2016

The Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award Nominee

Miyase Sertbarut (Bağcı)

Writer

TURKEY

“What else can I write about but life?”
“Merhaba,”
Dear Members of the Jury; Greetings from Turkey,
I do not know you, and naturally, you do not know me either. But this nomination allowed us to greet one another and this gives me joy.

To write for children and young adults in Turkey always means knocking against rules, traditions and beliefs. All these clashes leave us wandering between the lines, bruised and battered.

I hope that is not the case where you are. I would like to give an example to enable comparison.

Let’s say a child in a fairy tale befriended a star in the sky and made a wish. The authority inspecting the story might argue “we only direct our wishes to Allah, not upon stars!” Or, if the book includes a child whose parents have been divorced, it could be considered as material that encourages divorce and would therefore become objectionable.

Still, I continue to write based on my love for words and my belief in the boundlessness of imagination. I put my trust in children and young people. During gatherings in schools, I realise the students, not the parents or the teachers, are the ones who understand me, and this is why I do not give up.
Biography

Miyase Sertbarut (Bağcı)

I was born in Ceyhan in 1962 according to official records, in 1963 according to my mother. I trust my mother more than the state.
I started going to school in the village. I did not want to become a writer when I was a child. Because all the authors of the books I read were dead, so I thought only dead people could write books. I loved the books and all those people who wrote them who were no longer alive.
I graduated from Ankara Gazi University with a degree in Turkish Language and Literature (1985). I am grateful that I was able to protect my desire to write despite the university.
No one told me my writing was any good until I was 28. The reason was that I used to hide what I wrote due to being naturally shy, which I still am. My first works were radio plays. Then I started to write for children and young adults. My inner child proved inexhaustible through writing. A real frog that I encountered when I was a child became my muse. I wanted to rescue that frog from falling into a well but ultimately failed, now I adopt the optimism that other children can succeed in rescuing it.

Things that give me joy

I spent a lot of time with both my imaginary characters and my readers. I have talked face to face with thousands of children and young people in hundreds of schools. I pass on the greetings of real people to my characters when I get home and the greetings of my characters to the children when I go to schools.

It brought me joy that children elected to name their library after me in the Şehit Cem Özgül Middle School in Adıyaman.
(https://www.miyasesertbarut.com/?Syf=4&Fa=2&Id=239547)

It brought me joy that students across numerous schools staged my play Exam-Free Airspace that criticises the examination system in Turkey.
(https://www.miyasesertbarut.com/?Syf=4&Fa=2&Id=240678)

I was invited to the children's prison in Sincan, Ankara. I met with the incarcerated children and young people in the library of the facility. I told them they could dig up tunnels to escape from prison through reading books.

I never hesitated to write about difficult subjects: Child abuse, native language education, poverty, the examination system, issues in foster homes, rising up against value systems, the commercialisation of science... It gives me joy that I was able to present these topics to my readers without being overly dramatic or didactic, by using accessible language and presenting them with exciting adventures.

My stories have appeared in Turkish textbooks. (Theless subversive ones, of course! It would have made me happier if the subversive ones made it as well...)

I fearlessly took part in the jury of the Horror Stories competition bravely organised by Tudem Publishing!

I have always loved Turkish literature and want others to love it too.
"A powerful storyteller, a language artisan"

Throughout her writing adventure that started in the mid-90’s, Miyase Sertbarut has enriched Turkish children’s and young adult literature with numerous works on their way to becoming classics.

Although she initially suffered the disadvantages of not being close to the literary world, her work quickly drew attention and her voice became more prominent as she received top prizes from every competition she entered; she managed to endear herself to her readers with her smooth and flowing narration.

Since the 2000’s, when she added thematic explorations to her mastery of storytelling, she broadened the horizons of Turkish children’s literature, which has been stuck in the ever-similar mediocrities of daily life and has unfortunately been insistent on being didactic. From this point onwards, the defining characteristics of her authorship have been powerful storytelling and carefully crafted language.

In Hidden by the Fog, the consequences of scientific research divorced from ethical concerns, as to regard all life forms as guinea pigs, even for such a noble purpose as extending human life, are intertwined with troubles of puberty.

The pains caused by puberty and the search for identity were once again at the forefront in the form of a mystery novel in Who are You?

In Kapiland’s Guinea Pigs, the capitalist system markets genetically modified products to developing countries and encourages conspicuous consumption in the name of aid. Those who are aware of these plans and aim to disrupt them are subjected to a psychological reconditioning of their perceptions in The Dark Side of Kapiland. While the vast difference between public image and reality is highlighted, the paradox created by the massive advances in communication technologies that simultaneously enable uncovering of information while allowing misinformation to spread is also kept within reader’s attention.

Building on an endemic consequence of our country not having established the practice of sorting garbage, Junk Plaza offers a close look at the lives of the numerous workers who collect recyclable materials such as paper, plastics etc. from trash dumps while also criticising the legitimisation of all actions of the dominant on the poor, based on unchecked power.

For Ice Dolls, where she manages to draw attention on child abuse and makes us feel the loneliness of orphans in our hearts, we can definitively argue that it is one of the bravest works ever written in Turkish children literature so far.

Overall, we are faced with an author who takes issues of inequalities exacerbated by globalisation and who is striving to give a voice to masses pushed aside by the establishment. Her carefully crafted narratives, along with her missions to expand the horizons of her readers in matters of politics, society and science, to broaden the areas of interest and improve critical thinking are complimentary objectives of her writing.

Burhanettin Duzcay
Selection of book reviews


Sertbarut is attentive to the music and the rhythm of words as well as to the warm and cold feelings these rhythms create throughout her narrative, therefore improving readers’ awareness of language. At the same time, the author presents a critique of society as a whole. She is a writer who is deeply aware of social realities. Turkish children’s literature gained a very valuable story on child abuse with Miyase Sertbarut’s Ice Dolls. I hope that all children above 11 get to interact with this book in a classroom setting.


Sertbarut utilises dualities in her story. Elite City versus Junk Plaza, money-grubbing chief physician versus idealist doctor Metin. She portrays corruption on the individual level and casts the ministry of health and the police as protective institutions that are above corruption. However, she makes her reader acutely aware that the true problem is social inequality and illustrates very well how social exploitation makes the rich richer and the poor poorer. From beginning to end, the novel features the excitement of a detective story.

Can a bad event result in a good outcome? If housing were to be made for the residents of Junk Plaza within Elite City, the children of the two neighbourhoods were to live together, give strength to each other and enrich each other, could we make the impossible, possible? Could both the rich and the poor approach this neighbourhood without prejudice? The author provides her own answer at the end of the novel.

I will not spoil the ending for you. But, if you want to dive into a less known world presented with high tension, through a brilliant use of language, and create emotional bonds with children who collect trash, *Junk Plaza* is a good read.

As the author writes, “Because the world turns for all of us. If humanity, who is at the top of the food chain, keeps eating one another, suffering and poverty will persist as a scar that cannot heal. After all, aren’t we all blood siblings?” (p.150)


Good-hearted ones, swindlers, compassionate ones and cruel ones. Greedy ones, the ones who protect Pepper, those who inform on their long-time neighbours just to get a reward out of Pepper. A plethora of human behaviour. Miyase Sertbarut wrote this book before the Gezi protests and before the prime minister said “inform on your neighbour who bangs on their pots and pans”. However, with her artist’s insight, she illuminated human behaviour and seemingly predicted the dark days that were ahead. This narrative contains an exciting chase story as well as the strength of friendship and solidarity. What is beautiful is that this solidarity is not limited within a single species. As much as dogs support each other, when the time comes, dogs support humans and humans support dogs, displaying unity and solidarity among all living things. This is what I liked the most about this work. Pepper the Fugitive Dog offers a very pleasurable read with its exciting narrative and shimmering language.

*Ayfer Gürdal Ünal, author and critic, jury member for 2012 Hans Christian Andersen award*
Toprak Işık, author, Ice Dolls, Iyi Kitap Newspaper, 2015, Issue:72

Let’s all name –however displeasure it causes us, one of the monsters: child abuse! Miyase Sertbarut has struck her pen to a significant wound. Isn’t it one of literature’s duties to expose the ills of society? Ice Dolls accomplishes this exceedingly well. It tells us of monsters who grow stronger as they remain in the dark. It says, look at these deplorable things. How will they be eradicated if you don’t gaze upon them, if I don’t gaze upon them? These stories should continue: because there are many wounds that need to be bled to start healing.

Some artists carve their statues out of ice in the winter. When spring arrives, although their wonderful creations melt away, the impression they leave on people remains. Miyase Sertbarut similarly created a world out of ice. She touched on the heart-breaking tales of orphanages. She voiced her story so well that it brings me joy to read such an adept author, especially these days when the Turkish language is challenged. It gives me confidence that our language is capable of telling these stories. Such that it encourages one to write and embrace the language. When the artist builds a city out of ice with words, the reader might wander in and get cold initially but that city made of ice would eventually embrace her like a mother and warm her.

Mavisel Yener, author, critic, editor, Snake Fort, Cumhuriyet Newspaper book supplement, 05.08.2010

Miyase Sertbarut is one of the adept names of Turkish children’s writing. I am always curious to learn what is on her agenda. Like all her books, Snake Fort offers an exciting read for its audience. In addition to the science-fiction twist the book takes on towards the end, this is a work that would draw reader’s interest towards fantastical literature as well as mythology. While the book would enlighten the reader on many topics, it would be unfair to pass over the use of language by the author. The novel, set in Snake Fort, commonly known by the locals as the “Shahmaran Fort” that sits atop the Ceyhan valley between Ceyhan and Adana, features descriptions whose colours, sounds and smells prove to be unforgettable. “Snake Fort was set up in such a way as to instinctively instil respect in people. As if it had physical presence, it resembled an emperor who could at any moment sprout thousands of arms that could grab you and drag you into its dark dungeons.” (p. 29)

Imbued in Sertbarut’s pen, is the secret of the whispers and screams of Ceyhan’s stones, earth and trees. With Snake Fort, the author, while paying tribute to her homeland, also captures the voice that extends from the local to the universal. While the reader is asked to consider mankind’s cruelty to each other and the environment, the reflections on history and geography are imparted without becoming tedious. In the character of Ihsan the treasure hunter, who lacks scientific, rational thinking, the author questions reliance on superstition and spurious tales. “I know of a prayer. We will write this prayer on a piece of paper and hang this from the neck of a rooster. Before dusk, we will let the rooster roam around here. We will dig the spot where the rooster chooses to call because wherever the treasure is, he will choose to call there.”(p. 89)

It is hard, in our children’s literature that tends to walk on egg shells when it comes to certain topics, considering it appealing or safe, to find the realism that is present in children’s literature from across the wider world. We hear about the violence in our schools. We read that drugs are sold as easy as peanuts in front of school gates. We know that children are subjected to the sexual abuse of adults and their peers. We are aware that racism and fascism are on the rise under the disguise of nationalism or piouness.

Miyase Sertbarut, in her novel *Kapiland’s Guinea Pigs*, aimed at teenagers, chooses her subject matter as an economic conspiracy that has unfortunately become mundane and endemic… Turkey is suffering from a very dangerous virus. The virus particularly affects young people of ages between seven and seventeen with the effect that it compels them into violence. Thankfully, scientists from Kapiland, in cooperation with scientists from Turkey, develop syrup that acts as an antidote to the virus. Called Anti-Row, the syrup is suspiciously available for free and thanks to the ministry of health’s intense propaganda efforts, every single young person between the affected age group starts drinking the syrup. Throughout the story, Miyase Sertbarut highlights the strangeness of unquestioning belief and acceptance and the dangerous results of being governed by our fears.

In this world, just like there are people who face danger, voluntarily or not, there are also people who try to turn everything to their advantage helping the most selfish ones through their inconsiderateness, both exist next to each other. While the author makes her choice clear in the text, she also seems to expect her reader to pick a side as well. Meanwhile, she manages to enrich this exciting adventure story with frequent jokes by our heroes at the expense of the school headmaster and his deputy.


A family that packed everything they owned, their beds, pots and heaters and moved from their homeland (a village in Diyarbakir) where they didn’t even had a plot of land to sell, to someplace else. The father tells his son “Look Levo, we left our home and came here”. “Here” is a village outside Izmir. Because Levent will have a chance to go to a good school, not in the village they left behind but here. This means he will have a good job. A hope that “you will not end up like us”. However, it doesn’t take long for Levent to figure out that the good schools he was hoping to attend don’t exist here as much as they didn’t exist back in their village in Diyarbakir.

Levo is facing a patchwork of Turkish that approximates a language, some acquired in his native village, some used by the villagers that currently surround him and mixed with words that emanate from TV. He tries to understand his teacher but can’t manage. He suffers while trying to read books. People make fun of the way he talks. He can’t figure out how not to stumble and fall when he was born into another language and now being forced into growing up and understanding another.

As the author Miyase Sertbarut aims to highlight, the problems of education in the country transcends living in Diyarbakir or Izmir. This problem that awaits solution from parents, teachers and most of all decision makers on a policy level is standing in the way of children like a mountain. Anyone who strives to summit this mountain can find a foothold on the pages of the book *Unwanted Students Start Their Own School*. 

Hayri (aka Marginal) and Mehtap, students of the Aydınlıkevler High school who spoiled the plan of the dominant forces in the first book (*Kapiland’s Guinea Pigs*), take centre stage in *The Dark Side of Kapiland*. We join the action in a setting reminding us of Orwell’s “Big Brother”, where these rebelling high school students are being watched by shadowy forces at every turn and are brought to the doors of Kapiland as a result of a rigged exam that was publicised as a triumph. Documenting the machinations of this overarching government will be easy for the reader. Kapiland is a place where people become willing slaves that organise their entire lives around paying their debts to banks in order to keep buying things. A place where the homeless are kept in ghettos and every time they wander out of those gates, they are looked at as visual pollution, a place where scientists have lost all their standing and are used merely for state-sanctioned experiments and where any defiance is immediately ruled to be crushed! Kapiland itself is not a word chosen by coincidence. The word seems like an allusion to Disneyland, the heart of spectacle, carrying a stronger transparency than its various connotations with capitalism alone.


*Pepper the Fugitive Dog*, through the character of Pepper who does not want to become a police dog, offers a look at issues such as freedom, love, productivity, change, sharing and independence. When Miyase Sertbarut was writing this story, the spirit of Gezi had not yet emerged and she is not a sage but an author who has deep insight and can render visible what is not seen. The novel contributes to the thinking process of the young reader with the story of Pepper.

Pepper’s mother is a police dog, but that does not mean Pepper has to become one himself. He was born in a training facility and he is very talented. But, he is a dog with a free spirit. As he grows up, he becomes more aware and as his awareness grows, he becomes enlightened. Although the police officers think he can be tamed with “some cookies and lots of training”, Pepper already knows the requirements to live independently. By escaping from the training facility that is well outside the town, he takes his first steps towards realising his dreams. After walking for a day and a night, he arrives in Ankara and befriends other street dogs that are living as freely as he is. Their voices are also reflected in his story.

The novel does not prescribe answers to its young readers about what is “good”. While certain moral values are evaluated, the young reader is encouraged to consider various options in the spirit of democracy and without haste. The author manages to convey these lovingly and always keeping up a smile, often veering into the frame of laughter. The fast paced and solid construction of the text contributes to it being such an easy read.
I would like to introduce you to a book that I have read upon recommendation of my language teacher. The book is titled Hidden by the Fog, the author is Miyase Sertbarut, published by Tudem. The book covers the experiences of Ilay, who travels to the Kunduzlu village to join her aunt (unwillingly at first), the fog covering the village and the truths hidden behind that fog. Suspicious about the mine near the village, Ilay investigates and uncovers what is hidden behind the fog. My favourite character in the book is Ilay’s aunt, because she is a very intelligent and skilful woman. In this book, I have seen that city life is not inherently better than country life and that we shouldn’t forget about our relatives. One thing I would change about the book is the generally very brief length of the chapters. The author shows us country life can be as pleasant and interesting as life in the city. My favourite section in the book was titled “The Fog Clears” because many of the mysteries of the book are resolved. I would have named this book “Yellow Fog Dissipates”. If I were the author, I would end the book by portraying Ilay’s return to the city and her attempt to tell her mother what happened. The book is very beautiful and fun to read, apart from some of the sections that were too short. Recommended for all those who want to see the reality behind clouds of fog.

Hidden by the Fog has such a strong narrative that one is curious to know which method the author used while working on it. As if a great ball of yarn slowly unties itself in front of you and then re-ties itself all over again. This book is truly like a ball of yarn. Take Ilay, our protagonist for example; she feels completely genuine. There are many children like Ilay, who can’t eat their omelettes without ketchup, who desperately desire a cell phone and derive the greatest joy from going to the movies and chatting with their friends and know of Anatolia and its villages only through movies and make fun of them. I was one of those children once and therefore I kept wondering how Ilay wouldbe transformed.

We learn so much about crows through this book, just like we did when reading Samed Behrengi, we learn to love and care again about crows thanks to Miyase Sertbarut. The events that unfold in Sisbağ where genetic research is taking place, is so exciting that one does not need to be a child to keep turning the pages in anticipation. Hidden by the Fog is a gripping work and also a novel that is contemporary and in tune with the times and the youth of today.

Junk Plaza features a beautifully flowing narrative. With her artist’s sensibility, Miyase Sertbarut transforms poverty into the very air we breathe while we read, without turning it into emotional exploitation. She questions, and leads us to question, income inequality, the ethics of capitalism and the endemic problems of the system without ever becoming didactic. Junk Plaza is a book that will grab you with its exciting story and tension of a thriller.

At first, I was unsatisfied with the way the author wrapped up the story with a happy ending. Then, I jumped at the next sentence, “You would have liked the novel to end this way, wouldn’t you, dear reader? With a happy ending, like a fairy tale…” Here was a great surprise that gave the novel an entirely new ending. I once again bowed in front of Miyase Sertbarut’s storytelling prowess. I have never looked this closely to the “vampire people”. I have read much about them, but now I feel like I know them. Children will be surprised by the truth while reading this exciting novel that is half-fantasy.

Yıldıray Karakiya, author, children’s magazine editor, *The Shadow in the Cemetery*, Iyi Kitap newspaper, issue 72, March 2015

While *The Shadow in the Cemetery* takes us inside an old Turkish film by teleporting us into a neighbourhood we might have grown up in, it also portrays through a humorous perspective the endemic lynch mentality that exists in neighbourhoods and how this is expressed in social media. If we open our eyes, it becomes evident that this lynch culture has helped normalise rape and wasted our years and delayed progress by oiling the gears of the mainstream political stance. Hasn’t our entire country been run on a lynch mentality for many years? How are we finally going to break free of this? Miyase Sertbarut offers a venue for children to think about lynch mentality and for considered adults to discuss it with children.


Miyase Sertbarut plots her novel *Growing up with the Reality, Walking with Dreams* with a dramatic and strong through-line. She introduces an interweaving structure into her plot that might be one of the best implementations of the structure in modern Turkish writing. She provides a joyous airiness in her sentence structures, her detailing and the way she implies secondary meanings. All these lead to a novel that can be read eagerly.

Miyase Sertbarut manages to cover many different themes while portraying Samet and Sinan, two passionate, daring and playful boys. Some of these themes are cruelty, honesty, making mistakes and justice. For example, in the story “That Kid”, we hear from a girl complaining about the cruel new boy who arrived in her class. We get angry listening to her story, we feel her plight and we wonder what can be done. Then, following a clever turn in the story, we set aside cruelty and start considering justice. *The Kid who Flew on the Fire Extinguisher* has been a book that made me laugh, surprised me and made me think.

Ayşegül Utku Günaydın, researcher-editor, *Who are You?*, Iyi Kitap newspaper, issue: 27, May 2011

*Who are You?* by Miyase Sertbarut focuses on the experiences of Elif, who is transitioning from being a teenager into adulthood, and through Elif, the novel highlights the limits of our perception, reminding us that despite the limited colour spectrum we can see through, there is infinite diversity out in the world. Elif’s perception of herself, her family and her friends evolve with her experiences. The notion of experience plays a large role in this evolution. This is because the idea of experience puts into contrast the notion of perception, the ‘reality’ that we see and what remains hidden as well as having empathy. This period when Elif questions herself as well as life in general, and occasionally feels alienated from it all, leads to moments of self-reflection and the discovery of self-expression.
Zarife Biliz: I remember you once said, “I live through every child I describe in my books”. How did you succeed in entering the mind of a child who collected trash for a living? For example, have you felt the need to go and visit the neighbourhoods they lived in, look closer at their lives and get to know them better? Have you had different concerns from creating characters with more familiar social environments?

Miyase Sertbarut: Yes, I can say that I know these kids. I have been visiting junk markets of Ankara for the past five years. They contain all kinds of people; it really is a world of extremes. You make entirely different friends there, you can even chat with El-Qaeda members. I can’t bring myself to call it a flea market, because it is a market of a world below that, a junk market is an apt description. Children come to this market as well to sell things, alongside their fathers and their older brothers. But, it’s difficult to make these kids understand, truly difficult.

To narrate poverty through literature is like war photography. It feels similar to the selfdoubt the photographer feels when all he has done is to press the shutter while a child is being killed in front of him. The photography of death is not pretty, but one might take pictures of war to say “No to War!”

There is risk in describing destitution, because people might think all you are doing is telling a sad story. Writing a sad story is not what motivated me. It’s hard to put into words even, do you see how terrible it sounds if I were to say “I wanted to beautifully capture destitution”?

Zarife Biliz: Your books always have a strain of crime writing juxtaposed with personal or social problems. Your characters always try to solve a mystery. Junk Plaza has a similar feature. The adventure begins with the unlawful distribution of the blood of poor kids who live amongst the dirt but are healthy to the rich kids whose immune system has collapsed due to living in isolation all the time. Let’s talk a little about this choice of narrative. Do you think this kind of adventure is required to pull the reader into the book? Young children surely enjoy the adventure but I feel like young adults can handle a bit more...

Miyase Sertbarut: I really enjoy the adventure, to be honest, it is a fun game to live these events that we don’t experience in real life through books. If I had told the story of the kids of Junk Plaza within their own reality, without the trappings of an adventure, maybe the result would have been a book with greater literary weight. But unfortunately, it would have been read by a smaller audience. I wanted people to finish the book, to reach a large number of kids and young adults. The adventure, in this book, was a means to an end for me because the real point of the book was to tell the story of those children who live at the bottom, the children of the junkyard! I suspect, maybe some of the empathy would have been lost without the adventure. Isn’t the mystery they are trying to solve often what binds us to the characters? Moreover, we can look at the adventure metaphorically. Because, the blood stolen from the poor enables the continuation of the life of the ones at the very top. I think this communicates ruthless exploitation in some way.
Yeliz Kızılarşlan, critic, İyi Kitap newspaper, issue 27, May 2011 (On Snake Fort)

Yeliz Kızılarşlan: Where did the idea for combining the past and the present with a fantastical link came from?
Miyase Sertbarut: Writing fantasy opens up a lot of options. Fantasy can break the walls between reality and what is possible. But, none of my books are entirely fantastic. I always keep the reality of life in close step to this fantastic narrative. The queen of the snakes may have never existed, but her legend has been retold over centuries. The image of Shahmaran has been etched in metalwork and woven in tapestry. People believed in her existence. This is what is reflected in my novel.

Yeliz Kızılarşlan: By presenting genetics through a dystopia, by the end of the novel you are aiming for a world that can explain concepts like healing and justice scientifically, aren’t you?
Miyase Sertbarut: In 1984, George Orwell says “Until they become conscious they will never rebel, and until after they have rebelled they cannot become conscious.” In my children’s and young adult writing, I occasionally suggest rebellion, or cast rebellion in a sympathetic light. If I had written Snake Fort or Kapiland’s Guinea Pigs for an adult audience, entirely anarchist and destructive novels might have emerged. These tendencies in my writing are a result of a yearning for a more just, more life-affirming society that I hope will follow this rebellion and destruction. In my future works, even if I were to incorporate dystopia into my narrative, I would never want to lose sight of the utopia.

Oğuzcan Çağan, interviewer, KaradenizIN magazine, issue 22, 2014

Oğuzcan Çağan: With Junk Plaza and the Kapiland series, you consistently point out the cracks in the relationship between those in power and society. Doesn’t this subject matter carry risks with younger readers?
Miyase Sertbarut: Actually, I don’t set out to write a topical novel, I describe life as it is, and I try to be honest, I have faith in what I am writing and I want the core of the story and its plot to be solid. When I started Junk Plaza, I had worries, I thought children and adults were going to interpret it completely differently and that is exactly what happened. Both groups liked the book for different reasons. Children followed the adventure and the characters and they understood them, even if they didn’t fully understand the larger issues, they had an intuition. I guess this is what literature should do, to provide intuition.

Oğuzcan Çağan: Also in your novel Who are you? the narrative leads the main character into a correctional facility. I was really surprised by this while reading. I thought about what the reactions would be from your readers. Have you received any feedback, letters, emails, regarding this? Can you talk a bit about the topic of correctional facilities?
Miyase Sertbarut: This is also something that could happen. Who are you? is the book my readers recommend to each other the most. During a book fair, one child asked me, “Do you know how many times I have read this book?” I guessed maybe three times and told him so. He replied, “Eleven times!” I told him, he must be crazy, reading a book eleven times was beyond exaggeration. But I liked it, obviously that child was looking for something and whatever that was, he found it in that book and he wanted to enjoy it. The correctional facility might have been a part of this because even though they are behind high walls, children know they exist and they wonder what is behind it.

After Who are you? was published, I was invited to Ankara Sincan Children’s prison. This invitation was the initiative of a guard who had read his daughter’s copy. I met with teenagers who committed serious crimes in the library of the facility. I enjoyed talking to them, signing books for them and showing them they could dig tunnels by reading. I could communicate all of this in another book just as well, as long as the tone is right.
Ayşegül Tozal: First of all, what was your motivation for writing *Ice Dolls*? What is the story behind the world of Ece, the protagonist of the book?

Miyase Sertbarut: To be honest, I don’t think one can explain entirely the motivation to write a book. I can talk about it, of course, but that shouldn’t be counted as the entire motivation. The number of news concerning child abuse I came across on social media and across news online frightened me. I started putting myself in the shoes of those children. Let’s take the news report that a man has tricked a boy named Halil Ibrahim with a promise to “buy you a dog leash”. Building on this detail, I try to imagine the final hours of that boy. His excitement for that leash, his love for animals, what was going through that man’s head... Then, the boy’s realisation, his incomprehension, his fear... With a sense of experience, it starts to feel like a memory. Halil Ibrahim dies, so do other children, and we know this is going to continue. With the novel, I wanted to communicate this to other children, who were not tricked yet.

Ayşegül Tozal: Books about abuse are typically directed towards informing the reader. With these ingredients, you produced a work of literature. Were you concerned with imparting a particular message with this book?

Miyase Sertbarut: I had one goal when I sat down to write it: “Make this a good novel.” If I had an explicit message, this would take away from the natural flow of the narrative, having that concern would inevitably take away from the believability of the book. If literature aims to have a “purpose”, it ends up being purposeless. But, you can end up enabling unforeseen benefits. First of all, you can strengthen the sense of empathy in the reader, you can refresh the sensitivity of people, create awareness in children. All these fundamental matters of humane conduct and having a conscience can be improved by good literature, it is my hope that *Ice Dolls* also achieves this.

Zarife Biliz: In your book, you touch upon the subject of sexual harassment on two separate occasions. In both instances, harassment, just like in real life, comes from someone close, someone you know. In one case, the perpetrator is family, in the other from outside the family. What would you like to say about your inclusion of this difficult topic in your book?

Miyase Sertbarut: Actually, my intention was to write entirely about that. I thought about it a lot, I realised telling that story would be too heavy for both the children and me. But, the number of harassments and rape of children is growing and everybody guesses that the unrecorded instances are just as numerous. The first inklings of this novel began with the abbreviated names I’ve heard on TV. News about harassment and rape, reports on mismanagement of orphanages... It was a shameful situation and that was why the names were abbreviated. I thought removing the names did not remove the shame. I wanted to write, to fill in the abbreviations, I thought if I could capture the correct tone, I could do it. I read a few novels on this subject. I had to capture something unique within our society, so I’ve read a report that included interviews by the police. I couldn’t figure it out, I also consulted with my editor Burhanettin Düzçay. In the end, I decided that the novel shouldn’t entirely focus on the issue of harassment but incorporate it into a larger narrative.

Zarife Biliz: Ece names her diary Waluly, referring to the water lily pond on the garden of the orphanage. She builds a complex imagery based on that pond and those flowers. Life, death, love, hatred, mother, father, sibling; the pond contains all those meanings. How did that pond come into the story?

Miyase Sertbarut: I saw a water lily pond for the first time in my life...at the Ankara University Campus at Tandoğan. It was so beautiful and impressive that, one could impart a lot of imagery on to it. For me, to write is to combine images and words in my mind. It is very difficult to predict which piece will come from where. That pond I watched for five minutes five years ago became the most important imagery in *Ice Dolls*. The boarding school I worked in as an intern 35 years ago became the main location for the novel. Images in my mind from different time periods came together into an entirely new picture.
Awards (selection)


2. Second prize, children’s story competition 1997, Eğitim-Sen (Union for Education and Science Workers), *Unwanted Students Start Their Own School*.


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