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Good evening. And good evening Hanya Yanagihara. It is a great pleasure and an honor to have you with us in Amsterdam. But most af all: thank you for writing this great novel: *To Paradise*. It is not only a gripping story, it also provides a quest. An adventure. A trip. A warm bath that turns very hot. A hot bath that turns icy - and hot again.

*To Paradise* consists of 3 parts. These 3 parts dish out 3 periods in time: 1893, 1993, 2093. Mind you, these years are possiblities, parallel versions of our world. They are not ours, but still we can immediately relate to them.

To understand *To Paradise* one might think of the Butterfly Effect: The flight of a butterfly in Brazil could lead to a tornado in Texas - small decisions can have huge consequences. Remember the film *Back to the Future*? The biggest problem of that lovely hero Marty McFly being in the past, is that he risks erasing himself in the future, because of one small, well-intended piece of advice that he gives out of the goodness of his heart.

That is the way one can read these three versions of an alternate world history that Hanya Yanagihara describes in three separate novels. The miracle is that these 3 novels about three ages evolve into this one great book: *To Paradise*.

The 3 novels depict three different worlds. But yet they are linked, by the names of the characters. In each of the 3 parts Ms. Yanagihara showers the same names on different characters. David, Charles, Edward and the others.... and every time they are utterly different people. They aren't even versions of one another - but their names seem to suggest that they *are* related, in a magical mysterious way. What's in a name? Nothing? Everything? Whatever. 'What's in a name' turns out to be a serious question.

The characters tend to be all male - and suddenly there is one woman – her name is Charlie. She turns out to be the most interesting person in this great big book, the character into whom all the others dissolve.

To me, that is. Any other reader can, and will, have other interpretations. Because like all rich pieces of art, *To Paradise* imposes a personal relationship on its reader. I can sit next to you, I can walk hand in hand with you, and yet we will feel differently about these characters, as we will value differently the situations we find them in, in contrary ways.

We live in the age of Covid-19. Vaccination keeps it at bay, but after only two years in its grip we know: it has sunk its jaws in our throats and refuses to let go. We now all say: „We have to live with it, and we will learn to do so” – two years ago it was unfathomable that we would even consider this fate. We would conquer it, and that was that.

And then *To Paradise* came out. It stunned its readers. Here was a writer who based her novel on this virus and she wrote her book *before* it even attacked us. She predicted our fate, including alarmingly true details and a range of chilling possible consequences of the pandemic.

And now, since February 24th, there's more. Now war has broken out on the edge of Western Europe. Russia's President Putin viciously tries to overrun Ukraine for reasons that can only be labeled fake news.

And what is the other pillar of *To Paradise*, besides an all too real, ongoing pandemic? The effect of a world war, including a reshaped world order.

We do not know when this war will end, let alone how. We don't know yet if it can be contained, or if it will turn out to be World War 3. But we can be sure that balances of power will be shifted in unthinkable ways. They already have.

The strange, if not miraculous, truth is: in her novel *To Paradise* Hanya Yanagihara not only supposes the all too real outcome of the pandemic, she also takes an advance on a postwar future. And it doesn't look good. The only comfort is that she does not predict it, far from it. She suggests possibilities.

We still have a way out.

Reading *To Paradise* once more proved to me that a work of art, be it a play, a painting, a piece of music or a novel, can evolve into a being in itself. It lives, it moves. It can touch you in unexpected ways and force you in the strangest directions.

Reading *To Paradise* shocked me, it rocked my life. Certitudes no longer exist. Love exists, but can lead to disaster.

I read. I enjoyed. I cherished.

I got upset, I grew so sad.

I survived.

I experienced the proverbial loneliness of a long distance runner – the long distance being Life.

That is what Hanya Yanagihara did to me.

And now I can do nothing else but thank her for that.