Writing in opposition

A conversation on the politics of literature

Zsófia Bán, Rosie Goldsmith, A. L. Kennedy
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When political points can be scored by tearing up children's books that are deemed too tolerant, what is a writer to do? Should they become an activist?

Rosie Goldsmith meets writers Zsófia Bán and A. L. Kennedy to discuss upheavals in Hungarian cultural policy, the future of post-Brexit Britain and the status of literature in politicized societies across Europe.

Rosie Goldsmith: A. L. Kennedy, we almost dare not use the term ‘intellectual’ in Britain, let alone ‘European’. Do you feel comfortable with the label ‘intellectual’?

A. L. Kennedy: It’s such a low bar in Britain right now. I just try to duck and dive and avoid labels. I’m a person who’s trying to do their best – that’s about all I can say.

Rosie Goldsmith: Zsófia Bán, as someone based in Budapest would you call yourself an intellectual and would that be a badge of honour for you?

Zsófia Bán: Yes, although I think that if we translate the term into Hungarian then it fits into the kind of taxonomy that we inherited from socialist times. There were the intellectuals, the working class and the peasants – those were the three basic classifications. And I think, inevitably, I would fit under ‘intellectual’, even though it was used in a slightly different manner than it has been used traditionally in the West.

Rosie Goldsmith: Now, Zsófia, I’d like start with the publication of your recent children’s book, published in Hungary last year. You’ve been on the receiving end of some drastic measures imposed by the Hungarian government, but you and fellow writers have actually emerged stronger and more determined as a result. Can you tell us about this book and what happened?

Zsófia Bán: Well, the book’s protagonist is an owl, which has been befriended by a diverse class of third graders. There’s one from Transylvania, another with two moms, one who is brought up by his grandmother, and a new girl who is brown-skinned and doesn’t speak Hungarian, among others. The subtitle of the book points to the fact that
you can be different.

I felt there was a need in Hungarian children’s literature to talk about difference since there has been so much radical propaganda against difference of any kind under the Orbán regime. Without trying to be didactic in any way, I felt that there was something to be said about encouraging difference, shedding light on how difference can be a good thing and how it should be accepted.

There’s mention in the book – literally half a sentence – that one of the little girls has two moms. The book was singled out by a far-right member of parliament and torn up publicly as a kind of performance in the lobby of the office building of the members of parliament in Budapest. It was obviously a protest of sorts against this kind of discourse that supports not only gay and lesbian relationships, but also any kind of difference. And, of course, this politician had a problem with the fact that the children welcome this new, brown-skinned girl.

Prior to her tearing up of my book and the ensuing scandal, she had already shredded another children’s book in which the editor asked different writers to rewrite well-known fairy tales, with a focus on differences, such as the situation of the Roma, or poor people or foreigners.

Rosie Goldsmith: Alison, what do you feel when you hear about books being torn up and destroyed in other countries?

A. L. Kennedy: It’s showing the extreme fragility of what is effectively a death cult headed by the international alliance of old white men. They want to continue to make money during our lifetime. They know about global warming, but don’t care. And they’re pursuing so many different agendas, which are utterly illogical, that there cannot be any other narrative.

They are fearful to such an extent that there can be no stories and no difference. To them, it’s as if their heterosexuality will disappear if gay people exist. If brown people exist, their whiteness will evaporate. If trans people exist, all of the conventional sex roles will disappear overnight and it will be chaos. And they have to keep having this endlessly repeated unconvincing narrative about a search for ever greater purity and ever greater uniformity. But humans are not pure or uniform.

Of course, they’re terrified of books and have to shred and burn them because they’re literally terrified of words that aren’t their own words. And their own words aren’t that great and their own lies aren’t fantastic. It’s deeply sad.

Rosie Goldsmith: Zsófia, how did you react when this happened? It seems to have had some positive impact, because it galvanized more people to react. Tell us what happened as a result.

Zsófia Bán: Well, it certainly helped sales, which immediately soared. But setting aside this humorous aspect, I think it does have its upside, ironically, because it just shows how
important the written word can be. And, of course, it also reveals the very harsh culture war taking place in Hungary, which, by the way, is a fairly recent phenomenon. When Orbán initially took over, it looked as though his government was interested primarily in economics rather than culture, which everybody was happy to see.

But that has changed very radically in the past five or six years. There’s a very heavy-handed and rough takeover happening as far as cultural institutions are concerned, not just in the sense of governing these institutions, but in the very literal sense of taking over buildings and privatizing property that has traditionally been national or public property. It’s like the reverse of socialism, when all of a sudden private properties were taken over by the state.

**Rosie Goldsmith:** If the laws are being changed to disadvantage you and other creative people and all kinds of cultural institutions, what role or impact can you have?

**Zsófia Bán:** Well, the obvious answer to that, I think, is to draw attention to what is going on. The problem is that there’s very little opposition from independent media, aside from a few online newspapers and one radio station, because the media have been taken over or appropriated by the government.

There is, of course, the Internet, which makes it much easier to publicize information even without doing it in official media outlets. That’s something that the government didn’t consider – it’s not enough to simply appropriate or co-opt all the official media outlets.

I think the role of an intellectual in Hungary is a traditional role for Hungarian writers. We must not forget that writing in Hungarian as opposed to German in the nineteenth century was a political statement. Language has always been a very important carrier of national identity (not in the negative sense of the word as it is being used in contemporary politics); it helped develop a modern national culture.

And writers since then have always had this role, which is very much a public role, even though some writers obviously refrain from taking on that role. But, historically speaking, this has been a very traditional role for Hungarian writers and intellectuals.

**Rosie Goldsmith:** A. L. Kennedy, listening to Zsófia discuss the reaction to her book in Hungary, how do you think it compares with Britain? Is there any comparison at all?

**A. L. Kennedy:** Well, absolutely. You’re just looking at stages of an epidemic of far-right populism, which is completely global. It affects different countries differently, but it’s always aiming for the same thing, which is to say this incredible and impossible pursuit of purity as well as monetizing hate. Intellectuals are always going to be people who think and step back from things, looking at them and coming back with their thoughts formulated in words, which, hopefully, people will find useful.

Not everybody wants to be useful in a free society. That’s healthy. If you’re reading any form of writing, then you’re practising empathy. You’re looking at somebody else’s point of view. They might be overtly political or they might not be political at all, but it’s having an effect on you. It is changing the world one person at a time.
We are not in good times. It’s very hard now to talk about Britain because Britain is in the process of becoming ‘not-Britain’. The situation in Scotland is extremely different now. Wales also wants to be different, but it is very small. In Northern Ireland, things are extremely tense, and the only peaceful outcome will likely be a United Ireland. There certainly won’t be a ‘Britain’.

**Rosie Goldsmith**: You’re referring to the moves towards Scottish independence, which became quite vociferous, during the Brexit debate, as Scotland is very much in favour of remaining in the European Union.

**A. L. Kennedy**: Hearing Zsófia talk about writers writing in Hungarian and it being about a kind of national identity, which wasn’t exclusive, vicious or demeaned, reminds me of the long conversation about Scottish identity (Scotland was a colonised state with imposed language, albeit in a slightly different way).

The result of those conversations brought about a sort of semi-devolution, which even now exhibits a brand of nationalism that is inclusive. If you come to Scotland and want to be Scottish, then, hurray, you can! That’s the only conversation there is – it’s about Scottish identity and all living in a country and trying to do the best for it. But it’s not about whiteness. It’s not about straightness, maleness, dominance – yet! Politicians always ruin everything, though.

**Rosie Goldsmith**: The fact that Britain has left the European Union has changed the country. In terms of culture and writing, there have been some practical challenges, such as the difficulties many artists and writers are now facing when trying to get visas – on both sides. How has Brexit impacted you as a writer?

**A. L. Kennedy**: I’ve known it was coming since 2016, and so it hasn’t had too much of an impact. Increasingly, I’ve been writing for German and, to a lesser extent, French readers.

**Rosie Goldsmith**: Do you think they understand you better?

**A. L. Kennedy**: Well, I’ve wanted to write a lot for German audiences because every time I went to Germany they would say, ‘it’s a bargaining position, isn’t it? It’s not this suicidal, incredibly stupid thing that we appear to be seeing. There’s some kind of plan?’ And it seemed really necessary to disabuse people very quickly.

The difficulty in this country is that we don’t like overt things. We don’t like overt censorship, and so the censorship and the suppression are about the choices that the publishing gatekeepers make regarding newspapers and magazines, which involves financial censorship.

If you’re writing gay literature, you can say certain things, but you can’t say other things. You have a very narrow keyhole. If you’re writing about trans issues, the keyhole is even narrower. If you’re writing about black issues, you say some things, but you can’t be really upset about deaths in police custody (only a little bit upset).

Personally, there are things that I can say as far as political satire. I was saying
equivalent things while we were bombing Iraq, occupying it and creating the biggest post-war refugee crisis since WWII. At the time, I could say that in The Guardian, but they wouldn’t print it now. And I could say it without having security cameras and security lights outside my house because of the death threats.

Now, nobody says ‘don’t write for the papers’ or ‘don’t say this in the papers’, but I know that I wouldn’t be able to say exactly what I want to say because it would be watered down. Or I would be allowed to say what I want to say, but I’d have to deal with the (death) threats from the right.

**Rosie Goldsmith:** Zsófia, when you hear Alison speaking like that, are you surprised to hear this from Britain?

**Zsófia Bán:** We’ve all been following this process and it’s not so much a question of surprise as it is a question of disillusionment. Britain has always been the ideal democracy or has been projected as such, and so it’s disillusioning to see it falling apart. While we are in the process of having our relatively new democracy completely dismantled, it’s very difficult not to have any examples or ideals to whom we might look and say, ‘we need to be like them’. But who is ‘them’ right now? We don’t have those examples anymore, especially if we consider what happened to the United States under Trump, which both was and wasn’t a surprise.

**Rosie Goldsmith:** And yet there have nevertheless been wonderful outpourings of writing and emotion about Black Lives Matter. There has been a lot more attention in Britain on postcolonial literature and the arts, on statues and the meaning of museums. All of our literary and cultural enterprises have been questioned. Wouldn’t you agree that it’s quite a healthy thing to re-evaluate everything?

**Zsófia Bán:** Well, not to sound jaded, but Hungarians have a sense of déjà vu because we’ve already experienced this post-political transition period. We’ve removed statues. We’ve renamed streets. We’ve brought down the heroes from the pedestals. We’ve already gone through it all. And we have been going through this process again and again.

If you look at Hungarian history, everything has to be revised and reconsidered from time to time. The last time this was done in a very radical fashion was following the end of WWII, after the loss of some 600,000 Jewish Hungarian citizens who were exterminated by both the Nazis and Hungarians – something that has not been worked through very seriously in Hungarian politics and Hungarian history. We’ve had to keep on engaging in this process of revisions again and again, and we’re still in the process of doing it.

In terms of censorship, there’s also a kind of déjà vu, although as Alison said, today it’s done in a much more sophisticated fashion - deciding which projects to finance or publish. But I think that Hungarian culture and certainly Hungarian writers have already acquired a certain skill in terms of navigating the situation, a situation that might come as a surprise for Americans and likely the British too.

**Rosie Goldsmith:** Let’s talk about writing – is this a time for fiction? Or is there more journalism, non-fiction, essays and poetry being written today?
A. L. Kennedy: This is a time for everything. People need nourishment and a place to go and a voice to hear in their heads for reinforcement, encouragement and inspiration, which is what they always get from art. Art tells you that humans are worthwhile and you shouldn’t just kill them – that other people are as important as you.

Rosie Goldsmith: The arts are suffering everywhere because of a lack of funding at the moment. I was looking at the survey results of the Society of Authors, and it said that two thirds of writers, illustrators and literary translators suffered a loss of income. What’s happening in Hungary, Zsófia? From a financial point of view, is it a very difficult time now to write or to be active in the arts?

Zsófia Bán: Well, while looking at some graphs the other day about how much of their national income countries devote to supporting the arts, I realized that Hungary earmarks zero. Perhaps it’s possible for writers to continue to write – although you do need money to publish books – but imagine the difficulty for those in the theatre or in any kind of performance art or filmmaking. To answer your question, if this pandemic continues for much longer, then it will destroy a lot of our culture, heritage and institutions, and it will be very difficult to reverse or undo the damage.

Rosie Goldsmith: It’s not as bad financially in the UK, but it is quite bad – a terribly difficult and quite depressing time even – because writers can exist for a bit, but bills are always due.

A. L. Kennedy: Well, we have no time to be depressed. We’re still alive. We’re not in jail.

I agree, though, that we have tiny amounts of support, and it punishes the poor. There are so many writers and artists who don’t earn enough to pay tax, and the principal benefit that you could be on is this self-employed allowance, which is based on how much tax you’ve paid. But if you’ve never paid tax, then you don’t get any money, so it punishes the weakest.

The future of the arts will continue to be one in which artists will have to subsidise themselves. But we’re now at a point where people don’t have enough food or heating to keep warm, as they’re trying to avoid a virus while doing shitty jobs that expose them massively to it. We’re going to lose a generation and there will be a flight of people – it’s already started – whether temporary or permanent.

Zsófia Bán: Generational loss is very much an issue for Hungarian society as well. There’s been significant migration, especially of young, educated people, into Europe and beyond. In fact, we can already speak of the loss of a generation, and it remains to be seen to what extent the next generation can be convinced to remain in Hungary through access to education and jobs. It’s something that has become particularly obvious during the pandemic, as countless doctors and nurses emigrated to other European countries, leaving Hungary poorly staffed.

Rosie Goldsmith: This is something that happened right after the various walls fell across eastern Europe aswell, as the younger generation moved to countries in which they could live in a more economically viable way. But it’s no longer an East-West issue,
though, is it? We used to be able to divide cultural and intellectual life into what’s happening in the East and what’s happening in the West, but do you still see it as divided?

A. L. Kennedy: I think it was always more nuanced than East and West anyway. Just after the Berlin Wall came down, I remember talking about democracy with this man who was howling with laughter and saying, ‘well, yes, you have freedom of speech, but you’re all talking at once’.

It’s sobering to talk to Russian publishers who were risking their lives to publish, while back in Britain such freedoms were taken for granted. It’s important as an artist to sit back and think, ‘why am I doing this in a time when everything is desperate? Is this worthwhile?’ I’m not a nurse in a Covid ward without proper protection, playing Russian roulette every morning, but I can talk about it and I can be emotionally manipulative because that’s my job. And if people in suits tell me that life doesn’t matter, then I’ll continue to go after them for the rest of my life.

Rosie Goldsmith: What form does this literary activism take, then? Orwell wrote about the responsibility of writers and the importance of scepticism during political turmoil. With this in mind, Zsófia, do you feel that you have a responsibility as a writer? After all, we have to move forward; we have to have a blueprint or an idea for the future.

Zsófia Bán: Well, I think it’s inevitable, Rosie, because if you’re a writer, you always write from somewhere, even if you’re not writing directly about your culture. But there is a position from which you are saying what you are saying, and obviously, your cultural, historical and sociological context will have an impact on what you write.

You don’t even necessarily need to take on this very activist role of offering some type of criticism in order to reflect on the world around you. In fact, many writers don’t even wish to take on that role, especially not after fifty years of socialism in which you were expected to do just that.

If we take politically correct speech as an example, it has been very negatively received in Hungary, and hasn’t taken on the kind of role that it has in English-speaking countries because it was seen as yet another way to regulate language and thought. Again, it’s this idea of ‘been there, done that and we don’t want that anymore’. For this reason, many writers don’t even wish to take on that kind of role, but they do so in their writing. I think for an intellectual, if we want to call writers that, it’s inevitable that you will impact whatever is happening around you simply by writing whatever it is that you write.

Rosie Goldsmith: Hungary was – and is – a test case for European integration amidst rising populism and nationalism. In many ways, Britain was a test case for European integration as well. Zsófia, are you frightened to speak out as you have just done? Will there be any repercussions as a result of what you say or do?

Zsófia Bán: I don’t think so. It’s possible that my publisher won’t obtain funding for my books as easily, but luckily we haven’t yet gotten to the point where writers are being persecuted in any way except for this kind of financial blocking, which happens not only to writers. But I don’t think that we’re at the point yet where more serious repercussions
should be expected from the government.

And I say that despite the aforementioned culture war and its increasing severity, even in the context of a country that has been through many similar phases, obviously with different political agendas. But it is getting to a point where you just don’t believe your ears and eyes when you hear or read the news.

On the upside, I think it requires a new readiness for improvisation – new tactics have to be developed. You cannot rely on previous knowledge, but must move forward in search of new and different tactics and strategies.

**A. L. Kennedy:** The things that have been happening to black and brown people for ages are not happening to pink people. None of this is new, neither the problems nor the solutions. Working with different community groups helped me realize that they had complex needs. I had to go in prepared and know my actual aim and focus, which is to give them a voice.

What is it genuinely that I am called to say? What are my areas of concern? What on any given day is my opportunity to do something? It might be just being on the streets participating in or speaking at a march. I only went into comedy because I ended up doing political comedy at demonstrations. I’m not really interested in what is just funny. I’m interested in what is politically funny.

When I was five, reading gave me a light and a place to go and a reason to keep living. When I was 15, I began thinking about doing it as a job, one that could make me happy. When I was 25, it saved me from endless dead-end jobs, which is a precious thing.

**Rosie Goldsmith:** As a reader who has read deeply and widely in the past year, your writing gives me beauty, energy and joy. Bringing us back to reading could you end with some recommendations or some wonderful author who has uplifted you, Zsófia?

**Zsófia Bán:** I just finished an absolutely beautiful book by Jenny Erpenbeck entitled *Heimsuchung*. It’s been translated into Hungarian as *Home*, which doesn’t really capture the meaning of the original German, which also contain a search for home. And it has the meaning of haunting.

The story itself centres on a summer house across different historical periods. I’ve not yet had the pleasure to meet this wonderful author, but hopefully will at some point. Talking to like-minded and even non-like-minded authors is always something to look forward to. I found this book to be astounding and really recommend it.

If we look at Hungarian literature, Péter Nádas’s new volume of essays has just been published; his work is always a source of inspiration. And since Alison is also a comedian, I’ll say that Hungarian culture has looked towards and relied on humour – not necessarily in literature, not necessarily as a form of performing, but just in terms of the everyday. I think Hungarian culture has been very adept in handling misfortune with humour. It’s something that we can always rely on.

**Rosie Goldsmith:** That’s certainly the case with English literature too. Alison, what have
you been reading?

**A. L. Kennedy:** Around this time last year, I reread the whole of the *Lord of the Rings* because it’s like a childhood friend. It’s written by a man partly during World War Two, when he didn’t know what the end would be. And it’s truly about looking up at the stars when you think you’re going to die tomorrow, and thinking: ‘the story that I’m in might have a happy ending – I’m going to keep going’. It’s a very sustaining book, very wise about endurance.

I get sent lots of books and am asked, ‘will you read this?’ Quite often I say no because I’m busy, Stephen Keeler’s *Fifty Words for Love in Swedish* is an exception. It’s a tiny book, essentially around fifty words that he learnt when he was young and thought that he’d like to be in Sweden and had the ability to go and teach English there. And, mainly, he was being taught Swedish by his pupils in class. And it was just that thing of ‘oh, I fit in this country and I love the way they do all of these things and I love their cakes’.

It’s about suddenly discovering that when you’re in a different country by choice, you become a slightly different person, which is magnificent. It’s just such a joyous, outward-looking and peaceful book – basically a ‘thank you’ to Sweden.

**Zsófia Bán:** If I can add one more thing, I’ve recently been reading a lot of poetry on Facebook and other online platforms. In Hungary, we have a birthday for poetry, which is the birthday of the greatest Hungarian poet, Attila József, and people post their favourite poems online and we all share poetry. And I think that’s also a source of great energy, particularly when it is happening even during a pandemic. Poetry is always there for you, to uplift you.

**Rosie Goldsmith:** For everyone passionate about keeping Europe and our stories and our creativity and our brains alive, this is not an easy time. But sharing stories can inspire us to talk and act and remind us why the idea of Europe really matters.

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