Antares
LETRAS E HUMANIDADES ISSN: 1984-4921
Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras e Cultura
UCS UNIVERSIDADE DE CAXIAS DO SUL

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.18226/19844921.v14.n33.21

An interview with Christine Leunens about *Caging Skies* and *Jojo Rabbit*: on Literature and Politics

Uma entrevista com Christine Leunens sobre O céu que nos oprime *e* Jojo Rabbit*: de literatura e de política*

Sergio Schargel*

Christine Leunens plans to release her fourth book in 2022, *In Amber's Awake*, a story about the Rainbow Warrior bombing. Before that, she published *Caging Skies*, published in Brazil under the name *O céu que nos oprime* adapted into a movie in *Jojo Rabbit*, which earned an Oscar nomination for best film. A constant in her works is the theme of politics. Not politics in a generic form, without historiographic or theoretical concern, but in its *stricto sensu* sense, a fictional fortune that delves deeply into analysis and flexes as much as possible the symbiotic relationship between literature and politics. In addition to being a fictionist, Christine holds a Master of Liberal Arts degree in English and American Literature and Language from Harvard University and a PhD in Creative Writing from Victoria University of Wellington. Furthermore, her work has been translated into over twenty languages, including Portuguese.

In *Caging Skies*, a young man from Hitlerjugend, Johannes, falls in love with the Jewish refugee his family hides in their home. But it's in the second part that the plot changes compared to *Jojo Rabbit*, it becomes intense and claustrophobic, something strange to *Jojo*. If the film manages to mix moments of drama with humor – bringing Hitler as a pathetic figure who, paradoxically, is efficient in humanizing him

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and showing the influence of propaganda on the population, but can be equally criticized for the same reason, when treating him as a foolish man – the book has no pretensions to humor. On the contrary, the story moves towards dramatic anguish in its second part, as Johannes, as a kind of inversion of the protagonist of *Life is Beautiful*, invents stories to convince Elsa that Germany won the war, in an attempt to keep her close to him.

Christine received the interviewer for a videochat via the Zoom platform on October 3, 2021, in which she talked about her work, her new book, *In Amber's Wake*, and the success of *Caging Skies* and *Jojo Rabbit*.

Christine, could you talk a little bit about who you are? About your career, your trajectory, your books, etc. Not only you are a writer, but you also have a broad academic background with a thesis on Henry James. How did one influence the other? Did the academy help in the development of your fictional works? If yes, how? Could you also talk a little about your works? In Brazil, we received Caging Skies just recently, published in early 2020. I saw in an interview that Caging Skies had a long research process, right? Could you talk a little about this research and the creative process of this book? And how was the process of your other books? How was the reception of the book, especially on its release, before the film adaptation? What inspired you to write it?

I'm always very pleased and touched when there's going to be a translation – because every time there's one someplace, someplace new for me, it's not the number of languages, you know, "she has been published in over 20 languages" – it's not that. Each time when there's a new translation, what I feel is that the story I've written is resonating with people from somewhere else in the world who don't necessarily speak the original language of the book, but that the story still means

something to them. And I always find that very moving, that somehow my characters are reaching out to them.

I feel that a story that becomes universal means that it really brings to light important themes for other people, whatever the culture. Some of the languages that it's been translated into, I can't even recognize the title when I try and read it, like when I get a copy of the book in Turkish or in Russian or Chinese, Korean. That means a lot to me. It feels almost like my characters grew up and they started to migrate out into the world.

I find that research and creativity interact in a very vibrant way, because part of why I even wanted to write the story, even though it's fiction, is because I wanted to weave in a lot of truth about things that happened into it. I wrote this at the Memorial Museum de Caen in Normandy, a War Memorial, in their library, so I had lots of books all around me. The books would often describe the war and battles, but they wouldn't necessarily give me day-to-day information. So, for example, I couldn't find information about how an ordinary family would get by with their lives on a day-to-day basis. How did they get the food, exactly, how did they get and try and keep warm, how did they wash? Also, I wanted to know more about school and the Hitler's Youth, the camps, what went on in there, how things happened.

So there were two parts of the research. There was what I could learn from the books and then from the photos and video documentaries. Actually, three parts. What I could find from the books and the visuals, I started to build a structure around that. Then for the next part, I began to interview a lot of people. Just talk to them, ask them what had their life been like back then, what had being in the Hitler Youth been like. And this felt very important to me, because there was less and less people of this generation, who had been involved in the war. They were quite elderly. And I thought that if I didn't manage

to get this information, a lot of it would be gone afterwards. So there was this aspect. And then probably the most tricky last aspect was, as I wrote the book, sometimes there were elements that I had to find for a particular scene, which ended up being like a treasure hunt. At one point I needed to know, for example, if the post was open on a Saturday. Or when credit cards began to be used in Vienna, and if they were considered respectable when they first came out. Or once, I wanted to put some popular baked item from the day in a scene, but needed to know what ingredients went into it. So I had to go on a treasure hunt and find random people, people who could tell me what things were like in the 1940's, so I could tie up all the loose ends. At the very end, when I was done with the book, I had about here two hundred such random questions, with people all over helping me, some with trivia like questions, but some with fundamental ones. Simon Wiesenthal, from the Simon Wiesenthal Centre, was helping me with many of the latter, for example having to do with how exactly someone went about finding Jewish family and friends after the war ended. His long explanations, (there was no 'exact' way, it was all very hit and miss, try and try again) as we both spoke on the phone and corresponded in writing, informed crucial passages in my book.

I promise this interview is more about Caging Skies than about Jojo Rabbit, but I think at some point I couldn't help asking that... How was the process of adapting Caging Skies into Jojo Rabbit? And, before, the adaptation to a play? And the reception, both of the film and the book? Were there criticisms or attacks for the "comic" bias that Jojo brings? As a matter of fact, as much as adaptations always change several aspects of the work, the transformation of Caging Skies into Jojo Rabbit is particularly shocking to me. They are two completely different works, and both are excellent. But what did you think of the changes in the

film compared to the book? Hitler as an imaginary friend, the story ending differently and with a more childlike Johannes, what are your impressions of that?

The publication of *Caging Skies* was an odd journey in that at first nobody took it in its original language, in English. And so it was Planeta, in Spain, who first acquired it for Spain and South America. They're a large publishing house, because Spanish is such a widespread language. The editor, Berta Noy, told my London agent, Laura Susijn: we have a policy, usually the book has to be translated in its original language before we take it. But," she said, "this is one of the most important books I've read in ten years. So we've decided to publish it all the same."

This was like salvation for me. Because it was hurtful, you know, I'd spent years writing this book and at first was only getting reactions such as "Oh, we're tired of World War Two. We don't want another story about all this.""We don't feel it's going to be commercial enough. Your writing is too European." So after it was published in Spanish and Catalan, it was then published in Italian, then French. And in France it was nominated for one of their top literary prizes, Le Prix Médicis. It was taken in English after that, of course. So it's interesting how it had to be published in other languages first, and only after getting some sort of recognition, did it get taken in English. It's a book that spread very slowly from country to country, even before the film. Every once in a while I'd learn from my agent that another country had taken it. Then, you know, eight months would go by and to my surprise another country would take it. Then a year would go by… and more good news. So it wasn't a best-seller at first, but little by little it went its way very quietly. And then, it was picked up for a film, it was adapted for a play, and it just kept going like this. Interestingly, as a lot of time went by, then people began to say, "it's very relevant". Unlike at first, when people

would say, “We don’t need another WW2 novel, this will never happen again”. And now people began to feel like we are seeing a rise again, in extremism, in the far right.

I would say this change in attitude happened when the recession began, and a strain in resources started to be felt all over. The standard of life could be felt going down in many parts of the world, compared to what the generation of my parents had, when lots of things were far less expensive in those day. You know, property, housing, rent, food, power, fuel, was less expensive. So not only was there this global recession but then the inflation just kept going up and up and up. And then more and more people started to feel the strain in their own personal life. I’ve recently read that in the United States a significant percentage of people in their 30’s and 40’s now live with their parents, due to financial necessity, which was unthinkable not so many decades before. As more people start to feel the strain, people start to feel fear and anxiety, people start to feel anger, and then we enter this kind of situation where the book starts to become relevant again. People are starting to feel the frustration, the fear, the anger and then point fingers in different ways. So yes, I think that such emotions fuel such reactions. The book was taken by more countries, especially where the far-right was gaining political ground. Taika had actually started working on the script and trying to get the film financed eight years earlier, but the film, due to a succession of delays and setbacks, ended up coming out when its themes were relevant and needed.

Right, so the first experience I had of adaptation was seeing the play, adapted by Desirée Gezents vey and directed by Andrew Foster, at its premiere at Circa Theatre in Wellington. This was the first time I saw my characters, “live”, in front of my eyes. Because I’d imagined them, but I never saw them outside of my mind. And it was also the first audience experience of them I’d ever had. Books, people read by

themselves, on their own, and I'm not there when they are reading, so I don't know how they are reacting. So when I heard the dialogues – the play was very close to the book –and the grandmother saying things and then people started laughing, I thought "Oh, they got that!" Or then there'd be a thick silence in one of the dramatic parts, the audience's feelings tangible. It was an amazing experience.

The film brought some comical aspects because I believe that Taika wanted to have a very wide reach, and he didn't want it to be so serious that the younger generation wouldn't engage with it. So he used humor, and humor was his way to make people laugh and then feel uncomfortable at why they are laughing and then think about it afterwards.

There was some criticism, especially in the beginning, some discomfort about that. But then I think people started to understand that this was Taika's way of doing it. Because this is very typical of his style, he has done it in his other films. Though there are funny moments, the whole film, when you think about it, even though there are parts that made you laugh, make you think "oh, this is quite serious". So, it has a serious undertone but he puts comedy on the top to make it easier to take in.

Jojo navigates through the not always clear boundaries between horror and humor, which opened the door to criticism about the representation of Hitler. But both Jojo and Caging Skies, in my view, perform a fundamental exercise. I, particularly, as a scholar of fascism, have been working partly precisely with the deformations that Nazi-fascist figures received, always associated with monstrous figures, I have sought precisely to criticize these representations, this naziexploitation. Because, in my view, they ultimately exempt an entire population from the violence they committed, as if only the Nazi-Fascist Messiah was

to blame, like a great hypnotist. And it even gets in the way of identifying contemporary fascisms, which are always associated either with the Holocaust, or with monstrous figures, forgetting that fascism does not necessarily lead to genocide. A vision that forgets that the population of those countries wanted Nazism, that forgets that the Nazi-fascist monster is absolutely human and, therefore, inhuman. This exercise of showing how human, how petty and resentful the Nazi-Fascists are was done, in my opinion successfully, by the psychoanalytic interpretation of fascism with authors such as Wilhelm Reich and Adorno, among others. In short, monstrous acts, but perpetrated by absolutely human beings. A criticism that appears in that play by Thomas Bernhard, Heldenplatz, which is all about how fascism did not die in 1945 and about this phenomenon of denial that plagued some countries after the war, as if the fault were exclusively of Germany or Hitler. Austria as a victim, not a perpetrator. And his and your books are brilliant for showing just that too: how the Austrians wanted the Anschluss and then how to find a Nazi in Austria was suddenly difficult overnight after the War. I think that both your book and the film, for different reasons, successfully carry out this humanization of the Nazi-fascist figure, through Johannes's imagination. I would like to hear from you a little bit about that. Was this humanization your goal? Show, through fiction, how propaganda influences the creation of this imaginary, this reality?

Yes, this was absolutely my objective. The Austrians were feeling like they wanted to regain a sense of the glory of the past, when they had been a bigger and more powerful empire. And Johannes himself is just an ordinary boy, I wanted to make him just an ordinary boy. In the beginning he is just flying kites and riding his bicycle, he is just a boy like any other boy. Because I wanted to show how it doesn't take much

to spark a sense of pride, especially at vulnerable ages. To give people a sense of pride, a sense of power, and a sense of a common goal. And that happens actually quite quickly. Soon the whole country, and all the youth, gets onboard. Wanting to be part of this. And feeling a sense of something big is happening, you know, a feeling of self-importance.

It's exactly like you said, it's not something like an evil that came from another place. It's human. And if people don't realize how delicate things like democracy can be, because it takes just a little bit of fear at first, a little bit of propaganda, it doesn't take too much to nudge people in a different direction. And humans are more fragile than most people would like to admit. When they have enough food on the table, when everything is okay, it's not the same thing, but it doesn't take too much to swerveoff course in a way that is very dangerous.

Another interesting point in your book is how the effects of Nazism linger far beyond its defeat. And not just about the collective, but about the individual as well. The impression I got is that the violence and obsession Johannes develops over Elsa comes, in addition to his obvious loneliness at the loss of his family, from the influence of Hitlerjugend masculine propaganda. Indeed, Elsa is the inflection point on which Johannes moves away from the party. How did you want to bring this Nazi influence on the characters? How did this influence last after the war? What is the influence of advertising on the relationship between Johannes and Elsa?

I wanted to show that what we learn, either through school or through our family values, we learn young. And this leads to how our emotional core will be formed. It's very hard to get rid of that, it takes a long time and there's a residue that remains. So, for example, Johannes was made to believe that he was superior. That having blue eyes and blond hair made him superior to people who don't have blue eyes and

blond hair. Or that his race is purer, like his blood, than that of other people, and it takes a long time for him to feel no guilt over his feelings for Elsa, because of this. To be able to emotionally approach another human being and take them into account as fully a human being as he himself is.

That was something I wanted to show because it's not something you just snap your fingers and it goes away, what young people learn. I do think there's a residue still that remains, emotionally, even for some, intellectually, like some sticky stain. Some people think they've been endowed with a kind of superiority with this whole foolish unscientific idea of a superior race. It's a kind of childish fantasy, almost what you would see in a ridiculous comic strip. Belief in some kind of superhuman… To think that there was a political madman looking to exploit this, looking for a scientific basis. More frightening still was that there were scientists willing to go with this and actually do research. You know, measuring people's shape of heads, measuring their noses, saying that one shape of the head is superior, you have more feelings, and you are more sensitive if it's like this and not like this. Really? I mean, it was horrific that those so-called superior, more sensitive people, were able to do to other people on the basis of this. So it's just… There is no science behind it. Their whole educational system was not based on science. I think there are still residues where people can pick up racist ideas and not even realize it.

I find it interesting how, in this case, we are following, based on Johannes' own impressions, his growing violence and madness since childhood. And, as it is in the first person, the reader sees this vision from Johannes himself, which does not make it any less explicit, but, on the other hand, it is fascinating for allowing us to see how this is part of the character. Why did you choose to center the narrative in first person? Was your intention to show

this growing madness and the direct influence of Nazism on the individual? And, in this sense, what is the meaning of the title?

To me, *Caging Skies* has two different meanings. One, I meant to show that Elsa, though she is closed up in a cage, you can't encage the imagination, the human mind. So, though she is caged in, her mind, her imagination, like the sky, can drift out far and wide, and she can imagine she's anywhere. So the human brain can go back in History, it can imagine a future, it can be at any place and any time. That can't be caged in. However, when you damage somebody's mind, imagination, and somebody's humanity, the way Johannes was very damaged, he himself becomes caged in, within the borders of his own skull. So he loses his playfulness, his imagination, the way to see life as something broader and more beautiful. So that's the title's double meaning.

As for Johannes, the reason I chose the first person is because it was important to hear his thoughts. First from childhood, going back, and then the different ways in which it would develop into unhappiness, guilt, discomfort in his own skin, that we would really feel this journey we take with him. And it isn't a happy journey. It is a journey of learning, but it doesn't have a happy ending. As he gets closer and closer to her, he starts to exam himself. You know, from above. And he's closed in, in a way that Elsa was once. Then I also wanted his view on Elsa, so we could see her through his eyes. And we understand that somethings that are going on are not exactly the way he sees them. We feel when he is hoping, and he loves her, but we feel that she has more survivor's guilt and a sense of gratitude, but of course she doesn't love Johannes. And his love is more possessive. It's only when he matures and starts to realize that he has been so possessive and so full of superiority, keeping her as a prisoner. It was also, I thought, narrating from the first person that allowed me to show the many sometimes contradictory emotions. Because when he lies to Elsa initially, it's also a mixture

of many things. He is almost just joking, half-joking, when he doesn't want to admit to her "oh, we lost the war" and he feels that maybe he's not that superior. So, in a way, he was not expecting at all to get away with the lie. Because it was part joke, part lie, part many things, you know, many feelings, it helped that I could describe all these different nuances from his point of view.

An interesting aspect of your book, having read the book after having seen the movie, is how you are led to believe, halfway through, that the plot is moving towards a love story. And how the reader is later surprised as this relationship becomes progressively more toxic and violent. Why, in your opinion, does Johannes develop this obsessive sense of ownership over Elsa? Did you want to draw a parallel about contemporary toxic relationships, which, given their due resemblance, approach this psychological violence? In that sense, why doesn't Elsa seek to free herself from Johannes's web of lies? And why does he keep this web?

Initially, he feels that he is protecting her. You know, because when he saw what actually happened to the Jews in the scene when American soldiers make him and other boys from the Hitler Youth look inside the trains filled with emaciated corpses, he is shocked and can't believe what he saw, that it wasn't a nightmare. So he doesn't like outdoors anymore. And he is afraid, he wants to stay closed in. And at the same time he wants to keep her closed in with him. He has lost his father, his mother. He loves Elsa, and he feels that this somehow entitles him to in keep her. Of course, this starts to eat him inside out with guilt. Because at some stage he can't live with the guilt and he keeps wanting to tell her, and she keeps not wanting him to. Now, Elsa has a lot of survivor's guilt. Because she feels that she was responsible for the deaths, of people that were looking after her. But she also feels,

and it's a funny thing because no one can really ever know… A lot of people like to think that in a similar situation they would've acted to save other people, but until your life is actually in immediate danger, or your children's lives are, no one can truly know how they would act until they are there. So she assumes she would not have acted the way Johannes' parents did to save her, at the risk of their own lives. She feels that she wouldn't have risked her life in the same situation. And so she feels guilt. A lot of Jews have this survivor's guilt. You know, "why did I survive, when so many others were killed in the concentration camps. All my family is gone, all my friends are gone, why am I still alive?" So it's not only survivor's guilt, in relation to those who were protecting her, but it's also in relation to all her family, friends, to her old neighborhood. That's a lot of guilt to bear, a lot of weight. And because she's been closed in so long, part of her is afraid to go out into the world again.

Those Jews from Europe who didn't survive, when you look at the numbers, six million ,it's beyond comprehension, it's so profoundly shocking. And because Hitler and Nazi Germany took country after country after country, Jewish populations were destroyed even in countries like Estonia, Lithuania, Latvia. Vilnius had been affectionately known as "little Jerusalem", happy places, whole communities so well integrated and contributing so much. And then, from one day to the next, they come and take this. There was just no safe place to go anymore. And I think many people didn't try to escape because they'd seen *pogroms* before, but never something to this level of planned industrial extermination of Hitler's "dream". Who could have thought that any human would be able to do something so unthinkable? So the percentage of those who survived, is just abysmally small.

And it's something, when I did my research at the Memorial, it's just something I will never forget. They have something that's called the

Path of Remembrance. So as I would go through the museum every day, there were life-sized photos, you know, of individual Jewish victims of the Holocaust, I would see their faces, their eyes, expressions. But each photo, by some special effect, would fade as I neared and walked past. And as I got to experience that each day as I was coming and leaving, I'd feel the emotional tug, "this young woman here, she never grew up to have a family, she doesn't have descendants now."

We lost family members ourselves, my husband and I. In Mauthausen Concentration Camp, there was this teenage Jewish boy, whom the Nazis hung and were allowing a German shepherd to eat at his feet. So my husband's great uncle, Jean de Maupeou d'Ableiges, a priest and resistant, got to his knees and began to pray, which wasn't allowed. And so the other deportees started to move around him, to hide him. Shortly before the concentration camp was freed, the Nazis lethally injected petrol into his vein.

My grandfather was an artist, living in Paris, when he was taken to a German work camp and forced to make ammunition. He was never the same when he left, because of the regrets he had after. That he didn't have the strength to rather let himself be killed than do that. Because he lost all his artist friends in Paris, who had been deported to concentration camps, he suffered for decades from pain and guilt. He had painted with oils before the war, and after, he painted only with metal that he melted like he had at the work camp's foundry. He could go into deep depressions, at times didn't want to live anymore.

So I would say that what happened traumatized people, the damage was widespread, it's not something that's over when the war ends. Because the scars get transmitted in so many ways, through our friends, through our family. It is, actually, ongoing. I think it's in the book of Georgia Hunter, *We Were the Lucky Ones*, where she wrote about how her grandfather, who survived, always wanted to take a shower

with his underpants on. Even though it was modern days, they had a washing machine, and this was in the US. But he would always shower so that he knew he always had one clean pair of underpants at hand in case he had to escape. But he wouldn't talk about it, she would just come to realize much later what these things meant. What his silence meant. He was not speaking because it was things that were too terrible to be spoken of.

It becomes part of our lives when you hear people tell of their memories. My mother, who was a child in Italy at the time, would tell my sister and me that when the Nazis came, they were extremely violent with women, and put their mutilated bodies on display after to use them as "an example to others". You are told of this, it becomes part of your mind, part of your memory, and you see it. It is part of you, it happened to other people, not you, but you still see similar images that they saw through the words they transmitted to you. Then you also get these memories, and there's no escape from them. It goes on and on. I do think the memory needs to be transmitted, as a shadow. First, for the own sake of people who lived, and didn't survive, that era, they need to be always remembered. And also, because if it's not transmitted, then people are not aware of the truth. The truth needs to be transmitted, always, as a reminder that this cannot be allowed to happen again.

Some people were saying, after the movie, "oh, *Caging Skies* is very dark". Yes, it is very dark. But that was my intention and I have no regret in making it dark, because I needed to make it historically accurate, even as fiction, to what that era really represented. When you read Primo Levi, it's dark. And it should be no other way than dark. The new generation of literature of this era is not always factual. Focusing on a more "feel good" narrative attenuates the extreme state of hopelessness and necessity that drove the human behavior in the concentration camps. When people are in life or death situations,

they do things that they will regret later, but they do it at the time. You can't make it out as if it was a boy scouts or girl scouts camp where everyone was sharing. If you only have one piece of bread – I'm not saying this never happened – just that it's very unlikely that everyone was there handing out their one piece of bread altruistically to someone else when they themselves were starving to death. That's just… It's not factual. And anyone who wrote… Who went through the trouble of writing their experiences of that, gives a very true and realistic account, true to human nature. So what I don't like is when literature describing the *Shoah* aims to be "feel good", and in doing so, starts to not follow the reality of history, experience and human realities. It has to really reflect what humans can be reduced to in such moments, and a hungry human being is not the same as a well-fed human being who has all their needs satisfied. People need to be aware of that, especially when it seems that the future might bring some very major challenges to us, for the economy, for strained resources. It is an important time to be aware of what people can be like, and what people will be like if driven to it. Even when you will always have beautiful exceptions, who behave in ways that are admirable, these are just that, the exception, not the mainstream, not the mass.

Primo Levi had to be very clever to survive. I still remember a few scenes. There was a moment when the Nazis divided everyone into two lines. "You go here if you look sick", which meant death, "and you go here if can work", which meant survive. And he wasn't a big person, in size. But he knew he needed to make himself seen like he had a lot of energy and was strong. He remembers the guilt, because there was a younger man, much younger and stronger than he was, and fit, but he had glasses, and his way of coming forward just looked awkward. And one guard immediately called him over to the death line. Primo Levi almost thought it was mistake to put this young, strong student

to that one, while he picked him for the line that was going to survive. Then, of course, there was dysentery. And people would do everything to survive, swap buckets, it was a very dirty, filthy place, and people had to just try to survive however they could in the worst conditions imaginable.

The first half of your book, and the entire movie, reminded me of another narrative, Plot Against America, by Philip Roth. In the sense of showing the impact of fascism on a child's life and visions. But if Roth bends over the victim, you're dedicated to the perpetrator. How did you try to bring the influence of propaganda on the childhood? How do you believe this propaganda spreads? Why did the Nazis have a children's section?

I wanted to have one main character, Johannes, instead of several boys. Because I could have gone this way, with his friends, a group of boys. But my intuition was to really stick to just one person, to show that although people want to hide themselves behind collectivity – and they do that all the time, they say "this was happening and I was part of this"– everyone is in fact an individual, and every individual has a choice, and a conscience. That's why I focused on one child, who joined others in class and camp, to show that adults had the real responsibility, when they started to teach children "the new curriculum". Because at a certain age you can start to think for yourself. But when you go inside the classroom at an early age, there's some kind of inherent trust. And children have what is called the "sponge brain", they absorb other people's teachings. So people have a strong responsibility in how to shape the future in what they will be teaching the children. At first Johannes was at this vulnerable learning phase.

I couldn't help to trace a parallel with what we live in Bolsonaro's Brazil, in what is seen right at the beginning of the book

with the family division. How parents find themselves powerless to face the influence of propaganda on their child's education, as in a passage in which the father thinks that hearing the way "their" speak in the child's mouth was unbearable. In this sense, do you believe that your book can inspire the contemporary anti-fascist fight? How can a fiction about the past help the present? How can we prevent the resurgence of these fascisms?

Both Germany and Austria had renown universities and thinkers, that's what I find so frightening. It isn't like Germany at that time didn't have academics, arts, theatre. That something like this could happen in a place that was as educated as it was. Another bizarre thing I was recently reading about was on the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra, because a lot of its players were Jewish. I used to play in an orchestra myself too, so you have a very close relationship between the musicians, a tight sense of community. Because everyone has their time to play, then it's someone else time. You do something together, and you practice hours. And in this Vienna orchestra, people knew the Jewish musicians for decades, they were like a family, how could they keep quiet and just let these fellow musicians disappear? It's not as if they didn't have any say, these were people that they knew, and they were close, and they valued each other, people they looked up to. Professors, friends. These people weren't from outer space, they were active in their community, showing kindness together, playing music together; and then somebody comes along and starts teaching their children… Why didn't more people say, "no"? They could have stood up, stated "this is my friend, you can't have him". So what was it, at that moment, that had them say "ok, yes." Was it personal gain? Did they have that low self-esteem that they had to put some people down in order to think "ok, we're something, we're superior, we're better". It's still like… I thought on this a lot as I was writing the book, because it always

kept me wondering how this would have happened on an individual level.

Another thing that I find incredible, but I didn't find a way to put into the book, because, there is only so much History you can fit in. But Hitler, at some moment when he started to lose the war, he had a choice. Either he could send his own army food and supplies by train, because some of his army was starving, or he could keep transporting the Jews to Extermination Camps. He preferred to give the trains transporting the Jews priority, over feeding his own army. Which meant that this was his number one priority. I don't understand… Did he want the "final solution" to finish fast, so that not a single voice would be left to be heard? This is a question I cannot answer, but I do wish I had an answer to that. Did he want no survivors? Because the Nazis did try to hide the fact of the mass murders when the Allies came. Which meant that they knew that what they had been doing was wrong. Otherwise why would they try to hide it? That meant that knew there was right, there was wrong and they knew that what they were doing was wrong.

So I tried to get some of this in the book, through the child. And this child, Johannes, starts to lose his naiveness as he sees the truth. But it takes him time, before he starts to do the right thing and gives Elsa her freedom. Then, of course, this damages him. She's damaged, so he damages himself. This kind of hatred harms the people who are the victims, there's no doubt of that. But I like to say that it also harms the perpetrator, because you can't kill your own humanity without damaging everything in you that makes it worth living. If you start to damage this part of yourself, then you're not human anymore. You're… I don't even know…

I've kept researching this era, and what I find incredible is that I've been researching this for so long and I still find stories that I hadn't heard about before and just can't believe. And I keep thinking it's just

endless. I keep adding account after account, fact after fact to the mental pile, now this, now that. My husband worked at the Mémorial de Caen Museum, so each time we learn something new, because he keeps researching this too, one of us says to the other, "Come, you have to see this". We still end up finding archives neither of us had any idea about, but that we both find important to know about.

I would say that fiction provokes thought and feeling… You try to put people in other people's skin, so they feel things, so the way you try to work is more through emotions. Humans have a choice. Humans can choose to have hatred against other humans, this kind of oppression and hatred, or they can make choose empathy, compassion, and care for each other. Now that's a very important choice, because these two… I'd almost say extremes, though they sit on opposite sides of only a very fine line. The choice of a path of empathy and compassion will give everyone a completely different life experience as nurturing hatred and oppression. And there's nobody who will escape, neither the people who are the perpetrator, nor the people who are the victim. So what I hope that *Caging Skies* shows in any adaptation is that it is a conscious, individual decision and that everybody wins when you go more towards let's care for each other, let's understand each other, let's show compassion for each other. That makes for a so much more satisfying world. Because the life of a human being is not very long. We are here just for seven decades, maybe eight, if lucky. That is a very short time. This can be spent in a more joyful way. Or it can be wasted in hatred. To grow up in that kind of dark atmosphere as a child, friendships are not the same, even family is not the same. I would say if that the book can teach anything, it would be not to get taken in by this hatred, step back and look at History. It's come and it's gone, but the eras that have had this hatred and oppression have never been happy ones. Life is too precious to give into that.

Thank you so much for your time, Christine. I think this talk was very interesting, excellent for bringing a new perspective on your work. I think your other books are not yet available in Portuguese, at least I haven't found them in Brazilian versions, but would you like to talk a little about them before we finish? What were them about? Do you intend to return to the theme of Nazism in a future work? Are you currently in the process of writing a new book?

Thank you so much!

My new book I've just finished, which takes place at the time of the Rainbow Warrior bombing, is called *In Amber's Wake*. This is a love story, woven into the history of the day. Of course it's a very complex time, because you had France developing its nuclear weaponry, because they were looking to defend themselves, as were other countries, while New Zealand took a no nuclear stance. A lot of young people today don't quite grasp what the Cold War was like at the time. You, yourself, were too young, I'm guessing, that wasn't quite your era. I still remember… you didn't think of it all the time, but because there had been the Cuban Missile Crises, the possibility was always there, you know, there was the red phone. Any moment the US and USSR could have their missiles facing each other, potentially going off. So it was really something that people were conscious of, at the time, that a third world war was possible. Then, of course, after the Berlin Wall fell and everything, the new generation, my children, they don't fully realize what these days had been like. So again, I try to bring some of that back to life.

Thank you so much. I always see interviews not just as an interview, but as an exchange. And I, of course, benefit from exchanges as much as you do. So it has been wonderful to speak to you.

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Recebido em: 10/02/2022
Aprovado em: 30/06/2022