

Press release  
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## **Yusef Komunyakaa**

### **Laureate of The Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award 2021**

**The Zbigniew Herbert Foundation announced the name of the Laureate of the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award 2021. The honour went to Yusef Komunyakaa, an Afro-American living in the United States, veteran of the Vietnam war, and a poet inspired by jazz and the blues. The PZU Foundation is the strategic partner of the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award.**

*“Yusef Komunyakaa is one of the most original, most expressive of contemporary poets. His voice brings together the experiences of a black American born in the American South, a veteran of the Vietnam War, brought up in the jazz and blues tradition, writing about the most painful experiences of modern life in the USA, all at once universal in how he invokes the traditions of many cultures. Despite the painful themes he takes on, his poetry is never dry, on the contrary – it has great sensual energy, a poetry of dance and love; a song in honour of life and existence” – commented Tomasz Różycki, Jury Chairman, in justifying the verdict.*

*“Like Zbigniew Herbert, he [Komunyakaa] is an avant-garde classicist with a strong »tablet of values«. One can read his work as a lifelong quest for peace, freedom, and social justice. His artistry is unique” – underscored Edward Hirsch, co juror, American poet and essayist.*

**The laureate wrote:** *“(…) I am honored to receive this year’s Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award. Especially since the award bears the name of a poet whom I truly admire. I remember when I first read Zbigniew Herbert’s poetry in an issue of »Field« magazine published at Oberlin College in Ohio. Indeed, literature travels; I am thankful to be initiated into the tradition, one that crosses both geographical and cultural borders, as well as borders of time and space. One’s work (...) grows*

*when it comes in contact with others. (...) I often trust a persona to render a deeper truth of our world, and, in this sense (...) I envy the poet whose name this award bears, who conjured the great persona, Mr. Cogito. I am blessed to know that no topic is taboo, when language reveals truth. I believe poetry is an action, and I believe the great poet, Zbigniew Herbert, would have agreed with me."*

Yusef Komunyakaa was born in the small town of Bogalusa, Louisiana. He grew up in the American South, at a time of racial segregation and terror introduced by the Ku-Klux-Klan. Enlisted into the military in 1969, deployed in Vietnam as a correspondent, and later appointed managing editor of the »Southern Cross« earned him a Bronze Star. It was during this conflict that he began to write. His first volume of poetry was published in the mid-1970s, whilst American critics discovered him in 1984, following the publication of "Copacetic" a poetry collection, whose title (which in professional Southern jazz slang translates as: "very satisfactorily composed") invokes the jazz tradition. Komunyakaa has to date published over a dozen volumes, authored librettos for a number of jazz operas, edited numerous poetry anthologies, won the Pulitzer Prize (in 1994 for "Neon Vernacular"), and is a university professor. His work inherently places him in the tradition of African-American literature, all at once crossing its borders, eagerly partaking, say, of European culture, antiquity or Shakespeare.

The Polish reader might learn of his works, among others by delving into "*Pochwała miejsc ciemnych*" ["Praising Dark Places"], a volume published in 2005 (translated by Katarzyna Jakubiak). Cracow based Znak has prepared a new, substantially expanded edition of this retrospective selection of poetic works, published in recognition of Komunyakaa's receipt of the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award, that is about to hit bookstores, titled "*Niebieska Godzina*" ["Blue Hour"]. Jerzy Illg, **Znak's Editor-in-Chief**, notes that the poetry contains "*numerous polonicas. Komunyakaa has often visited our country; thanks to which Hasior's sculptures, Jagiellonian University's murdered professors and anonymous victims of the Holocaust, have all benefited from this Afro-American artist's poetic testimony.*"

The Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award is a distinction on the literary world stage – primarily in the field of poetry. It has been conferred since 2013, in recognition of outstanding artistic and intellectual achievements, inspired by the values and ideals which Zbigniew Herbert's

work exemplifies. Previous Laureates include W.S. Merwin, Charles Simic, Ryszard Krynicki, Lars Gustafsson, Breyten Breytenbach, Nuala Ní Dhomhnaill, Agi Miszol and Durs Grünbein.

*“In the 1970-71 academic year, together with Herbert, we lived in Pasadena. My husband was employed at the local California State College, lecturing American students about Rimbaud and Rilke, whilst also working on a volume of »Pan Cogito« [»Mr Cogito«], whose hero fell to the heart of this year’s prize laureate. Though Herbert’s interest lay principally with European culture, he was obviously very much aware of the tragic fate of Afro-Americans, and was instinctively on the side of, as he put it, ‘the humiliated and beaten’. I am convinced that he would be delighted that an award bearing his name falls to a representative of this particular culture, that is presently regaining its full rights” – reminisced Katarzyna Herbert, the poet’s widow, and founder of the **Foundation.***

*“Zbigniew Herbert once said, that his interests lie especially with nations or peoples ‘who historically have not done so well’, adding, referring to Poles: ‘things also didn’t go especially well for us’. He valued freedom, heroic acts in its defence or to regain it. I thus believe that he would be all for granting the award precisely to Yusef Komunyakaa. This choice would be well matched by his [Zbigniew Herbert’s] assessment of contemporary American poetry of his time, which he described as ‘maximalist, brave, endeavouring to provide answers to questions afflicting modern humanity’ ” – summed up Andrzej Franaszek, Award Secretary and author of the two volume “Herbert. A Biography” [Herbert. Biografia].*

This year’s Laureate was chosen by a jury, composed of poets, essayists, translators and publishers: Yuri Andrukhovych (Ukraine), Edward Hirsch (USA), Michael Krüger (Germany), Mercedes Montana (Spain), and Tomasz Różycki (Poland).

**The Award Presentation Ceremony will be held at the *Teatr Polski* in Warsaw on September 15<sup>th</sup> 2021. The ceremony will be transmitted live via the Zbigniew Herbert Foundation social media accounts.**

**Zbigniewa Herberta Foundations Partners:**

**The PZU Foundation** – Strategic Partner of the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award 2021;

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For more information about the Zbigniew Herbert International Literary Award go to:

- [www.fundacjaherberta.com](http://www.fundacjaherberta.com)
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