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Opening Ceremony Frankfurter Buchmesse 15 October 2019

Speaker: Erika Fatland

- *The spoken word takes precedence* -

Your Royal Highnesses,
Prime Minister,
Dear guests, dear colleagues and translators, dear readers.

I was an odd, solitary child, and an even odder, solitary teenager. But I never felt lonely, because I had books. I read all the time: in the school breaks, at the supper table, I even developed a technique that allowed me to read as I moved around the house. My teenage rebellion was to skip the obligatory family walk on Sundays so I could read Hamsun.

Now, that may not sound so momentous, but in my western Norwegian family it was tantamount to sneaking a drink before breakfast or taking hard drugs at the weekend. My father's greatest concern was that this dangerous activity might permanently damage my eyes, and who knows, perhaps he was right, because I am now totally dependent on contact lenses if I want to see the world clearly. And my father, who is over 60, does not even need reading glasses, but then, nor does he read.

And I have to say, my father is missing out on the greatest invention in history.

I am not going to talk about how wonderful the Norwegian literary system is or how rich our literature is, or in general how beautiful our country is (in particular, Western Norway, where I come from), as our prime minister has already done that, and you will hear more praise from our minister of culture when she opens the pavilion. Because that is what politicians do best.

Nor do I need to tell you that the Frankfurt Book Fair is a meeting place for traders and poets, though perhaps more for the former. But authors need money too. They struggle with taxes and loans, as well as trivialities such as electricity bills, renovation costs and the price of ski wax. So I wish everyone a very successful fair – may the contracts and advances be extra generous this year. (And I would be more than happy to put you in touch with my agent - the elegant, white-haired lady in Row X - afterwards).

Instead, I want to talk about the power of literature.

I have spent most of the past year travelling. “As usual,” my author husband would probably add – for some reason he has started to record my travel activities and keep statistics. I have been travelling in the Himalayas, home to some of the most beautiful, culturally diverse and yet poorest and underdeveloped regions in the world.

Apart from the old, often handwritten texts that the monks recite from, I barely saw a book there. For most people, a book was and still is an unbelievable luxury. Going to school is a luxury. And yet it is the key to a better life. I cannot count the number of times I have seen the

spark that lights up the eyes of children who have learned to read and write. The difference is visible, tangible.

The Sherpas I met at Everest Base Camp used their savings to send their children to Kathmandu, where they can get a good education. They did not want them to risk their lives so that rich, Western climbers can take a selfie on top of the world's highest mountain.

It is said that the world is getting smaller, but in fact the world is the same size that it has always been, 510 072 000 square kilometres. Only now more and more people from the expanding middle class are travelling to the same places.

Nor is it true that our globalised world has fewer borders – to the contrary, borders and restrictions have possibly never been stricter than they are now. For example, around eighty or ninety years ago, caravan routes criss-crossed the Himalayas and merchants travelled through the mountains on camels, horses and yaks. Today the high mountain roads are asphalted making transport smoother and more comfortable, but the modern traveller is frequently confronted or stopped by surly border guards and complex visa regulations. Following the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947, and China's annexation of Tibet in the 1950s, the borders were set in stone, which heralded the demise of the old trade routes.

Illiteracy is no longer the main problem in Tibet, but rather the government's distrust of the written word and its own people. The Chinese customs officers at the border checkpoint were interested in only one thing. With remarkable efficiency, they pulled out the four books that I had stowed in the corners of my suitcase. The trilogy about an orphaned boy by Icelandic author Jón Kalman Stefánsson was treated as though it were dangerous, radioactive material.

Just outside Lhasa, I met an elderly woman who told me that the only pleasure she and her neighbours had had in winter was to gather in the village hall and read Buddhist texts together.

But they were no longer allowed to do this.

On another trip, a host from a small village in northern North Korea came running after us as we were about to get into the mini-bus. He was holding a paperback in his hand.

"Who forgot this?" he asked, in a frantic voice.

"It's mine, but I've finished it, so you can just throw it away," said a Dutch tourist.

"It's best that you take it with you," the North Korean said.

"But I don't need it any longer, just throw it away," the tourist said again.

"*It's best that you take it with you,*" our guide insisted, forcing them to take the book.

The book in question was a Ken Follett thriller, hardly something that was likely to topple the regime.

Dictators are afraid of the written word. The fact that they are so frightened of books is almost endearing.

Because words can very definitely be dangerous. There are still many countries in which a performance of Henrik Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* involves considerable personal risk, 136 years after the incendiary play was first performed. Even in my own country, Norway, which is about as far from a dictatorship as you can get, the head of government recently criticised a theatre production, saying the content might be problematic for some politicians.

Dear Prime Minister: it was *your* statements that were problematic.

But going back to dictators - they often have an excessive belief in their *own* literary endeavours. The first president of Turkmenistan, Saparmurat Niyazov, better known as

Turkmenbashi, published the first volume of *Ruhnama*, The Book of the Soul, an opus on Turkmen history and culture, in 2001. The book was introduced into the school curriculum at all levels, and unnecessary subjects such as algebra and physics were replaced by classes in “Saparmurat Niyazov’s literary legacy”. Imams were instructed to preach the *Ruhnama* in mosques, a *Ruhnama* exam quickly became an obligatory part of driving tests, and all libraries outside the capital were closed. People had *Ruhnama*, what more could they possibly want?

Turkmenbashi died in 2006, and was succeeded by his dentist, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, also known as Arkadag, the Protector. It almost goes without saying that Arkadag himself has also become a highly acclaimed writer.

But at least the dictators of Turkmenistan have understood something important. They have understood the power of the written word.

The death of the book has been predicted for years and it has certainly come under pressure with competition from the Internet and streaming services. But until now, all prophecies of literature’s demise have been proved wrong. The world is becoming an increasingly complex place, as the population grows, and books are more important now than ever.

Reading a book is alone-time, it is immersion, it is a shortcut into another world, another mind; in a complicated world drowning in fast information streams, easy answers and *fake news*, a book offers slow knowledge and insight.

And for a rather odd, solitary child, books can become a lifeline.

Even though censorship sadly plays an increasing role, books can cross borders without having to worry about cumbersome visa regulations. Every year, millions of books cross both national and linguistic borders, and the Frankfurt Book Fair is a primary player in this exchange. But they do not cross these borders without the assistance of people like the white-haired lady in Row X, without publishers and intermediaries, and not least, translators.

Translators, who are so often overlooked, are my everyday literary heroes. The words you are listening to now, are not just my words, they are also the words of my English and German translators, Kari Dickson and Ulrich Sonnenberg. And my books would contain many more errors were it not for the keen eyes and efforts of my translators – you see, they do not trust me, and therefore double-check everything, from the colour of the ceiling in Turkmenbashi’s far-from-modest mausoleum, to the kind of tree that dominates the banks of the river that marks the Norwegian-Russian border. And I would therefore like to end by asking you all to give these everyday literary heroes a resounding and well-deserved round of applause.

Thank you for your attention!

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