

## Speaker's manuscript – Literature prize 2021 Abdulrazak Gurnah

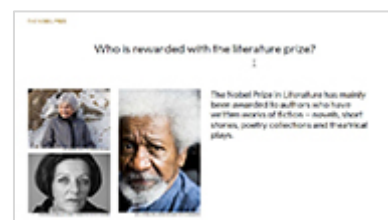
### The Nobel Prize in Literature

- The Nobel Prize in Literature is one of the five prizes founded by Alfred Nobel and awarded on 10 December every year.
- Before Nobel died on 10 December 1896, he wrote in his will that the largest part of his fortune should be used to fund a prize to those who "have conferred the greatest benefit to humankind".
- One of the five prizes should go "the person who shall have produced in the field of literature the most outstanding work in an ideal direction".



### Who is rewarded with the literature prize?

- The Nobel Prize in Literature has mainly been awarded to authors who have written works of fiction – such as novels, short stories, poetry collections and theatrical plays.
- The literature prize has also been awarded to authors in other literary genres.
- In 2016 the prize went to a musician and songwriter, when Bob Dylan became the literature laureate.
- Examples of authors who have received the prize are Selma Lagerlöf (1909), Ernest Hemingway (1954), Wole Soyinka (1986), Alice Munro (2013) and Tomas Tranströmer (2011).



### The 2021 literature prize

- Abdulrazak Gurnah was born in 1948 on the island of Zanzibar, at the time a part of Tanzania.
- Gurnah has written ten novels and many short stories.
- His first language is Swahili, but he writes literature in English.
- He has also worked as a professor of literary criticism at the University of Kent.
- Gurnah is usually considered to be among the most important post-colonial authors, though he does not want to be labelled as such. In an interview, he has said, "I'd rather not be called anything other than my own name."



## The 2021 literature laureate

- While Abdulrazak Gurnah was growing up on Zanzibar, the island was liberated from British colonial rule. What followed was a revolution that led to oppression and persecution of citizens of Arab origin, and Gurnah was among them.
- At the age of eighteen, he was forced to leave behind his family and his life on Zanzibar to live in exile in England.
- As a twenty-one-year-old living in England, Gurnah began to write. In a 2008 interview, he explained why.



## From an interview with Abdulrazak Gurnah

- “I guess it was coming to England – that there were things that were nagging to be worked out in a way, and also those things were nagging to be worked out privately. These things weren’t something you could just sit around with friends and chat about. Some of those feelings of regret or homesickness, of wanting to think about what had been left behind. You couldn’t just really sit the way you are at eighteen, nineteen or twenty, and so it began as a desire to understand the things that were nagging and troubling.”



From an interview with Abdulrazak Gurnah conducted by Marco Ruberto at the University of Kent, Canterbury, 3 December 2008.

## Debut and breakthrough

- In 1987, Gurnah made his debut with the novel *Memory of Departure*. It is about a gifted young man on the east coast of Africa who tries to find a way out of a difficult situation at home, with an alcoholic father and a sister who has been forced into prostitution. His prosperous uncle in Nairobi refuses to help him, and he is sent back home.
- Gurnah's breakthrough as a writer came with the 1994 novel *Paradise*. The book is based on stories from the Old Testament and the Quran about Joseph, who rises out of slavery in Egypt to become chief advisor to the Pharaoh. Gurnah sets his version of the story in Tanzania in the early twentieth century.



## Recurring themes in Gurnah's writing

- Themes that recur in Gurnah's writing include refugees' experience of displacement and exile. The characters in his books are often caught in the gap between cultures and continents, between the life they've lived and the one that awaits them.
- Gurnah sheds light on how colonialism has affected East Africa and what happens when different worlds and cultures collide.
- Abdulrazak Gurnah's seventh novel, *Desertion*, is about a love affair between Martin and Rehana, who come from different worlds both culturally and religiously. The novel is based on Gurnah's own youth in Zanzibar, which for centuries has been a place where many different languages, cultures and religions have lived side by side, but also fought with one another.
- In the second part of *Desertion*, Rehana's grandson surfaces, proving that the love story between her and Martin did not end in catastrophe but led to many new stories.



## A storyteller who portrays people in a complex world

- Abdulrazak Gurnah's writing shows the impossibility of simplifying what has happened, or what is happening, in the world, and he does so by following the fates of individual people with great compassion and a powerful empathy that erases all stereotypes.
- He often counters the expectations that readers might have – like expecting that a romance about forbidden love must end either happily or in catastrophe.
- Ultimately Gurnah also opens our eyes to East Africa's rich cultural diversity, which is unfamiliar to many in other parts of the world.



“It's both the pleasure of making things, crafting, getting it right, but it's also the pleasure of getting something across.”

- In an interview given in conjunction with the announcement of the 2021 literature prize, Abdulrazak Gurnah spoke about how he sees his writing and his creativity.

