

“I don't live in an ivory tower”

By
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Stegaurach – Nevfel Cumart builds bridges. Literary bridges. From his home in Stegaurach to his family origins in Turkey. And back again. To Germany and its social hot spots. In vocational and special needs schools, where he works with children and youths, showing them how to cope with their problems through literature. And so he builds on – into politics, feuilletons. Advancing into the upper echelons of the literary world. Shortly, at the end of October, poet Nevfel Cumart, 44, will be awarded Eon's Bavarian Culture Prize.

In our interview, he speaks of the “blessing of isolation” and the lyrical ivory towers he wishes to avoid.

Were you surprised when you received the letter from Eon?

Nevfel Cumart: At first, I didn't take the envelope seriously. I even let my daughter scribble all over it. So yes, I was very surprised.

Pleasantly surprised, I hope?

(laughs) Certainly – I was just thankful it wasn't an electricity bill!

10000 euros – that must be a lot of money for an author?

Less than 2 per cent of writers in Germany can survive on their earnings from their literary work. I'm one of the lucky ones.

Yes, but we've never seen you on the best-seller lists.

All my poetry books are, in fact, best sellers – in inverted commas. Each edition comprises around 2000 copies which is a hell of a lot for this category.

But surely that isn't enough to pay the bills?

I don't survive on the written but the spoken word. By that, I mean presentations, seminars, lectureships, readings and the like.

And your poems?

They're my real passion. I need poetry to understand myself, God, the world and, of course, my daughter's laughter.

So this is the stuff of your poems?

I write about anything that grabs my interest or preoccupies my mind. It could be anything.

Surely your work contains some central themes?

Of course. But it's not my job to explain and interpret all that – that's for others to do.

So, is it your job to translate between cultures, to build literary bridges?

Yes, I was thrown into this role from an early age. Whenever I took my mother to the local authorities, the doctor's or the hospital. This calling became my profession. I'm well acquainted with all the social hot spots. I don't live in a lyrical ivory tower.

So where do you live then?

As you know, I do a lot of talks at schools, primarily at vocational and special needs schools. I want to reach youths who have a migrant background. This is grass roots work. Floating above the clouds writing poetry isn't really my thing.

So you need to keep a firm grip on reality?

I suppose you could say that. But on the other hand, I also teach at universities, moderate panel discussions, give talks about Turkish culture and Islam. My life meanders between these two extremes.

Does this mean the issues of integration and migration are always with you?

Well, that's a very broad field. It's impossible to put it in a nutshell.

But if you had to, what would you say?

Migration is by no means a bed of roses. The same can be said of integration. While it would be wrong to conclude that integration has failed, it certainly hasn't succeeded either. The truth lies somewhere in the middle. 2.8 million Turkish people live in Germany today. This is often forgotten.

Language skills are one of the main problem areas, are they not?

Yes, that's right. Language is the key to actively participating in society. Unfortunately, many parents don't have a good command of German. So how can their children expect to receive their support?

But you're a “second-generation immigrant”. Where did you learn such good German?

I like to call it the “blessing of isolation”. I grew up on a small pen-



insula beyond Stade in the north of Germany. I was the only Turkish child there, so I was forced to speak German.

And now you speak German, English and Turkish?

Yes, but German is my literary language, the language I like to work in. My first language, if you like. It proved to be my strongest language.

And your mother tongue?

(laughter) It certainly isn't German. My mother always spoke to me in Arabic. So Arabic is my mother tongue even though I didn't learn it properly until I was at university.