



Georgia  
Made by Characters  
Guest of Honour  
Frankfurter Buchmesse 2018

10-14 October 2018  
**FRANKFURTER  
BUCHMESSE**  
Guest of Honour Georgia

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## Nino Haratishwili / ENG

It is impossible to talk about people without talking about borders. People, societies, and nations have always defined themselves through borders, as they shape our identities.

However, our world is really obsessed with this concept these days. We are divided in here and there, in right and wrong, and in us and the others. Exclusion has become presentable. It seems to be permissible to discuss whether people should be allowed to be drowned in their bitterest struggle for survival. And that is only possible because there is always a boundary between us and the others. This border is sometimes marked with barbed wire, but it is mostly invisible somewhere between our heads and our ribs.

I am often asked, why I write in German or what nationality I define for myself. I can only say that my identity - and probably those of many others - has become fluid, and when I am asked who I am, German or Georgian, I do not have to decide and, in addition, I do not want to... Because where there are no borders, there is no either-or.

I write in German, because I can write in German, because I love this language, and because I believe that I can tell my Georgian stories in German much more precisely. I do this, because I was given the opportunity to learn the language and become part of this culture. Literature has made an enormous contribution to this. In the books I read in German, I never felt alien. When reading, I was always able to become part of the book and of that new culture.

Yes, I am convinced that literature can build these bridges, because it is not caught within borders. When we empathise with someone else, we can empathise with what it feels like on the other side, and we discover ourselves anew in the relativisation of ourselves.

We also seem to be able to forget the deeply human capacity of empathy. However, good books can evoke it back in us anytime.

When I started to write, I was a Georgian author in public perception. Later, I became a German-Georgian and then German. Strangely enough, the latter was due to a book of 1278 pages dealing with Georgia. I became affiliated by telling a story of a seemingly foreign country.

Over the past 27 years, Georgia has been fighting for its own identity it has claimed since the antiquity and defended against all occupiers throughout the centuries. And even there, many forget that identity is not something ossified within narrow limits, that things and times must change and they do change, and that the richness of Georgian culture grew out of being permeable and perhaps brave, taking in foreign ideas and mixing with its own in its search for novelties.

That is why all those Georgians, who have the courage to question borders day after day, deserve openness and sympathy of others and interest from the middle of Europe, just as Europe may need to be reminded that others are not that different.

And I believe that just as literature became a bridge for me personally, it can also connect countries.



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Georgia has many stories to tell. They are full of tragedy and full of cruelty, but also full of humour, because such was the life over the past 100 years. They are stories of upheavals, occupation, and dead hopes, stories full of longings and prohibitions, stories of improvisation and survival strategies, stories full of confidence, stories of war and loss, sadness and lack of prospects, but at the same time, stories full of courage and optimism, full of laughter, full of comedy, and full of wonderful people.

And so I want to end with one Georgian story:

On the Russian-Georgian border in the Tskhinvali region, South Ossetia, part of Georgia under international law controlled by Russia, there has been a creeping border since 2008. The term describes a situation, where Russian barbed wires secretly advance every month, if not every week. So, for example, a Georgian farmer, who thought he was safe and at home, found himself in an occupied area one day.

The story of that farmer from a border village, who suddenly awakened on the enemy's territory in the morning of a sunny day and refused, despite all the entreating of his family, to leave his house and yard, but above all his son's grave, has deeply touched me.

I can see this farmer in front of my eyes resolved to fight, being aware that it is impossible to win a victory. I can see an old man branded by sun and fieldwork and many privations, who faces a young Russian soldier and explains why it is impossible for him to leave this place, where he has lived his life and buried his son. In my imagination, he explains it calmly and thoughtfully, repeating his words over and over again.

And by not accepting this border and questioning it, he exposes it in all its ridiculousness. And since he remains friendly and perhaps even laughs, simply not abiding by the laws of the border, the soldier may have no other choice but to give up. Perhaps he thinks for himself: "Let him stay, the harmless, crazy grandpa", failing to realise that his rifle and he himself have lost all power.

And without the soldier noticing it, he becomes a character of a story.

I do not know if my version of this story is true, and ultimately, it is irrelevant. I just want to believe in it, because as Chekhov put it:

"People who are right write bad books."

And so I hope that here in Frankfurt, many stories from Georgia may overcome boundaries.

**The spoken word prevails.**