

Response

Orhan PAMUK

A WRITER is someone who spends years patiently trying to discover a second being inside him and a world that makes him who he is. When we speak of writing what comes first to my mind is not a novel or a poem or a literary tradition or a form. It is a person who shuts himself up in a room, sits down at a table and in solitude turns inward, and amid its shadows he builds a new world with words. This man, or this woman, may use a typewriter, may profit from the ease of a computer, or may write with a pen on paper, as I have done for forty years. As he writes, he can drink tea or coffee or smoke cigarettes—that is what I used to do.



The writer in his study.
Photo: Erzade Ertem
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From time to time he may rise from his table to look out of the window at the children playing in the street, and if he is lucky at a tree and a landscape, or he can gaze out at a black wall. He can write poems, plays or novels as I do. All these differences come after the crucial task of sitting down at a table and patiently turning inward. To write is to turn this inward gaze into words; to study the world into which that person passes when he retires into himself. And to do so with patience, obstinacy and joy. As I sit at my table for days, months, years, slowly adding new words to the empty page, I feel as if I am creating a new world, as if I am being shaped into being that other person inside me, in the same way someone might build a bridge or a dome. Stone by stone, I have been doing this for the last forty-one years. I have been writing novels for the last forty-one years. The stones we writers use are words. As we hold them in our hands, sensing the ways in which each of them is connected to others, looking at them sometimes from afar, sometimes almost caressing them—the words—with our fingers and tips of our pens, weighing

them, moving them around, year in and year out, patiently and hopefully we create new worlds.

I am very happy to announce, to say and to share with you that I have been writing a novel for the last two years that takes place on an island. And on an island in the Mediterranean. It is a historical novel, but that island has something to do with Crete, with Cyprus, with this part of the world. It is an imaginary island in the Orient, or the Levant so to speak. So, I am very grateful for this great honour, and also for the practical joy of travelling on Crete—and this is what I have been doing for the last three days travelling around in Crete—; and I am going to say a few things about what I have seen there, things that I may use or turn around. What I am writing is not a realistic novel. It is a combination, a very political realistic story combined with some fairytale qualities.

And now I want to talk about the things that I have seen in Crete in the last three days. With the help of Manolis, my friend, Professor Manolis Patedakis, we went first to Heraklion, then we went to the monastery of Preveli, and I had some glimpse of the Battle of Crete; but more importantly we went to and walked around in downtown Rethymnon; then yesterday we were in Chania and the Venetian Harbour. I was moved by all the things that I have seen—the architectural details, streets, mansions, wooden houses.

[Please, do not forget that I come from Istanbul, Konstantinopolis, I am a son of a man who used to count in Greek, because my father used to go out into the streets of Istanbul and play football, play outside with kids who spoke Greek in their homes and he would come home, and would speak, imitating the way they spoke, and would say: “nobody taught me Greek, I play in the streets.” My father had his childhood in 1930s, in Istanbul of 1930s. Another thing: when I was in primary school and secondary school, before 1964, five or six out of the forty students in my private high school would be speaking Greek at home.]

Then, later we went to Knossos and I was impressed by the archaeology of Arthur Evans, and of course like everyone else I was also partly critical of it. But there I came across the Minotaur and the Labyrinth, something that the great writer Borges encountered, to whom you had also given the same honour many, many years ago. I have learned so much from Jorge Luis Borges. Then I saw a photo of him with María Kodama, whom I met in Argentina some five years ago. I was happy and moved even more.



Gülsün Ayvalı-Aksoy, Manolis Patedakis, Nikos Panoutsopoulos, Georgia Moschovi, Orhan Pamuk, and Maurice Born, in front of Porta Maestra, Spinalonga (2.5.2018).
Photo (©) Manolis Patedakis



Orhan Pamuk at Knossos (2.5.2018).
Photo (©) Manolis Patedakis

Then, also, two days ago, we were in Spinalonga island, and there I saw the *karantina* (quarantine) room. The novel I am writing now is about the imposition of *karantina* (quarantine) in Ottoman society. My new novel, which will hopefully be called *Nights of Plague*, will be also about the problematics of imposition of *karantina* (quarantine) in a country, or a land like Crete or Cyprus, exactly in the year 1900. I will be definitely inspired by everything. I am walking around, taking notes, writing, talking



Professors Manolis Patedakis, Alexis Kalokairinos, and Angela Kastrinaki, with the honored writer Orhan Pamuk and Mrs Asli Akyavas, in Rethymnon (May 4th, 2018).

Photo: George Christodoulakis (© University of Crete)

to my partner Asli, whose grandmother's mother was also the daughter of a Cretan person and spoke Greek at home.

So this is a world that I am very familiar with. This is a world that your sweet words touch deep inside me. And moreover, when I was listening to Angela's comments about my work, I wanted to say one thing: Angela, my religion is literature. And I always say this, especially when they ask too naturally, "Mr Pamuk, what do you think of this? What do you think of that?" and they provoke me, I always simply say that my religion is literature, and it's such a deep, deep religion.

The writer's secret is not inspiration, for it is never clear where it comes from. It is his stubbornness, his patience, that the lovely Turkish saying, "To dig a well with a needle," seems to me to have been said with writers in mind. Maybe, I should have here this, that just eighteen months ago I published a new novel. Unfortunately, I am writing and working too much... That summer of 1988, I was writing one of my books, in fact the *Black Book*, and on the island of Chalki, Heybeli Ada, where I was born—almost a Greek island a hundred years ago—,

where I was born and raised, someone was digging a well, the master well-digger and his apprentice, so I decided to pay writerly attention to them, and later they told me stories, one of which I was telling about many, many years, and in the end I found a way of making a comparison between Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, which is about somebody killing his father, and the consequences of this act, and Ferdowsi, the Persian great epic poet; Ferdowsi's epic (*Shahnameh*) has a short, two-page story, this time about a father killing his son; and my new novel—which will be coming out here in two weeks—is a sort of a novel of ideas about why on earth a person's character could be such that he kills his father, or why on earth a person's cruelty and authoritarianism could be such that he kills his son. Yes, my novels are both realistic and are based on old stories, old traditions, and cannot do without any of them.

I have just talked about the writer, the writer whom I see as a person who shuts himself in a room. But once we writers shut ourselves away, we soon discover that we are not as alone as we thought. We are in the company of the worlds of those who came before us, of other people's stories, other people's books, other people's worlds. The balance of literature is to be aware of all that tradition and also to be able to keep your individuality, your freedom: there is an immense tradition that we have to learn and play around with, but there is also our freedom, our force of freedom, and we can disregard or play around with tradition and can invent new worlds. The power of literature is based on the previous literature before us and on our willingness to change and invent new worlds.

I believe literature to be the most valuable hoard that humanity has gathered in its quest, in its search to understand itself. Societies, tribes and peoples grow more intelligent, richer and more advanced, as they attempt to remedy the troubled worlds of their predecessors; and, as we all know, the burning of books and the persecution of writers, and putting writers into jail and intimidating them, are both signals that dark and improvident times are upon us. But literature is never just a national concept or a political concern. The writer who shuts himself up in a room and first goes on a journey inside himself, will over the years discover literature's eternal rule. He must add artistry to tell his own stories, as if they were other people's stories, and to tell other people's stories, as if they were his own stories: for this is what literature is; and I have been trying to do this for forty-one years. But of course we must learn to be open to life, and to be open to other's stories.

Now, as I conclude, I will answer the question that I have been asked by most people all of my life. I have answered this question very many times, but I want to repeat my answer. First, the question I have been asked is: “Mr Pamuk why do you write?” As you know, this is the question asked of writers, this is the question we have been asked so many times; and I have so very many answers but the answer sometimes for a poetry, or for a sort of a poetic essay, is this:

I write, because I have an innate need to write. I write, because I can't do normal work like other people. I write, because I want to read books like the ones I write. I write, because I am a n g r y with all of you; a n g r y at everyone. I write, because I love sitting in a room all day writing. I write, because I can only take part in real life by changing it. I write, because I want others, all of us, the whole world, to know what sort of life we have lived, what sort of dreams we have had, and what sort of life we continue to live in Istanbul, in Turkey, between, say, 1950 and today. I write, because I love the smell of paper, pen and ink—I still write by hand. I write, because I believe in literature, in the art of the novel, more than I believe in anything else. I write, because it is a habit, a passion. I write, because I am afraid of being forgotten. I write, because I like the glory and interest that writing brings. I write to be alone. Perhaps, I write, because I hope to understand why I am so very angry with all of you; so very angry at everyone. I write, because I like to be read. I write, because once I have begun a novel, an essay, a page, I want to finish it. I write, because everyone expects me to write. I write, because I have a childish belief in the immortality of libraries, and in the way my books sit on a shelf. I write, because it is exciting to turn all of life's beauties and riches into words. I write not to tell a story, but to compose a story. I write, because I wish to escape from the foreboding that there is a place I must go, but, just as in a dream, I cannot quite get there. I write, because I have never managed to be happy. I write to be happy.

Thank you very much for all!

