscle thickly overgrown with fat, I loved.

Was this how Mrs. Goebbels thought about her husband, for instance, that she loved a bad man? And did she love him? What is love if you love someone so bad? I'm a bad person too, but he doesn't love me. That's our set-up, two bad people, me bad, him bad, I love him, but he doesn't love anyone, he doesn't even love himself, so maybe that makes me somehow better, that in all my immorality, the whole filth of this non-soul of mine, I still love him, so maybe I'm not completely bad,

maybe something human has remained inside me, but not in him anymore, because he doesn't love anybody. He used to love himself, he loved all those little toys of his, the little pistols, switchblades, and suits, he loved the little expensive leather shoes and the automobiles he decked himself out in, because he wanted to be something more than yet another little Warsaw Jew, a Jewish nobody, shit, human manure, and he didn't have a not-heart and not-soul inside him to give for some idea, like his brother had given himself for Palestine and wanted to die for it, and he died not for Palestine, but for nothing, and also because of Jakub, so maybe for Jakub, maybe it was for him he gave his life?

Excerpt translated by Sean Gaspar Bye



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Selected novels

Morfina, 2012 – **over 100 000 copies sold; film rights sold**

Drach, 2014 – **over 50,000 copies sold**

Król, 2016 – **over 100 000 copies sold; TV series rights sold to Canal+**

Twardoch is also the author of short story collections, essays, and journals.

Foreign language translations

Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Germany Hungary, Italy, Macedonia, The Netherlands, Romania, Serbia, Slovenia, Ukraine, UK & USA (World English)

Selected awards

Józef Mackiewicz Literary Prize (2009 – nomination; 2011 – distinction); Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2008 – distinction; 2011 – nomination); Angelus Central European Literary Award (2012) – shortlisted; Gdynia Literary Prize (2012, 2013) – nominations Nike Literary Award (2013 – Readers' Choice; 2014 – nomination) Polityka's Passport Award (2012); Le Prix du Livre Européen/ European Book Prize (2015); Brücke Berlin Literatur und Übersetzerpreis (2016) – with the translator Olaf Kühl