



The Lithuanian writer Laura Sintija Černiauskaitė won the EU Prize for Literature for *Breathing into Marble*, which is being published in English in December 2016 by Noir Press.

“Good literature is like lightning: it has to shock, to pierce the heart”

In this interview, Laura Sintija Černiauskaitė shares her experience of becoming a writer in the post-Soviet conditions of 1990s Lithuania. Her development as a writer coincided with a drastic change in what it meant to be a writer: from being a political spokesperson to being an economic entity.

by **Stephan Collishaw**

For Laura Sintija Černiauskaitė, writing has always been a central part of how she has identified herself. “I think I have always been a writer,” she commented, “I don’t remember deciding to become a writer at any particular moment; I simply discovered I had the potential to be one. I started writing when I was young because I enjoyed it.”

By the late 1980s, when Černiauskaitė came of age, and began to experiment as a writer, the Communist ideological grip on Lithuanian writing was coming to an end. The celebrated Lithuanian novelist Ricardas Gavelis wrote, “If the arts voluntarily submit to politics, the arts are good for nothing. I would like to die in a country where art is art and politics is politics.”

Laura Sintija Černiauskaitė was born in Vilnius in 1976. She studied at the Senvagės school in Vilnius and then read Lithuanian Language Studies at Vilnius University. Černiauskaitė was 15, in 1991, when the country declared its independence from the Soviet Union.

It was two years later, in 1993, that she was to have her first taste of literary success. “I was 17 when I first stepped into the Writer’s Union, in the wonderful palace of Duke Oginskis, carrying the first copy of my book to the publishers. Those four short stories were written in school during math and science lessons; I wasn’t a particularly zealous student.”

She remembered that as she put her hand on the banister rail of the stairs, “Such a strong feeling washed over me that I would be a part of that building for rest of my life. That moment, I felt, was a defining moment in my life.”

And this turned out to be true. Černiauskaitė’s book won the Writers’ Union’s First Book Award and was published that year.

“That was how I became a writer,” she commented.

The Lithuanian Writer’s Union, which played an important part in the launch of Černiauskaitė’s career as a writer, has had a complex political history. In 1940, Lithuanian writers and intellectuals were among the early vocal supporters of the Soviet annexation of the independent Lithuanian Republic. Throughout the Soviet period, the

Lithuanian Writers' Union, while supporting the social status of writers, exerted a political control over them too. The Lithuanian writer was then inevitably, a political writer.

And this was still the case in the late 1980's, when writers were at the forefront of the revolt *against* the Soviet Union. Vytautas Martinkas, the writer and critic, commented during this period that "pens filled with political ink".

However, as the 1980s came to an end, and in the chaos and euphoria of independence in the early 1990s, there was a growing sense in the literary world that it was not the writer's job to act as a politician. Gavelis was certainly a key voice in this movement to assert the independence of the writer.

At the extraordinary 9th annual congress of the Writers' Union of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Lithuania, members declared their independence from the Writers' Union of the USSR, rejecting censorship of their worldview. The union then began the complicated process of redefining its relationship with the state. The members of the union began to move towards seeing the writer as an economic entity, rather than a political one, modelling their view of the writing process on the Western model.

IT DID NOT TAKE LONG for the harsh realities of the market economy to hit in the cash-strapped post-Soviet landscape.

"During first few years of independence," Černiauskaitė commented, "there was a great deal of confusion, a lack of trust and a sense of nihilism. Writers influenced by this were R. Gavelis, J. Ivanauskaitė, S. Parulskis, and R. Šerelytė. It seemed that all the moral handicaps and dirt were poured out, all the pain and fear that we had been hiding during the Soviet years. Not many books were published during that period; we were able to read them all."

The poet and children's author Jonas Liniauskas wrote, "We writers are doomed, doomed to write as this is our lifestyle. And, in most cases, it is not important whether the works will be published – this is the concern and the shame of the state."

Though Černiauskaitė's first book came out in 1993, she subsequently went to university and it wasn't until 2004 that her next work was published, so that she was not part of the generation that was most affected by the changing dynamic of being a writer in the immediate aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

"The situation is different now," Černiauskaitė commented speaking this year, "anybody who has enough energy writes books; bookshops are full of books of varying literary quality. There is a lot of commercial literature emerging

Breathing into Marble by Laura Sintija Černiauskaitė

“ May was stuffy. The air blossomed and the clouds were like translucent petals scorched by the sun which was as ruthlessly hot as a stone hissing in hell. Isabel would get up in the morning already heavy and slide towards evening like a shadow cast by her own swollen body.

Having taken Gailius to school, she stopped by the side of the road above which the dust swirls kicked up by Liudas' car still hung. And the stones inside her grew red with the heat.

Liudas would leave and she would stay, searching the whole day long for somewhere to hide from the monstrous heat.

She would be alone with the drowsy boy sipping milk in the kitchen. He wouldn't wipe the white drips from the oilcloth patterned with pears, nor would he put his cup back into its place when

he had rinsed it in the bowl. Later he would slip into the yard or would disappear into the pine woods near the river across the bridge. And moments later she would hear the splash of the stones being thrown into the water.

Isabel preferred to go to the river bank that was at the bottom of the garden, closer to the house. She would descend the slope through the lilac bushes and stop in the shade. In the sun over on

the other bank the air would roil slowly and heavily like hot oil. The blossom of the lilac gave off a strong fragrance under the blistering sun. Isabel would pull her old cotton dress off over her head and, keeping to the shade of the bushes, slide into the water. The river would hug her waist tightly at first, then push and pull at her with its mischievous current. The stones within Isabel would hiss and blacken.

The river lashed her skin like a cold wind; it washed away the ashes and rinsed away the names. Isabel would stretch in the water like she was in bed, while the current washed her clean.

On the 22nd of May a fresh wind blew; the grass whispered and the pine forest hummed like a bee hive. Isabel, having gone to put the washing out, shuddered and folded her arms across her chest – as if to protect herself from the raging of the trees. But the wind was quicker – it sliced open the old wound and the ache of her heart poured out from her like blood.

She took the boys into the woods.

But with each step her despair grew, sending out branches, an increasingly intricate polyphony of emotions. She would have wept were it not for the boys who pushed each other and ran around. In the clearing Isabel said she needed a rest; she sat on a tree stump and closed her eyes.

Excerpt
of the
EU Literature
Prize winner

and the publishing houses are encouraging that. What's important to them is not the literary value of the book, but how much publicity it gets. In my opinion, the situation [in Lithuania] is not that different to the rest of Europe. To some extent I tend to think that the books that were published during the first years of independence were stronger emotionally, even if they were dark. They made an impact. Writers today lack that kind of energy and that rebellious nature."

That said, Černiauskaitė's novel, *Breathing into Marble*, which won her the European Union Prize for Literature in 2009, is a dark novel, and that is, in part, reflective of the continued difficult social circumstances of life in the post-Soviet Baltic states. "It is the tragic, poetic story of a family, and there's everything in it: love, betrayal, childhood illness, unsuccessful attempts at adoption, alcoholism, abuse, murder, the inner conflict of a female artist. While writing it I was driven by the desire to raise these terrible problems to the level of poetry, to look at them with a purity of vision, as if through clean glass."

Central to the novel is the complex emotional relationship between Isabel and her adopted son Ilya and also the legacy of the troubled family life that Isabel herself experienced as a child. "Isabel is not ready to break through the obstacles to love – her lack of success with Ilya only emphasizes her own problems, the most important of which is that she has been crippled by her parents and doesn't know how to love. She needs to be loved. I tried to write a story of a woman growing into maturity when one tragic loss after another devastates her and breaks her down. From the ruins of her soul emerges a new, more mature person."

WHILE ČERNIAUSKAITĖ DOESN'T THINK that the social problems in the novel are specific to Lithuania, she recognizes that some of the issues are particularly pertinent to post-Soviet Lithuania. "In recent years a lot of attention has been given to the issue of adoption; people have been encouraged to adopt or foster the children left in orphanages. Only the positive experiences get media coverage, but I know that there are sad experiences, when parents change their minds and return children. When I was writing an article about this topic, I happened to talk to a social worker who dealt with preparing parents for adoption. I was shocked by her stories of the irresponsibility of some people. The specialists now prepare parents for the "shock" of adoption in order to reduce the number of cases of children being returned.

**"FROM THE
RUINS OF
HER SOUL
EMERGES A
NEW, MORE
MATURE
PERSON"**

ILLUSTRATION: MOA THELANDER



Through her closed eye lids she watched the wind-driven shadows that scuttled around like ghosts. She thought that she would burst into tears but the tough bark around her heart resisted. She dug her nails into her heart as if trying to scratch it out.

was leaning on into the moss, tossed her knotted grey hair and suddenly a smile lit the dense, quivering network of wrinkles on her face.

"It's my birthday today," Gailius boasted. "Oh, I can't ignore such an occasion... Give me your palm, I'll tell you your fortune."

She felt no pain – she listened to the crackle of the thawing ice and to the bubble of the coming storm.

It was then that she heard Gailius greet someone. Opening her eyes, it took some moments for her to notice a tall, shapely woman – from a distance she looked lighter and softer than the pine trunks. The woman's face was thin and suntanned and her gaze was sharp and pierced Isabel. As Gailius greeted her, she plunged the birch stick she

The woman stepped towards Gailius, knelt down and stretched out her hand. Gailius instinctively mirrored her movement. They knelt opposite each other, forehead to forehead, intuitively shielding the fate which rose like steam from the lines on the palms of his hands.

Isabel rose from the tree stump and approached them.

"Gailius, don't do it." Her whisper was addressed to the woman. The grey-haired crone lifted her eyes, scorching Isabel with a dark gaze.

"Your mother doesn't want us to," she relented. "How old are you?"

"Eight."

The woman was silent. Standing up she smiled at Isabel with the same penetrating smile and strolled across the moss to collect her stick – there was no need for it though; her steps were as firm as her smile.

"I gather herbs," she explained, turn-

“The closest issue to contemporary Lithuania is the problem of suicide; here, as a country, we have, unfortunately, the highest rates in Europe. Also, in terms of statistics, it’s evident that half of marriages end in divorce.”

INTERESTINGLY, CONSIDERING that Černiauskaitė grew up in a Soviet state, she recognizes the powerful influence of Catholicism on Lithuanian writers. Lithuania is a predominantly Catholic nation, and its sense of nationalism is often deeply entwined with its Catholicism. The Catholic church played a major part in encouraging the dissident anti-Soviet independence movement during the period of subjugation to Russian rule. “Whether we think we are believers or not, we grew up in a Christian culture and received its moral values in our mother’s milk. Speaking about a more conscious relationship with religion – at 30, after long wanderings through Buddhism and Hinduism, I experienced a powerful conversion to Catholicism.”

“Are [Lithuanian] writers comfortable writing about spirituality? Who is comfortable writing about intimate things? It’s similar to writing about sex. But literature shouldn’t be ‘comfortable’. Comfortableness is what ‘pop’ is and it doesn’t interest me. Good literature is like lightning; it has to shock, to pierce the heart to its depths. That is not very comfortable. But that is exactly what I would like my Englishspeaking readers to experience.” ✕

ing back suddenly, tapping her canvas bag. She headed back into the depths of the woods and disappeared among the tree trunks as if she had turned into one of them.

“Mama, who was she?” Gailius asked.

“We’re going home,” Isabel whispered. Her tone stopped any argument from the boys.

In the evening Liudas brought a cake from town and they all gathered in the garden for a cup of coffee. Gailius had made a card on which he had written his wishes for everybody on the occasion of his birthday. “Father – I wish that you never run out of petrol half way”, or “Mama – I wish for lots of silk ribbons for your hair”. For Ilya, having drawn a watercolour black bird, he wished, “Don’t be afraid of the light, it only bites at first”.

“What do you mean by that?” Liudas asked.

Gailius shrugged.

They laughed a lot that night; it even seemed to Isabel that she could put up with almost anything – that she could live each day without any expectations and laugh each night without disrupting the daily rhythms of their life, listening to the stories Liudas brought home from town. And she could even believe them. She could stay away from it all, keeping a care-less distance.

The moon arose above the woods, a narrow, elegant comma, an eye lash, a

tiara. Liudas followed Isabel’s look and flashed her a bored smile. And that was it. Immediately everything returned to the way it had been. An owl called in the woods, its dark, velvet sound spread a mournful cape across the heavy, damp soil and the grass which was wet with dew.

On the kitchen table there was a box wrapped with orange paper awaiting Gailius – Isabel stopped short, not knowing what Liudas had chosen and having forgotten, herself, that you were supposed to give presents on birthdays. Gailius blinked and paused. Only once he had run his finger over its shiny surface and it had not turned into anything else did Gailius finally believe that the box was real and belonged to him. He wrapped both arms around it and lifted it carefully from the table – the present wasn’t heavy and that disappointed him slightly.

“I want to be on my own when I open it,” Gailius whispered. “Ilyusha, only you can come with me.”

Ilya loped after him. He opened their bedroom door and let his stepbrother in; Gailius could barely control his excitement. The door slammed and from behind it, moments later, came the sound of paper being ripped. Liudas smiled absently. Isabel turned her eyes away.

At that moment there was a scream.

The door opened with a crash and Ilya shot like a bullet into the kitchen. For a

moment he hung in the air, his feet barely touching the floor, as if thrown out by an angry gust of wind, then he dashed into the porch and out into the yard, so that only the black back of his head was visible through the kitchen window. The opened box lay on the floor, its glittery glamour gone and though the present was still in it, Gailius seemed to have lost all interest in it. He turned towards the door and hid something behind his back.

“What happened?” Liudas asked.

“Nothing, father...”

“What have you got there?”

“Nothing...”

Liudas jumped over to Gailius and prised open his fist.

“Something happened to him,” Gailius whispered, holding back the tears.

A wound swelled on his wrist and blood seeped through the bitten skin.

“Ilya!” Liudas howled. “Ilya!”

Feverishly he turned to Isabel who was frozen in the doorway. She was so pale it looked as if it were her blood that had gathered in the wound on Gailius’ wrist.

“Please forgive me,” Isabel whispered and stuffed her fist into her mouth in an attempt to staunch her tears.

“He doesn’t get enough attention,” she said, switching off the light.

“I don’t give a damn what he doesn’t get enough of,” Liudas snapped. “The child is dangerous.” ✕