

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long:

I'm Karen Long, and you're listening to the Asterisk*, a production of the Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards. An asterisk is a reference mark indicating an omission.

Karen Long:

Today, we are figuring out some of the holes in our knowledge with Ilya Kaminsky, the author, most recently of "Deaf Republic." Professor Kaminsky joins us from Atlanta, and he won an Anisfield-Wolf prize for poetry in 2020 for "Deaf Republic." Welcome, Professor Kaminsky.

Ilya Kaminsky:

Thank you so much for having me.

Karen Long:

We are thrilled to be in your company, especially in this political season. Can we just start with your thoughts as we see a new chapter in American politics, but one that carries forward so much that is pertinent to the topics of "Deaf Republic."

Ilya Kaminsky:

Yeah. Thank you. It's an interesting day to be in conversation. The beginning of the second day of a new administration. I say interesting because on one side, so much jubilation, so much relief to be able to turn the page. And on the other side, so much sadness that we have to do this. Do we have to be turning the page?

Ilya Kaminsky:

That so much has been done that this flurry of activities, so many Presidential acts are necessary, and that we are so relieved to have basic human rights given back to us. This kind of happiness to my mind, is a strange happiness. And so I thought I would begin with a poem called, "We Lived Happily During the War."

Karen Long:

We would love to hear you read that to us. This is, "We Lived Happily During the War."

Ilya Kaminsky:

We Lived Happily During the War.

And when they bombed other people's houses, we

protested

but not enough, we opposed them but not

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

enough. I was
in my bed, around my bed America

was falling: invisible house by invisible house by invisible house.

I took a chair outside and watched the sun.

In the sixth month
of a disastrous reign in the house of money

in the street of money in the city of money in the country of money,
our great country of money, we (forgive us)

lived happily during the war.

Karen Long:

Thank you. Thank you so much, Professor Kaminsky. As I look at those lines, and you speak to the falling in America, invisible house by invisible house by invisible house, on this day, it feels like a reference to the pandemic. And yet you wrote this poem, if I am remembering correctly, during the invasion of Iraq?

Ilya Kaminsky:

Yeah. I wrote this poem during the second invasion of Iraq. I was visiting a wonderful contemporary poet, a brilliant poet, Eleanor Wilner. Eleanor was so furious with what was happening. And I was a relatively recent Russian immigrant watching in surprise that things like that can happen if you will. As an immigrant, you come expecting a very different kind of way. And so I hoped people would have moral standards that were kind of translated into the poem, if you will, at the time. What it said to me is that is the poem still relevant? It wouldn't be the case, but alas...

Karen Long:

And it layers other kinds of meanings of disconnection. The way the pandemic has scythed down so many people in just 10 months. 400,000 people and our task of putting the houses back up is domestic and international.

Ilya Kaminsky:

Well, I think it's also important to be clear whether it's pandemic that did this, or whether actually irresponsibility and recklessness. People who were supposed to handle the pandemic didn't. I think it is probably fairly obvious right now that the pandemic should have reached the level it has at this point.

Karen Long:

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

I think that's fair. As I've re-read "Deaf Republic," which I loved doing, thank you — you're so brilliant at keeping the joy and the unhappiness in the same book. I reflected on the repetition of the cycle we are caught in starting with the second poem, which you wrote and dedicated to Jericho Brown. It's the poem called "Gunshot," where a boy falls in the street, killed by the military. And we see authorities killing boys over and over here. And so "Gunshot" is also sadly as relevant as the day you wrote it.

Ilya Kaminsky:

Yes, I'm glad you mentioned it. Jericho Brown, who is a very powerful, powerful poet, who was himself on the subject of racism. For me coming from Ukraine, I'm kind of a person in transit if you will. Are there any immigrant or refugee really isn't? So a part of the book is very much speaking back to Eastern Europe and Ukraine, but a large part of the book is also speaking to United States. And what I was struck by again and again in writing the book, it took about 15 years to do that, is how many similarities there are. When I gave a public event, people love hearing, about 12 billion exotic places like Ukraine. It happens somewhere else. And the audience feels like almost, they are on Mount Olympus overlooking the rest of the world. But in fact, there are gunshots right here in our country. And poets like Jericho really show to us very powerfully and immediately and bravely. And so it was an honor to be in conversation.

Karen Long:

I love that. And Jericho also writes of the body, very movingly, which I think is one of your great strengths. You and he both live in Atlanta. Have you done readings together?

Ilya Kaminsky:

Yeah, we have a number of times.

Karen Long:

Hooray. We will need to watch for the next time that happens, when we are safely able to be together that way.

Ilya Kaminsky:

That'd be wonderful.

Karen Long:

There are lines from "Deaf Republic" that feel like they are entering our conversations. And of course the line that is sampled on the back of the book itself feels profound and important. "Silence is the invention of the hearing." I love it because it does what Anisfield-Wolf literature exists to do, which is shift us so that we are not thinking conventionally. So "silence is the invention of the hearing" lets us see there are other ways to be. When you won your prize, one of the most beautiful things you said, one of the most important things you said, I believe is that, "the disabled body doesn't just belong to the realm of the hospital, but to the realm of the political minority." Would you talk a bit about that?

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Ilya Kaminsky:

I think it is especially relevant at this moment of pandemic, but also in a moment when we speak about health coverage, how few people actually have it. And that makes us really stand in front of a question of what does it mean to have a disabled body and whose body is disabled at which point and who is in charge of labeling bodies?

Karen Long:

Right.

Ilya Kaminsky:

And what I was trying to do, being hard of hearing, what I was trying to do is to navigate the question of at which point is deafness as a disability? At which point is it the culture? Who calls what a disability? Why disability sometimes has negative connotations at times in mainstream culture and how can the tables be turned? And perhaps everybody should want to be just like the deaf people. Perhaps the deaf people can show a different way to have a communication, which is otherwise unknown to many different cultures.

Ilya Kaminsky:

And what did he mean by that? There have been basic studies done that I mentioned to you before I think in our conversation. So I hope it's okay to repeat. For example, scientists have put four hearing people from different parts of the world in the same room, and left them in the room for six hours. Once they come back, four people say from Poland, South Africa, Mexico and United States, would sit in different corners of the room and be slightly afraid each other, not talking all day. And then they repeated this same situation for deaf people. Now sign language is not a universal one, but different countries have different sign languages. And yet when they come back after six hours, they saw something radically wonderful happened. What happened? Four deaf people were creating a new sign language.

Karen Long:

Creating a new language.

Ilya Kaminsky:

They were creating a way to communicate. And that tells us of the four, one of them loves the spoken language, this written language, one of them loved speech and yet one of those are acutely aware of limitations of speech.

Karen Long:

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Yes, and I think “Deaf Republic” invites the reader through the pictograms, to think about entering. Entering a new kind of speech and being — especially the clever way at the end, you allow people to remember the pictogram and find a message.

Ilya Kaminsky:

What I was hoping to do was to show the reader that the community is creating its own language in order to defy the authorities, so a language which the authorities would not understand. And as the reader would go with the book together with the writer. The reader would begin to pick up that language as well. The reader would learn sometimes as well and as a book contains subtitles so they understand. But as you mentioned it as the end of the book there are no subtitles and yet the reader knows exactly what the signs say. So in a way the reader becomes a part of that community of the book, a community that stands out, a community, that struggles to stand out. A community that perseveres despite the difficulties of the journey.

Karen Long:

Remember Rita Dove loving that part of your book. Its invitation to think differently. When Peter Ho Davies won an Anisfield-Wolf for his novel, “The Fortunes,” Margot Lee Shetterly won that year for her book, “Hidden Figures” about the African-American mathematicians at Langley who helped usher in the Space Age. And Peter made the beautiful observation that you could call almost all the Anisfield-Wolf books, Hidden Figures. And Margo said, “If you want to tell a true story, you need to tell a complete story.” I see “Deaf Republic” helping us see and think and tell more completely.

Ilya Kaminsky:

Thank you. It's hard for me to talk about my own book. I know what I tried to do was to write about how community lives in a complicated situation. And I wanted to make sure that I don't just make over the top heroes in the book, they had to be human, they had to be flawed in order to be real. And the main thing for me was to make the reader part of the community of the book. And also show the reader the complicity of the community of the book and thereby the complicity of the reader who enters that conversation.

Karen Long:

And now we'll pause for a short break. The Asterisk* is a project of the Cleveland Foundation to bring more readers and listeners into conversation with the best writers in English. In this case, recipients of the Anisfield-Wolf book award. We now return to the conversation.

Karen Long:

One question poets have is knowing when they're ready to publish. And I know 15 years went into these 60 poems, which is patience that feels so beautiful and elusive. You write about the patience a man learns from his wife. I wonder about your patience in crafting “Deaf Republic” or “Dancing with Odessa” and how you knew when it was ready for the world.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Ilya Kaminsky:

The truth is a lot of things happened in the writing of the book. When I first published “Dancing,” which is my first collection in English, it was very much a book about a Russian immigrant – a young kid really. In conversation, we used the tradition, the language that he loves that he didn’t live among anymore. And that was very much a book written in images because I didn't have hearing aids living in the USSR. And so the language I knew was a language of images. It was probably more written in my mind in images than in English even.

Ilya Kaminsky:

But when I finished that book, I had to ask myself a real question of, "Okay, what am I going to do next? Am I still going to play Russian even though I have lived in America for a decade now? What does it mean to live in America for a decade? What is my relationship with the place?" And around that time, I moved to Southern California, to San Diego, which is a city on a border. And a lot of the things that people see on TV now about what's happening on the border where not on TV at that time, but very much in the streets of San Diego. San Diego is a place, a beautiful city that calls itself, America's finest city, happiest city. But it is also a place where a lot of really terrible things happen. You can be in a parking lot at Home Depot and you see a family being dragged into the ICE car. And that is a regular occurrence, it is not an unusual occurrence.

Ilya Kaminsky:

So those things also left me wondering, “What is my relationship to this as a young immigrant?” And at that same time, Ukraine was being invaded by Russia, a part of Ukrainian territory still under Russian occupation. And I go to Ukraine periodically and things that I saw were basically leading me to question how many similarities there are between the places that are so radically different. And there are a whole lot of similarities. And what does that mean? Perhaps a picture of shining democracy that we tell ourselves, the propaganda of shining democracy, that we tell ourselves about ourselves, is not exactly true.

Ilya Kaminsky:

And those images – and I still very much write in the language of images – those images lent themselves to the book, which I knew had to be a fable because as somebody who lives in between two cultures wanting to speak to both, one uses the kind of a narrative that would work for both. And that's how the fable of the book was born. But as I was writing, I found myself even publishing in journals very different versions of the story because some versions spoke more to the Ukrainian side and other stories the American side. And as somebody who's an immigrant that wanted to have something that's true for both, because that's a part of my experience. And so I knew that the book was done when it was done, when I felt it was true for both.

Karen Long:

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Fascinating. It also raises for me your transition from lawyer to poet. Those are two radically distinct ways that language works. It's the precision of the law that works toward removing ambiguity versus the bountifulness of the poem that welcomes a multiplicity of meaning. Tell us how you took one road in the woods that led toward poetry from your initial road?

Ilya Kaminsky:

I have always written poetry before I went to law school. I do have to say that at least for the kind of law I was involved in, which was public interest law, I worked as a law clerk at Legal Aid and worked for National Immigration Law Center in Oakland as well. For that kind of law, it's a lot less of dealing with the language that prevents people from justice and a lot more of dealing with the language that brings equity, and human to human. Legal Aid is all about that, about a line of people to help and you trying to accommodate as many as you can on a daily basis. Sometimes that is also very much true in poetry, because in poetry be all about stories, all about images or about the arrogance of the music of what happens. The images are the evidence. The lawyer, you're supposed to listen to a long narrative of what happened then pick up just the examples that are most striking and most obviously useful, you're now helping the human in the case.

Karen Long:

So you don't see that radical difference.

Ilya Kaminsky:

I don't and there have been, at least for Russian poets, or Eastern European poets, there have been plenty who have studied law. I think the problem with law in the United States. As you mentioned, the legal language, the legalese, is so different from a language we speak. But that has to do with the history of racism, the history of poverty in the United States has a legal language itself. And also UK of course, how the legal language itself was a kind of language that was for a specific class and not for people who needed protection from that class.

Karen Long:

Yes. And you're making me think of Eric Foner because one of his arguments in his book, "The Second Founding," is that the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendment, post-Civil War, are sleeping, they have not been brought to the fruition, thanks to the rulings of the Supreme Court. They could be inputting to write the full rights of people who used to be in slavery or their descendants. So when we spoke with Eric Foner, he was very interested of course, in the mob at the Capitol, but he was more interested, I think, in what happened in your home state. And like you, he was holding both in his conversation. He mentioned how radical it is for the state of Georgia to send an African-American pastor and a Jewish activist to the Senate. That the laws of Georgia are set up so that won't happen, according to Professor Foner. So I would love to hear how you're thinking about that development.

Ilya Kaminsky:

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Well, to my mind, and of course I don't necessarily live in the State of Georgia, I live in a great city of Atlanta. And Atlanta is a modern 21st century city. Georgia sometimes is still a 19th century state. What do I mean when I say that is there are great many people who could vote, but are unable to for various reasons that are illegal. And what we see happening in Georgia is people who could vote actually being able to vote. The gates had been opened. So when we talk about both sides equal, this very language of both sides is an invention. You look at general vote and you see that there are millions and millions, millions more people. And same thing happens at state level. How many more people would be able to vote if artificial restrictions that are illegal would be lifted. That's my take on the state of Georgia.

Karen Long:

I so appreciate that because it's applicable to the state of Ohio. We have people living in the 19th century in Ohio and not at all eager to enter the 20th. Congress member Jim Jordan is from Ohio. So "Deaf Republic" might feel to some readers like its evil twin got unleashed January 6th, that the people who formed a mob did it not to include, but to exclude, how do you think about the template in the hearts of folk in that mob who might see themselves as throwing off their own oppressors?

Ilya Kaminsky:

Much of what I say is based on where I grew up. And now I'm going to give that example from USSR, in contemporary Russia right now, but it began in the late USSR. There was a politician, a Nazi politician who is still very much in the Russian version of Congress, his name is Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. The whole country is fully aware that Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is telling lies and is supported by secret services or whatever, Russian version of people who would like to keep the power. And the whole country is aware that 99% of what he says is not true. And yet he's able to stay in power. If you compare the rhetoric of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy to the rhetoric of Donald Trump, how two people speak, how they form sentences, how they disrespect people in front of them, it's wildly similar. And at a point, one begins to think, "Okay, what is the relationship between language and a conversation that's an honest conversation? How do other countries form propaganda?"

Ilya Kaminsky:

What we have in America right now is of course, very American, but also very similar to nationalism elsewhere. Very similar to propaganda elsewhere. And perhaps it is useful for us to compare what happened just a few days ago, a few weeks ago now in the Capitol building to say, what happened in Germany in 1930s, or what was happening in Putin's Russia. Those things are not exactly dissimilar, of course, they're very specific to the history of this country, very specific to civil war in this country, slavery in this country. But nationalism is nationalism and sometimes just opening it on the letter N in a dictionary explains quite a lot. I don't want to be stating the obvious, but those symptoms are kind of obvious. When one human say bothers another, whatever their life story, or skin color, or whatever else that is inherently wrong, you can call it racism or nationalism or any other thing that unfortunately exists. But most humans on the planet will say it's wrong and we have many examples in history, how tragedy springs from that kind of behavior.

Anisfield-Wolf Book Awards*

Karen Long:

And it's reminding me of Arnold Schwarzenegger's Instagram, where he talked about his father after the second World War and the broken men around his father. He was born two years after the war, Arnold was, and he talked about the shame and the drunkenness of the Austrian men who had participated in this exercise of cruelty that Nazi-ism unleashed. And I remember somebody writing about the Trump administration — “cruelty is the point.” And that seems to echo what you're telling us, Professor Kaminsky, that nationalism or racism, these forms of diminishment sit in cruelty.

Ilya Kaminsky:

And it's also a lot of it is simply a form of propaganda. Was Hitler really interested in German people or was he interested in power? Is Donald Trump really interested in the well-being of those people who are attacking the Capitol building or is he interested in a dollar sign? I'm willing to bet that he is interested in a dollar sign.

Karen Long:

Well, you have given us a way to think that is unique and beautiful, and we are in your debt to welcome you into the cannon and to be your readers for the rest of your working life. I will wait 15 years for the next book. I hope it's not that long.

Ilya Kaminsky:

Thank you. Thank you so much. Thank you for having me. It's truly an honor to be in conversation. And I just want to say that no matter which language we are in, it is really important to my mind, for us to find value also in things like language and choice of language in a song, in a lullaby, in a love poem, in a story. We survive as a humankind if we're able to continue the struggle of humankind, because we tell stories and songs of what happened before and hopes of what might happen in the future. And those are linkages that connect us, that help us to go on. So thank you for making this connection happen and for making these linkages happen over time between books and between people.

Karen Long:

Thank you. The Asterisk* is brought to you by the Cleveland Foundation. The executive producer is Alan Ashby, and the producer is Jae Williams of WOVU Radio. I'm Karen Long who manages the prizes, thank you for listening.