

Orhan Pamuk with Carol Becker

On the occasion of the Columbia Alumni Association Forum, September 22, '07, organized by Columbia University at La Bourse, historic site of the Paris Stock Exchange, Carol Becker, Dean of the School of the Arts, spoke with Orhan Pamuk, Nobel Prize-winning Turkish novelist and Professor of Middle East and Asian Languages and Culture and the Arts at Columbia, about his life and work.

Carol Becker:

I'd like to start by talking with you as a literary critic. It seems to me that there is an incredible sense of optimism in the way you write about other writers. In other words, through the works of European novelists, especially Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann, Kafka, and Joyce, you have gained your own insights about Europe and inevitably your love and devotion to the novel. In the essay from "In Kars and Frankfurt," you wrote that "Mallarmé spoke the truth when he said, 'Everything in the world exists to be put into a book.' Without a doubt, the sort of book best equipped to absorb everything in the world is the novel." Similarly, in *The Black Book*, you have this wonderful phrase, "The world is a book." And in your marvelous introduction to *Tristram Shandy*, you talk about the novelist's ability to bring paradise into the present. Would you talk about the nature of the novel, and why you think it's capable of such vitality?

Pamuk:

As we know, much to our despair, it's such a common cliché among the journalists; they always call me and say, "I am doing a piece in the arts page for a magazine, and the novel is dead. What do you think?" Most of the time when I was writing the essays that you just mentioned, part of me would get quite angry over these comments. I sometimes, with self-irony, would also say that I am a humble servant of this great art. The novel, beginning in the 18th century, began to take over all the previous literary forms. In fact, we can even say it was the early form of globalization. The world, in so many ways, is so culturally globalized that

our ways of seeing it are very similar to the post-Renaissance, let's say from the invention of perspective in Italian and Dutch painting to the invention of photography and thereafter; we still see the world in a similar manner. We are likewise all globalized in our literary imagination, in the forms that we use, and I would say the literary globalization of the world had been completed years ago, when nobody was talking about globalization. With this, I imply that the art of the novel is well and kicking and that everyone from all over the world has access to and is using it. It is now a common heritage of humanity. It has what I would call an intense elasticity in that it can absorb national problems and represent national dramas, so that you can use and impose your particular understanding of this form into your corner of the world, or discuss your national debate, whatever it is, such that it will hold the nation together, because it is a text that everyone can argue with. Let me give you an example: I wrote *Snow*, a political novel, thinking everybody would be angry, and, yes, everyone was angry; but everyone was also reading, discussing and talking about it. I think the art of the novel, as a form, is one of the great arts humanity has developed that has continuity, that changes and survives. Over the last twenty years, we have witnessed a return to the 18th century Diderot kind of novel, which is a form that combines essays and novels together. Actually, I consider myself a sort of a representative of that "encyclopedic" novel. In other words, you can put anything into novels; novels are encyclopedias. Malarmé's words to that effect say that in the end, everything in the world, for the imaginative novelist or imaginative literary person, is in fact made to end up in a book. That's how I see the world as well, because I am a novelist, and I care about the informative, encyclopedic quality of the novel.

Becker:

You use a Stendhal quote from his *The Charterhouse of Parma* as the epigram for *Snow*. "Politics in the literary work are a pistol shot in the middle of a concert, a crude affair though one impossible to ignore. We are about to speak of very ugly matters." It's a great place to begin a political novel. Can you talk about why you think politics ruins the novel and why it is so difficult to create a really successful political novel?

Pamuk:

There are so many problems with the political novel.

Becker:

Of course, and yet you wrote one.

Pamuk:

I wrote one, right, but I don't think it is a great genre that produces masterpieces. It's rather a limited genre, despite the fact that Dostoyevsky, Conrad, Stendhal and a few others produced the best examples of it. Still, it's troubled by some inner contradictions. By that I mean when a novelist or an artist has heartfelt political agendas about prior political tension in some corner of the world where there is a highly dramatized and unstable political situation, he or she tends to interiorize these problems and desires to express them on a political level. But once the author commits himself or herself to those problems, he or she is not a good novelist, because they takes sides. They can't identify with everyone. They often have clear-cut good guys and bad guys, white guys and black guys, and so on. Once someone is morally committed to a political stance, it is almost impossible, or it is very problematic, to produce a satisfying, aesthetically convincing and "beautiful," so to speak, novel. However, a few have managed to do that. Dostoyevsky's *The Possessed*, sometimes translated as *The Demons*, is a great political novel in this sense. On the one hand, Dostoyevsky had in him the quality of believing angrily, with energy, in a social cause, getting angry about everyone; he had a nasty side to his spirit. He also had the unique ability, even in his anger, to identify with the bad guys. So it's hard to be politically motivated and committed and write a novel that will not be damaged by the natural consequences of moral commitment, that is, inability to understand the "bad guy." That is the fragile moment of the political novel. Although there have been a few classics, I think it can never be a major genre.

Becker:

What I found so insightful was the notion that a writer or a novelist can break through what you define as “the confines of the self” by entering into the otherness of characters. And it would seem at this moment, when otherness is such a difficult issue in the world, that globally there would be a major reason to be a novelist. That was what I meant when I said there’s an incredible sense of optimism in the way you write, and you managed to express it in *Snow*.

Pamuk:

Thank you.

Becker:

This is especially true with the character Blue, whom you made so attractive. But what really was interesting to me was not just that you were able to represent a radical Islamist, as you call him, as a sympathetic character but that you were able to enter into the philosophical argument that a person like him would pursue. How did you do that?

Pamuk:

Well, at the heart of this great art of the novel that we’re talking about lies the human capacity to identify with what we call “the other.” The “other” is an academic word we use for people who are not like us; to talk about those who are not like us has been the problem of the last twenty years. So much has been written about “others” academically, but not in the form of the novel. I strongly feel that the art of the novel is based on the human capacity, though it’s a limited capacity, to be able to identify with “the other.” Only human beings can do this. It requires imagination, a sort of morality, a self-imposed goal of understanding this person who is different from us, which is a rarity. Once you begin to do that, you also imply or define a frame of understanding of a group, because a group is made of people sometimes like us and sometimes unlike us, and once you begin to identify yourself with those who are not like you, you inevitably begin to enlarge both your frame

of mind and the frame of the group, you begin to see things differently. This is what Proust, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Thomas Mann, the great masters of this art, have managed to develop; this human capacity, which I strongly believe is inherent in all human beings, such that all nations use it as their basis of communication. Now you're asking me, "How did you do that?" I don't know. The personal side of me doesn't want to explain it at all. Of course I have read a lot to understand the inner workings of the political Islamists, the rebels. But then I should also warn you that I have political Islamites in my part of the world, and they had so many affinities, say thirty years ago, with radical Marxists. Among the old fashioned Marxists and political Islamists there is a continuity and repeated pattern of anti-Westernism, of parochialism and all sorts of conspiracy theories in place of logical thinking, especially nationalism disguised as anti-imperialism. Varieties of these thoughts and sentiments are shared by the Marxists and Islamists in many ways.

Becker:

In your new book, *Other Colors: Selected Essays and A Story*, published last September, there is an essay called "On My Name is Red," which is a reflection on *My Name is Red*, one of your most popular novels. You wrote, "As I was finishing the book, it seemed to me that the mystery plot, the detective story, was forced, that my heart wasn't in it, but it was too late to make changes. I had worried that no one would be interested in my lovely miniaturists, unless I found some device to draw the reader in..." It's as if you were being apologetic for the structure of the novel. I thought that was a humbling gesture. To shift the subject a bit, I know that your first love was painting, at least from the age of seven to twenty-two, and you also have an essay in this volume describing why you didn't become an architect. Why did you become a writer as opposed to a painter or an architect?

Pamuk:

First of all, the idea of wanting to become a painter, between the ages of seven and twenty-two, was encouraged by my family. I came from a family of civil engineers where my parents would say

of my other siblings, “this one will go to the same school as his grandfather, the other the same school as his father and his uncle, but this one”—meaning me—“will be an architect,” which is a bit of an artsy engineer, or at least that’s what they thought at the time. Then I dropped out of school suddenly and began writing novels and stopped painting. Now, when people ask how I managed to establish myself as a Turkish novelist in my thirties, or why I gave up painting and architecture, I look at them like a deer in headlights because I don’t have one single answer for them. In fact, if you read *Istanbul*, my memoir, it explains everything in detail about that turn in my life.

Secondly, I had learned at an early age that painting requires self-imposed discipline and solitude, which is in many ways quite identical to writing and suits my temperament. But now, as I get older, I return back to my childhood by writing more about the visual arts. Actually, I’m teaching a course with Andreas Huyssen which is a sort of survey of the history of the relationship between words and images in humanities, exploring essential points about the differences and shared problems of painting and literature. I hope that students will come to the realization in the end that when we entertain a thought in our minds it becomes an image, which can then be translated into pictures or written words. That is, our minds work in such a way that what we call thoughts or ideas are made up of a combination of words and pictures. I also feel the need to bring up the history of Islamic art, which is so heavily embedded in the idea that the Koran prohibits the use of images, yet the Ottoman sultans didn’t care about that. They made paintings inside books, finding all kinds of excuses to do so. That in itself is an interesting subject.

Becker:

It’s especially interesting because increasingly with young art students who want to manifest ideas and work between forms, it’s a question of the appropriate form or inventing forms, which is a different matter altogether. They seem to be more and more interested in what form will best suit their ideas, concepts, or missions. In the future, with an increased availability of media and technology of all forms early on in the progression of an artist’s educa-

tion—film, video, animation, computer-generated images and so on—we are going to see more of this overlap of form.

Pamuk:

I do have sympathy for that kind of representation, but I still believe young artists should not neglect the classical idea of craftsmanship. The hand should be trained before the mind, especially in painting. In the last hundred years or so, the idea of uniqueness and individuality is becoming more and more emphasized, so much so that we tend to think less of past art. Actually, the old masters were less self-centered than we are now. The idea that is, as in conceptual art, a water bottle sitting on the table can be put in a frame and shown as art.

Becker:

Not necessarily even with a frame.

Pamuk:

Yes, it's too seductive and appealing to those who can execute such conceptual ideas which qualify them as artists. But what about the art that requires the hand to deal with color, pigments, and all the complex issues that come with them? We can think of a person who wants to express himself and whether he or she should study painting or literature. He or she can do it all, but there are limits to time and acquiring craftsmanship.

Becker:

In Istanbul, which I read with such delight because it reminded me so much of Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and *Ulysses*: it reveals the process of how someone becomes a writer. For me, the book is about the ways in which an imagination is challenged for an entire childhood, and at the very end declares, "This imagination will be a writer." It's an amazing Proustian moment. The book ends with your decision to become a writer. But of course the writer has written everything we have read so far. What did you learn while writing that book?

Pamuk:

Well, my anxiety was not in learning something in particular, but in putting together all my memories in the shape of a book. I ended up learning more about the process of going back to my history. To some extent, writing an autobiography is deleting or editing out 95 percent of your life, and it's such a painful process. I have so many wonderful anecdotes of, let's say, my primary school, which I share with everyone, but if I write all of them, I'd have to write another ten volumes.

Becker:

The Nobel speech "My Father's Suitcase," included in the recent book, is a beautiful tribute to your father. His temperament was such that you say, "He was too comfortable in his skin, too assured about the future ever to be gripped by the essential passions of literary creativity." He would say to you, "Life is not something to be earned, but to be enjoyed." In some sense, this is your explanation for why he did not pursue the sort of literary career that you have, even though he wrote. You present him as someone who didn't seem to have the hunger or disquietude necessary to give his life over to writing. Then also you present the wonderful notion that we don't really want to know the interior lives of our parents, that our own narcissism precludes our desire to understand them as anything other than our parents. Could you talk a bit more about your father?

Pamuk:

Well, on the one hand, my father's father was a very rich man, and that made life easier for him. He came from a secular Westernized family who had enjoyed the first two or three decades of the Modern Turkish Republic. They strongly believed in Turkish Nationalism and Turkish Occidentalism, that is Westernization, which they thought of as a path towards civilization. That said, my father being the son of a very rich family, I strongly felt that he did not want to endure or live through the hardship of a literary life during the late '40s to mid-'50s, when that life would have been very tough, and it was considered a rich man's fancy to be a writer. On

the other hand he was an intelligent person who enjoyed books and had literary friends. He would also, behind their back but in a charming manner, mock them for only addressing a Turkish readership. Listening to my father—even at an early age—I had the impression that an author should address not the national concerns, but all humanity. When he was bored with us at home, he would often travel to Paris, stay in hotel rooms, and fill pages and pages of notebooks, which he gave me just before he died. I remember him saying to me and my brother, with a laugh, “Well you guys have to work hard. I was privileged but there’s no money left, children. Too bad.” But he did this in such a graceful, kind manner that you liked the man for even saying it. He had an immense and excellent library and cared about Jean-Paul Sartre instead of Pashas and Saints in Turkey. It inspires me to think similarly, that I should take a modern writer as a secular saint, one I’ve decided I want to be like. My father had tremendous confidence in my brother and I, which we took for granted. I would draw a line and he would say, “Oh, this is genius!” Not because he really believed I was a genius, as I sometimes thought. He believed in himself so much that he thought only a genius’s son could do such a thing. But he gave me the self-confidence that I needed.

Becker:

You have written about writers who were physically on the so-called “periphery,” like Borges, but who were in fact central in terms of their contribution. I would add Neruda or García Márquez to that group. Can you elaborate on the meaning of such categories?

Pamuk:

I lived practically all my life, except the last two or three years, in Istanbul. That is to say, especially in the '50s, '60s and '70s, we were living in the provinces. The center of the world is somewhere else. Even though we identify with and follow Westernization, we are not a part of it. That gives you a heavy sense of living on the sides, not at the center. V. S. Naipaul, though I may not agree with his politics, is a good observer of this kind of situation—what was academically called the post-colonial situation—although

it doesn't quite apply to Turkey, as Turkey was never a western colony. We Turks have never been victims of "imperialism." That makes the Turkish situation somewhat unique. But then being on the margins inspires you to go to the center. The cultural consequences of this kind of sentiment are an important part of my work. When a new book of mine is reviewed positively by international press, especially in the first books, I had the impression that, say, my love scenes were considered to be about "Turkish love," while I thought I was writing about love in general. It seemed that when I wrote about love it was about Turkish love. When Proust wrote about love he wrote about love in general. All my life I fought against the impulse to impose my story, to make others accept my story; not to pigeon-hole me to an ethnic or national identity, but to accept my humanity as a part of a whole humanity, to accept my story as humankind's story.

Becker:

I'd like to ask you about the issue of freedom of expression. There is always the assumption that when artists and writers speak out politically, exposing the lies or the contradictions within their own society, that they are somehow anti-American or anti-Turkish, while in fact if you are truly attempting to call attention to what is happening in your country, if you care enough to really do this, you are being the most patriotic. I remember being on picket lines during the anti-war movement during the '60s and people would yell out at me, "Go back to Russia!" I would think, "Go back to Russia? I don't come from Russia, I come from this country and I'm trying to make a statement about this country." You talk quite elegantly about notions of the novelist's desire, ability, compulsion, and obligation to record the secret "shames" of his or her society, even though others want and need to keep them hidden while feeling betrayed when they are made visible. I've seen this in the United States, especially with the war in Iraq, and in South Africa. In fact, when J. M. Coetzee's novel *Disgrace* came out, even though it was an accurate representation of part of the reality of the new South Africa, it was received by many in the ANC government with negative criticism and accusations, which I know was very painful for him. You must have gone through the same experience.

Pamuk:

Well, firstly, political hardships have taught me not to pay attention to rhetorical figures or rhetorical maneuvering of political enemies. If they insult you on something, you shouldn't go back and say "That's not the fact." We should not pay much attention to it. My mind is not concerned with the lies ultra right-wingers tell about me in Turkey. Secondly, in a semi-repressed society like South Africa, once you talk about things the establishment doesn't want you to talk about, they will use their power to misrepresent you. You cannot fight back. Even if you fight back, it's hard to convince the majority of the people that the accusations are untrue. You call them the establishment because they have the media, they have the army, and so on. This is not only in Turkey, it's everywhere. The definition of being critical is to say something to the establishment and to say something against the media. It has its costs. My point is that sometimes the political situation is so repressive that little things you say get grossly enlarged and distorted by the time they come back to you. Either you have to take a step back or wait for them to pass away. I did not really look for the political troubles I was forced into but I felt that they fell into my lap so to speak. I never sought them out. I see myself as a person who is writing in solitude all the time. I know that politics is a matter of community, of friends getting together, talking, drinking, living, thinking together, especially in my part of the world, but at the same time, the art of the novel implies that you become another person, someone who doesn't join the community so willingly.

Becker:

You mention this in *The Implied Author*. All the work you have done has become so politicized that you've been thrust into the political arena, even though you'd rather lock yourself in your room and write. And yet, in your own terms, your involuntary political involvement has helped you to grow up, at the expense of a certain childishness. How difficult was that realization?

Pamuk:

These are my words, but I'm not happy growing up.

Becker:

This I understand.

Pamuk:

I make it clear when I say creative thinking requires a sort of irresponsibility. By that I mean the seriousness and responsibility that society demands, which you impose on yourself and others, will vanish once you find yourself in a political situation. However, creativity also requires the kind of freedom of a child who does not consider the political consequences or any other consequences of his playfulness. In fact, new ideas come to us when we pay attention to this playful aspect, which is in some ways contradictory to politics.

Becker:

Do you have a sense of who your readers are in Turkey?

Pamuk:

My readers inside of Turkey and outside of Turkey are always the same, that of women and students who like to read novels, and "intellectuals" who want to be updated on the scene, about the recent creative writing. But that may be less true outside of Turkey. Ninety-five percent of men over 35 don't read novels in my part of the world. It's true in other places as well. I have seen so many resentful attitudes that say "I could have written novels, too. But there are more serious things to do in life." Or they say, "Mr. Pamuk, I don't like your political comments, but I respect you as a serious writer. Can you autograph this book for my wife?" But then students, or people who care about creativity and different ideas, about representing a nation and its problems, all the things that make a good intellectual student enthusiastic—all these people read my novels. Including woman readers à la Madame Bo-

vary. But this is not a Turkish situation. It's a global situation.

Becker:

Would you comment on the geographic distribution of the novel? Are there literary cultures without novels? And if so, why?

Pamuk:

Franco Moretti, who was a Columbia professor, now at Stanford unfortunately, wrote extensively about the geographic mapping of the novel. He paid so much attention to the geography, in fact, that I think he sometimes lost the point. But as I said before, anyone who reads books in translation in any corner of the world is similar to those who want to write them. We cannot make a generalization about the art of the novel. It is definitely a global art. The unity of humanity and the world is based on the fact that everyone still wants to write novels.

Becker:

Could you read something that would represent your voice as a writer? [Hands him a marked passage from his new book, *Other Colors*].

Pamuk:

[To the audience] This is a fragment from my Nobel Prize acceptance speech, entitled "My Father's Suitcase": [Pamuk reads.] As you know, the question we writers are asked most often, the favorite question, is: Why do you write? Here's an answer: I write because I have an innate need to write! I write because I can't do normal work like other people. I write because I want to read books like the ones I write. I write because I am angry at all of you, angry at everyone. I write because I love sitting in a room all day writing. I write because I can only partake in real life by changing it. I write because I want others, the whole world, to know what sort of life we lived, and continue to live, in Istanbul, in Turkey. I write because I love the smell of paper, pen, and ink. I write because I believe in literature, in the art of the novel,

more than I believe in anything else. I write because it is a habit, a passion. I write because I am afraid of being forgotten. I write because I like the glory and interest that writing brings. I write to be alone. Perhaps I write because I hope to understand why I am so very, very angry at all of you, so very, very angry at everyone. I write because I like to be read. I write because once I have begun a novel, an essay, a page, I want to finish it. I write because everyone expects me to write. I write because I have a childish belief in the immortality of libraries, and in the way my books sit on the shelf. I write because it is exciting to turn all of life's beauties and riches into words. I write not to tell a story, but to compose a story. I write because I wish to escape from the foreboding that there is a place I must go but—just as in a dream—I can't quite get there. I write because I have never managed to be happy. I write to be happy.