

## **Nobel Prize in Literature 1961**



**Ivo Andric**

**The Nobel Prize in Literature 1961 was awarded to Ivo Andric *"for the epic force with which he has traced themes and depicted human destinies drawn from the history of his country"*.**

The Nobel Prize in Literature has been awarded this year to the Yugoslav writer, Ivo Andric, who has been acknowledged in his own country as a novelist of unusual stature, and who in recent years has found an increasingly wide audience as more and more of his works have come to be translated. He was born in 1892 to a family of artisans that had settled in Bosnia, a province still under Austrian rule when he was a child.

As a young Serbian student, he joined the national revolutionary movement, suffered persecution, and was imprisoned in 1914 when the war broke out. Nevertheless, he studied at several universities, finally obtaining his degree from Graz. For several years he served his country in the diplomatic service; at the outbreak of the Second World War he was the Yugoslav ambassador in Berlin. Only a few hours after his return to Belgrade, the city was bombed by German planes. Forced to retreat during the German occupation, Andric nevertheless managed to survive and to write three remarkable novels. These are

generally called the Bosnian trilogy, although they have nothing in common but their historical setting, which is symbolized by the crescent and the cross. The creation of this work, in the deafening roar of guns and in the shadow of a national catastrophe whose scope then seemed beyond calculation, is a singularly striking literary achievement. The publication of the trilogy did not take place until 1945.

The epic maturity of these chronicles in novel form, especially of his masterpiece *Na Drini cuprija* (The Bridge on the Drina), 1945, was preceded by a phase during which Andric, speaking in the first person of the lyric poet, sought to express the harsh pessimism of his young heart. It is significant that in the isolation of his years in prison he had found the greatest consolation in Kierkegaard. Later, in the asceticism of strict self-discipline, he discovered the way that could lead him back to what he called "the eternal unconscious and blessed patrimony", a discovery that also signified the introduction into his work of the objective epic form which he henceforth cultivated, making himself the interpreter of those ancestral experiences that make a people conscious of what it is.

*Na Drini cuprija* is the heroic story of the famous bridge which the vizier Mehmed Pasha had built during the middle of the sixteenth century near the Bosnian city of Visegrad. Firmly placed on its eleven arches of light-coloured stone, richly ornamented, and raised in the middle by a superstructure, it proudly perpetuated the memory of an era throughout the following eventful centuries until it was blown up in the First World War. The vizier had wanted it to be a passage that would unite East and West in the centre of the Ottoman Empire. Armies and caravans would cross the Drina on this bridge, which for many generations symbolized permanence and continuity underneath the contingencies of history. This bridge became the scene for every important event in this strange corner of the world. Andric's local chronicle is amplified by the powerful voice of the river, and it is, finally, a heroic and bloody act in world history that is played here.

In the following work, *Travnicka hronika* (Bosnian Story), 1945, the action takes place at the time of the Napoleonic Wars. Here we witness the rivalry between the Austrian and French consuls in a desolated, old-fashioned city where a Turkish vizier has

established his residence. We find ourselves in the midst of events which bring together tragic destinies. The discontent which stirs among the bazaars in the alleys of Travnik; the revolts of the Serbo-Croatian peasants; the religious wars between Mohammedans, Christians, and Jews - all of this contributes to create the atmosphere that, after a century of tension, was going to be rent by the lightning at Sarajevo. Again, Andric's power is revealed in the breadth of his vision and the masterly control of his complex subject matter.

The third volume, *Gospodjica* (The Woman from Sarajevo), 1945, is different; it is a purely psychological study of avarice in its pathological and demoniac aspect. It tells the story of a merchant's daughter who lives alone in Sarajevo. Her bankrupt father had told her on his death-bed to defend her interests ruthlessly, since wealth is the only means of escape from the cruelties of existence. Although the portrait is strikingly successful, Andric here confines himself to a subject that does not permit him a full display of his great narrative gifts. They are revealed fully, however, in a minor work that should receive at least a brief mention: *Prokleta avilija* (Devil's Yard), 1954. A story set in an Istanbul prison, it is as colourful in its pattern as an Oriental tale and yet realistic and convincing.

Generally speaking, Andric combines modern psychological insight with the fatalism of the *Arabian Nights*. He feels a great tenderness for mankind, but he does not shrink from horror and violence, the most visible proof to him of the real presence of evil in the world. As a writer he possesses a whole network of original themes that belong only to him; he opens the chronicle of the world, so to speak, at an unknown page, and from the depth of the suffering souls of the Balkan slaves he appeals to our sensibility.

In one of his novellas, a young doctor recounting his experiences in the Bosnia of the 1920s says, "If you lie awake one whole night in Sarajevo, you learn to distinguish the voices of the Sarajevian night. With its rich and firm strokes the clock of the Catholic cathedral marks the hour of two. A long minute elapses; then you hear, a little more feeble, but shrill, the voice of the Orthodox Church, which also sounds its two strokes. Then, a little more harsh and far away, there is the voice of the Beg Mosque clock; it sounds eleven strokes, eleven ghostly Turkish hours, counted after the strange division of time in those

far-off regions. The Jews have no bell to toll their hours, and God alone knows what time it is for them, God alone knows the number indicated on the calendar of the Sephardims and the Ashkenazims. Thus, even in the deep of the night, when everybody sleeps, the world is divided; it is divided over the counting of the lost hours of a night that is coming to an end."

Perhaps this suggestive nocturnal atmosphere also gives a key to the chief problems that have dominated Andric's work. The study of history and philosophy has inevitably led him to ask what forces, in the blows and bitterness of antagonisms and conflicts, act to fashion a people and a nation. His own spiritual attitude is crucial in that respect. Considering these antagonisms with a deliberate and acquired serenity, he endeavours to see them all in the light of reason and with a profoundly human spirit. Herein lies, in the last analysis, the major theme of all his work; from the Balkans it brings to the entire world a stoic message, as our generation has experienced it.

Dear Sir - It is written on your diploma that the Nobel Prize has been bestowed upon you "for the epic force with which you have traced themes and depicted human destinies from your country's history." It is with great satisfaction that the Swedish Academy honours in you a worthy representative of a linguistic area which, up to now, has not appeared on the list of laureates. Extending to you our most sincere congratulations, I ask you to receive from the hands of His Majesty, the King, the Prize awarded to you.

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