Magda Grădinaru: I am very glad to have this dialogue with Mr. David Grossman, and, of course, I will enjoy the privilege of asking him questions. Welcome, David Grossman. First of all, I would like to invite him to read a few words in Hebrew from his book translated into Romanian.

DG: Good. Before we say a word, I just want to have the Hebrew echo in Timișoara. [reads a short fragment in Hebrew from Life Plays with Me, translated into Romanian by Gheorghe Miletineanu and published by Polirom Publishing House, 2020].

MG: Thank you. I must say from the beginning that I've been waiting for this opportunity for a long time, so I have many questions. I'll start with my first. After reading Life Plays with Me, translated into Romanian by Polirom Publishing House, I felt the need to return to another one of your books that I've read many years ago when I first discovered you and became your reader. It was the French edition of See Under: Love, in French Voir ci-dessous: amour. I believe it is translated into Romanian, too. In those two books, there is someone who rewrites a story: on one hand, we have this boy, Momik, who tries to write the story of Wasserman, his great-uncle; and on the other hand, we have this girl, Gili, a script girl who rewrites a story using her camera. David Grossman, what does a storyteller add to or, on the contrary, take from the reality of the facts as they happened when he writes his story?

DG: It's a big question. I think in every book that I've written there is somebody who is telling a story to a listener. I somehow believe that if you tell an old story in a new way, suddenly things change in reality and in yourself. I think every one of us, we have a kind of "legislative story" that we tell other people that we meet. Usually it's a story about our childhood and how our parents misunderstood us, about our siblings or our teachers; these

stories have some amount of insult that can never be repaired. They are meant to arouse sympathy for us when we tell it to new acquaintances. Sometimes we do not realize or recognize to what extent we became prisoners of our legislative story. At a certain age you might look back at the story you always tell others and you should ask yourself: Is it really reflecting myself now? Is this story loyal to me now? Or maybe it has become my prison, it prevents me from being much more flexible, more open in my own life. Perhaps I can tell the old story, but I will move a little within the text of the story, within the point of view of the story, and I will see not only myself as a child, but also my mother. I could suddenly understand that even Mama had a mama, and also Papa had his own papa and his own psychology, his own stories that he was trapped in. If you tell an old story anew and you have a good listener – this is a very important condition – a listener who can be like a midwife, that will bring this baby's story to light, to reality, then suddenly you can be released from a story that has fossilized you. I spoke about individuals and how they can be trapped in their own story; but also, countries and nations. They have their legislative story, and they need it. Of course, they need it. At the beginning of a nation everybody needs a strong story, a mythological story that will say how wonderful we are and how awful our enemies are, how we fought for our independence and all our highly appreciated values. If we look at these stories after some years or some decades, we can understand that they became our prison; that they prevent us from changing our existential situation; that they do not allow us, for example, to make peace with our enemies. Telling a story is a very important, primal thing in the life of people.

MG: I asked you this because it seems to me that you give a chance to the protagonist and to his biography by entrusting the story to a storyteller, a third party. For example, we have Vera, with her superimposed lives: she's an extraordinary stepmother; but at the same time, a

natural mother who, at one point in her life, made a hard choice not in favor of her daughter. In Communist Yugoslavia, during Tito's dictatorship, she chose to go to the Gulag, to the Goli Otok, an island of "re-education." Here, in Romania, we understand very well what this "re-education" was about. She chose Goli Otok, although theoretically she could have betrayed her husband and stayed with her child. Do we all need someone else to change the angle at which our lives can be seen or told? How does it feel, David Grossman, to have this power of giving a second chance?

DG: That's the great gift of literature. It gives us a second chance. Usually in life we do not get a second chance. We make a mistake and quite often we pay heavily for it. We leave scars and wounds behind us which are very difficult to heal. Literature, firstly, shows us the way to recover from those wounds and scars; secondly, it shows us that flexibility is still an option and, if we have a good partner to our problems, our stupidities, our regrets, maybe we can find ourselves in another place after we retell the story. You described the dilemma of Vera, my protagonist, who is a real person. Her name was Eva Panić-Nahir, she was born in Čakovec, a city in Croatia. She belonged to a Jewish family. When she was seventeen (or more than that), she fell in love with a non-Jewish Serbian officer. It was a total love. In order to keep his memory pure and not allow anyone to dirty or blacken his memory, when she was confronted with the dilemma of going back home and be with her six-year-old daughter, little Nina, or adhering and sticking to the idea that her husband was not a spy against Tito, she chose the version that cleared her husband. She said nobody else would clear his name and someone would take care of her daughter. It's really a story of such a dilemma and such a decision that very few of us, luckily, have faced in our lives. I always thought that after such a crisis, such a terrible decision of a mother to choose not her daughter, but the sacred memory of her late husband, there would be no contact between the mother and the

abandoned daughter. Here, reality proved me wrong. I met Eva Panić-Nahir, the old lady, and I met her daughter, Tijana. After years of crisis, they were able to be together with empathy, love and forgiveness. They taught me something. Here I can say that literature gave me a second chance. I did not believe in the option of recovery or healing. They taught me how it is possible.

MG: You've told me about this official story. I believe, in one of your articles, you call it a "visit card story", like the story we like to tell when we go to a psychologist, a self-protection story. Do you have such a story?

DG: I'm sure I have some stories that became my prisoners. Probably even the need to give interviews when there is a new book. Inevitably you start to repeat yourself, but even when I repeat myself, I will not say things that do not move me from the inside. I don't want to quote myself to death. I will try to find new words to describe old stories. Of course, I have stories that I will not tell openly, that I will keep totally private for me and my family, but also for my next books. Sometimes I feel that if I tell a private story too much, I will never be able to put it into one of my books.

MG: But are there stories that cannot be told? Stories that refuse you, so to speak; that you could not write in your books.

DG: Hardly. I think I try to write – not to publish necessarily, but to write – everything that is primal for me. Sometimes, these things are horrible, painful. Sometimes, I write something, and I look at what I've written, it's like a verdict against myself on the paper. Again, the power of the story, of the dialogue is so important for me, because I've progressed so much in

my life and was educated by dialogue with people, by listening to other stories, listening to my own text through their eyes and ears. Suddenly I've learned so much. For example, I wrote books about the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Whenever I did it, it was difficult because I had to understand how a Palestinian, who is my enemy, observes the text of the conflict between us, how he observes myself. How does he see the bad qualities that everyone turns towards his or her enemy? Maybe the enemy is the one that feels this before you feel it: to what extent the ugly qualities of an occupier have infiltrated into my internal organs? If we look at ourselves through the eyes of our enemy, it will not change us totally, it will not make us totally identify with the interest of our enemy. Our enemy is not a saint. They also have their mistakes and their crimes. If we allow ourselves to look at our reality from his point of view – and usually the occupied see things that you do not want to recognize in yourself – if we do that, maybe even the conflict could've been solved much earlier.

MG: Both your characters, Momik and Nina, live with pieces of stories. They fill the gaps, the silence the best they can: the silence of Wasserman, the silence of the parents about the Shoah, the silence of Vera about the Gulag. What we see in reality is exactly what frightens them the most. The fact that Momik doesn't know about the Holocaust makes him anxious when he hears his father screaming at night. What are the virtues, if there are, of silence, and what are the faults? Where does silence lead to?

DG: I think that, for these two characters, for Momik and for Nina, the silences are like hell almost, because they feel that something terrible has happened there and nobody tells them. With their wild imagination of children, they illustrate for themselves a picture of reality that will compensate for the lacunas, for the voids in their life stories. For example, Momik, who

is eight years old, keeps hearing from people around him in the neighborhood about “the Nazi beast” [in Hebrew]. This is how the Nazis were called in the 50s and 60s in Israel and even today you will hear about “the Nazi beast.” He wanted to know what this beast was. He believed that this beast was like a monster or a dinosaur that used to rule over the country over there – they always talk about “over there”, “the land of there” [in Hebrew]. He asks the grownup people what the Nazi beast was, and nobody would tell him. So, he goes to Bella, the owner of the grocery store, and almost forces her to tell him what the Nazi beast was. He cries out and – because she doesn’t want to pollute him with knowledge, he’s only 8 years old – she ironically says, “the Nazi beast can come out of any creature if it gets the right food and nourishment.” She says it with sarcasm, but he’s only eight years old and he takes her very seriously. He started to collect all kinds of small animals, like a hedgehog, a lizard, a cat, a raven, a doggy. He puts them in cages in the cellar underneath the apartment of his parents, who were survivors from the Shoah, from the Holocaust. He hopes from one of them, if it gets the right food and nourishment, the Nazi beast will come out. Then he plans to capture and chain it, force it to change its ways from this expression that was such a mystery, “the Nazi beast.” I remember as a child when I first heard it, I was shocked. I was sure that there was such a beast and that it’s somewhere there and it’s dangerous. Because of the silence that was imposed on him, he was almost suffocated in this silence, he created a whole world made of rumors and whispers and fragments of conversations that were hushed down when a child entered the room. In this case, silence was a very strong creative motivation. There are places where silence is a blessing. We can feel it in relationships between individuals. And of course, when you write, when you create, there is a moment when you don’t want to say too much. You have to withdraw. If you continue, you will tell too much – not in the meaning of a spoiler, but you will articulate something too much. You have to withdraw and allow the silence to echo there.

MG: This boy Momik relives the Nazi trauma without ever being there and then. In one of your dialogues, I believe it was in The Yellow Wind, you speak about the Arab children saying that their birthplace is a village that they have actually never seen, the place where their parents or even grandparents have lived in the past. How does trauma pass from one generation to the next? Perhaps it would be better for one generation not to know what happened in the past?

DG: I am not sure it will be the best because, after all, we are made of the stories and memories of our parents. Of course, I think that it can be very healthy to forget a little, not to remember too much, not to be totally paralyzed by the atrocities that have been done to your ancestors. Remember them to know that they've existed but remember that you don't want it to totally block your life and your ability to breathe and to break through the suffocation of the past. We in Israel are now the third or almost the fourth generation after the Shoah. It's interesting to see how this generation is so thirsty and yearning to learn more and more and to understand more and more how this could have happened. There are trips who are taking high school children to Auschwitz-Birkenau and some other places. It's a very sensitive thing to find the equilibrium between describing the hell in which they lived there during the time of the Shoah, describing the brutality and the cruelty of the Nazis, their associates and those who helped them; and, at the same time, to remember that there were other options, that there were people who risked their lives in order to save Jews. There were people who remained loyal to very strong, solid values of humanism. Remember that we can choose not to surrender totally to the pessimistic and even nihilistic perception of the world. There's always the question whether mankind is good or bad. There is this phrase from the Bible after God threw the flood on us in the Book of Genesis and Noah built his arc; then God said, "I know

that the heart of human nature is bad from the beginning. The human being is bad from the beginning." I thought, well, maybe God is right here, he is not always right, by the way, but maybe here he is right. But he says only half of the truth: if there are good conditions, perhaps the origins of man's heart can be good from the beginning. It depends so much on the environment, the circumstances, the education. I think this is one of the lessons to learn from the Shoah.

MG: There's another common note in the two books at the level of secondary characters. The torturer Neigel, the commander of the extermination camp, steals Wasserman's stories and writes them to his wife. He wants to appear a better man and to show that he is not just a murderer. In the other, we also have the torturer from the island, a woman, who has these moments of humanity, telling Vera that she hopes she will see her daughter again. Like you, I have always been fascinated and scared at the same time by the mix of good and evil in the same person. Can they really coexist? Is it a choice to be so and not otherwise? How does an ordinary person, like most of Nazis and their supporters were, become part of such a mass murder system?

DG: I think this is a question that will continue to torment humanity until the end because people have both options. Yes, people can be evil, and people can be good. I always feel that it's easier to be evil. You just join something. If you want to do good, you have to initiate, to act sometimes against the nature of other people. It's really a heavy question, for a philosophy lesson. I think there is always a need of a whole system of education, media, political levels in order to really expose people to the evil parts of themselves. Usually normal people, when they are not sick or psychotic or whatever, they will not do terrible evil. Evil is not only to go and to kill a whole family or to do something of an atrocity like this, but

evil today is just being indifferent. If you see a kind of horrible injustice, if you see someone tormenting another one, if you think of a distorted, terrible situation like Israel is occupying the Palestinians for fifty-three years; if you see all that and you turn a blind eye on it, if you don't want to look at it, this is the new cruelty and the new brutality of today. It's so easy to be indifferent. It's so easy to detach yourself from a situation, to say, "I saw nothing. I heard nothing. I don't belong to this reality. I don't want anything to do with this reality." I remember several times when I went myself in the occupied territories and I was invited to see something like the evacuation of a Palestinian village in the south of the Hebron mountain. There was a child sitting on a pile of mattresses. He looked at me – he was, I think, eight or nine years old – and he looked at me with such a desperate old-man look, his gazes were so desperate. It was only a child. I knew that if I look at him, I will never be able to forget it and I will be totally committed to this question of the evacuation, of the expelling of this little tribe from the place where they live. Of course, I looked at him and of course, I became committed. I think every normal man, when you see an injustice and you don't turn your head from it, you become committed. This is why people don't want to look at it. They don't want to be committed. They prefer only to peep into the wound of another, not to really look, not to be totally exposed to what they see in the wound of the other. If they really look, most of them will not be able to shrug it, to say, "No, it doesn't belong to me." They will become committed.

MG: You had this image in one of your books, the children who play football. After Nazis come and take the Jewish children away, the others continue to play their game. It's a frightening image.

DG: It's a true story.

MG: It's like man is dispensable in history. Replaceable. Nobody cares about him. He doesn't play a big role, he's too small for the Great History.

DG: Yes, there are people who want us to think like that. I think all my work as a writer, as an activist here is to prove the other way around, that the individual is important, essential. There is this horrible saying attributed to Stalin, "One death is a tragedy. A million deaths are a statistic." I always quote this horrible, horrible quotation because it is like a teacher to me, a guide of how I don't want to be. I want to extricate the drama of the individual, the singularity of the individual from this dead idea, the metaphor of the dry statistic of Stalin. I think this is the essence of literature. When Tolstoy writes about a huge war, he will write about two, three protagonists only. We are focusing on the individual, on the wonder of the individual, on the multilayered-ness of the individual, on the inner contradictions of him or her. By doing so, we really redeem him. We bring him back to life and to reality. We do not collaborate with this terrible idea of "every man is dispensable." Like in the famous story of the person who murdered Bruno Schulz, a genius writer who lived after the First World War ended. In the Second War he was trapped, he became a house Jew, a servant in the house of a Nazi commander in the city of Drohobych. This commander had an enemy and the enemy met Bruno Schulz on a crossroads in Drohobych, pulled his gun and shot him dead. He came to the "employer" of Bruno Schultz and he told him "I killed your Jew." "Very well," was the answer. "Now I'll kill your Jew." When I read this story (that was maybe only an anecdote, a rumor, not the truth), it expressed something deep about that era. I felt I don't want to live my life in a world that allows such monstrosities, such horrible options like "I killed your Jew", "OK, now I'll kill your Jew." As if people as dispensable, as if we are talking about a chair or a table. All my being rebelled against this. Because of this sentence, I wrote See Under: Love,

because I felt I wanted to write a book that will have so much vitality in it that it will shiver on the shelf, that it will be like one millionth of the imagination and the richness and the creativity of Bruno Schulz himself.

MG: In many places in your writing, just like now, you do this exercise of transitivity. You ask yourself these questions, "What it would have been like to be in this man's shoes?" even if the man was a bad guy. What is the use of this exercise? Here in Romania, for example, many of my generation who knew the dictatorship, rather, through their parents' experiences than through their own, perhaps judging their silence, we ask ourselves this question: Would I have resisted in their place? Would I have been a dissident, a hero? Is the world built by heroes?

DG: Everyone has to answer this question for himself or herself. We cannot really know. Nobody really can know how he or she are going to behave in such times. Like a soldier before he goes the first time to be under fire, he does not know how he will react. Many soldiers suffered from kind of a battle shellshock or trauma because they suddenly discovered that they are cowards, that they are just afraid. Rightly so. If somebody is shooting at you, I think it's a very reasonable reaction to be cowardly and to run away. But they did not know it before. Whenever we approach a kind of moral dilemma, we don't know how we shall behave. This is something that happens to Vera in my book – and Eva in real life, she always tried to convince me by saying, "You don't know how you would have acted in front of such a dilemma that I faced." I told her, "Listen, I know how I would have reacted. It's not your way." But I cannot really feel the spirit of the era, the zeitgeist in which she lived. She lived in a reality where ideas were more important than human beings. For me, such an era is a terrible era.

MG: In this book, Life Plays with Me, you take a step outside Israel, but in another area are deeply marked by conflicts: the Balkans. There are, of course, many differences, but are there common traits of people who live their lives in such countries marred by conflicts, like Israel, or the Balkans?

DG: Yes. Of course, every region has its nuances and character. If you live your life in war, under fear or existential threat, you develop some expertise that is common to every human being in such a situation. The strength of a society is measured by the ability of not surrendering to this gravity of catastrophe, of being prepared all the time for the next catastrophe, of not believing in the option of having a future and starting to idealize ourselves and to demonize our enemy, in thinking that our conflict is exceptional and there is no other

conflict like that in history. Inevitably, we cannot solve it. All of these things, all these symptoms you can trace in every society that goes through a long state of war.

MG: Everything you write is a return to the literary history. If people were willing to see things from this perspective, through the eyes of a normal person, would that change anything in Great History? For example, would that change the feeling of mutual fear that you are often talking about in Israel?

DG: It's a good experiment. I'm not able even to answer it. I think that we are marked so heavily – we, the Jews – by our history and our experiences. For so many years, we were never at home in the world. Until today, Israel is meant to be our home, the place where we feel secure and solid and with a future, and yet it's not the home it can be. It's very much a

home in many layers, but it's not the home that that one feels when there are no dangers to him at all. Sometimes I think that even if the peace between Israel and Palestine and Israel and the Arab world would've come yesterday, it would've already come too late because of the things that were engraved in our mind, in the way we act, in our worldview. You pay a heavy price for living all your life under fear and in violence. Again, I will go to this idea of home. For me, it is so essential to come to a reality where Israel will become this home. I think we really need this home to start to heal the traumas that we suffered from throughout our history. We need a place that we feel is ours, that we have settled all the conflicts and disputes with our neighbors, that we shall see a sequence of children and grandchildren, that we have all our perception of time, not only of our past and present, but about us having a future, us living without fear. It is so essential for us, and we are so deprived of this option. To tell you the truth, I don't know if I will witness it in my lifetime. I don't know if it will happen. I don't know if the two parties, Israel and the Palestinians, will be courageous and clever enough to achieve peace and fight together to fight all those extremists who will try to assassinate the fragile peace. Many questions.

MG: You spoke about fear. What does fear do to a man? It's a question, David Grossman, I also asked Lyudmila Ulitskaya and Ismail Kadaré, writers who lived under oppressive political regimes. In Israel, of course, fear is of a different kind. It's not about dictatorship. How can fear change a man, a human being?

DG: I think it narrows you. It really narrows you and you try to limit or minimize the contact between your soul and the outer world because the world is dangerous. It's threatening, frightening, polluting. So, you shrink, you entrench yourself. You become like an entrenched fist. There is a beautiful song by our (almost) national poet, Yehuda Amichai, "Even the fist

was once an open hand with fingers" [quotes the original in Hebrew]. When you are afraid, the fingers are entrenched, and you become a fist. If you are a fist, then you do not really live life, only a very limited one. I think of this paradox of the Jewish people who throughout our history survived to live our lives, and now we only live to survive, as if we do not believe in the option of real life with many layers, many prospects, with men with a future. Fear limits you. You start to think in clichés. You are an easy prey for all kinds of manipulation, like dictatorship, xenophobia, racism. I can see this even in my country, but also in other countries in the same situation. When you are afraid, there is a growing void. It becomes bigger and bigger, a void between the citizen of the country and what is being done in his or her name. This void never remains empty, because there are all kinds of organizations or people with a very strict agenda. They pour into this void, this valley between that individual and what his country is doing. They usually have a very fundamentalist, nationalist or extreme agenda. They kidnap the situation and they kidnap us, and they will kidnap the future of our children. This is why it is so important to fight for your ideas and not to surrender to fear and to this narrowing down.

MG: Many politicians seem to be very good at speculating on people's fear.

DG: It's very easy to manipulate people when they are afraid. When I look at Israel, we are a traumatized society and community. We went through terrible things. It is so easy to manipulate us, to make us think that we should live by the sword and die by the sword, that there is no chance ever in our fate. There is an existential impossibility of us having a life of tranquility, security, peace. This is why it's so difficult to be a leftist in Israel. It's so much easier to be a right-winger, believe me. When you are a right-winger, everything is organized in a very clear way. "We are the good ones. They are the demons. We have all the justice.

They have nothing." My friend Amos Oz said that man is born a right-winger, because he's territorial, because he's xenophobic, because he adheres to his parents and his family and suspects everyone else. In a way, he's right. Amos Oz was right. It takes such an effort to act against the gravity of the narrowness and of the surrendering to a worldview that is so superficial.

MG: What is your biggest fear?

DG: Well, there are some. I am an expert on that, one is not enough. Right now, not to talk about private family fears, of course, everybody knows what we wish for ourselves, what everybody wishes for himself or herself. On a larger scale, I am afraid that Israel will not be the democracy that it should be. Already we are less of a democracy. You cannot really be a democracy if you are occupying and oppressing another people for so many years. You must create a kind of a mental exercise in your brain that will deny and exclude half of reality. And we Israelis know how to do it in a very efficient way, an amazing, creative way to cut, to buffer between us and our morality. We regard ourselves to be a very moral people, but we create a dichotomy between this and what we actually are doing in the occupied territories. It is hard to understand how this machinery works. There is inevitably an eating up of the infrastructure on the basis of our democracy, especially when we have a prime minister, Mr. Netanyahu, who is almost an expert and a genius in manipulating his people, in making them think what he wants, in this melting and breaking of many of the institutes that are meant to buffer between the prime minister and to keep the prime minister from become less and less democratic, like the attorney general and many other important roles which are meant to keep and protect democracy.

MG: Is this two-state solution still on the table in Israel?

DG: Actually, the one state solution, which means a binational state, is popular among a very small minority of people. It doesn't mean they are not right, but I still believe in the two-state solution. I think what both peoples, the Israeli and the Palestinians, desperately need is to keep some distance from each other for some time. Not to denounce each other, not to be hateful towards each other, but to start looking into their society and not into the enemy or the one who used to be the enemy. To start to heal the conflict of more than a century. We still need a border between us and the Palestinians because there will be many who will try, as I said, to damage this peace, if it will be. I don't think of a border in the form of a wall, a huge cement wall that exists now, but the border between two neighboring states with as many gates and doors to allow people to commute and trade and share ideas. I think these two peoples, the Israelis and the Palestinians, they grew up on hatred for each other in the last century. You cannot take such people, who were really manipulated and programmed to hate, and make them fruitful citizens in the same country. It takes time to heal this. It takes time to understand who we are, who they are, which are the meeting points between us and them. I believe deeply that when there is peace and when this peace will be established and becomes solid, we shall be surprised by the collaboration of the two peoples by the way they work together and maybe even start being curious regarding the other. I believe that this peace can be very fruitful, important and essential for both of us.

MG: I want to stay a little bit here, on the theme of the conflict between a human life and the Great History, the political life. Ora, for example, my favorite character, is a mother who refuses to receive the news of her child's death, and she tries to live her life outside of it. Can a man really escape from a bad history?

DG: A man can have the illusion that he or she escapes. For example, in Israel, you can have quite a good life if you have enough money and you have a job. Of course, everything today is very shaky because of the Coronavirus. There is a big layer of people who can really live good lives and at the same time be totally detached from the reality of the conflict. It's not easy. Even in the occupied territories, the current government built for the settlers a whole system of roads and tunnels and bridges so that they can travel without noticing the occupied people. It is possible. What's the point of being if you are not part of your time, part of the history of your time, part of the moral dilemmas of your time? I think this is what humans are for. Otherwise, what is the life that you live if you just erase the important, big questions? It doesn't mean that you can influence these questions or answer them, but at least ask.

MG: I believe that in all of your books – literature or nonfiction books – there is always a family there. Ora and her son, Tamar with her brother and their parents (even though their relationship is somehow dysfunctional), Momik and his great uncle, Vera, Nina, Gili. The family is present in every book. What does the family mean to you? What is a family?

DG: It's the basis. It's the place that I am known in the deepest way, maybe deeper than I want to. It's the place where almost everything radiates something relevant for me, some things that I like, some things that I dislike. It's the place where I can decode the codes of almost everything better than in any other circumstances of mine. Sometimes it can be suffocating, sometimes it can be supportive and enriching. This is why, for example, the Bible is so fascinating to read even sometime 3000 years after it was written. It's so much, especially the first books and especially the Book of Genesis. It's a drama of families. I always have this story, this little story about when I wrote a book called The Book of Intimate

Grammar, I don't know if it's available in Romania.

MG: Yes, let me show it to you. Cartea de gramatică interioară in Romanian.

DG: OK, this book is about a Jerusalemite family, very symbiotic, very intrusive. Let's say it reminds me a little my own family. Before the book came out, I thought it would be only fair to show it to my parents to prepare them before others are going to read it. My father read it and he said, "Well, David, it's a very nice story, but do you think that someone outside of our family will be able to understand it?" I thought it's such a sweet comment. My books are translated to many languages, and it makes me very happy that people are reading my books all over the world. Regarding every new book of mine, my father will ask, "Do you think that anyone outside of our family can understand it?" Whenever there is a new copy coming in Slovakian and Chinese and Norwegian, I come and give the book to my father. He's now ninety-four, clever and clear, very sharp. I show the book to him and I say, "You see, Abba, they have understood."

MG: At the beginning of the pandemic, many of us expected to be reconnected with the essentials: "Let's read more. Let's spend more quality time with our families. Let's get rid of the noise and avoid the unnecessary from our lives." Did this happen to you?

DG: Sometimes yes, sometimes no. In the first phase of the pandemic, I had it. Suddenly there was silence and I realized how noisy our life is. I read a lot. I made a kind of decision: I wrote only for children and I read only books that are older than me. I wrote for children in order to achieve some optimism and I read elderly writers' books for sobriety, to know exactly what's going to happen. In the second phase, the second wave which started here

something like three or four weeks ago, it's very noisy. There are many demonstrations. There is a lot of political tension, animosity and sometimes a feeling of almost anarchy in Israel. We are not there, but there is this flickering of anarchy, even the temptation for anarchy that some people surrender to. It's much harder to read and concentrate. Somehow, by surprise, like an unexpected pregnancy, I had an idea that I'm working on it now. Maybe a book will come out of it. Who knows?

MG: At the political level, the pandemic has brought a strengthening of authoritarian political regimes. I'm looking at Russia or even Turkey. Are people willing to give up their freedom when they are promised security?

DG: I think you answered the question. They are promised security and security is a rare product today. All the world is shaky. The person who is the strongest in the world, Mr. Trump, his expertise is to make us feel more and more unsteady, to be doubtful regarding everything, not to trust truth. On the contrary, he spreads around him so many lies that you can't really know what is true and what is a fake and a lie. He draws pleasure from it, really. He gets a kind of satisfaction from seeing the old order break down. Now, I think there were many bad things about the old order, many people suffered and were excluded from this order. Between that and what is happening now, there is a great gap. This gap is dangerous. The reality today, the shakiness of this reality is quite dangerous. People, like all the name of the dictators that I'm not going to mention, they promised their people solidity and a new way to understand or re-understand the world and to make the world relevant for them again. I think we have to be very suspicious, because especially in such times of instability, there are more and more elements who are nationalists, fundamentalists, racists. We have to look at the situation, write and warn about it, not collaborate with it and not allow all those elements to

fake our minds, our language. We have to insist on nuances, not allow those thick formulations of ourselves, of the situation. We have to insist on nuances and revive the delicacies of every human situation. This is the thing we are expert in. This is what we know how to do: observe a certain reality and articulate it in a way that will insist on its nuances. When you insist on nuances, you cannot generalize, you cannot stereotype, you cannot prejudice, you cannot become a racist. You are critical, you're open-eyed. And please don't give up on this open-eyed-ness.

MG: I don't know which question to choose for the end of our conversation, so I'm going to ask you about love. You give love the ultimate power: Assaf's love for Tamar in Someone to Run With, Rafi's love for Nina. Can love really hold so much on its shoulders?

DG: Yes, I think it's such a revitalizing sensation. Love is such a source of life. It's such a wonderful way to act against the gravity of despair, anguish and sadness. I think whenever we are doing an act of love, not necessarily between couples, but also towards our children, our parents, our friends, there is such a feeling of breathing with both lungs and we become bigger and more generous. Yes, I think it's a great gift given to us.

MG: David Grossman, if I were to describe you to someone in one word, I would choose generosity. Thank you very much for your generosity in having this dialogue and I thank you on behalf of Polirom Publishing House and the bookstore At Two Owls in Timisoara, and, of course, on behalf of the Romanian readers. I hope to see you soon in Romania.