



**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier
at the opening of the second Forum Bellevue
“Freedom of thought in turbulent times”
in Schloss Bellevue on 30 November 2017**

Ralf Dahrendorf once called intellectuals the “court jesters of modern society”. He saw it as their obligation to doubt everything that was undisputed, to wonder at everything that was self-evident, to critically put all authority into perspective, and to ask all those questions that no one else dared to ask.

As we know from history and literature, a good court jester must, of course, ensure that he does not become the puppet of the lord of the castle – no matter who that is – and that he always strives to maintain his freedom, does not obey instructions and never does what is expected of him. Ideally, he will render his audience a great service by never serving anyone.

This afternoon, therefore, I will not even attempt to define the role of the intellectual from my lectern, and most certainly not as lord of the castle. And I am certainly not going to be a Federal President who assigns social tasks to writers and artists. After all, what characterises our open society is that it does not oblige literature and the arts to commit to specific goals, not even democracy, reason or any given idea of what constitutes a good life.

However, that does not mean that literature and the arts cannot have a political impact. On the contrary, storytelling in particular always has a political impact if it analyses society, depicts an era or challenges our usual view of the world. Storytelling fosters a society’s self-knowledge when it takes us on detours, lures us into dark corners and ambushes, and lends a voice to those who would otherwise have remained unheard.

The Scottish author Ali Smith explained recently why she believes that fiction is more important than ever today in these confusing times: “The people who make fictions,” she wrote, “can proffer worlds that give us back the world. They can alert us to the workings of the

people who make fictions of our world and call what they're doing truth."

So it is no coincidence that we have invited authors to be with us today. They are particularly affected when freedom of speech and expression are challenged, when politicians invent stories and literature has to tell the truth – using its own tools. As masters of the written word, they are perhaps best placed to help us understand what is actually happening at the moment – both to and around us.

Despite their very different biographies and works, our guests have one thing in common: they are all award-winning authors and storytellers who have published new books this year – both novels and short stories – that have shown us surprising perspectives and provoked a widespread reaction. However, all of them are also active observers who regularly get involved in public debate.

My first guest was born in Bombay and has lived for many years in New York, the city in which many of his novels are set. He knows from his own experience what it means for a writer to receive death threats from religious zealots and to be forced to live in hiding. He said everything there is to say about this in his great autobiographical novel "Joseph Anton".

Time and again he has defended freedom of speech as an inalienable universal right against religious intolerance and authoritarian rulers, but also against the guardians of political correctness in liberal societies. He once said that "The attempt to silence our tongue is not only censorship. It is also an existential crime about the kind of species that we are. "The ability to tell stories is basically what makes us human, he said.

In this "time of lies", he had thought hard about his own literature and then decided to write a "social novel of our times": "The Golden House" is set in the United States. It is about the fictionality of reality, about fluid identities, about the question as to whether an individual can be good and bad at the same time. It is also about a real democracy in which grotesque figures undermine the old liberal world along with its virtues such as self-irony, equanimity and reason.

Mr Rushdie, when I think that certainly most of your book was finished by November 2016, we can only suspect that you are able to see the future!

I am delighted that he is here with us today. Please join me in welcoming Sir Salman Rushdie!

My second guest was born in Vienna and has lived here in Berlin for many years. She not only writes beautiful fictional prose but also, to my mind, intelligent, stimulating and occasionally furious essays. And she is well-known for "shooting her mouth off and not letting anyone stop her". At least, that is what she says about herself.

She expects artists to make use of democracy – especially as they can play a special role in public discourse: “The only power we have,” she has written, “is our voice and our vulnerability. We are oddballs sitting in quiet rooms (...) We spend a lot of time on strange, old-fashioned ideas. We have and indeed need distance. Precisely that is our expertise, the prerequisite for a different, hopefully freer view.”

In her books, she has examined a Holocaust denier’s court case, told the story of a Viennese family with Jewish roots in the most magnificent fashion, and explored the many identities of a woman in her novel “Quasikristalle”.

Her latest work, for which she has just received the Austrian Book Award – I do not think it is too late to congratulate her! – is called “Tiere für Fortgeschrittene”. Of course, it is about human beings and their self-delusions about their complicated relationships. And it is also about their attempts to cope in a changing world.

Without a doubt, your literature is based on contemporaneity and I am sure that it will be heard this afternoon. A very warm welcome to you, Eva Menasse!

My third guest this afternoon was born in Munich, lives in Vienna, Berlin and New York and – very fittingly – is a friend of Salman Rushdie.

While many contemporary authors outline dystopian visions of the near future in their novels in order to analyse our society, he adopts the opposite approach and takes a detour through the past to portray the abysses of the present.

In his new work, he moves the historical figure of Till Eulenspiegel into the age of the Thirty Years War. Among other things, he turns his Tyll into a court jester – a free thinker at a time of sweeping changes – which brings us back to our theme today.

If Tyll stands for anything, then it is perhaps the strange role of the artist, about whom his creator says: “The artist is not simply the voice of reason, opposed to all nonsense around him. Ideally, he is much more. Darkness and uncanniness also play a role.”

Our guest’s message to anyone who thinks that the Thirty Years War was a long time ago goes as follows: “I fear it is a very topical book. (...) We are currently witnessing once more the destructive clash among religions, or rather an unfathomable mix of religion and power politics – just like back then. The Thirty Years War is what happens when politicians on all sides fail completely.”

We all know that not only does he repeatedly take the world’s measure, he is also a great novelist and humourist who has a keen sense of horror. Please welcome Daniel Kehlmann!

It now gives me great pleasure to hand over to a journalist who knows the cultural scene better than almost anyone else. She lives in Berlin and Milan and was the face and voice of the ZDF arts show *Aspekte* for many years.

Luzia Braun, the floor is yours. I will take my seat on the platform – not as the lord of the castle and not as a court jester, but rather as a citizen with a bit of experience in the political arena who wants to hear what courageous intellectuals have to say to us in these turbulent times.

I am looking forward to discussing all of this with you.