



# Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column written by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.



Sometimes the word is there before anything else – a missing picture rather, formulating the perception of something ephemeral, something dreamlike, something difficult to grasp.

These kinds of words open up spaces beyond reality and yet they are an integral part of one's very own reality.

In my case, my grandparents built my love for the word and for literature. Refugees after the traumatic experiences of World War II, they ended up far away from their home city of Riga in a devastatingly narrow-minded small town in the middle of Germany. I still see my bohemian grandmother entering the town store and everyone stared at this unlikely apparition stranded at this unlikely place.

But that was a memory of times much later and much happier. Her early days in Germany were bitter and poor and full of depression.

It was the stories that kept my grandmother alive. Those stories that she had been told when she was a child. The stories that have been a part of our family's history for so many generations and have lived on over time. The story of Karo, the dog and Murikätzchen, the little kitten that always outran the dog.

Beyond these stories a new narrative arose in the boring reality of that unfamiliar town in Eastern Westfalia. Riga, the former home became the place of longing, the place of dreams and a constantly talked about subject during the childhood years that I spent with my grandparents. Riga, the city of Amber and Art Nouveau became as real to me as to those of my family who once lived there.

Memory is a treacherous thing, full of deceit and illusion. It was a fairy-tale rather than anything real. The former home was kept as a paradisiacal and sacred space.

Riga, for the young girl, bore the same promise as Timbuktu and Mandalay, places she found in the maps she frequently dug into while trying to escape the boredom of the German province.

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There is something deeply comforting in reading, writing, translating and communicating through the means of literature. To understand that somehow there is a universal *conditio humana* and finding analogies in different texts and cultural references can open horizons, grow your perceptions about your own and the world around you and bring us closer to each other.

Even in the most exotic text is an essence that relates to all of us.

Since I have introduced a series of contemporary African fiction called AfrikAWunderhorn on the German speaking market, I am confronted with the same questions all the time – why Africa and what can African writers tell a German speaking audience? As if we did not inhabit the same world. Beyond cultural differences lies something that we all share. Different approaches to this very essence of humanity widens our imaginations, our experiences.

To offer readers new perspectives, to connect writers, translators, editors and book lovers is an important part of what we do and thus we learn so much from each other.



Literary landscapes go beyond the obvious and make us aware of subtleties that otherwise would be kept a secret.

It is the imagination and the experience we gain while reading that enriches our lives. No doubt you learn a lot about how it feels to be denied justice without being Michael Kohlhaas himself; and through *Phillida* how difficult it is to bear enslavement and exploitation when not lacking the longing of freedom and the brains to reflect, but only the language to say so.

Stories let us travel the world. This leads me to my next column, which will talk about a Cambodian-Botswana poetry collaboration in Phnom Penh and the literary scene of Hanoi. **CF**

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