




AGNIESZKA NĘCKA

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0874-0295>Uniwersytet Śląski w Katowicach
Katowice

Bookshelf 2019

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Abstract: The essay presents an overview of the most important and most interesting prose and poetry publications that appeared on the Polish publishing market in 2019. The past year belonged mainly to artists perfectly rooted in the readers' awareness. Particularly appreciated were especially works with underlying autobiographical themes, revisiting the often difficult past to try to sort out the "here and now", socially engaged books, and books that remind us about shortcomings of the communication code. The authors of the recommended books included: Justyna Bargielska, Konrad Góra, Ewa Kuryluk, Mikołaj Łoziński, Krystyna Milobędzka, Wojciech Nowicki, Jakub Pszoniak, Dominika Słowik, and Paweł Soltys.

Key words: literary hits of 2019, review, contemporary Polish prose and poetry

The beginning of the year usually involves drawing up various types of year-in-review lists. Our Polish publishing market also deserves a synthetic review. The year 2019 was a favourable one for Polish literature; it abounded in many interesting publications, although it would be difficult to speak of any spectacular publishing success or a surprising literary revelation. The most important success was undoubtedly the awarding of the Nobel Prize to Olga Tokarczuk. Nevertheless, the past year, just like the previous one, belonged mainly to artists perfectly rooted in the readers' awareness. Here are some of the authors who published new books: Ewa Kuryluk (*Felumi*), Wojciech Nowicki (*Cieśniny*), Mikołaj Łoziński (*Stramer*), Dominika Słowik (*Zimowla*), Paweł Soltys (*Nieradość*), Jakub Żulczyk (*Czarne słońce*), Hanna Kowalewska (*Okna z widokiem na Weronę*), Hubert Klimko-Dobrzaniecki (*Złodziejże bzu*), Jacek Dehnel (*Ale z naszymi umarłymi*), Bogusław Kierc (*Rytmy albo wiersze stałe*), Urszula Koziół (*Znikopis*), Jerzy Kronhold (*Pali się, moja*

panienko), Ewa Lipska (*Miłość w trybie awaryjnym*), Piotr Matywiecki (*Wszyscy inni*), Krystyna Miłobędzka (*Spis z natury*), Adam Zagajewski (*Prawdziwe życie jest gdzie indziej*), Marcin Świetlicki (*Ale o co ci chodzi?*), Darek Foks (*Ludzie kultury*), Maciej Melecki (*Bezgrunt*) and Karol Maliszewski (*Piosenka o przymierzanii*), as well as Eugeniusz Tkacyszyn-Dycki (*Dwie główne rzeki*), Konrad Góra (*Kalendarz majów*), Justyna Bargielska (*Dziecko z darów*) and Szczepan Kopyt (*Na giełdach nadprodukcji pikują akcje przetrwania*).¹ As every year, there were also some newcomers to the literary scene, and those who gained particular recognition were the following: Paula Gotszlich (*Bezdech*), Kasper Pfeifer (*Adblock*), Jakub Pszoniak (*Chyba na pewno*) and Monika Lubińska (*Nareszcie możemy się zjadać*).

Even a cursory review of the books listed leads to the following conclusion: in 2019, particularly appreciated were especially works with underlying autobiographical themes, revisiting the often difficult past to try to sort out the “here and now”, socially engaged books, and books that remind us about shortcomings of the communication code. Below, just a few of the titles are discussed which deserve recognition according to numerous commentators of the contemporary literary scene.

Ewa Kuryluk: *Feluni*.
Wydawnictwo Literackie

Here are some notes by Anna Marchewka on Ewa Kuryluk’s books:

Already in her debut novel, completed in 1988 [*Wiek 21 – A.N.*], one can find almost all the most distinctive features of her later work: living memory casting a shadow over life, a heritage of trauma, family stories, a world that has undergone disintegration, passionate exiles who desire freedom, as well as an abundance of biographical and literary riddles (Marchewka 2019).

These are the central themes of books such as *Goldi* (2005 Nike Award finalist), *Frascati* (2010 Nike Award nomination) and *Feluni*, published in 2019 – forming a trilogy telling the traumatic story of the Kuryluk family: Karol, who was Minister of Culture in Cyrankiewicz’s government, ambassador in

¹ A detailed summary of what was going on in the poetry marketplace in 2019 was provided by Jakub Skurtys in his essay entitled *Była rewolucyjna. Podsumowanie roku 2019 w poezji* (Skurtys 2019a).

Vienna and director of the PWN publishing house, his wife – Maria (Miriam Kohany), who miraculously survived the Holocaust but lost the battle against her nervous breakdown, and their son – Piotr, whose sensitivity and artistic soul were broken in a mental health hospital. In fact, the very last sequence of the work focuses on the painter's brother, who succumbed to schizophrenia after the unexpected death of his father in December 1967.

As before, the title of the book refers to the author's intimate world – *Feluni* being the pet name given to Ewa Kuryluk's brother by their mother. Initially, he stayed at the mental hospital in Tworki, and then in Branice, a facility associated with Aktion T4, an institution resembling more a camp than a clinic. The lack of appropriate treatment made the boy's condition deteriorate, making him lose not only the ability to speak, but also control over his physiological functions. The writer revisits their childhood together, the memories tormenting Piotr, the events that drove him to dark despair, causing his aphasia, pushing him to suicide attempts, and finally contributing to his death. Ewa Kuryluk, interviewed by Agnieszka Drotkiewicz, confessed: "In the mental hospital, my brother became crippled and mute, but until his death he managed to pronounce two words distinctly, namely *Auschwitz* and *Dachau*, signifying moral defeat and crime impossible to express directly in art and literature" (Kuryluk 2019, online).

Feluni is consequently a shocking story about the drama of a brilliant child that loses the fight against the disease and suffers due to inappropriate treatment of the wounds caused by a self-immolation attempt, a book about tenderness and sisterly love that can endure a lot, about the Polish People's Republic, the burden of war trauma passed on from generation to generation, an attempt to build a refuge and the hardships of an artist fighting for her talent.

Wojciech Nowicki: *Cieśniny*. Czarne

The central theme of Wojciech Nowicki's *Cieśniny* is dromomania – a condition consisting in succumbing to the compulsive urge to travel, to constantly be on the move without a specific purpose, treated with bromine in the 19th century. The main protagonist of this story, immersed in history and combining fact with confabulation, is Albert Dadas – a real-life character whose case was used to describe the condition for the first time and whose

tragic story drew Nowicki. Here is what the author of *Salki* said, interviewed by Paulina Małochleb:

His whole life is a sequence of misfortunes, he really had itchy feet. He'd do seventy kilometres a day. He didn't know where he was going, he was actually surprised when he arrived at a place. He would wander around without money or documents, each time in the same way. At the same time, he wasn't surprised that he was doing that, he didn't feel wronged by fate, even though he often had dramatic adventures, and it seemed many times that he wouldn't be able to go any further, that it was the end, that there was no return. He was happy when he was on the march, when he was travelling (Nowicki 2019, online).

There were many other, similar cases of people possessed by the mania of wandering; the protagonists of *Cieśniny* also include Adam Mickiewicz (de-mythologized here) and his wife Celina. Nowicki describes the condition as “gloominess”, trying to map the psyche of those suffering from it and showing how they tried to cope with their melancholic despair, depression and the consequences of the disease. The only salvation usually turned out to be travelling, providing a certain kind of “safety valve”, bringing inner peace of mind and improving one's mood, at least temporarily.

It is hard to disagree with Paulina Małochleb's opinion that

Cieśniny is an excellent, powerful and very dark novel about struggling with one's body, attempts to achieve rationality and clarity of mind, and about what happens when one is unable to achieve this state. It is also, on the other hand, about the need for health and stability. However, these are impossible to achieve – and this absence and longing is something experienced both by concrete historical figures and by entire communities. Nowicki makes his protagonist roam the remote corners of history, dig up forgotten stories of cruelty, wandering and loneliness (Małochleb 2019).

Mikołaj Łoziński: *Stramer*.
Wydawnictwo Literackie

It took as many as eight years to see another book by Mikołaj Łoziński, as his previous novel *Książka*, given the Polityka weekly magazine's Passport Award had been published in 2011, but it was well worth the wait. The writ-

er managed to meet the expectations of even picky and fussy readers. In fact, *Stramer* is a carefully thought-out, elaborate and thoroughly moving story about Nathan Stramer and Ryfka Stramer, a married couple with six children, growing up in the early 20th century. The novel is set in the town of Tarnów. The poor Stramer family live in a single-bedroom flat, on the ground floor of a tenement house in Eliasza Goldhammera Street (the main street in the Jewish quarter). Nathan, who used to work as a porter in the USA, returned to Tarnów out of love, to start his own business here. His efforts prove futile, and if it weren't for his brother's help, he wouldn't even have enough money to pay rent. The children, on the other hand, stick together and cope with this difficult situation in their own way: they wander around the city, play and get into mischief, sell cigarettes and steal roasted chestnuts. A different fate awaits each of them. Rena falls in love with a married man, who reciprocates her feelings, Rudek studies Classics, Hesio and Salek are fascinated by the communist idea, while Wela and Nusek dream of being adults. Each of them has their own plans for the future and different longings, and each of them makes different mistakes. The author, interviewed by Emilia Padol, confessed:

For me, *Stramer* is a book about family love and closeness, about relationships between parents and between siblings. But it's also about trying to find one's place in difficult and interesting times, which shaped not only my protagonists, after all. It's also about what I realised after completing the novel: that we are wiser than the previous generations only to the extent in which we know what happened to them, as they did not know their future. Just like we don't know ours today (Łoziński 2019, online).

Stramer is also a story about the pursuit of illusions, about unfulfilment, about the destructive clash of dreams against reality and the difficult struggle with adversities.

Although the story outlined here is fictional, the name in the title is actually the surname of Mikołaj Łoziński's grandfather, which, as the writer explained in the aforementioned interview, "means strong or vigorous. I always liked it. It disappeared after the Second World War together with almost the entire Jewish world. In this way, it will return and stay, at least in the book." (Łoziński 2019, online). The author also made sure that the story he told in *Stramer* had some universal features. This is because, as Justyna Sobolewska rightly pointed out, "the fate of many Jewish families and the

divisions that formed at that time are embedded in this novel. One can also see how Łoziński's previous books are intertwined with this one, including his debut novel *Reisefieber*" (Sobolewska 2019).

Dominika Słowik: *Zimowla*.
Wydawnictwo Znak

"For a compelling, multi-layered story, containing many puzzles and mysteries, about the family, about recent history, and about Poland – 'a country where the past is the best capital for the future'," said the justification statement for the Polityka's Passport award given to Dominika Słowik for *Zimowla* (see *Dominika Słowik laureatką...* 2019). In fact, the novel, written with great narrative momentum (it is 600 pages long), is set in Cukrówka in Zmornicka Valley in the 1990s. The narrator revisits her past to reconstruct the post-transformation small-town vibe. However, the reconstruction is rather particular, as Słowik's novel combines realism with magic. A series of odd and bizarre events take place in Cukrówka: Magda, the narrator's friend, sleepwalks naked and sings songs in an unknown language on the roofs of houses, the narrator's father becomes a fortune-teller after Poland joins NATO, engaging in astrology and horoscopes, and a drowned man is found in the lake.

Zimowla, as a multi-layered and multi-faceted story, is an attempt at describing the political transformation. According to the author of *Atlas: Doppelgänger*, this "watershed" contains "the key to understand today's phenomena. I did not become fixated on this period out of sentiment, it's an important historical period for Poland, although perhaps not enough time has passed to write about it without difficulty, in a detached manner and without emotion" (Słowik 2020, online). According to Słowik, people's identity is built on memories, and memory is selective and whimsical.

Olga Wróbel sees *Zimowla* as

a powerful, dense, carefully woven and multi-layered narrative, a fabric from which one can pull out thread after thread, discovering new patterns, but without having to worry about overall coherence. Dominika Słowik did not limit herself to simple dichotomies of male vs female, faith vs science, reality vs imagination, or, finally, nostalgia for the socialist past vs wild capitalism (Wróbel 2019).

This narrative reconciles reality with mythisation, reminding us of what lies somewhere at the bottom of our subconscious, and is founded on cause-and-effect relationships that are not always immediately perceptible.

Paweł Soltys: *Nieradość*.
Czarne

Paweł Soltys aka Pablopavo published his second collection of short stories. *Nieradość*, the latest publication by the author of *Mikrotyki*, was announced as one of the most sensational premieres of 2019. Contrary to what might seem, however, this is not a continuation of the highly-regarded debut, which brought the author the Marek Nowakowski Award, the Gdynia Literary Award and a nomination for Polityka's Passport, as well as made it to the final round of the Nike Award. This new volume contains twenty-five short stories that focus on several central aspects: old age, illness, and discovering secrets. The title, meaning literally "non-joy", can be interpreted above all as a state of mind suspended in a way between joy and sadness, between euphoria and nostalgia, and as reference to the Polish saying "starość nie radość", suggesting that old age is a heavy burden and brings many ailments with it. In fact, most of the characters of *Nieradość* are old people telling different stories from the past. Consequently, the collection is strongly uneven and diversified. Alongside travel sketches or street snapshots, there are some quasi-diary entries here as well as some bits and pieces that make it possible to save one's emotions, at least seemingly. Paweł Soltys actually writes this as a kind of a warning, trying to encourage the reader, on the one hand, to notice the poignant loneliness of old people, and on the other hand, to stop at least for a moment in the daily hustle and bustle and take a look at the reality around us, as well as at different ways of telling stories. The author said in an interview with Dorota Gacek:

It seems to me that just like *Mikrotyki* stood up in a way for the group of people of modest means, not represented in Polish popular culture, this book does a similar thing, but for old people. If they are presented at all, this very often happens on an anecdotal basis, the usual grandmother baking a cake or the grandfather who goes fishing. Nobody cares what they really think and feel (Soltys 2019, online).

It is worth quoting Marcin Kube's opinion:

The writer/musician is phenomenal not only in his descriptions of the transient body, but also when he shows old age in the existential dimension. Sometimes, he combines it all in one phrase: "Memories won't rejuvenate my tendons, they won't make my hair black again, although they do keep the past me in today's me in a way. In both of them, there's also the child, the adolescent, and the middle-aged guy. This is what he thinks. Six or seven guys in that guy who gets off the bus and winces because his knee-joints creak." (Kube 2019).

Justyna Bargielska: *Dziecko z darów*.
Wydawnictwo Wolno

Justyna Bargielska's novels always arouse great interest among readers, divided into admirers and opponents of her writing. The same goes for her latest book. *Dziecko z darów* continues the topics the author addressed in her previous works. It focuses on the topic of children – their imagination, creative invention, fragility, and independence. Bargielska writes about everyday life, which keeps changing constantly, about motherhood, which is heterogeneous (because it is demanding and not always desirable, but also offers much), and about love that is not eternal. Key words here include *loss* and *disintegration*. The author of *Dwa fiaty* recalls events from the past, examines various small things and listens carefully to her dreams. "I'm worried about the future. / The future is like a draft version of an SMS to somebody / dying in the meantime: you have lots of time / to refine the text, but what's the point" (Bargielska 2019, 53). One can see the attitude of uncertainty here, typical by the way not only of the poems collected in *Dziecko z darów*.

The poems in this collection are texts snatched from life, which makes them intimate, (self-)ironic and uncompromising. They also tend to be internally contradictory, and their punchlines refer to "previously suggested meanings" (Orska 2019). As Agata Passent wrote,

these are some wonderfully twisted poems. The first two lines are usually invitingly simple, like miniature stories, but then the poet's linguistic washing machine tumbles them, rushing at a crazy pace of thoughts and associations, with a mix of different moods. The poems are "accessible" in the sense that we do not need to return to analysing Hegel's *Phenome-*

nology of Spirit or to know what the network of relations was in the circles of the former “Brulion” to admire them, but they do require meditation (Passent 2020).

Konrad Góra: *Kalendarz majów*.
Biuro Literackie

Konrad Góra can be described as quite a unique poet. His poetry books clearly advocate political commitment and usually do not go unnoticed. Many commentators of contemporary literary life consider this poet, in fact, to be one of the most interesting representatives of authors born in the 1970s. This is also confirmed his latest book. The publication, entitled *Kalendarz majów*, includes twenty-two epigrammatic works, subordinated to the author’s diction, well-known to his readers. Just like before, this volume strikes the reader with all the parallelisms, inversions, ellipses and enjambments, allowing the poet to accentuate even more strongly the distorted and imperfect nature of language. There are many archaisms, sociolectal elements and expletives here. This is connected with the writer’s journalistic flair, with criticism pointed against the politicians currently governing Poland. Jacob Skurtys is right when he writes:

I see the political openness and grotesqueness of Góra’s poems, which no longer work only in the formal registers of social and linguistic analogies, but explicitly name, call out and mock individuals as well as crack jokes, as a recovery of the themes from *Requiem*...for which he was appreciated when he was still a young rebel (Skurtys 2019b).

Kalendarz majów opens with a motto taken from Básník Ticho – a contemporary Czech poet whose name appears in a poem which is an impression of a tram trip between the Zgorzelisko terminus and the stop named after J. Palach. The most recent collection of Góra’s poems represents the writer’s return to himself. It is anchored much more clearly than before in the author’s everyday life. The lyrical subject confesses that he is living “in a state of the dead”; he tries to talk not so much about the contemporary human condition as about himself. This is why one of the key words this time is *home* – shown in different aspects (living, destruction, creation, loss) – and the *fear* associated with it (though not only with it).

The strength of these poems also lies in their particular structure – in fact, they are centred around random associations, at times leading to odd/bizarre, not entirely comprehensible punchlines. The most important goal, however, seems to be to tell a story, to spin a yarn, to offer anecdotes. Even if it is accompanied by the awareness of communication being imperfect, it is worth articulating one's thoughts, feelings, and experiences.

Krystyna Miłobędzka: *Spis z natury*.
Wydawnictwo Wolno

Spis z natury by Krystyna Miłobędzka is a unique publication. It consists of three volumes, the first two of which include works written in the 1960s, which appeared in various literary publications, and texts not published before, taken from the author's private archive. As a result, readers received the previously-unreleased first volume entitled *Male mity*, as well as the first full edition of *Anaglify*, Miłobędzka's actual debut (1960). They are supplemented by an interview by Jarosław Borowiec with the poet, who provides a commentary not only on her work, but also tells the story of her life.

Spis z natury confirms that Miłobędzka's works are incredibly coherent, and the poet addresses issues dear to her in them. As Bartosz Suwiński writes:

Krystyna Miłobędzka's first poems already anticipate what the poet would scrupulously develop in her subsequent books: the unbridled, childlike curiosity of the world, an incredible awareness of the movement of meanings in the reality and in words, and images – seen, freeze-framed, touched, and experienced. A vision that opens up the world, which does not suffice for words. The constant unreadiness of record, being constantly open to what goes on, to what comes about between us – as the poet would put it (Suwiński 2019).

The writer is perfectly aware of the fact that it is impossible to describe the reality (and the experience of the reality) using words in a sufficiently adequate and complete way, because it keeps eluding us. Consequently, the author pays attention to small, only seemingly insignificant details. However, these are details that move her sensitivity, disturb and delight – this is poetry of loss. Miłobędzka wishes to capture what is fleeting, although she does

realise that it is unfeasible. She does write, however, that one should try to halt – even if in an illusory manner – what inevitably disappears, because as she confessed, interviewed by Jarosław Borowiec:

At the very beginning, in the process of creating *Anaglify*, recording things seemed like a miracle to me. This possibility of seeing the world in my own way and of seeing myself in this world was unusual for me. Then the worries came... I would have preferred to use a mute language, a language that allows you to replace words with things, I would have felt most free in it. Instead of talking, holding it in my hands (Milobędzka 2019, online).

Krzysztof Hoffmann interpreted this work precisely in the same way, concluding in his notes on *Śpis z natury*:

Milobędzka is focused and mindful when she watches the world. Only in such a way can one see that the same objects acquire colour both in a moment of joy and during a war, both from fireworks and from bombs. This same mindfulness, however, makes it a matter of the poet's honesty to admit that it is impossible to express the world in an equation describing only the relations between humans and inanimate objects. That's why there is so much nature and biological life in these poems (Hoffmann 2019).

The poet encourages one to be open towards the world, because inspiration can come out of nowhere and at the least expected moment.

Jakub Pszoniak: *Chyba na pewno*.
Biuro Literackie

Chyba na pewno is a unique volume, not only because it is yet another publication as part of the publishing project entitled *Pierwsza książka* (*First Book*), accompanying the Stacja Literatura festival, but also because this is the first poetry published by Jakub Pszoniak, born in 1983 in Bytom. The collection consists of thirty-five poems, which generally speaking focus on movement and motion. The lyrical subject is constantly on the move – also literally; he travels by urban transport, where one has to, as the poem entitled *linia 6 linia 19* says:

scratch the frost from the window glass with one's fingernail
 estimate the age
 show respect
 get up
 stand
 find
 sit down
 (Pszoniak 2019, 6)

and be vigilant, so as not to oversleep and miss one's stop. He moves not only around Bytom (which appears in the background of many works in this collection), but also between cities, without noticing the borders between them.

The lyrical subject (...) is this part of me which is moved around every day. There and back again, twice a day. Seemingly sitting motionless, but as you rightly pointed out, being moved. The tram, the bus, the same route, the same view behind the window, only colours that seem more faded every day. Urban sprawl leads to cities with no clear boundaries. It's hard to say whether you are still in Katowice or already in Chorzów. It's a paranoid impression. The lyrical subject lives and sleeps on board the tram, writes with his finger on the foggy window pane, at times doesn't do anything, and at times does nothing (Pszoniak 2019, online).

The mood of these autobiographically rooted texts is intensely gloomy, and consequently hypnotically compelling. In any case, as we read in the exhaustive questions, "Bytom determines consciousness" (Pszoniak 2019, 16). However, this small-town mentality would have had no chance to survive anyway. In fact, there is a constant race everywhere, the world is rushing towards (self-)destruction. Everyone is busy and in a way lost in this monotony and stagnation. As a result, Jakub Pszoniak's poetry is "engagé" or rather it gives a critical presentation of the reality around us.

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The list presented here comprises merely a few publications, and it is based on the subjective feelings of the author as well as on a review of the reception – it is thus inevitably selective, as it usually happens, and may

therefore be challenged and replaced with a different one. Nevertheless, even this cursory review of the Polish publishing market shows just how diverse and rich Polish literature is. In fact, it is doing quite well, despite the growing difficulties (e.g. of financial nature, or due to the increasingly strong leaning towards non-fiction). This allows everyone, regardless of their reading preferences and expectations, to find something for themselves.

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Agnieszka Nęcka, PhD, Institute of Literature Studies, Faculty of Humanities, University of Silesia in Katowice, Katowice, Poland.

Literary critic, literary scholar, author of books: *Granice przyzwoitości. Doświadczenie intymności w prozie najnowszej* (2006); *Starsze, nowsze, najnowsze. Szkice o prozie polskiej XX i XXI wieku* (2010); *Cielesne o(d)ślony. Dyskursy erotyczne w polskiej prozie po 1989 roku* (2011); *Co ważne i ważniejsze. Notatki o prozie polskiej XXI wieku* (2012); *Emigracje intymne. O współczesnych polskich narracjach autobiograficznych* (2013); *Poli-fonia. Literatura polska początku XXI wieku* (2015). Editor of the literary criticism section of “Postscriptum Polonistyczne”. Holder of the scholarship of the Marshal of the Silesian Voivodeship in the field of culture (2009).

Contact: agnieszka.necka@us.edu.pl