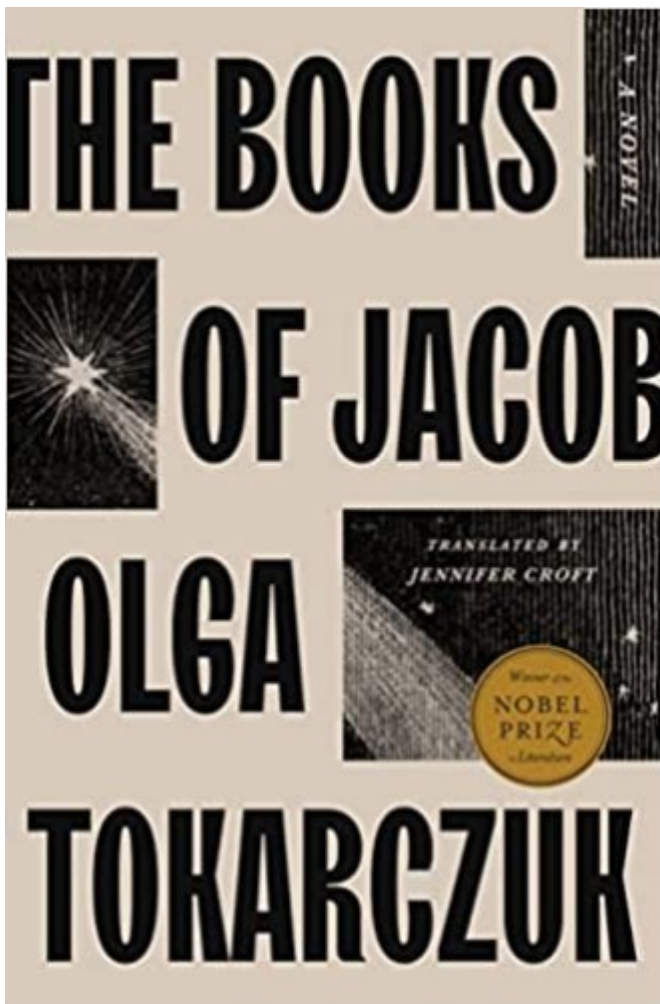


A 21st-century Polish epic

Based on historical events, Olga Tokarczuk's massive novel is simultaneously heartbreaking and comic.

by [Jeannine Marie Pitas](#) in the [January 2023](#) issue

In Review



The Books of Jacob

by Olga Tokarczuk translated by Jennifer Croft

Riverhead Books

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This 965-page novel by Polish Nobel laureate Olga Tokarczuk took me seven weeks to read. While that might seem like a long commitment, it's nothing compared to the seven years its author spent writing it and the seven subsequent years that translator Jennifer Croft spent rendering it in dazzling English prose. In an age of short attention spans, sitting down to read a long novel may seem an arduous task. But with an unforgettable cast of characters and a page-turning story line simultaneously comic and heartbreaking, Tokarczuk's magnum opus is well worth the effort.

Based on real historical events, the novel revolves around Jacob Frank (1726–1791), an 18th-century Jewish leader who declared himself to be the Messiah. Shunned by the mainstream Jewish community within a wider context of common antisemitism, his followers survived by forming a close bond, taking refuge in the Ottoman Empire, and eventually seeking baptism into the Roman Catholic faith.

The book—the subtitle of which is, in part, *A Fantastic Journey across Seven Borders, Five Languages, and Three Major Religions, Not Counting the Minor Sects*—follows Frank around Central Europe as he prophesies the arrival of a messianic era. Along the way, he encourages orgiastic rites to bind his community together, develops an apparent Marian devotion, faces imprisonment but convinces his jailers of his spiritual authority, and ultimately meets death and the dissolution of his community—but not without leaving behind a powerful remnant that flowers into his descendants' miraculous survival during World War II.

Much of the novel's power lies in its ability to be simultaneously historical and timeless, culturally specific and universally human. The plot is driven by a delightful cast of characters like Antoni, a nominally Christian, libertine Polish adventurer who serves as the Frankists' interpreter and surprises himself by how attached to the community he becomes; Nahman, a devoted follower of Frank and a mystic who views reality through a lens of enchantment; and Frank's beautiful daughter, Eva, who despite a very strange and traumatic upbringing refuses to be anyone but herself.

While Frank is an arrogant, infuriating, and creepy cult leader, he wins our sympathy through the hope and devotion he inspires. His followers' yearning to realize his

vision of a new, hope-filled messianic era rings true across time and space. “The Messiah is something more than a figure and a person,” states the novel’s omniscient narrator, embodied in the family matriarch, Yente. “It is something that flows in your blood, resides in your breath, it is the dearest and most precious human thought: that salvation exists.”

For me, this novel is a 21st-century resurgence of an ancient literary genre that is particularly present in the Polish tradition: the epic. Kraków’s main square is graced with a statue of Adam Mickiewicz, considered the national poet of Poland, Lithuania, and Belarus. Born in present-day Belarus in 1798, Mickiewicz lived and wrote at a time when the Polish state did not exist on any map but Polish people preserved their cultural identity and language. His epic poem *Pan Tadeusz*, which tells of conflicting noble families who ultimately put aside their differences to resist Russian occupation, is widely read as a tale of the modern Polish nation’s founding.

Though the Romantic era is considered the period when Polish literature flowered most abundantly, the epic tradition continued in the 20th century with such figures as Nobel Prize-winning novelist Henryk Sienkiewicz, dramatist Stanisław Wyspiański, and filmmaker Andrzej Wajda. What many of their epics hold in common is a sense of celebration in the face of failure and tragedy—a phenomenon that some might argue is characteristic of the epic genre as a whole.

The Martinican writer Édouard Glissant has argued that every attempt at a national foundation myth reveals the impossibility of creating any comprehensive, complete vision of a group of people. “Within the collective books concerning the sacred and the notion of history lies the germ of the exact opposite of what they so loudly proclaim,” he notes in his 1990 book *Poetics of Relation*.

The Greek victory in the *Iliad* depends on trickery; Ulysses returns from his odyssey and is recognized only by his dog; the Old Testament David bears the stain of adultery and murder; the *Chanson de Roland* is the chronicle of a defeat; the characters in the *Sagas* are branded by an unstemmable fate, and so forth. These books are the beginning of something entirely different from massive, dogmatic and totalitarian certainty (despite the religious uses to which they will be put). These are books of errantry, going beyond the pursuits and triumphs of rootedness required by the evolution of history.

What Glissant calls “errantry” permeates Tokarczuk’s novel—not only in its wild plotline but in the contexts and minor characters that contain it. Oppressive social structures that keep peasants down, antisemitism that turns violent, and Poland’s history as both a colonizing and colonized nation are not concealed. While Mickiewicz saw Poland as a messianic Christian nation whose suffering at the hands of occupying powers would redeem the world, Tokarczuk sees it as a multiethnic and multireligious nation with slippery borders, a nation composed of human beings who are simultaneously wise and foolish, cruel and kind.

It is especially significant that, in a country where today 92 percent of people self-identify as Roman Catholic, Tokarczuk has chosen to tell a story grounded in a Jewish community. In Poland’s long history, Jews have at times been welcomed and at other times faced discrimination and violence, but in this country whose national identity has so often been inextricably linked with Catholicism, they have usually been marginalized. Antisemitism persists in Poland to this day; when confronted about it, many Poles bristle with the same kind of defensiveness seen in White Americans when confronted with the reality of racism. It is perhaps in part for this reason that Tokarczuk’s novel met with some controversy in Poland. But as I read it, the novel does exactly what any good epic should: it unsettles its readers, making us question who we are in a way that ultimately guides us toward recognizing our shared humanity.

Croft regards translation as an art that requires equal parts passion and dedication. In a cross-cultural novel in which translation and interpretation play a major role in the action—such as when the Frankists must learn Polish as they seek refuge in Poland—Croft creates an English prose that simultaneously unsettles us and invites us in. The effect is enchanting. Croft, who has advocated for greater recognition of translators’ art, has achieved something tremendous. In an interview in which she discusses her lexical and syntactical choices, she said that her goal was to create “micro-suspense: the desire to keep reading, the drive to turn the page.” This she has indeed done.

Together, Tokarczuk and Croft have brought us a truly marvelous tale that offers an antidote to quick sound bites and media maelstroms, highlighting a human capacity that transcends all national and cultural borders: our capacity for imagination.