

My Annual Update for Goran

27th November 2024

My name is Pat Marsh. I was married to the Macedonian playwright [Goran Stefanovski](#) for 42 years, 26 of them living together in Canterbury. He taught screenwriting at Canterbury Christ Church University from 2002 until his death in 2018.

Every year since then, Goran's friends, colleagues and I have met up at the tree dedicated to him in Canterbury Cemetery on 27th November, the anniversary of his death. It is now a tradition that I give him an update about what's been happening with his work and what in particular has made me think of him over the year.

In 2024, I especially wanted to tell Goran about the similarities I'd discovered between his life and writing and those of another writer from Eastern Europe buried near his tree, Joseph Conrad.

It's six years since Goran died. You may remember on the first anniversary of his death we assembled by the grave of Józef Teodor Konrad Korżeniowski, Joseph Conrad. Then Elizabeth^[1] gave us the bright idea of dedicating a tree to you nearby, Goran, and we found this highly appropriate tall pine, which you would have loved, especially the smell of it, which you would inhale every time you walked up the road to Canterbury East. It reminded you of home. It's several years now since they cut those pines down. I never understood why they did that.

Anyway, your neighbour Joseph Conrad has been much in my mind this year. Stewart Ross, your former colleague at Christ Church, who is President of the Canterbury Commemoration Society, has been organising readings of works by writers associated with Canterbury, chiefly Aphra Behn, which is how I got to know him. We've read many of Aphra's plays together, which was extremely useful when I was writing my novel about her over the last three years^[2]. We've read some Marlowe, of course, and Somerset Maugham, who was educated at The King's School, which I hadn't known before. On your grandson Ezra's birthday on 4th October, we read extracts from Conrad's work.

^[1] Professor Elizabeth Cowie, friend and colleague from the University of Kent, Department of Film Studies

^[2] Three Faces : The Story of Aphra Behn by Patricia Marsh, The Conrad Press

I was struck after you died in 2018 how many similarities you had with Joseph Conrad. You were both Slavs from Eastern Europe. Conrad's country was part of the Russian Empire when he was born. His family was politically active in the fight to restore the Kingdom of Poland and he felt guilty all his life for choosing exile over resistance. You were made to feel guilty, too, that you didn't want to return and lead your nation after it had become independent, as the playwright Vaclav Havel had led the Czech Republic after it was liberated from its Soviet yoke.

The position of an established and acclaimed writer is very different in the culture you grew up in from what it is in Anglo-Saxon countries. You were always expected to pronounce on current issues, although you managed without fail to walk that fine line of not really committing yourself to expressing political views. You did talk endlessly about the fact that you were not a politician, but that you were "interested in both the voice of the angel and the voice of the devil. I sympathise both with the darkest on the Right and the brightest on the Left". I'm not sure you would have sympathised with Donald Trump, but you might have been fascinated by what makes him tick.

Anyway, back to you and Conrad. You both ended up in Canterbury. In the last interview Conrad gave to a journalist, his right eyelid was seen to be drooping. The same symptom of something wrong with you was what took us to the doctor's the month before you died. Conrad told the journalist: "I am played out, played out." You told the doctor: "I'm tired of living in two homes with two languages and two cultures." Perhaps Conrad died of a brain tumour like yours. No one seems to be sure. Both of you had had enough of life. Both of you were 66.

Wikipedia says: "Throughout almost his entire life Conrad was an outsider and felt himself to be one. An outsider in exile; an outsider during his visits to his family in Ukraine; an outsider, nationally and culturally, on British ships; an outsider as an English writer.... Conrad called himself a "bloody foreigner." You used exactly the same phrase about yourself.

I chose to read from *Amy Foster* last month at the reading Stewart organised because it was your favourite work by Joseph Conrad. There are more parallels here, too. The castaway in the story is recorded as Yanko Goorall in the marriage register. *Góral* means 'mountain dweller' or 'highlander' in Polish, the same meaning as the name *Goran* has in the languages of the former Yugoslavia. But, unlike the Goorall in Conrad's short story, you, Goran, didn't die "in the supreme disaster of loneliness and despair". You were much loved by many in this city and died with those who loved you most by your bedside. Jo^[3] was there by my side, too, as she is now.

^[3] Dr Joanna Labon, Editor of *Storm : Out of Yugoslavia* (1994) an anthology of writing by authors from the former Yugoslavia, which includes Goran Stefanovski's *Sarajevo : Tales from a City* (A Play)

To quote Wikipedia again: Conrad ‘wrote novels and stories... that depict crises of human individuality in the midst of what he saw as an indifferent, inscrutable and amoral world.’ Much the same could be said about your writing.

We read your play *Shades of Babel* in the same setting as we read Conrad, Goran, in St Peter’s Anglican Church, opposite the Oxfam Bookshop where I worked every Tuesday afternoon for a few years. It was your least performed play but I chose it because it was written when we could all feel the decline in the society we were living in in the 80s, a very similar feeling to what we feel now in England: “an indifferent, inscrutable and amoral world” indeed.

Some of your friends here took part in the reading. The play seemed to me to have a lot of relevance to today. You were always prophetic. You’re part of the programme for the Canterbury Commemoration Society readings now. We’re going to read *Sarajevo* together next October. That’ll bring back painful memories, but there’s hope in there, too. Rebuilding, renewal, trying again. It’s a vicious circle, of course. Let’s hope it won’t be too long before we choose hope over hate again and pick ourselves up from the ruins of the world we’re destroying.

Good news about that book of your plays which was supposed to have been published a couple of years ago in the States: they’re planning publication on your birthday next year, 27th April. A strange coincidence that the day of your birth and your death are exactly six months apart. As I told you, your American book of plays was delayed because of the interest in Ukrainian authors with the war going on in their country. The war’s been going on for more than 1,000 days now. I’m glad you didn’t live to witness it, as I’m glad you didn’t experience Brexit, Covid and Boris Johnson. It would all have depressed you so much. Inveterate optimists like me manage to live through such times and keep the eyes of the mind firmly fixed on a better future, even as it recedes further and further away. Who knows if I’ll live to see it? But I hope our children and grandchildren will.

We all miss you, but I often feel you around. Thank you for still being there. It helps in these dark days.