



‘Writing, to me, it’s like entering the unknown’ ... Jon Fosse. Photograph: Thomas Ekström

Jon Fosse

[Interview](#)

Nobel prize winner Jon Fosse: ‘It took years before I dared to write again’

[Chris Power](#)

In 2012, the Norwegian novelist and playwright collapsed. He gave up drinking, retreating from the public eye – then, earlier this month, he got a call from the Swedish academy. He discusses how it feels to win a Nobel prize

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On the day this year’s [Nobel prize in literature](#) was announced,

Jon Fosse went for a drive in the countryside outside Bergen to relax. “I was nervous before the announcement,” says the Norwegian playwright and author, with a laugh. He has been a fixture on bookies’ lists of Nobel favourites since 2013, so he felt, “you know, ‘It could be me.’ But I didn’t think it would be me.”

At 20 minutes to one, a call came through from Mats Malm, permanent secretary of the Swedish Academy, and “I felt a sudden happiness entering my body and my brain.” Then, perhaps unsurprisingly for a man whose plays and novels are filled with uncertainty – about everything from the nature of God to where his characters might be located in time or space – he began to doubt what he was hearing. “If you don’t believe it,” Malm said, “just watch me at one o’clock on television.”

The Nobel, awarded to Fosse for his “innovative plays and prose which give voice to the unsayable”, crowns a remarkably productive, highly decorated career: 39 novels and short story collections, more than 40 plays (plus many more translations), 13 volumes of poetry, and a handful of children’s books. All of these are written in Nynorsk, a form of Norwegian used by around 15% of the population, mostly in the west around Bergen (Fosse divides his time between western Norway, Oslo and Lower Austria). While his writing is pitched both higher and lower than the political realm, focusing on the spiritual as well as the minutiae of existence, and the ways they intertwine, he says: “Just by writing in Nynorsk and growing up as I did, just by that, there’s a kind of political dimension to my writing.” An atheist and anarchist in his teens (he describes his political beliefs as “kind of a mess, but it was on the left-hand side at least”), who now describes himself as leftwing, he converted to Catholicism in 2012.

It was writing that led the way. “I wrote and I didn’t understand where it was coming from. How do I manage it? It’s coming from somewhere else.” He was already attending the Catholic church in Bergen in the 1980s, “and yeah, it appealed to me, but I felt it was wrong to convert”. He spent time with the Quakers, too, but by 2012, “especially when I stopped drinking, I felt I needed something else, something stronger. Then I started looking at Catholicism again.” Around this time he met Anna, now his third wife, “and her family are Catholic. So I started to learn how to behave as a kind of Catholic.”

Arriving to meet Fosse at the Norwegian Theatre in Oslo on a cold grey morning, a week after the Nobel announcement, I’m confronted in the lobby by a series of bare, wintry trees. They are reminiscent of the tree that dresses the stage in [Waiting for Godot](#), which seems fitting, since Fosse’s minimalist plays have often been compared to Samuel Beckett’s. Then I notice a poster on the wall for the imminent Nordic premiere of the stage version of Disney’s Frozen. Which explains why, shortly afterwards, watching Fosse have his picture taken on the theatre’s vast, black stage, its only adornment is a pile of fake snow.

Jon Fosse at the Norwegian Theatre in Oslo.

Fosse winning the Nobel doesn’t exactly represent the same collision of high and mass culture as a production of Frozen in one of Norway’s most

respected theatres (where Fosse's new translation of Aeschylus's *Oresteia* just ended its run). But it does invite new audiences to his plays and novels, which can sound forbidding in summary: long silences, fractured timelines and sentences that run for hundreds of pages. I read him a quote from a letter Beckett wrote a week after winning the Nobel: "Here things are pretty awful and little hope of improvement." How does Fosse feel a week on? "I think Beckett's wife said, 'What a catastrophe!' It's not a catastrophe for me at all."

Born to a farming family in western Norway in 1959, Fosse was seven when he suffered a near-fatal accident. One of his characters, Asle, a recurring alter-ego in Fosse's work, suffers the same accident in his story collection *Scenes from a Childhood* (1994) and in *Septology* (2021), widely considered his masterpiece. But in both cases what happened, beyond a fall and a lot of bleeding, is left vague. When I ask Fosse for details he squirms in his chair. "I don't like to talk about it, to be honest," he says. "I lost a lot of blood and was close to dying, no doubt. But I also had this close-to-death experience. I saw a kind of shimmering light and it was very peaceful and beautiful. I think this experience changed me in a fundamental way, and perhaps made me a writer."

At 20, Fosse won a university writing competition. "The jury was completely clear in their decision that I was the obvious winner," he tells me. He is smiling, but it's not the only time today he somewhat nervily underlines his achievements; of his novel *Trilogy* winning the Nordic Council's prize for literature he clarifies, "That's the most important prize, except for the Nobel, you can get."

Fosse was still a student when his first novel, *Red, Black* (1983), was published. It was written in the highly repetitious and rhythmic prose characteristic of all his fiction; his publisher persuaded him to cut it by half, "and in my opinion it was also half as good. I decided when my next novel was published, I would listen only to myself."

He considers that book, *Closed Guitar* (1985), which won rave reviews not in Norway but Sweden, his breakthrough. Now he describes these early novels, about suicide and a woman paralysed with indecision when she locks herself out of the flat in which her baby is alone, as "heavy metal: there's too much pain". In this period, his 20s, "I had a lot of anxiety when I woke up – 'Oh, another day'. And then I started writing and after an hour or so I was in another place and life was quite OK."

Set on a novelist's path, Fosse's transformation into one of the world's most successful living playwrights (there have been more than 1,000 productions of his work, from New York to Berlin and Havana to Tokyo) happened by accident. A chance invitation in the early 1990s led to him writing his first play, *Someone Is Going to Come*. Writing it was "a great revelation, because

I really didn't like theatre". He read a lot of plays as a student but rarely saw any, and only considered a couple of productions – Swedish playwright Lars Norén's *The Last Supper* and Beckett's *Rockaby* – worth the trip. "Most of the productions I saw were just boring and the audience was trying to behave" – he sits up straight and primly folds his hands – "in a bourgeois way."

When you drink you become someone a bit different. Writing is like drinking – I do it to get rid of myself

Fosse's plays seem calculated to discomfit such theatregoers, pushing deep into enigmatic meaning and plotlessness (he notes witheringly that his work has been called "post-dramatic"). His characters sometimes have names but are more often called "The One" and "The Other", or "The Woman", "The Boy", "The Older Man". There is humour but the dominant moods tend towards dread, claustrophobia and sexual jealousy, his characters often struggling to connect. Playwriting allowed Fosse to employ silence in a way he couldn't in prose. "I could use the word 'pause' a lot, and 'he or she breaks off', and somehow make the silence speak and establish a second silent language behind the spoken language." Whenever he gets this feeling now, he says, he knows he's writing well.

He had immediate theatrical success in Norway, but it was after Claude Régy's 1999 Paris production of *Someone Is Going to Come* – "I think the best production I have seen of any of my plays" – that Fosse became one of the most in-demand dramatists in the world. "I wrote, I wrote and wrote for the theatre, and I travelled and I travelled and I travelled to productions and to promote, to give interviews, like a kind of theatre 'star' or something like that," he says, still sounding bemused by the experience.

Bemusement, too, characterises the UK reception of Fosse's plays, that or outright hostility ("opaque"; "adolescent twaddle"; "Waiting for Godot without the gags"). I mention hearing English playwright [Simon Stephens](#), who translated Fosse's 2008 play *I Am the Wind*, saying that when the play opened at the Young Vic in 2011, Fosse felt hated. "Yeah, I was very hated, and to me it was very strange because my plays were well received in most countries. But in the UK it was always awful – gloom, gloom, 'nil points Norway'."

Fosse is keen to point out, though, that American critics were kinder. "I had some productions in New York that went quite OK," he says. "You can read the reviews in the *New York Times* if you want, they are still on the net." There's something disarmingly sweet about being urged by a Nobel laureate to look up decade-old positive reviews of their plays. It indicates, perhaps, how puzzled Fosse remains by the Anglophone theatre world's largely frosty opinion.

But even being feted, as he was pretty much everywhere else, wore him down. "In the end I got extremely tired of it all. I was drinking far too much.

I was writing far too much. It was too much of everything.” Feeling he had “emptied out my possibilities as a playwright” he renounced drama, deciding to “go back home to writing poetry and prose”.

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Shortly afterwards, in 2012, Fosse collapsed. He was drinking so much that he had stopped eating. Alcohol had helped him perform the role of theatre star. “I’m a shy and in a way very private person, and the theatre is the opposite. So I was the wrong person for the job.” He doesn’t have regrets – “It’s nice to drink whisky with Simon Stephens,” he says, laughing – but when he left hospital he never drank again, and claims not to miss it. “I think basically writing resembles drinking to me. When you drink you become someone a bit different, and you get rid of your normal self. And to me writing ... it’s not to express myself, it’s to get rid of myself.”

Drama hasn’t been as simple to kick. After a few years during which, alongside prose, he only translated plays (including the Norwegian version of Simon Stephens’s stage adaptation of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*), he has returned, in a smaller way, to writing them. In fact his latest novella, *A Shining*, is a prose version of a new play, *In the Black Forest*, which had its theatrical premiere in Oslo in September. This brief, haunting work isn’t the best place to start with Fosse, though. In his case, which is rare, the Nobel has been awarded to someone who has very recently published their masterpiece. *Septology*, an 825-page novel written in a single sentence, may sound like a daunting entry point, but Fosse’s mastery of rhythm (superbly recreated in English by translator Damion Searls) is so total, the compassionate attention he pays to his characters so affecting, that the book quickly immerses the reader in its flow. It is a unique literary experience.

A Shining by Jon Fosse

Fosse began writing *Septology* in 2012, but progress was slow. “Writing, to me, it’s like entering the unknown,” he says. “You have to leave yourself, in a way. And if you are very fragile it’s scary to leave yourself. So it took some years before I really dared to start writing again.”

Like much of Fosse’s work, this story of an ageing painter, Asle, presents a character going about daily tasks in rural Norway while being swamped by the past and meditating on divinity. As in his play *Dream of Autumn* or the novel *Melancholy*, among numerous other works, layers of time overlap to dizzying effect. From his car Asle sees a couple out walking: his younger self and his late wife, Ales. The memory plays out in the physical space of the present, to the extent that the older Asle worries his younger self might catch him spying.

Fosse fuses domestic realism – making food, getting ready for bed, looking after a dog – and the mystical. There are two Asles in *Septology*, doppelgängers between whom Fosse shares out details from his own life. The Asle who narrates the novel marries a Catholic, converts and, eventually, quits drinking. The other is an alcoholic; early on he's found collapsed in a snowy street. One Asle has no children, while the other has had three with two different women. Fosse, meanwhile, has had six with three wives. His oldest children are grown, while his youngest is yet to start school.

Asle lives in the countryside outside Bergen, where Fosse has two properties. (Fosse also has a flat in Austria, but he and his wife spend most of their time in a state-appointed house in the public park surrounding Oslo's Royal Palace.)

Despite these shared traits (Asle also has his creator's grey hair in a ponytail, bald spot "still visible through the strands of hair", and a penchant for scarves), Fosse isn't interested in autofiction, which he once experimented with "before that even became a concept". His ambition with *Scenes from a Childhood* "was to write exactly as it was. But I didn't manage it. It started to take its own way, to be something else." Was that frustrating? "I simply had to accept it," he shrugs. "I could write down a kind of resumé of what happened but that isn't literature. As soon as it gets a kind of literary quality it has transformed into something else. And I guess that's close to what literature is all about. What you write, it needs to – it's a cliché perhaps – but it needs to be bigger than life."

In Fosse's case, this expansiveness has remarkably spare origins. Like Beckett, or other influences including the Austrians Thomas Bernhard and Georg Trakl, Fosse returns obsessively to the same relatively small store of ingredients: "all those fjords, all those row boats, all that rain, all those siblings, all that music," as Fosse's former student Karl Ove Knausgaard has written of him. Yet from these meagre resources he continually produces something new. In *Septology*, Asle says the artists he feels closest to have "pictures they'd paint again and again, but their pictures were never similar, no, not that, never, they were always different, but every picture resembled one another too".

I leave Fosse having more pictures taken, but on my way out of the lobby notice a box of posters bearing artists' illustrations of Norwegian playwrights. I buy one of Fosse and ask if he'll sign it. "They didn't ask my permission to make this poster," he says as he writes his name. "I noticed it when I was here for an opening night." He hands me back my pen. "So I stole one," he says, smiling mischievously. Then, with a wave, he goes past the line of bare trees and out into the rain.

A Shining is published by Fitzcarraldo. To support the Guardian and Observer order your copy at guardianbookshop.com. Delivery charges may apply.

Hello to you, dear reader from the Czech Republic!

When the former Albanian dictator Enver Hoxha delivered his New Year message back in 1967, he pulled the cord marked “truth bomb”. “This year will be harder than last year,” he declared. “It will, however, be easier than next year.” I mean ... on the one hand: thanks for not sugar-coating it, Enver. On the other: way to kill the party buzz, you monster!

I don't want to murder the atmosphere (or indeed any dissidents) by reminding you of the news year you've just lived through – or by warning you of the news year you're about to live through. It's not big, it's not clever, and it's sure as heck not seasonal.

But I will say, pointedly, that our reporting feels particularly necessary in dark times. [If you can, please help support the Guardian on a monthly basis from just €2](#), so as to keep it open for everyone. I can't tell you how much it would be appreciated. A free press is needed now as much as it has ever been – and on some days, more than it has ever been.

In return for this support, I am formally* bestowing upon you the right to refer to yourself – in conversation, in the pub, and on any business cards you may care to have printed up – as “a newspaper baron”. Face it: if you pay to support a news organisation, then you ARE to all intents and purposes a newspaper baron. Just enjoy it! All the others do.

With that, it simply remains is for me to wish you a very happy holidays, and a splendid new year. Goodness knows you've earned it.