

INTERVIEW

'Life translated into

Author and curator of this year's Malta Festival of Mediterranean Literature, JEAN-PAUL BORG, explains why the humble book still has the power to radically impact people, even in a fast-paced, digitised world



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There is an age-old debate along the lines that 'literature' – as an art-form – should somehow reflect (if not address) contemporary realities and issues... and that otherwise, it is merely 'escapism'. Do you see literature as a means of addressing contemporary realities... or as an end in itself?

Personally, I see it from two angles. Let's start with Inizjamed: the NGO I form part of, and which organises the annual Mediterranean Literature Festival. It may be a cultural, literary NGO... but its roots are deeply embedded in realities of everyday life. Some of its founding members were very involved in the Cooperative for Fair Trade, for instance. So you can't really say that Inizjamed is not, up to a point, also a 'political' NGO. I myself, and others like me, tend to look at literature as 'life translated into words'... as Oliver Friggieri defines it in 'L-Idea Tal-Letteratura'. So I don't really see literature as something that alienates us from reality. Even when you consider where many of the authors participating in this year's festival are coming from: Venezuela, Algeria, the UK... all places where there are pressing socio-political realities. On the other hand, however, the festival itself offers a space which – rather than alienating us from reality – reduces the tempo of the rhythms of life... especially when it comes to poetry readings. People can take a break from their hectic routines, relax, and enjoy a performance... so in a sense: yes, literature is

an end in itself. It is there to be enjoyed, ultimately. I, for one, would not want to see literature as being there only to serve a purpose: to teach, for instance... though good literature often does provoke.

Turning to the local scene: there seems to have been a substantial evolution in the last 20 or so years. More and more novels are being published annually by local authors, in an ever-increasing variety of genres – historical, horror, romance, fantasy, even sci-fi... in brief, we can almost talk of a cultural, literary 'revival'. Do you agree? And if so, how do you account for this phenomenon yourself, as a writer and promoter of Maltese fiction?

The Maltese literary scene has no doubt taken massive strides forward, yes. In fact, I consider myself privileged to be living in a rather extraordinary age for Maltese literature. One of the advantages we have, as a country – and this is evident even from winners of annual literature awards – is that we have opened up a lot to foreign influences in recent years; and we now have a lot of Maltese authors who are no longer living in Malta... but still write about Malta. So they have the advantage of being able to look at Malta through a different prism... unlike myself, for instance, who has lived here all my life. It is even something we are trying to promote, as it were, with the festival. One of the things that makes the festival special is that there are workshops attached to the performances.

Those 12 foreign authors will be here for a week, so that, first of all, local authors will be able to mingle with authors of a certain calibre. It always helps to be exposed to established writers who have reached a certain level with their art. And it also gives rise to mutual influences. Local author Clare Azzopardi, for instance, met a Spanish author at a past edition of the festival... and ended up translating several of her works into Maltese. Even I myself... before I joined Inizjamed, in fact... had met a Palestinian author, and was so impressed that I translated her book. This is another advantage Maltese writers have today. In the past, one of the stumbling blocks was always that the audience was restricted. Who's going to read your work? A few hundred, at most. Today, thanks to translation, your work might reach places that you'd never even have imagined before.

However, you first have to publish... and in Malta in particular, the cost of printing (coupled with the size of the market, etc.) remains unlikely to be recovered through copy sales. Is it even possible to make a living as a writer in Malta, for instance?

No, absolutely not. At most, you might win the National Book Prize, and get a little something back; but as far as I know, nobody makes a living as an author here. At the same time, however, there isn't all that much money in the writing profession anywhere else in the world, either. Even Booker Prize winners tend to only sell

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around 50,000 copies worldwide. Alice Smith's 'Autumn', for instance, had only sold 15,000 copies before winning the Booker Prize. We're not talking extraordinary figures here. It's only a few international best-selling authors – like Stephen King, or J.K. Rowling – who achieve that kind of success... but I doubt whether they write their novels specifically for financial gain. In this sense, it's a bit like the local music scene: there is a Maltese musical revival, too... with more and more bands writing songs in Maltese, experimenting with different genres, different musical ideas, etc. There isn't very much money to be made in the Maltese music industry, either; but Maltese bands still exist, and produce music. Not for money, but because it gives you an experience that cannot be valued in financial terms. That, I think, is what keeps driving them on...

But the Maltese literary scene also faces commercialisation issues of its own. The traditional 'book-shop' seems to be disappearing... with established names (such

as Sapienza's in Valletta) being replaced by largely homogenous 'magazine'-style stores such as Agenda. As a result, the available choice of reading matter seems to be diminishing. Does it concern you that we may be losing part of our book culture?

Up to a point, yes. In fact, it is something the National Book Council is currently working on; it will soon be establishing its own bookshop. I myself have had personal experiences, too. Recently, I was trying to put up posters of the festival at various outlets... and at one of these 'magazine-style' shops, as you describe them, I was at first told: 'Sorry, but we don't put up posters here'. Imagine: a bookshop in Malta, refusing to promote a Mediterranean Literature Festival on its premises. In any case, I eventually spoke to someone else, and they agreed to put it up. But it gives you an indication. Having said this, bookshops are not the author's only interface with the public. Compared to other countries, Malta has a very high rate of individual book-launches, for example. There are also several book clubs: I myself am a mem-

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ber of a few of them. Another aspect is that there is more of a coffee-shop book culture now. More and more cafés are opening up new spaces for reading. So we're finding other ways of 'getting around' the problem. There is, however, one other thing that concerns me as a writer in Malta. I sometimes feel as though – without meaning to, or without even realising it - I am always addressing the same coterie of three or four people... people I know, and who understand me...

Is that a reflection of Malta's restricted literary circles?

Not just literary, I would say. If you go to a Brikkuni or Brodu concert... or the Valletta film festival... or to the theatre... very often, you will see practically the same audience. But there is a much wider audience out there: for example, when we try to promote an activity at St James Centre for Creativity... which is not exactly a very 'alternative' venue... we encounter lots of people who have no idea where it is. They would never have gone there before. And I could say the same for myself, up to around

10 years ago. But then – as my own experience suggests - very often, all it takes is for people to go there once. It's like breaking down an invisible barrier; in my case, I went once... and I went again, and again and again. And I see it happening with others. Most of the time, people who go to that one performance, or exhibition, or film, or poetry reading... those people will go again. The challenge therefore becomes: how do you break out to reach a wider audience? Do we keep talking among ourselves, the same old four or five people... or do we open up the discussion as much as possible?

Could it also be that, for many people out there, 'literature' remains a distant, inaccessible and somewhat 'highbrow' sphere, inhabited only by the canonical authors we all had to read at school - Dun Karm Psaila, Guze Ellul Mercer, Francis Ebejer, etc.... and that, therefore, it is 'not for them'?

That perception exists, but it is being challenged... and has been challenged before. Take Juann Mamo, for instance. In his own lifetime, he was never

very highly regarded. For example, Dun Karm Psaila once told him: 'Prosit, Juann, you made us laugh'. It was a form of compliment, in a way... but let's face it, he was also ridiculing him. It was only recently that we looked back on our past literature, and realized that some of it was actually very good... but we never gave it credit, at the time. And when you read contemporary criticism of Mamo's 'Uljed in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerika', you notice that there was this prevailing view that – to be 'good' – literature had to also 'preach'... it was seen to have a duty to be religious; or to try and inculcate certain 'positive values', and so on. Not to mention that censorship was all-powerful. So the perception of Maltese literature was that – how can I put this? – it was the domain of a superior, enlightened class.

You say this perception is being challenged today: how?

In various ways: sometimes even through language choices and writing styles. We no longer avoid certain words or phrases that – though realistic

– we were always ashamed of, in the past. Sexual innuendo, blasphemy, and so on... these realities were simply never mentioned at all, until quite recently. Today, you will encounter a lot of realism in Maltese writing... because, let's face it, it was laughable that writers would use a completely different idiom from the man on the street. In fact, Maltese literature has very much evolved in the opposite direction. If anything, today's novelists are loyal to the contemporary realities they reflect in their writing.

One other change is that today, there is competition from other spheres of influence: mass-media, the internet, computer games, virtual reality, etc. In this day and age, does the printed word still have the power to influence and shape thought? Or will 'internet kill the literature star', as video once did to radio?

Speaking for myself as a writer – and I know that others feel the same – if my work impacts even just one person, it's already an achievement. But literature sometimes does have a deeper impact. The last major controversy over Maltese literature, I would say, was the 'Li Tkisser Sewwi' case [when author Alex Vella Gera and publisher Mark Camilleri were prosecuted on obscenity charges]. People spoke about the case, at the time. Clearly, then, literature still has the power to shock...

And that case also led directly to the abolition of censorship laws... so it had a tangible outcome, too.

Yes, but I would say that literature changes things at other

levels, often without us even realising. When I read a book, for instance, I change in ways I don't even really understand. Literature gives you a different lens through which to look at things... it de-familiarises the familiar. In fact, I would say that this is a power literature has, where other factors of influence may not. Like the news, for instance. The same man who may be moved to tears by a fictitious tragedy in a novel, might watch a news bulletin about migrants drowning at sea, for example... and feel no emotion at all. Often, it takes a poet to hit that raw nerve. So yes, I would say that literature can and does have a transformative effect.

But surely there is another way literature reflects reality. Those past perceptions and prevailing ideas about literature were also 'real', in their day. So even the fact that yesteryear's authors avoided certain realities, tells us something about the age in which they lived. What would you say today's literature tells us about our own age?

It certainly tells us something about how our society is changing. The sheer variety of styles, forms and content, alone, illustrates how much influence we are receiving from external stimuli. There is a growing graphic novel culture, for instance; or short films based on Maltese poems. Even the availability of reading matter has changed. Until a few years ago, 'going to buy a book' meant being confronted with the same canon to choose from... today, I can choose Shakespeare and Irvine Welsh at the same time. All this is reflected in emerging Maltese literature.