

## NORWEGIAN AUTHOR JON FOSSE WINS THE NOBEL PRIZE IN LITERATURE 2023. AN INTERVIEW WITH THE WRITER

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Interviewing Jon Fosse in October 2023 was a great honour for the Norwegian Academic Environment at Babeş-Bolyai University, where students in the Norwegian Language and Literature Bachelor's Programme study Jon Fosse's work in the *Literary translation* and *Short fiction* courses.

In 2018 the Department of Norwegian Language and Literature Studies in Cluj celebrated the PhD defence of a thesis entitled *Jon Fosse and the New Theatre*, by Anamaria Babiaş-Ciobanu, supervised by Professor Sanda Tomescu Baciu, founder of the Norwegian Language and Literature BA studies at Babeş-Bolyai University in 1991. As part of her PhD thesis, the candidate had the privilege to interview Jon Fosse and to publish the translation of the play *Skuggar* [Umbre, 2015] into Romanian, with the support of *Norwegian Literature Abroad* in the Nordica collection of Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă Publishing House.

In 2023, the Nobel Committee praised Jon Fosse "for his innovative plays and prose which give voice to the unsayable", stating that "Fosse blends a rootedness in the language and nature of his Norwegian background with artistic techniques in the wake of modernism" (<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/>).

Jon Fosse (b. 1959) writes in different genres, from plays to novels, from poems to stories or even from essays to children's books. His texts have been translated into around fifty languages and his plays have been staged all over

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the world, including Romania. Norway has constantly appreciated his amazing work and awarded him its honorary artist's residence for life, Grotten (The Grotto), which is located in Slottsparken, the park surrounding the Royal Palace.

Fosse grew up on a small farm in Strandebarm in the Hardanger region of Norway. He studied literature at the University of Bergen and became a full-time writer. Fosse's actual literary debut is considered to be the short story *Han [He]*, published in a student newspaper in 1981. His national breakthrough came in 1989 with the novel *Naustet [Boathouse]*.

He started writing for the theatre although he expressed his scepticism of the genre, and he wrote his first play *Nokon kjem til å komme [Someone is Going to Come]*, which in 1999, when the French director Claude Régy staged it in Nanterre, became his international breakthrough. In a few years his plays were staged not only in Norway, but also abroad, in France and in Germany.

Jon Fosse wrote more than 30 plays, including *Eg er vinden [I Am the Wind]*, *Namnet [The Name]*, *Ein sommars dag [A Summer's Day]*, *Vinter [Winter]*, *Dødsvariasjonar [Death Variations]* and *Draum om hausten [Dream of Autumn]*. Fosse is the most performed Norwegian playwright after Henrik Ibsen.

Fosse's novels comprise *Melancholy I* and *Melancholy II* (about the Norwegian painter Lars Hertervig); *Morning and Evening* (about the birth of a child and, years later, the day of his death) and a trilogy, consisting of *Andvake, Olavs draumar, Kveldsvævd [Wakefulness, Olav's Dreams, Weariness]*, for which Fosse won the Nordic Council's Literature Prize in 2015.

His longest work is *Septology* (2019–21), which he started to write after converting to Catholicism in 2013. The stylistic tempo of *Septology* is opposed to fast-paced drama, using what Fosse calls "slow prose". It has been published in three volumes: *Det andre namnet [The Other Name]*, *Eg er ein annan [I Is Another]* and *Eit nytt namn [A New Name]*. *Septology* is a magnificent work dealing with the nature of art and God. It tackles complex themes such as love, alcoholism, friendship and time and has been translated into more than twenty languages. Before receiving the Nobel Prize in 2023, *Septology* received numerous awards, like the Brage Prize, or the Critics' Prize, while also being shortlisted for the American National Book Award and the International Booker Prize.

Fosse's most recent prose work, *Kvitleik [A Shining]*, about the limit between life and death, was released in 2023.

We are thankful to Jon Fosse for this interview.

**Sanda Tomescu Baciu, Roxana-Ema Dreve:** Congratulations, Jon Fosse, on winning the Nobel Prize in Literature 2023! How did you receive this news from the Swedish Academy?

**Jon Fosse:** Thank you very much for your congratulations! At this time, I usually live in Oslo, but I was in a flat we keep north of Bergen last Thursday. My name has come up a lot in speculations about the Nobel for the past ten years, so even if many considered me a favourite this year, I didn't expect to win. I was driving in my car along the coastline nearby when I had the call from Mads Malm in the Swedish Academy. I felt a sudden happiness in my whole body when I got the message. But then I started to doubt that it was real, and Malm told me that if I was in doubt, I just had to watch television at 1 pm that day. And at that time the phone started to ring and ring and email after email popped in.

**S.T.B. and R.E.D:** It is the first time in history that the Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded to a New Norwegian writer. What would be the importance of this prize for New Norwegian literature seen as world literature?

**J.F:** I know that at least three writers writing in Nynorsk have been nominated for the Nobel and have been in the cards. Arne Garborg, Olav Duun and Tarjei Vesaas. Anders Olson mentioned Vesaas in his speech, and he has no doubt influenced my writing. I guess other writers have been considered in the years after Vesaas, but their names aren't official yet.

I guess each and every language in the world wants to have a writer writing in that language, one who is given the Nobel Prize. For Nynorsk as a minority language in Norway, and a language which Norwegians have quarrelled about for years, I think it is especially important to get the prestige such a prize gives not only the writer, but also the language he or she writes in.

**S.T.B. and R.E.D:** You use repetitions, pauses of different lengths, lack of punctuation, and everything resembles a continuous flowing stream. Is there a subtle link between your writing and music?

**J.F:** In my teens I played the guitar and even the violin a lot. I also listen to music all the time. Then, for reasons I don't know, I had enough, stopped playing and even listening to music. About the same time, I started writing. And when writing, I tried to recreate what I experienced when playing. To me writing is still an act basically of listening – exactly what I'm listening to I cannot tell, but I somehow feel that what I write is a gift.

**S.T.B. and R.E.D:** You grew up on the banks of the Hardanger Fjord, which is a fabulous landscape, even for Norway. What impact does this miraculous nature of Western Norway, with all of its fjords and mountains, have on your writings? What other important influences do you think have been essential in shaping the process of your writing?

**J.F:** This very beautiful landscape I grew up in has formed me a lot, both as a human being and as a writer. And if my writing is located somewhere, it is located in a fictitious place in such a landscape. It is always like that. The fundamental sound of the waves, the darkness in the winter, the blueness of the sea and sky in the summer. And, not least, the sound of the dialect spoken in this region, which is very close to Nynorsk. I can hear my grandmother's voice in Nynorsk, but it is impossible to hear it in Bokmål.

**S.T.B. and R.E.D:** Whom do you consider to be the most important author that has inspired you?

**J.F:** The biggest influence on my writing must be the philosopher Martin Heidegger. Another big influence is the Austrian poet Georg Trakl, whom I'd already read as a teenager. A couple of years ago I translated his collection *Sebastian in Dream* into Norwegian. I also know that I am influenced by the writing of Tarjei Vesaas, as I've already said. I think everything I have read has influenced me, but not in a way that I am conscious of. If I am to mention one more, I think it will have to be another philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein.

## LITERATURE

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