



THE STORIES WE LIVE  
STOYAN POPKIROV

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I was born in the year of Chernobyl, and things have generally been less disastrous since. After finishing Georgi Gospodinov's *Natural Novel* in 2005, I left Bulgaria for Germany to study medicine at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum, which, despite its imposing halls of concrete, turned out to be a remarkably welcoming place to learn about the human body and its inner workings. At the university hospital, I later trained to be a neurologist and became fascinated with symptoms that were not explained by brain disease, but by something else. I got to write a book about this "something else" at the Wissenschaftskolleg zu Berlin, the Wiko. – Address: Universitätsklinikum Knappschaftskrankenhaus Bochum, Klinik für Neurologie, In der Schonau 23–25, 44892 Bochum. E-mail: popkirov@gmail.com.

Looking back at my time at Wiko, or rather, looking backwards in time, the Corona-triggered silent exodus at the end of March reverses beautifully. A fantastic mix of people hesitantly come out of isolation and meet up in a large turn-of-the-century Villa in Grunewald. Georgi and I stand in the restaurant and gaze at the isolated chairs and tables, placed far apart – the next time we meet there, the furniture is rearranged into group tables, six chairs huddled around each four-person table. We all gather for daily lunches, and our ebullient chatter fills the room and ascends the stairs towards the lounge, where the newspapers report on the days ahead. After lunch, and before breakfast, we go to our offices, where we bring manuscript pages to the printers and rinse them of the ink. Then we get to writing. Rinse and repeat. As time goes by, in reverse, we slowly start to forget each other; we get lost meandering through Berlin's many neighbourhoods, like the characters in the novel Georgi unwrote at Wiko. And after six wonderful months, Natalie and I return home, where everything is as we remembered.

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I got to write a book during my time at Wiko. It wasn't a novel or a collection of short stories, as I had hoped for as a teenager, but it was about stories in a way. Stories of anguish that neurons tell each other behind our backs. Stories based on memories and expectations, told through movements, in a tremor or a seizure. The unutterable shock of an injury that paralyses the legs; the rumour of a toxicant that makes one's head spin; the memory of a parent losing their mind, now retold in first person. Such malfunctions of the brain are not tall tales of madness, but neural scripts stuck between our thoughts, unreachable by will. This is not a myth of times past, as reports of hysteria during la Belle Époque might have you believe. It is the story of every sixth person going to a neurologist in 2020. Hopefully, my slender book will help retell the story of functional neurological disorders.

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In March, Wiko hosted a workshop on this topic, supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation. Neurologists, psychotherapists, psychiatrists, and psychosomatic medicine experts from all corners of Germany came together and debated age-old questions of mind and brain in the light of modern neuroscience. In a forthcoming publication with several workshop participants, we review the clinical management and mechanisms of functional pain disorders. While pain typically arises from tissue or nerve damage, it can also emerge within the nervous system without acute injury or lesion, woven together from memory and emotion, to drive behaviour, sometimes into a deadlock. Manoeuvring the complex neural apparatus out of such painful deadlock requires the coordinated skills of physical and psychological therapists alike. Hopefully our article can contribute to the interdisciplinary collaboration and holistic understanding required to best help patients with functional pain disorders.

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When functional paralysis, triggered by pain or panic or both, strikes suddenly, the first thought of patients and medics alike is usually "stroke". Indeed, one in twelve suspected strokes turns out to be a functional disorder, yet much uncertainty remains regarding diagnosis and treatment. Wiko Fellow Alastair Buchan, one of the world's leading stroke physicians, and I, one of the world's physicians, co-wrote (together with my mentor Jon

Stone) an article advising clinicians how to recognize and manage functional neurological disorders that look like strokes.

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How do the stories of neurological dysfunction fit within larger social and cultural narratives? This question can be answered as broadly as one is willing to look. And if there's one thing Wiko does best, it's broadening one's view. Talking to my fellow Fellows, questions stretch almost to a breaking point, opening up new perspectives, new explanations, new questions. How does the Church decide whether an unexplainable cure constitutes a miracle, Felix? Can "speaking in tongues", related to functional speech disorders, be found among certain Slavic religious communities, Jeanne? How are the ethics of human experimentation applied in the social sciences, Xóchitl? How can patterns of symptoms across individuals be represented mathematically to quantify trends of cultural "transmission", Bryan? And would anyone like some more red wine?

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I am not at all good at keeping in touch. I'm hesitant to reach out, as if afraid to pierce the bubble of memory, within which we still sit together at dinner on a Thursday night, talking of mitochondria, Minotaurs, and Michelangelo. Do I dare disturb the memory? It doesn't take a neurologist to know that we cannot walk backwards in time or preserve memories unblemished forever. So here's to hoping we meet again, in Berlin or elsewhere, for there are still stories to be told.