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Review of Kaja Malanowska's *Fog* (transl. Bill Johnston)

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Malanowska, Kaja. *Fog*, translated by Bill Johnston. Text Publishing, 2021.

The third novel of a contemporary Polish author, Kaja Malanowska, is introduced for the first time in English as *Fog*, which, in Olga Tokarczuk's words on the cover, is "a crime novel for our times".

The novel is translated by Bill Johnston, a prominent translator of Polish literature into English. Johnston's translation opus consists of a long list of Polish literary works, both contemporary and classic. He is a professor of comparative literature at Indiana University and is a recipient of multiple awards, which include the PEN Translation Prize, the Best Translated Book Award, and he has been recognized in Poland for his significant contribution to the advancement of Polish literary culture in English. Johnston's translation of Malanowska's *Fog* is a work of exceptional quality.

What is interesting about this title, from the point of view of Australian readers, is that the project is originated by a Melbourne publisher, Text Publishing. To have an international author of such quality translated by a renowned literary translator and published in English locally is a rarity, which makes this volume that much more precious.

In her home country, Malanowska is known as a writer of quality literary fiction. She is the author of a critically acclaimed collection of short stories *Immigration (Imigracje)*, 2011). Her first novel *Small Madness of Everyday Life (Drobne szaleństwa dnia codziennego)*, 2010) saw her recognized as an author who deals with complex emotional and social issues while engaging in stylistic explorations, using illness journal and social media post forms. Her 2012 novel *Look at Me, Klara! (Patrz na mnie, Klara!)* was nominated for Polityka's Passport (Paszport Polytiki) and the prestigious Nike Literary Award, establishing her as a prominent contemporary voice. She has been a columnist for *Political Critique (Krytyka polityczna)*, a publication which promotes the work of public intellectuals, and has written articles on a range of issues, from bureaucratic absurdities related to reporting a stolen wallet, to experiences of gaining a teaching certificate while highly qualified, the dangers of riding a bicycle on Warsaw roads and footpaths with no bicycle lanes, and the implications of the overuse of antibiotics. All of these see her employ her piercing observations, sometimes interspersed with dialogue. She is a scientist with a PhD in bacterial genetics from the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

With *Fog (Mgla* in the original) Malanowska turns to crime writing for the first time, following the conventions of the genre, while also staying true to her interest in the nuances of human character and explorations of broader social issues. At nearly 400 pages, this is a slow-burning crime procedural. The focus is on the absorbing story of the criminal investigation, while it also depicts contemporary Warsaw, its social fabric and the complicated lives of its characters. The themes explored within the central murder story include entrenched work sexism, domestic violence and sexual abuse at work, mental states in their variously functioning and debilitating forms, social isolation, prejudice related to class differences and immigrants, and they all contribute to the complex view of the contemporary society presented in this work.

Detectives Ada Rochniewicz and Marcin Sawicki are the police partners discovering the truth behind the murder of a young woman Zofia Wagner in her Warsaw apartment. Their work relationship follows the conventional trope of a mismatched duo, a talented female detective and her sceptical male partner; one which starts with Marcin's prejudice and reluctance, and Ada's indifference to it, to the one that eventually sees them recognize each other's qualities to reach a mutual understanding. Through the course of the investigation, we find out more about their lives: Marcin's neglect of himself and his family, his lonely wife whom he takes for granted and his two young daughters, with his marriage in tatters; and Ada's mysterious history which we only glimpse. Her relocation to Warsaw from another region appears to be due to a traumatic previous work experience, her nightmares and daytime visions, or "trances" as she calls them, are part of her make-up, which she is trying to keep in check, but which periodically surface, giving her insights into the murder story and various aspects of her own life. There is an unexplained difficult relationship with her father, and her estranged half-sister Kasia, with whom she reconnects during the course of the investigation.

The investigation takes various directions, from a predictable suspicion of Zofia's abandoned working-class lover, to her young Chechen cleaner, and associations with illegal immigrants and their perilous lives. There are sinister influences of a religious sect-like movement, and its impact on one family, including Zofia's past love, her former fiancé, as well as links to the political establishment.

The prose glides through all of these themes and events, and is seamlessly brought to life in English. The reader is aware of being immersed in this compelling world, while the deftness of expressions, the immediacy of the dialogue, the crafting of longer narrative passages are all rendered with skill. An occasional jolt is a crude joke, translated quite literally, but this serves to illustrate the cloistered police environment the reader is inhabiting.

The fog which envelops Warsaw during the course of the investigation, obscuring the city as well as the search for answers, adds a noir dimension to the narrative. It finally lifts when the crime is solved, and while the city transitions to a bright spring, the dark undercurrents which led to the murder of Zofia Wagner remain.

The author's biographical note mentions that she is working on a prequel to *Fog*, and it is to be hoped that the readers will be able to see that work in print soon, and that an English translation will also follow, one which will be of a similar calibre to this one.