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“French is killing my mother tongue”

Ágota Kristóf (1935–2011) wrote in French about such things as war, murder and manslaughter. This is remarkable, given that the French language remained her avowed enemy to the last.



Ágota Kristóf
(1935–2011)

Photo: Yvonne Böhler

CHARLES LINSMAYER

Kristóf's trilogy of novels, “The Notebook”, “The Proof” and “The Third Lie”, stand alone in Switzerland for the direct, plain, simple yet horrifically brutal way in which they portray war – and for the distinctive style in which they are written. They provide harrowing accounts of what humans are capable of doing to each other once they become estranged from humanity.

Fleeing war and terror

Kristóf, born in the Hungarian village of Csikvánd on 30 October 1935, was nine when German troops captured her country – exactly the same age as the two twins in her trilogy who live through war and then Stalinism. She fell in love with her history teacher at high school, and fled with him and their little daughter to Austria after Soviet troops moved in to crush the Hungarian Revolution of 1956. “I left my secret diary behind in Hungary, including my first poems,” she recalls. “I abruptly left the country without saying goodbye to my brothers or my parents. But above all, it was on this day at the end of November 1956 that I stopped belonging.”

Making watches in Neuchâtel

After arriving in Austria, Kristóf travelled on to Switzerland, where she found work at a watch factory in Neuchâtel. She learned French and resumed her literary endeavours in this new, adopted tongue. However, the language of Molière would remain her avowed enemy to the last. This is because she never mastered it completely and could only write with the help of a well-worn dictionary. “And because French is killing my mother

“The factory is a good place for writing poems. The work is monotonous, you can think of other things, and the machines have a steady rhythm to recite verses. When a poem takes shape, I write it down. I am one of ten Hungarians who work in this factory in Neuchâtel. The food in the canteen is very different to what we are used to, so we eat almost nothing. At lunchtime, I have made do with coffee and bread for at least a year.”

(Excerpt from a column in “du” magazine in 1990; published most recently in “The Illiterate”, 2007)

tongue.” Kristóf's inconspicuous first steps as a writer came in amateur theatre. Her radio plays in Neuchâtel were broadcast on Radio Suisse Romande.

Unexpected global success

Paris publishing house Éditions du Seuil printed her debut novel “The Notebook” in 1986. To her surprise,

not only this work but its sequels “The Proof” (1988) and “The Third Lie” (1991) catapulted her to worldwide prominence – despite the unbearable brutality of human existence ultimately being their overriding theme. Their relatively simple written style reflects how much trouble Kristóf had with French. In a laconic tone conveying nothing but coldness and emptiness, the author evokes the oppressive era in which she lived as a child in Hungary. Everything is grey. Even the colour white is grey. The protagonists, and their names, are interchangeable. Their senses deadened. Love is dead. The weak inflict on others what the strong inflict on them. Unconscionable things like murder, manslaughter, betrayal and incest. For no plausible reason. The trilogy tells the story of twins Claus and Lucas, who share a symbiotic relationship. The books are filled with horrendously traumatic, cruel imagery and imbued with a somewhat archaic, mythical intonation found lacking in such later novels as “Hier” [Yesterday] (1995) based in the Jura. When comparing Kristóf to other authors, no one from Switzerland comes to mind. There are similarities to Kafka, Daniil Charms, and Beckett maybe, whose writings can also elicit the same feelings of utter despair found in the last sentences of the trilogy: “Once mother has died, there will be no more reason for me to live. Jumping in front of a train is a good idea.”

ÁGOTA KRISTÓF'S WORKS ARE PUBLISHED IN GERMAN BY PIPER VERLAG, AND IN FRENCH BY ÉDITIONS DU SEUIL. HER TRILOGY OF NOVELS (“THE NOTEBOOK, THE PROOF, THE THIRD LIE: THREE NOVELS”) IS AVAILABLE IN ENGLISH FROM GROVE PRESS.

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