

My name is José Eduardo Agualusa.

Agualusa is a word that has almost completely disappeared from the Portuguese language. As a surname, it's rarer still. Old sailors used to use the word to describe a sea that was calm and luminous. I imagine it started out as some sailor's nickname – a Portuguese grandfather, no doubt.

I believe certain names impose their destinies. Perhaps that's why, despite having been born in Huambo, a city in Angola's central plateau, almost three hundred kilometres from the coast and at an altitude of two thousand metres, I've always felt drawn to the sea.

I chose to live beside the sea in Luanda, in Lisbon, in Rio de Janeiro, or on Ilha de Mozambique. All these cities are characters in my books. But most of all Luanda, Angola's capital, a port city founded in 1575 (one thousand five hundred and seventy five), a place both beautiful and awful, ferocious and sweet, a place of unlikely encounters and the stage for the wildest stories. Luanda is the main character in "A General Theory of Oblivion". The other is an old Portuguese woman, Ludovica, who is terrified by the city and its inhabitants, and walls herself off in an apartment.

The novel's subject is the fear of the other. It seems – I'm sorry to say – that the subject is even more current today than when I wrote it. In the troubled times we're going through, in this world in search of new political thinking and new ideals, the fear of the other is a kind of conflagration, started by pyromaniacs, that threatens to consume us all.

In my novel, Ludo is saved by a boy who allows her to see what is obvious: there is no Other. The Other is always ourselves. Each man is all humanity.

This is also a book about the fear felt by those who live under totalitarian regimes. I once spent a year in Berlin, thanks to a literary bursary. The wall had been brought down some years earlier. At that time, however, it was still possible for any foreigner to recognise which neighbourhoods had been on the side of the defunct German Democratic Republic. You always knew you'd crossed over the moment the city started losing its colour. One evening, as I was walking the grey neighbourhoods of East Berlin, I remembered an example of environmental adaptation studied by most biology students: a type of butterfly in an industrial English city that lost its original colours so as better to hide, to escape its potential predators. In places subjected to totalitarian regimes, something similar happens to their citizens. Fear steals away the colour. People start preferring shades of grey. They lose their originality, their irreverence, their exuberance. They force themselves to disappear into the crowd. In a dictatorship, nobody wants to attract the attention of their predators. Fear immobilises, and it degrades. People aren't just afraid of being arrested for having made a sour comment about the President of the Republic in a public place, or because they were reading a particular book. People are afraid of losing their jobs because they were seen in public with somebody who didn't look afraid. They're afraid of expressing any opinion outside the norm. They're afraid of talking out loud, laughing out loud, thinking out loud. They're afraid, then, of existing too much. So they exist on a small scale, disguised, invisible. Fear steals our individuality. Fear steals our lives.

The greatest writers are able to put their readers into another person's skin. I think that's the greatest virtue of reading. By entering the skin of different narrators, by feeling a part of other lives, a reader increasingly finds himself part of the rest of humanity. In my view – and I'll venture to share this belief with you, naïve though some will find it – great readers have less propensity to violence and hate. First, because violence is always a surrendering of

intelligence, a retreat of thinking. But mostly because reading, as an exercise in otherness, brings people closer.

I come from a country – Angola – which has suffered a long and cruel civil war. I experienced this war as a citizen and as a journalist. I've learned a bit about wars. I learned, for example, that in order to generate a favourable climate of hysteria, creators of civil wars start out by de-nationalizing the enemy. Then they go on to question their humanity. The enemy is first a foreigner, then a monster. And a monster – and a foreign one at that – can be killed. Should be killed.

Great literature, meanwhile, almost always works in the opposite direction. It allows us to see the humanity in others, even those foreign to us. Even those who seem like monsters to us.

I was glad to learn that a book of mine was chosen for this prize for many reasons, but particularly because of the selection process – because the books are chosen by public libraries – and because the whole award process is run by Dublin City Public Libraries. I became a writer in public libraries. Not only because if I hadn't had access to books in some of these libraries, as a child, I never would have started writing, but because to a great extent my first book was actually written in a public library.

If literature develops our empathy muscles, makes us better people, then you might think of public libraries as weapons of massive construction: powerful tools for personal development and the development of societies.

The fight for democratization, for peace-keeping [or pacification?] and for the development of countries like Angola, undoubtedly entails the creation of good networks of public libraries, capable of bringing books to their readers. My very best dream – and I dream a lot, I have epic, grandiose dreams – is to contribute to my country's developing a network like that. I dream of the day when all Angolan children, all Angolan young people, can read – just as I read when I was their age – the great writers of universal literature.

I'm also delighted that this prize is not just for authors but also for translators. Translators are writers, too. Authors who are generous, sometimes almost invisible, and largely responsible for a book's success.

And so I want to take this chance to thank my translator into English, Daniel Hahn. He has produced the English translation of this speech and I want to add now that he is the best and cleverest and handsomest person I have ever met in my life. We started this adventure of English-language publishing together, some years ago, with a little novel called Creole.

Books have given me a great deal. Best of all, they have given me some friends. Danny is one of those.

I was also pleased to learn that among this year's shortlist there were two African writers: Chinelo Okparanta and Mia Couto.

Mia is more than a friend to me. For many years, he's been my big brother. He phoned me a few days ago, from Maputo, in Mozambique:

"Hey," he said, "apparently I lost the Dublin prize."

"I'm really sorry, they told me that my book won," I replied, breaking the rule that I was supposed to keep the news secret till today.

Then Mia laughed. I heard the laugh of my best friend, my big brother, like an explosion of light: “In that case I didn’t lose. We won!”

Yes, we both won. So from this place I send my greetings to my Mozambican brother Mia Couto; I send my greetings to my Nigerian sister Chinelo Okparanta. I send my greetings to all African writers, those who came before me and shaped me and made me a writer, and those who journey with me today, in this common project of rethinking our continent and making it known to the rest of the world – with all the pains and tragedies that afflict us, yes, but also with all our great joy, creativity, hope and love.

Thank you very much.