

PREFACE

In December 2001, the centennial anniversary of the first Nobel Prize was celebrated. To mark the occasion, the Swedish Academy organized a symposium on the theme of “Witness Literature” that was held on December 3rd and 4th in the Grand Hall of the Stockholm Stock Exchange. The symposium was planned by a committee consisting of two of the Academy’s members, Horace Engdahl and Per Wästberg.

Speakers from Asia, Africa, as well as Eastern and Western Europe gave talks, including four winners of the Nobel Prize. A number of Swedish critics, scholars, and authors participated in the discussions. The first day took the form of a closed seminar while the second day was open to the public.

The primary objective of the symposium was to examine the concept of witness literature and its relevance to contemporary literature. The concept is relatively new and has not yet been defined clearly by literary criticism and scholarship. Yet, twenty-five years ago, Elie Wiesel described “the literature of testimony” as the literary invention of our times. As can be seen in the contributions submitted in this volume, the discussion primarily alternated between two aspects of the topic: on the one hand, the particular claim to truth that witness literature puts forward; and, on the other hand, the process that leads from catastrophe to creativity and that turns the victim into a writing witness with the power to suspend forgetfulness and denial.

The contributions to this volume are given in the order in which they were presented at the symposium.

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Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy
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