

JAN MICHALSKI PRIZE FOR LITERATURE

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SPEECH BY ISABEL HILTON

It is a tremendous honour always to take part in a literature jury, a great pleasure but it is also a great responsibility because it invites one to reflect on what we should be rewarding, we can't reward everything. Shouldn't be ambitious, shouldn't be execution, shouldn't be the topic, shouldn't be the literature sensibility, for every choice we make, of course, we exclude wonderful books. So why this choice this year ?

I think the first thing that attracted me to this book was, of course, the subject of all the subjects of our age. I think the encounter between Europe and Asia is one that we all need to understand. It is changing our life, it is reshaping the world, it is changing the future of our children. And it has a past, it has a history, it did not come out of nowhere in the last ten or twenty years. At any moment of rapid change, I think, we are understanding that the world begins to fragment. We have to reassemble it in a new shape and for that we turn to writers. It is writers who have the perception, the understanding and the education to help us understanding to reshape our world.

So this writer, Julia Lovell, is both a literary translator per se and an historian. So as a historian, she brings an literary sensibility which comes from understanding not just the events and the facts and the historical records, but understanding the soul of a great culture through translating its literature and through her great understanding of the depth and complexity of its language and culture. So one of the things that makes her history so original is that sensibility that she brings. She brings perception, she brings humour and she is very rare also in a sense that as a historian who explores characteristically these encounters between Asia and the West, in this case Asia and Europe, and she brings a profound understanding of both sides which is not always true with historians. In this very dynamic and multifaceted narrative, she manages to raise the sensibilities that each side brings. For the other thing that I would draw your attention to about this book is that history is not all about events, it also about the way we describe those events, it is about the stories we tell about those events and what they mean to us as each generation retells these stories and reshapes its understanding of the past for present needs.

This book is a wonderfully witty, and accessible account of the event, but it is also the story of what those events meant at the time and what they came to mean through history, how both Europe and China have taken this narrative and reshaped it to meet present needs. So it is for me an exemplary text which takes history and tells us what we need to know today. It is a book written by a great expert but accessible and I think important to all and I recommend it to you. Thank you.

*Isabel Hilton
Member of the jury*