

Interview
with Jennifer Croft
by Weronika Szwebs



Photo from author's personal archive

It Took Me Ten Years and a Lot of Work to Find a Publisher

How did you first come across Olga Tokarczuk's books? What was it that attracted you to her writing?

I found Olga's books at the University of Iowa library, and I loved everything about them. Her psychological insights, her prose style, the way she sympathizes with her characters. I found a way to get in touch with Antonia Lloyd-Jones, Olga's other English translator, and she helped me with my first translations and put me in touch with Olga, too.

Why, of all Tokarczuk's books, was *Flights* the one you decided to

translate? Was your choice based on personal preference or practical calculation?

I loved *Flights*. I was working on a PhD in Comparative Literature at Northwestern University by then, and the playful experimentation of *Flights* was the perfect complement to the critical theory and literary history I was reading. It was not at all a practical choice. I knew it would be difficult to find a publisher for the book in English, given how unusual it was.

***Flights* was published by Fitzcarrald Editions, a young, small press based in London...**

It took me ten years and a lot of work to find a publisher. Finally, we did find the right match, and things have been wonderful since then. We publish with Riverhead in the U.S., as well.

Learning Polish does not seem to be an obvious choice for an American student. The Polish language seems to be complicated and not very practical. Moreover, a lot of attention directed to the region of Central and Eastern Europe is drawn by Russian culture, which is reflected even in the structures of the Slavic Departments. If the choice is not obvious, there might be an interesting story behind it. How has your relationship with the Polish language started?

In fact my love affair with Polish did begin with Russian. I tell my Russian story in *Homesick*, an illustrated memoir that is coming out in English from Unnamed Press this fall, and in Polish and Spanish (its original language) next year. But I majored in English and Russian and minored in Creative Writing in college, and as I was preparing to graduate, it seemed to me the only way to combine those three interests would be through translation. At the time, there were not many MFA programs in Literary Translation, but the University of Iowa was offering one. Through a strange sequence of events, I found I was unable to continue studying Russian when I arrived, but they were offering another Slavic language instead: Polish. I got extremely lucky with a wonderful professor named Christopher Wertz, who taught me

for two years, and then I got lucky again with two fellowships to go to Poland: a FLAS and a Fulbright. I started in Krakow and then spent a year in Warsaw, which I learned so much from, in so many different ways.

Did you develop any intellectual and literary fascinations with the Polish authors during your university studies? Which authors did you find the most captivating?

I've always been most interested in contemporary women writers, in any language. The first Polish writer I worked on was Hanna Krall. Olga Tokarczuk was the next.

Did your Fulbright scholarship in Poland help to develop or change these interests? Were you close to the academic environment and literary circles?

I attended some classes at the University of Warsaw and made some friends that way. It also took me a time to be able to speak Polish. I think the main thing it enabled me to do was start to understand Polish culture and everyday life, and to travel around the country, which I did as much as I could.

The Polish title, *Bieguni*, refers to the Russian religious sect, a faction of Old Believers, who deemed that constant movement is the only way to escape the devil. The name is not common knowledge in Polish, but it resembles the verb 'biegać', to run – which makes it sound both mysterious and familiar at the same time. Translating it into English must

have been a challenge. What led you to choose *Flights* for the title? What were the other solutions that crossed your mind?

I love your phrasing of “mysterious and familiar at the same time.” That’s exactly why I chose “Flights” rather than “Runners.” In English, “runners” just sounds like “joggers.” It’s not evocative at all. “Flights” means many things: fleeing, flights of fancy, and of course, air travel, which is a guiding thread throughout the book. Now, I actually think that title is one of the best decisions I’ve ever made.