

HOME > Cultura (World)

## [Han Kang] Hallyu Conquers Europe, And Korean Literature is Next

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The Nobel Prize for Literature 2024 is awarded to the South Korean writer and poet Han Kang. This news has pleasantly surprised Koreans, both because of the author's young age (she was born in 1970, the second youngest winner of the prestigious award after Rudyard Kipling who won it in 1907 at the age of 41), and because, while appreciating her undisputed narrative and poetic skills, they were, if anything, thinking of a victory postponed by a few years.



Yet this recognition should not come as much of a surprise: daughter of art, since her father Han Sungwon is also a writer, she had already published some poems in 1993, wrote her first and probably best-known novel "The Vegetarian" in 2007, and in 2016 won the Man Booker International Prize, one of the world's most famous and most prestigious literary prizes.

The fictional works of Han Kang, who is also the author of deep-breathed poems that explore the most intimate feelings expressed in verses rich in evocative images and powerful metaphors, address universal themes with an original and peculiar voice, moving from crude and violent representations of reality to dreamlike descriptions already present in the first novel "The Vegetarian" translated into Italian by Milena Zemira Ciccimarra and published in 2016 by Adelphi. In this work, the writer tackles the theme of the female body that becomes a way to rebel against social standards, against the physical and psychological violence exercised on women in a patriarchal society.

A dramatic inner struggle leads the protagonist, Yeong-Hye, to decide for herself to avoid eating living beings and in the end to stop eating, to the point of wasting and deforming her body, thus progressively detaching herself from reality. It is a painful journey, to the limits of what is possible, where detachment from the surrounding world also entails detachment from corporeity, progressive decay in the illusion of no longer being part of a human being, but identifying totally with a vegetable being. It is an inner journey with nothing mystical about it, but it makes the reader reflect on the meaning of life and whether death is something so terrible.

Reality and imagination are also to be found in the novel "Human Acts" (Adelphi, 2016, translated by Milena Zemira Ciccimarra), where the author recounts the massacre carried out in May 1980 under the regime of the dictator Chun Doo-hwan on the inhabitants of the city of Gwangju, in particular the students. Han Kang's artistic talent sees descriptions of crude violence transcend into a dreamlike dimension that belongs to the sphere of poetry, to reflections on the need to worthily protect the memory of the dead through the memory of a dark past that torments the novel's characters, who support each other as they try to regain a sense of belonging to their community. Each tragedy is thus united in a choral dimension that transforms personal trauma into a collective dimension.



"Convalescenza", on the other hand, is a book that collects two short stories, the first one giving the title to the volume and the second one entitled "The Fruit of My Woman" was published by Adelphi in 2019 (transl. Milena Zemira Ciccimarra). Both tales focus on the intimate travails of two women caused by the complexity of emotional ties with people close to them; the first is the drama of the protagonist caused by remorse because of her inability to establish a relationship with her sister from whom she has detached herself and whom she can no longer recover because she is now dead. The second is the original core of the novel "The Vegetarian", as it tells the story of a woman, a restless and aching soul in search of freedom, but unable to escape conventions. She meets a man with whom she became attached but cannot understand her inner drama and the protagonist's desire for freedom will only be fulfilled through a metamorphosis: the transformation into a tree.

Han Kang's latest book is "Greek Lessons" (Adelphi, 2023, translated by Lia Iovenitti). It is the novel where the author's lyricism reaches its highest peaks: it is the story of a woman who has lost her speech due to a series of traumas and who tries to recover it because she is fascinated by ancient Greek, "a language of extreme self-sufficiency, in which a word does not need to be combined with any other to be used". That is why she takes a course taught for a few students by a professor who has almost lost his sight, and has returned to live in Seoul after years spent in Germany. The author describes with great delicacy and prose that borders on poetry the relationship that gradually arises between the two characters, where the progressive loss of sight and speech seem to be metaphors for the incommunicability between people in a metropolis the size of Seoul. Plato's language becomes the red thread that will eventually unite two souls whose feelings remain as if suspended, where the reciprocal brushing of their faces with lips and fingers becomes the intimate communion of two souls hitherto locked in mutual solitude. In this novel in particular, the author succeeds, through the vicissitudes of the two characters, in bringing into dialogue Eastern and Western culture, in making the perennial light of the classical world illuminate the contemporary world.

Han Kang is the first author to win the Nobel Prize for Literature in South Korea, a country that is making great strides not only in the most advanced sectors of technology (think of the giant Samsung), but has also for some time now been conquering ever larger swathes of the European population with the so-called 'Hallyu', the Chinese term for the 'Korean wave', a cultural phenomenon that embraces cinema, drama, music and the culinary arts. Now it will almost certainly also be literature that will be of interest to Western readers, to make Korean poets and writers known to an ever-widening public, until now only to "insiders".



**Laura Garavaglia** Laura Garavaglia is a poet, translator, journalist, founder, and president of 'La Casa della Poesia di Como', and director of the International Poetry Festival 'Europa in Versi'. Her books of poems are translated into several languages, including Korean. Many of her poems are published in national and international anthologies, websites, magazines, etc. She won many international poetry awards and is invited to many festivals in various countries around the world.

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### 인기기사

- [인터뷰 - 에이리안 아스] 지구에 드러운 공포, ...
- [신간 안내] 변형규 시집 『죽어』
- [신간 안내] 김중연 시조집 『시 약방을 아시나...』
- [클투라 기획전시] 권동효 작가 《불무 & 화아...》
- [신간 안내] 이혜민 다카시집 『그늘이 자라는 ...』
- [신간 안내] 오정순 다카시집 『실루엣 감별법』
- [9월 문화소식] 《오랑주라-오르세미술관 특별...》
- [9월 문화소식] 《이자벨 드 가네-모던츠》
- [9월 문화소식] 《바스키아: 과거와 미래를 잇는...》
- [9월 문화소식] 클래식 《단조 미사》

### 최신기사

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- [북리뷰] 소위된 존재들에게 전하는 따뜻한 시선 — 손세실리아 『꿈결에 시를 베다』, 『가시를 베다』
 
- [북리뷰] 예리하게 담긴 전쟁의 상흔 — 빅토리아 아델리나 유작 에세이 『여성과 전쟁』 (따조)
 
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- [부산국제영화제] 아시아 영화의 심장, 서른 번째 가을을 맞다 — 제30회 부산국제영화제
 
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