

DE
CULTU
CIVILI
ESTONICO
VOL I

The WORLD¹ of ESTONIAN² LITERATURE^{1/3}

1 → world

- you feel for a while that you are at the
centre of the universe.

2 → Estonia

- a curious **periphery** where in places
the phenomenon known as 'wilderness'
has been preserved.

3 → literature

- 'literary culture' in this part of the
world meant translating the Bible, and
other stories were told as they had always
been - as **folk poems in song form**.

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THE WORLD OF ESTONIAN LITERATURE



THE NOBEL

No Estonian has ever been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. It may be of comfort to some that the same is true of the Latvians and Lithuanians, and that the Finns were awarded it a long time ago, but the fact remains nonetheless. Admittedly there are rumours that it has been almost within reach. The chief subject of those rumours was the Estonian writer of greatest international renown, **Jaan Kross**, who wrote spectacular historical and philosophical novels peopled with **brave, intelligent characters** of **Estonian stock** whose backs were unbowed by the machinations of history despite its unkind treatment of them. In short, Kross's characters resembled Kross himself, who was transported to Komi as a young man. They say that some time in the 1990s Kross was so close to the Nobel Prize that journalists virtually staked out **his flat** so that when the good news came, they would be among the first there. Now that Kross, a tough and quietly genial elderly man is no longer with us, the Nobel rumours have also fallen away even though we have several novelists with historical epic-writing persuasions.



Medieval and early modern Old Town of Reval, the setting of Kross's *magnum opus*, four-volume *Kolme katku vahel* (1970–80, *Between Three Plagues*). The novel's protagonist, author of the *Chronica der Prouintz Lyffland* (*Chronicle of the Province of Livland*, 1578) Balthasar Rüssow, served the Estonian congregation of the Holy Spirit Church, just a stone's throw from Kross's home.



Jaan Kross (1920–2007)

Estonian novelist and poet. Born in Tallinn to the family of Jaan Kross Sr., a machine-tool foreman, and Pauline Kristine (Uhlberg) Kross. Attended Jakob Westholm's Grammar School, studied law at the University of Tartu. Jailed in 1944 by the Nazis for supporting pro-Allied Estonian nationalist resistance, deported to a Gulag labour camp by the Soviets, in 1946. A professional writer since his return from exile in Siberia in 1954, Kross's leitmotif became personal loyalty towards one's upbringing and countrymen – themes pre-eminent in all of his historical novels, including *Keisri hull* (*The Czar's Madman*, 1978), *Professor Martensi ärasõit* (*Professor Martens' Departure*, 1984) and *Paigallend* (*Treading Air*, 1998). Also an author of several collections of poems and short stories, Kross is among the best translated Estonian writers in the 20th century.

Estonian Writers' House

(see p. 45)

his flat (Harju 1–6)

Black Ceiling Hall

(see p. 45)

Estonian Writers' Union

(see p. 45)

Looming

(see p. 36)



Erasmus Public Broadcasting Org

brave, intelligent characters

Kross's *Kolme katku vahel* on screen: one of the greatest Estonian singers of the 20th century, Georg Ots (in the foreground, with a scroll), portraying one of the greatest historical characters of allegedly Estonian stock, Balthasar Rüssow.



Topi Lepp

of Estonian stock

Although the Nobel Prize for Literature is not awarded solely or principally to novelists, the powerful image Kross has in Estonian consciousness is so prominent that since his death a number of questions have reverberated here and there: who will stand in his stead? Who would continue the literary custom of depicting a time and place as a setting for gripping stories about the fate of a **small band of people** caught up in the whirlwinds of history and the pressures of the present day? Would a new Kross emerge and where?



Ove Oksala



Mikko Mäkipuu



Ingram Kumbhar

a small band of people

novel-writing competitions



most famous

(see **beloved Estonian poetess** at p. 12)

The winning titles of the first novel-writing competition in 1927. First Prize: *Vaeste-Patuste alev* (*A Borough of Poor Sinners*) by August Jakobson, and three Second Prizes: *Tuulearmuke* (*The Wind's Paramour*) by Betti Alver (see p. 12), *Andeline parasit* (*A Talented Parasite*) by Reed Morn (pseudonym for Frieda Drewerk), and *Videvikust varavalgeni* (*From Dusk till Daybreak*) by Mart Raud.

stepping stones

Started by the Publishing House Loodus in 1927, the novel-writing competitions have continued in Estonia up to this day. The revival of the tradition in the restored Republic of Estonia was largely due to the novelist Juhan Saar, the co-founder of Estonian Novel Association – the supplier, together with Tänapäev Publishers, of the 'stepping stones' for upcoming novelists.

A number of **novel-writing competitions** are held in Estonia, the **most famous** of which began under the pre-war Republic. These events are increasingly used as **stepping stones** – younger entrants try to elicit greater support and find good publishing opportunities for their debut or early novels. The older generations are also looked upon with hope – every novelist with historical interests is considered to have a potential to influence the national consciousness as Kross did, even if they have no particular interest in Estonian history or no particular interest in the individual, but in the ideologies instead.

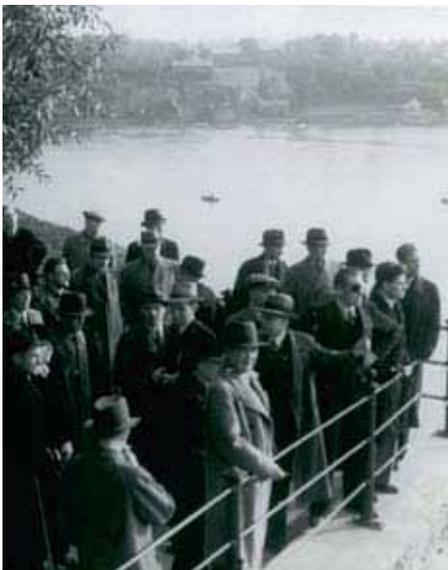
It is actually quite possible that Jaan Kross was one of the few people who did not take his narrow failure to win the Nobel Prize to heart. If it is mere illusion, it is definitely a significant one.



Introduction of the winning entries of the Estonian Novel Association's competition of 2007.



TRAVELLING



Estonian writers in Virumaa, 1930s

The historical province in Estonia's northeast, Virumaa, known mainly for large deposits of oil shale and Russian-speaking towns of mining and electric power industry, is actually one of the most variegated regions of natural beauty in the country. Since the late 19th century, this corner of Estonia has become particularly renowned for its holiday resorts, such as [Narva-Jõesuu](#).

A section of film from the end of the 1930s has been preserved which portrays [Estonian writers in Virumaa](#) becoming acquainted with local nature and industry. Some years ago the Writers' Union decided to implement a similar kind of scheme – in October and November each year between 20 and 30 writers are sent to appear in libraries in groups of three or four. The rain drips down, the forest edge is fragrant with [mushrooms](#) and decay, and carloads of literary people rattle far and wide over Estonia. The event is a wonderful undertaking in every respect because writers come face to face with their readership, its expectations and its problems. Once there they are offered coffee, [curd cheese cake](#) baked by [local people](#) and are asked for autographs. The writers read out their own work and manage fairly often to dismantle stereotypes and find a new audience. A few questions are taken; the Estonians are reserved people and when the questions come they are generally more or less of similar ilk, such as why is there so much bad language in modern literature, and others in that vein. Eventually the writers shake the hands of the [courageous librarians](#) and head off towards their next destination.

In other respects the meetings are very different – sometimes they speak to a dozen morose elderly people, sometimes to a dozen happy elderly people, sometimes there are about a hundred [youngsters filling the hall](#), all of whom have turned up, to everyone's surprise, of their own free will.

Narva-Jõesuu¹



mushroom



local people





curd cheese cake ('Bright time, no shadows')

Ingredients

250 g curd cheese
 4 eggs
 a pinch of salt
 100 g butter, melted
 juice of 1 lemon
 1 tbsp finely grated lemon zest
 250 g plain flour
 2 tsp baking powder
 50 to 100 g raisins

Mash curd cheese into uniform mass. Add eggs beaten with sugar, melted butter, flour mixed with baking powder, and raisins. Pour into a greased and floured cake tin and bake for 45 minutes.

Once, in the first year of the library visits, it so happened that the writers' group was sent to a parents' meeting at a local school instead of the library, their appearance scheduled immediately after an address by the [local chief of police](#). When the police officer finished his speech, the parents went to have a coffee, leaving their [offspring to confront the writers](#), one of whom was a known existentialist who had penned an ironic, gloomy catalogue about the alienation of urban life and another who was an expert on Marcel Proust.

courageous librarian



youngsters filling the hall



offspring to confront the writer



(see [angry young writer](#) at p. 31)

local chiefs of police



They were later taken to spend the night in a tumbledown hut in the **middle of the forest** where they were afraid that a **bear** may use the space where the window should have been to intrude into the ground floor during the night. Nevertheless they survived and their next appearance went according to plan. They seem to have the best memories of the visit.



middle of the forest

bears

The Eurasian brown bear (*Ursus arctos arctos*), Estonia's largest terrestrial predator, with body length up to 280 cm, weight up to 315 kg, and shoulder height up to 150 cm. Totem animals of Estonians' forest-dwelling forefathers, bears are quite timid and shy away from humans, getting only occasionally excited about beehives, oat crops, or orchards. Recently, one particularly enterprising specimen reached Ruhnu (probably rafted on an ice floe), Estonia's outermost island in the Livonian Bay, where it spent the summer, only to disappear just as mysteriously in the autumn.





THE POETESS

The history of Estonian literature has a fondness for singling out poetesses. They seem to comprise a story of their own, a crystalline, [unattainable necklace](#) in which the gems are the beautiful, superbly talented wordsmiths whose destiny is to succeed each other in working miracles on the Estonian language and spirit. For many the idea is encapsulated in a [famous photo](#) from 1917 in which one of the more [glittering jewels](#) in the chain in question, a poetess who was still fairly young at the time and doubtless caught the fancy of many of the brighter men of her era, is leaning languorously yet proudly against her [colleagues-admirers](#).

The story of the poetesses continues today – it cannot be denied that a number of Estonia’s best poets over the last decade have been women. And there are still all kinds of them around now – some are languorous and some sterner, with softer or keener outlines. There is a pensive [guardian angel of poetry](#) whose exquisite games of words and thoughts are both clear as water and intoxicating as wine. There is a young [mother with elfin features](#) who speaks forcefully in the name of the past and traditions, and knows how to do so in such a way that she is heard even in the cities. Then there is a stereotypical [merciless literary surgeon](#) whose word cuts like a scalpel, leaving wounds that heal slowly.

One of the above-mentioned recently received a bracelet as a gift, which had once belonged to a [beloved Estonian poetess](#) who handed it down years ago to a younger colleague. That [younger poetess](#), who is now approaching 70, passed it on in her turn. It is to be anticipated that the [current owner](#) of the bracelet will bequeath it in her own time to the next beautiful, proud successor in the line of Estonian poetesses; perhaps she is yet to enter the world or is newly born this very day.

unattainable necklace



first jewel

(see p. 14)



beloved Estonian poetess¹



guardian angel of poetry²



mother with elfin features³



merciless literary surgeon⁴



younger poetess⁵

(see older poetess at p. 22)

famous photo⁶



colleagues-admirers (1918/2007)

glittering jewel⁷



literary surgeon & current owner



Lydia Koidula, first jewel⁸

The appreciation of literary authors in Estonia is evident on the national currency, re-established less than a year after the restoration of independence in 1991. Two of the highest-valued banknotes back in 1992, the 100- and 25-kroon bill, were embellished, respectively, by the portraits of the **first jewel** in the necklace of Estonian poetesses, **Lydia Koidula**, and the ‘national novelist’ A. H. Tammsaare.



A. H. Tammsaare
(see p. 16)



Kultuurkapital

Along with project-based funding, Kultuurkapital grants a number of annual prizes, e.g. the grand prize for literature, the prize for the best book of prose, best poetry collection, best essay, best dramatic piece, best children’s book, best translation from Estonian, best translation into Estonian, best author writing in Russian, and what is known as the open award – presented to a significant title, which sits somewhere between and/or above the categories.

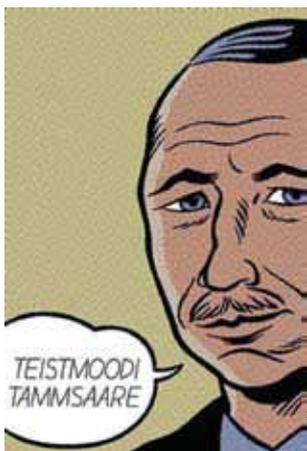
Fortunately for Estonians, the portraits on the national currency – obsolete since the entering of Estonia to the Euro zone in 2011 – is not the only advantageous connection between culture and money. In this regard there is also to mention the key cultural institution, Eesti **Kultuurkapital** (Estonian Cultural Endowment, founded in 1925 and re-established in 1994), a public fund that regularly allocates significant sums to creative individuals – for writing, production, travel, composition, publication, staging exhibitions, performances, etc. The basic objective of kulka (as the Kultuurkapital is affectionately abbreviated) is to fund creativity directly – all decisions concerning the allowances are passed by panels chosen from among the creative people themselves. In other words: democracy at the grass root level.



Põhja-Tammsaare farm.

THE HEART

Every nation probably has a number of books that are regarded as special, as depicting the fate and existence of its people. For the Estonian nation this category is occupied by **A. H. Tammsaare's** novel *Tõde ja õigus* (*Truth and Justice*) – an epic in five volumes about the life of the Estonian people at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. Many schoolchildren cannot abide this **cornerstone** of compulsory school literature, history on a grand scale, although even they cannot avoid the fact that it is the source of more than one of the aphorisms that have seeped into the Estonian language to become part of everyday speech. It is also interesting that although *Tõde ja õigus* has been portrayed in several cinematic and **many stage versions**, not a single one has been able or willing to tackle the work in its entirety. The **volume-by-volume approach** still abounds. Translations of *Tõde ja õigus* do exist in which the volumes have strictly separate titles. That is something of a shame because Tammsaare bestowed the best possible title upon his epic novel which is the universal story of **how truth does not, as a rule, overlap with justice** because there is perhaps no single, clear truth and if there is, it is personified in justice between individuals, a thing which is almost as difficult to personify as it is to find the truth. The truth cannot yield a single justice, although justice may contain something of the truth.



cornerstone

To celebrate the Year of *Tõde ja õigus*, in 2006, a competition of cartoon-drawing *Teistmoodi Tammsaare* (*Tammsaare with a Twist*) was organised, hoping for a fresh look at the literary heritage of Tammsaare, as well as drawing attention to the cartoon as an original form of art. The number of entries, together with the artistic merits of the resulting publication proves that Tammsaare's works can still address the young people.

Anton Hansen (1878–1940)

Pen name A. H. Tammsaare – Estonia's most distinguished prose writer, original and prolific publicist and translator. Born a fourth child to a crofter family with ten children, Tammsaare funded his education and began a writing career by working for newspapers. He had to quit the law studies at the University of Tartu because of TB and spent a year in a sanatorium in Sochi, Caucasus. From 1914, Tammsaare lived as a freelance writer in his brother's farm in Koitjärve, in 1919 moved to Tallinn. His death from cardiac arrest in March 1940 was perceived as an ominous sign of the impending ordeals, as thousands of people paid their respects at the writer's last journey to Metsakalmistu ('Forest cemetery'), the resting place of remarkable persons of Estonian public life.





many stage versions

Posters of Tammsaare's plays from over half a century.

volume-by-volume approach

Larger-than-life and with a weird sense of presence, cardboard cutouts in the forest near the Põhja-Tammsaare farm depict the interpretations of Tammsaare's texts by leading Estonian actors over generations.





how truth does not, ...



... as a rule, ...

farm, museum

In June and July 2008, to celebrate the 130th anniversary of Tammsaare, a monumental venture took place at the birthplace of the writer, the prototype of the Vargamäe farm of his epic – stage versions of all five volumes of *Tõde ja õigus* performed one after the other.

The 22-hour marathon, covering the history of Estonian people throughout the turbulent years from the 1870s to the 1930s, was performed by 70 professional actors, nine choirs and 40 volunteers in an old grain storage and on three open air stages constructed in adjacent meadows. The attendance of over 15 000 at 30 performances shows the respect the 'national novelist' still enjoys.

The first and fifth volumes of *Tõde ja õigus* are strongly bound up with the place where Tammsaare was born and spent the first twenty or so years of his life. His *nom de plume* was even taken from the **farm** where he first saw the light of day. It now houses a **museum** in the county of Järvamaa in central Estonia.

Incidentally, the county town of Järvamaa, Paide, is known as the 'Heart of Estonia'. Perhaps the same expression would be fairly apt for *Tõde ja õigus* if just to hint at its role as the bloodstream of 20th century Estonian literary culture.



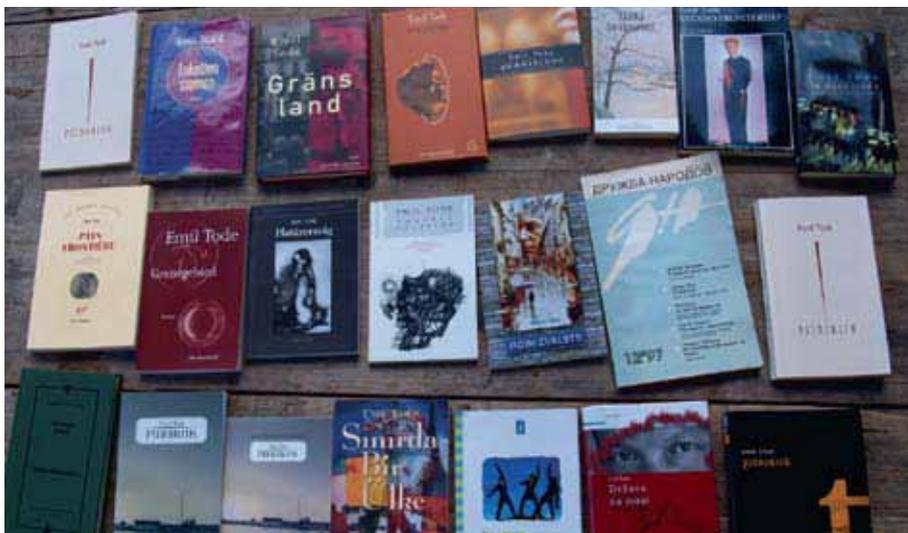
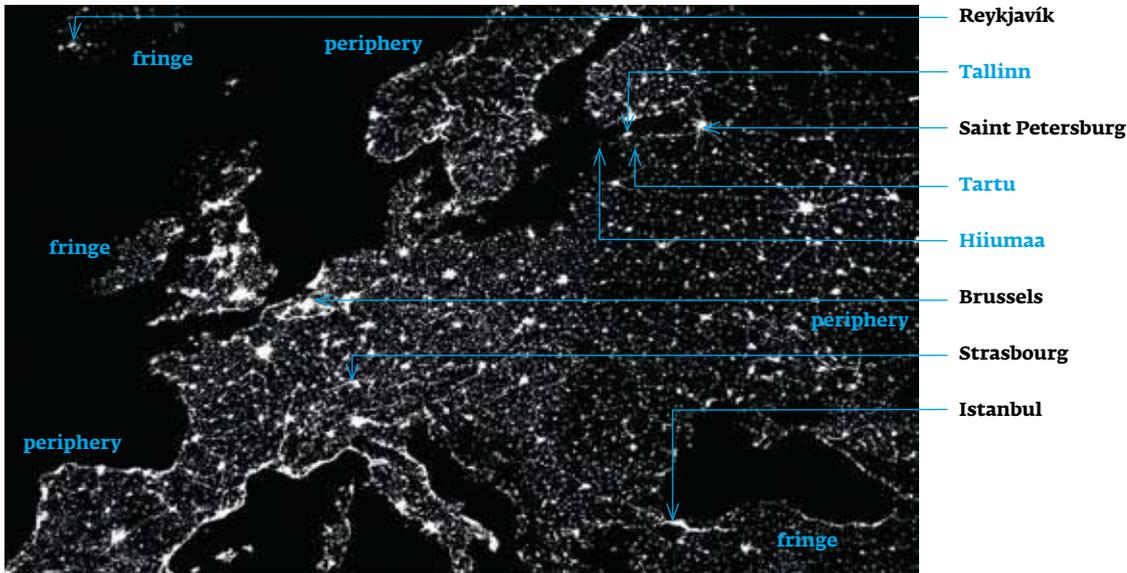
... overlap with justice





AT THE PERIPHERY

Estonia has always been something of a **fringe** area. In the Soviet time it was a fairly captivating place that you could visit to catch the fading scent of bourgeois western atmosphere; in the European Union Estonia is a curious **periphery** where in places the phenomenon known under the epithet of 'wilderness' has been preserved.

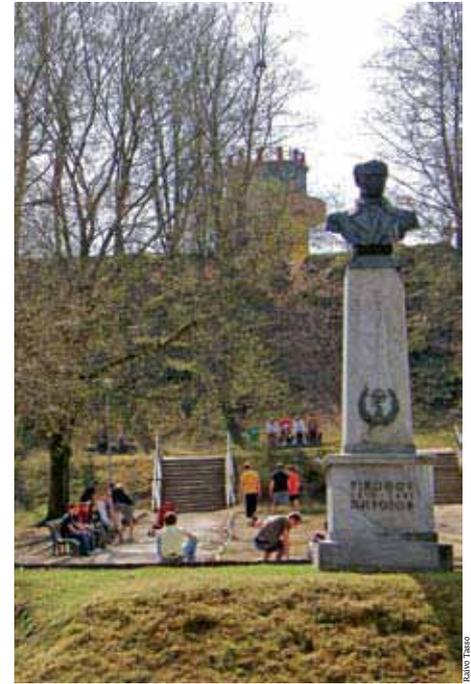


Piiririik, leading novelist* (see p. 51)

At the beginning of the 1990s, while Estonia was transforming from the occupied domain of the disintegrating Soviet sphere into the borderland of the integrating Europe, a novel titled **Piiririik** (*Border State*, 1993) was published by a **leading novelist** of the post-independence generation of Estonian authors. A cornerstone of the literary decade, **Piiririik** also became one of the most translated Estonian literary works in the 1990s.

Estonia, of course, has its own centres and fringes. This stems from the strain between the two major cities of Estonia – time and again the image flashes up of the capital city, Tallinn, as a metropolitan stronghold of veiled power and progress, and of Tartu as the somewhat sidelined, haughty cradle of intellectual and cultural traditions. There are of course, many writers in both Tallinn and Tartu but several also live outside these cities, or even a long way away from them, in the borderland. Of course, intellectually most writers are destined to stay in the fringe – the opalescent mandate of consumer society to endlessly enjoy and consume holds little fascination for them; they squint in the aggressive neon light and withdraw into their own shadowy recesses where the darkness is adequate and the night sky is still visible. Unfortunately life is becoming increasingly focused on Tallinn and Tartu, where the dark corners are either being demolished or renovated, often beyond recognition. The skylines of both cities have changed noticeably in just a few years, building work is going on both in city centres and suburbs. It would appear as if becoming European here often means a complete overhaul of the building, unless it is a brand new one.

Tallinn, veiled power and progress



Tartu, haughty cultural traditions

The darker, **smaller places** live their **own lives**, however. **Hiiumaa** comes to mind, one of the more alluring fringes hereabouts – Estonia’s second largest island and smallest county both in terms of area and population. Berlin would barely fit into Hiiumaa. Here there is extensive forest, abundance of bogs and sea breezes galore. In **Kärdla** (which is so small it has no suburbs), the county town of Hiiumaa, there is an old wooden house which served as a courthouse in the Soviet time although it has now been made into an **intellectual centre** run by an **older poetess**. The house smells of lost childhood, of an age gone forever – a little dampness, a bit of mould, black and green tea, firewood in the stove and time aplenty. The poetess plucks out a cigarette and gives a husky laugh like a real-life **Kunksmoor**, a character from a well-loved Estonian children’s book; in the dark evenings (of which there are many in Estonia) candlelight casts ghostly yet cosy shadows. At such moments, in such places, you feel for a while that you are at the **centre of the universe**.

Kärdla, intellectual centre, of the universe



older poetess (see **younger poetess** p. 12), **Hiiumaa**



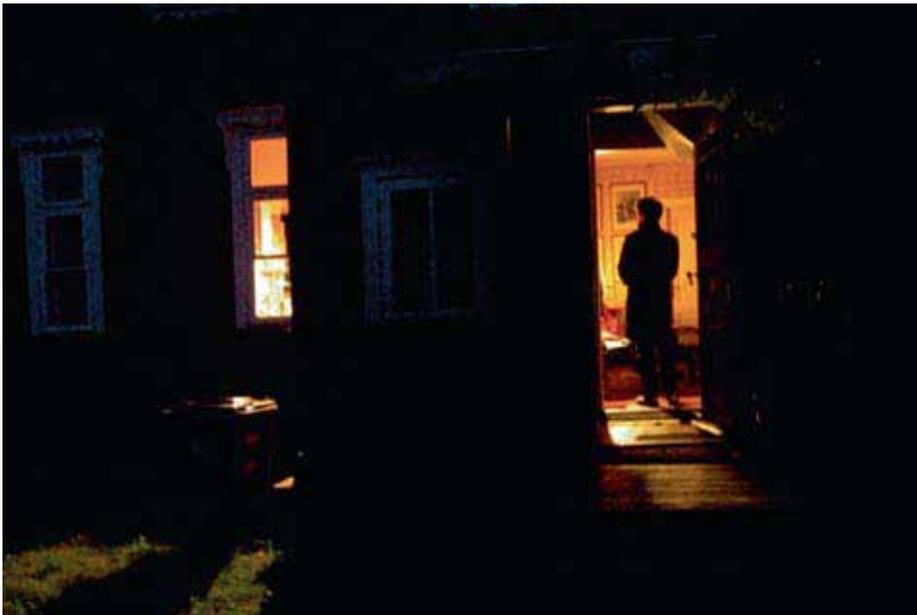
Kunksmoor

Kunksmoor, an extravagant trickster and affable elderly lady living in a house built in an old pine tree on a remote islet together with Captain Trumm ('Drum'), a retired skipper who asked for a shelter after his skating tour went wrong one winter.



smaller place² (see **bears** at p. 10), **own lives**

Lenni, a foxy resident of one of the most peripheral peripheries of Estonia, Ruhnu island.

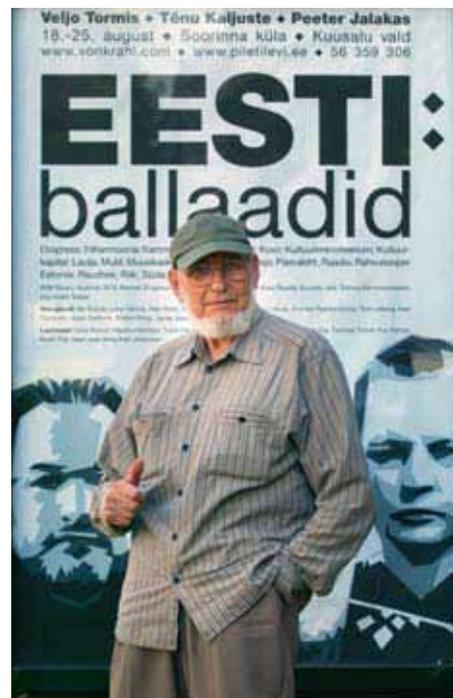




Setu women hailing the Day of the Setu Kingdom.

SONG

For Estonians, poetry and song are intimately linked. For centuries they were one and the same thing. Even with the advent of the modern age, 'literary culture' in this part of the world meant translating the Bible, and other stories were told as they had always been – as **folk poems in song form**, the lyrics of which could vary during performances, yet at the same time singing kept the **oral tradition** alive. The special bond between poetry and song can be observed much more recently, even in current rock music – several of the more important bands in Estonia use the work of known Estonian poets as lyrics. This was unquestionably what happened during the stagnation period at the end of the Soviet times.



oral tradition

Veljo Tormis (b 1930), probably the most iconic Estonian choral composer of the 20th century, has based many of his key compositions upon the oral tradition. In Tormis' own words: "It is not I who make use of traditional music, it is traditional music that makes use of me."

folk poems in song form

Among the best examples of modern 'covers' of traditional folk poetry is Tormis' cantata-ballet *Eesti ballaadid* (Estonian Ballads, 1980). A new production of the work in 2004 was regarded by many Estonians as the music event of the year.

Nowadays a woman who writes lines such as “I see the light / Don’t want to fight / Let’s be together tonight” for a **chick band** is referred to as a ‘poetess’. In fact, these days singers whose lyrics can stand alone without music (or with it), or poets who sing as well as write, are even more highly regarded. **Poets who sing** are rare creatures but often do not come into the limelight so readily, usually because they are **not used to holding a tune**. Admittedly there are several **interesting exceptions** – enough so that if grouped together a distinctive little rule could be formulated about them.



chick band, used to holding a tune

not used to holding a tune'

A folksy poet of younger generation singing along at the re-enactment of the Night Song Festival in 2008, celebrating the tenth anniversary of the Singing Revolution.



interesting exception, poet who sang?



One fairly well known singer writes absurd poems that skilfully hover between good and bad taste but his voice is [astonishing](#), a tender yet powerful tenor. He performs successfully in concerts and at poetry soirées. One of his most favoured songs tells the story of his buying six ice-creams, two of which he eats, leaving four in the fridge. Come and visit, we'll have a party, are the song's final lines. The song is amusing but also moving because something in the tender voice of this [gentle giant](#) instils a belief that he is actually taking it seriously. The words are in the voice, and the voice is in the words.

[astonishing, gentle giant³](#)





ABSURD

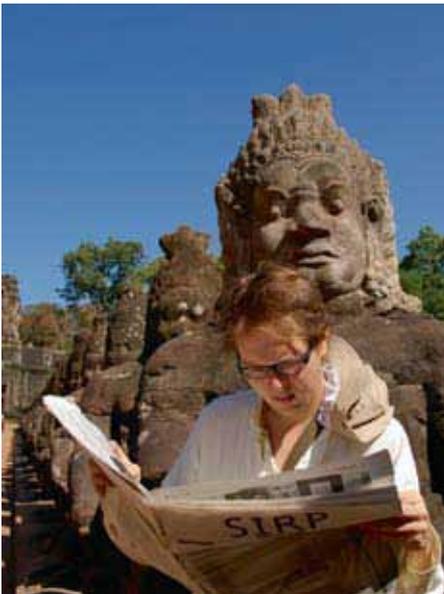
It was recently reported that since the year 2000 the equivalent of the population of Viljandi [has left Estonia](#). For us, Viljandi is actually quite a big city, home to almost 20 000 people. The news undoubtedly reminded many Estonians of previous announcements by local researchers that the Estonian people are in danger of extinction. The birth rate has risen, admittedly, but not enough. There are fewer than one million Estonians and, although that figure is several times larger than the number of Icelanders, Iceland is a distant island. Estonians [like it abroad](#), many of them don't like the damp, cold, dark climate here, many of them don't like the Estonians' reserved nature with its inclination to envy and over-industriousness, many of them don't like cowboy capitalism, many of them simply want better lives. One of my best friends lives in Germany, has a [wonderful husband](#) and three children. It's great that she [speaks Estonian at home](#) and expects her children to reply in the language, but in my view her three pleasant rascallions are German through and through. That is not meant as a criticism, heaven forefend! but merely as a melancholy reflection.



[has left Estonia](#)

Estonian émigrés, ca 100 000 of whom still speak Estonian, are distributed quite evenly on all continents except Antarctica. Many exile communities have managed to set up Estonian-medium schools for their children to maintain their mother tongue.

[like it abroad](#)



[wonderful husband, speaks Estonian at home](#)





writing into a void

Celebrating Kristjan Jaak's famous journey at his statue in Tartu.



mild absurdity, in the Estonian

Re-interpreting Kristjan Jaak's *tour de force* in 2010.

Kristjan Jaak Peterson (1801–1822)

The first student at the then German-language University of Tartu to acknowledge his Estonian origin, a forerunner of the Estophile Enlightenment movement and one of the first poets to write in learned Estonian. After studies in theology and philosophy in Tartu, Peterson returned to Riga in a renowned 250 km trek on foot. He died from TB at the age of 21. Kristjan Jaak's birthday on March 14 is celebrated in Estonia as the Mother Tongue Day.

being Estonian, defined by language

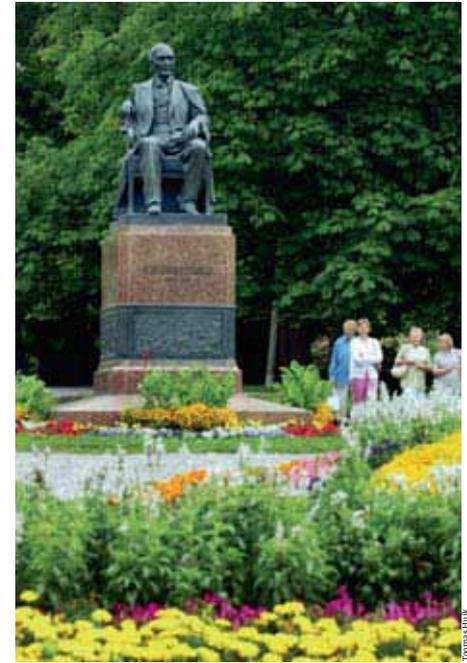
... kas siis selle	Cannot the language
maa keel	of this land
lauo tules ei voi	In the wind of incantation
taevani toustes üilles	Soaring to the heavens
iggavust ommale otsida?	Pursue for eternity?

Kristjan Jaak Peterson's early (1818) call to Estonian national self-awareness.



The whole business of our people becoming extinct makes the writers' work somewhat pointless because the fact of being Estonian seems to be chief y **defined by language**. Since **Kristjan Jaak Peterson**, we write in Estonian and in doing so we are not only writing for the present but for the future. Yet we cannot help to imagine that at some point in the future there will no longer be anyone reading our work. As a result, Estonian writers seem to be **writing into a void**. Admittedly, there are translators around. Let me be the last person to belittle their work! A good translation faithfully conveys the original author's style and linguistic skill as well as content. One thing that can never be translated, however, is the beauty of language. Much has been said about the wonderful Estonian translation by beloved poetess Betti Alver of Alexander Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin*, which some people periodically declare to be even better than the original. That's as may be, but nevertheless it does not sound the same as it does in Russian. The Russian language sounds true can be truly appreciated only in Russian, the Estonian language sounds true only in Estonian and so on for all languages. Something is always lost in translation. Therefore, even if most of my books were translated into other languages (most unlikely), it would not diminish the **mild absurdity** of creating literature **in the Estonian** language.

In a recently published essay about [Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald](#) – a physician of Estonian descent, who wrote down the epic of the Estonian people, *Kalevipoeg* (*Son of Kalev*), in the mid-19th century – an intriguing claim was made that absurdity was precisely what prompted the Bard of Viru to set about writing. Namely, the conviction that his work to that end was futile in the long run since the Estonian people, who were living under German baronial rule, were destined to become extinct. Kreutzwald wrote despite the fact that he regarded his writings as of little purpose. And yet the [national epic](#) is still being reprinted and [angry young writers](#) deconstruct the monolithic text with gusto. In short, Estonian writers perhaps prefer a destiny in which future generations will come across their works, hopelessly old-fashioned as it may be, in the language in which they wrote it, even if time does not treat it well.



Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald (1803–1882)

Writer, translator, man of letters, educator and publicist. Born to the family of serfs (acquired his surname at the freeing of his father in 1815), became one of the first Estonians to accomplish the university studies in medicine, worked for 44 years as the town physician in Võru. Known to his contemporaries as the Father of Song and the Bard of Viru, the author of *Kalevipoeg* (1857–61), *Eestirahva Ennemuistsed jutud* (*The Old Fairy-Tales of the Estonian Folk*, 1866), *Kilplaste imeväärlikud ... jutud ja teud* (Estonian version of the *Merrie Tales of the Mad Men of Gotham*, 1857), and several other enlightening books. As a member of the Learned Estonian Society (founded in 1838), Kreutzwald was actively involved, among other things, in reforming Estonian spelling.



Kalevipoeg¹

To follow the famous example set by eight patriotic Estonians in 1870, *Kalevipoeg* was recited at the Song Festival Grounds on Rakvere Castle Hill in 2003. The enterprise took a little under 14 hours for 121 readers to complete.



angry young writer²

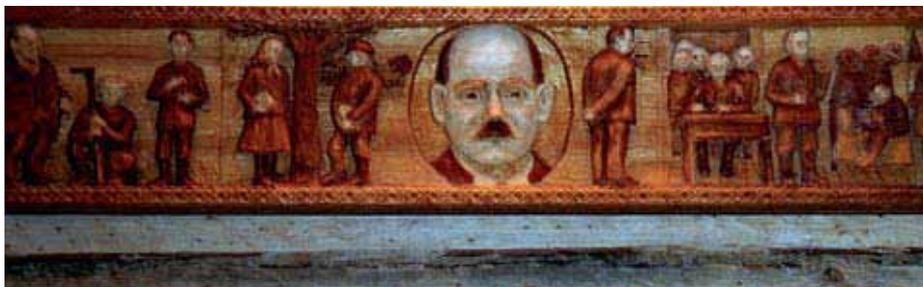
(see p. 33 and **offspring to confront the writer** at p. 9)

The inspiration from the national epic is evident in numerous retellings and treatments, e.g. the open air play by Rakvere Theatre in 2003, loosely based on the comic short prose by an angry young writer.

A FLOAT ON A RAFT



A FLOAT ON A RAFT



Characters from *Kevade* and the portrait of its author on the frieze in Palamuse Parish School Museum.

“When **Arno** reached the schoolhouse with his father lessons had already begun” – this is probably the best-known first line of a work of literature among Estonians. The book which opens with those words bears the title *Kevade* (*Spring*, I–II, 1912, 1913); it was written almost a hundred years ago and describes school life in Estonia at the end of the 19th century. Most of the stories in *Kevade* are etched into Estonians’ collective self-image, for example an episode which relates how a sturdy schoolboy by the name of **Tõnisson** sinks a raft belonging to the Baltic German offspring as revenge for their coming to the schoolyard to pick a fight with the **Estonian peasant boys**.

Estonian peasant boys, Arno (right)



Tõnisson (right)



Oskar Luts (1887–1953)

Poet, novelist, writer of humorous short stories and plays. Son of a rural artisan, studied in Palamuse and Tartu, also briefly at the University of Tartu; worked as a chemist, a bookseller, and from 1918 on as a professional writer. Best known for his novels *Kevade*, *Suvi* (*Summer*, I–II, 1918, 1919) and *Sügis* (*Autumn*, I–II, 1938, 1988), which were made even more popular due to the films by the same titles.



Kevade

Kevade, published in 19 editions since 1912, is among the best read Estonian novels of all times.

The schoolhouse which was the inspiration behind *Kevade* is now home to a museum where you can sit on [school benches](#) and study the possible inspirations for *Kevade* in the [multicoloured gallery of characters](#).



[school benches, angry young writer](#) (see p. 31)

Four winners, over the years, of the Oskar Luts Humour Prize, including the angry young writer in the foreground, sitting in school benches dating from the time of the writer's childhood in (the) late 19th century. The annual prize was founded in 1987 to mark the 100th anniversary of the author's birth.



[multicoloured gallery of characters](#)

An unusual rendition of *Kevade*, a ballet staged in the oldest Estonian professional theatre, *Vanemuine* in Tartu.

And that's not all. There is also a [raft](#) on the [river behind the schoolhouse](#) and anyone who wants to can stand on it.

Literature is still a strangely powerful thing. I know full well that the raft is not the one that Tõnisson sank. And who on earth knows what the prototype for the proud character of Tõnisson was like, or whether he ever said that [raisin broth](#) was no more than [slops](#) until it had a pinch of salt?

Yet nevertheless a shiver goes through me as I eye the raft. The timber structure is a clever fake, but for all that, for some reason the fact that it is bobbing there is good. Words have become wood and water, the words crackle in the schoolhouse's aged walls, the words can be inhaled deeply. Words have become a raft upon which our imagination sets sail.

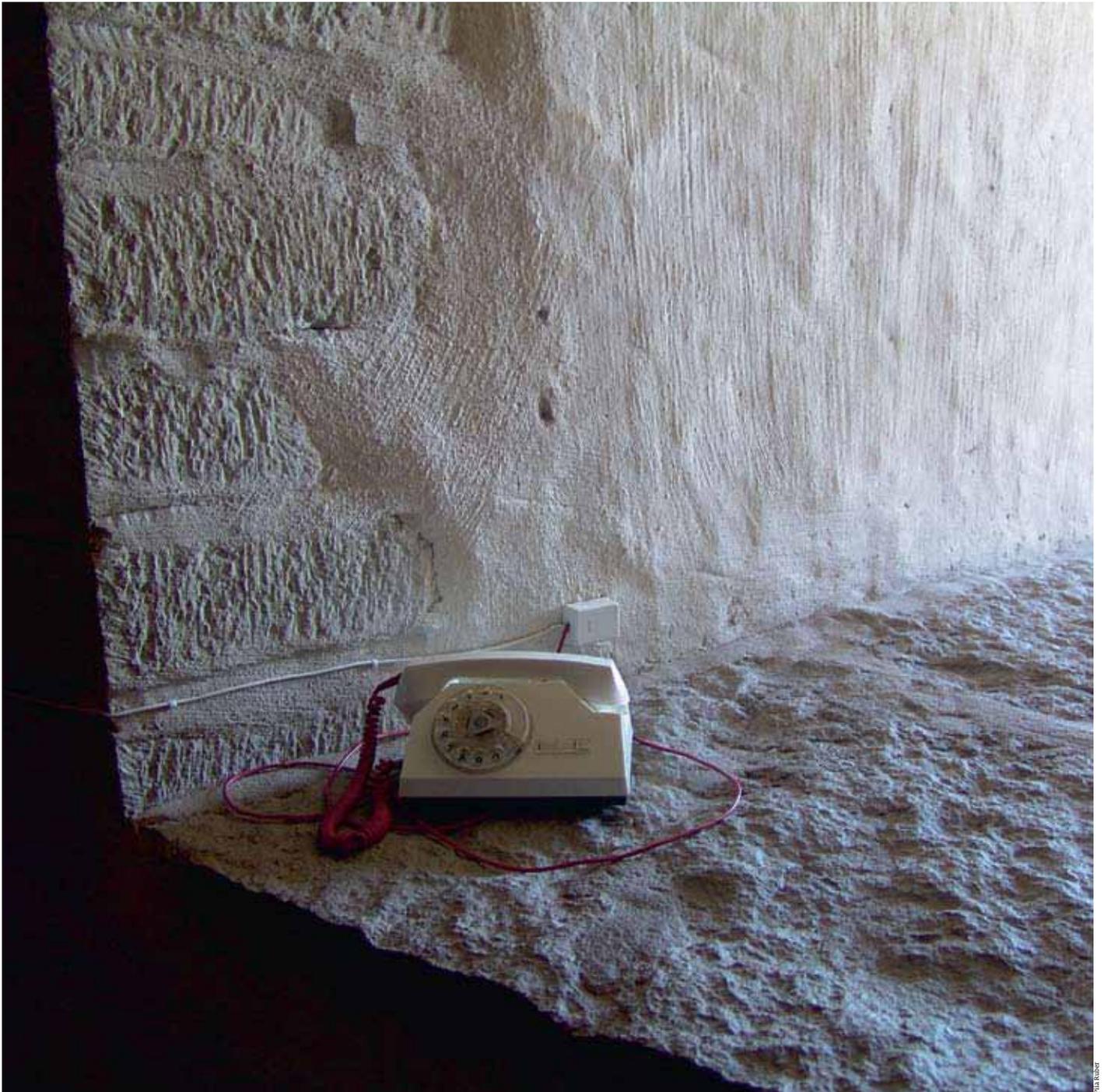


[raisin broth](#), [slops](#)

[raft](#), [river behind the schoolhouse](#)



TRY AGAIN IN A YEAR'S TIME

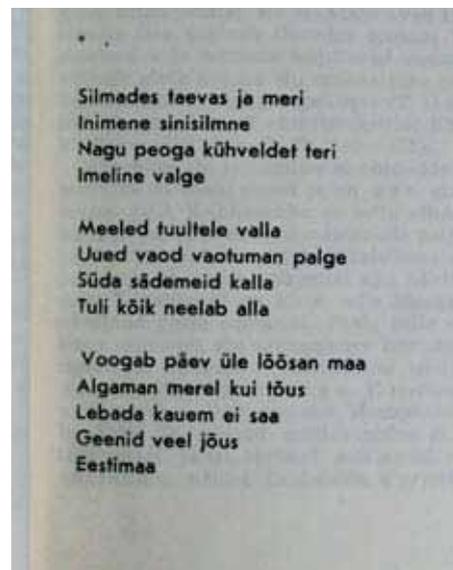


TRY AGAIN IN A YEAR'S TIME

I remember my parents' gigantic bookshelf from the time when the Soviet Union was led by an ailing Brezhnev. It towered in our two-room slum home right next to the stove like the [knowledge-imparting monolith](#) in *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Fewer books were published in those days. As a result a print run of up to 50 000 for a masterpiece of world literature might reach nearly one million Estonians in the Estonian SSR.

When the Soviet monster began to crumble, circulation rose even further. For example the print run of [Looming](#) (*Creation*), the most [important literary journal](#) here which publishes new work by Estonian authors was 12 000 when I was born in 1971. During the singing revolution in late 1980s that figure almost tripled. It can be concluded that literature had been one of the rare splashes of colour that brightened up daily life in the Soviet greyness. More than that even, reading high calibre literature not only made everyday Soviet life, a relatively desolate existence with its paucity of events and products, more interesting, it could also be seen as personal, unvoiced opposition to the blunting influence on society and the messages trumpeted out about the success of the USSR which daily life so clearly contradicted.

The concept of '[writing between the lines](#)' arose whereby local writers tried to outwit the censor by writing apparently ideologically blameless texts while hiding messages in or over words which could potentially be interpreted to mean the exact opposite, for example as a yearning for independence.



[Looming](#), 'writing between the lines'

In 1981, a poem of hitherto unknown Andrus Rõuk *Silmaees taevaa ja meri* (*Sky and Sea in the Eyes*) appeared in *Looming* – an acrostic with the initial letters of the lines reading 'SINI-MUST-VALGE' ('blue-black-white'), the colours of the Estonian national flag, strictly banned by the Soviets.

[important literary journals](#)



Later on the new regime emerged, the longed-for freedom fell into our grasp, life seemed to be welcoming us in full colour. The temptations of consumer capitalism meant that literature began to lose its social role. Our family was delighted to move out of the slum in the first flush of independence into a flat – with its own bathroom and toilet, and hot water on tap! We took the monolith with us although the **place of honour in the lounge** went to the brand new colour TV.

Nowadays it's considered a success if sales of a classical work of world literature reach 1000 copies. The print run is also perhaps dependent largely on how the publishing house markets the book and whether the author has a grasp of product design. The print run of *Looming* fluctuates somewhere between 1000 and 2000.

Some years after our delighted move into the flat I began to realise I wanted to be a writer. I sent my efforts to *Looming* – having my work published in it felt like an unattainable joy. A couple of months later the editor gently but unambiguously informed me, “perhaps you should try again in a year’s time.” I didn’t give up, after all it was understood that only publication in *Looming* would clear the way to a book. I think it was around six years later that the first of my efforts was finally published in *Looming*, a reflection of mine. I was reeling with joy.



place of honour in the lounge



knowledge-imparting monoliths (see p. 43)
... at the entrance of Viljandi City Library.



Estonian literary journals, from *Eesti kirjandus* (Estonian Literature, 1906) and *Looming* (1923) to *Estonian Literary Magazine* (1995) and *Värske Rõhk* (Fresh Emphasis, 2005).

This too has changed with the new times. A new self-confident generation has grown up whose access to literature is not constrained to a journal with low circulation as nowadays there are so many **other publishing opportunities** and the new generation is confident of their quality without needing to seek approval or recommendations from older or more experienced colleagues. Over the last ten years I have had poetry, prose, essays and reviews published in *Looming*. I live with my family in my own house, **I sit at my personal desk** and at times think longingly of the moment when the **editor of *Looming*** phoned – back in the days when everyone used landlines, and said in an off-the-cuff fashion, “This latest piece was pretty good. We’ll be publishing it in the last issue of the year.”



other publishing opportunities



editor of *Looming* (AD 2010)



I sit at my personal desk



THE VILLAGE

The area of Estonia is greater than that of Holland or Denmark, although distances are small still. There is much more room here compared to those countries – you can travel for tens of miles around only forest and bogs. But there is life, including cultural life, amongst all this wilderness.

Estonian Writers' Union has a [beautiful house](#) within the boundaries of Lahemaa National Park, in [Käsmu](#), a village of retired master mariners between the sea and the closely packed forest. The former skipper's home has become a [creative roost](#) – all that is left of the pipe-smoking seadogs is the creaking of the floorboards at night. The house is very popular among writers and other creative people – chiefly because it is peaceful there, but also for the inspiring workshops arranged by the Writers' Union, the [Estonian Literature Centre](#), or some other party. The pines sway in slow motion, the forests are flush with boulders, berries and mushrooms. Some people go there to write, some simply to rest with their spouses, children, dogs and tortoises. To have time to do and to be.

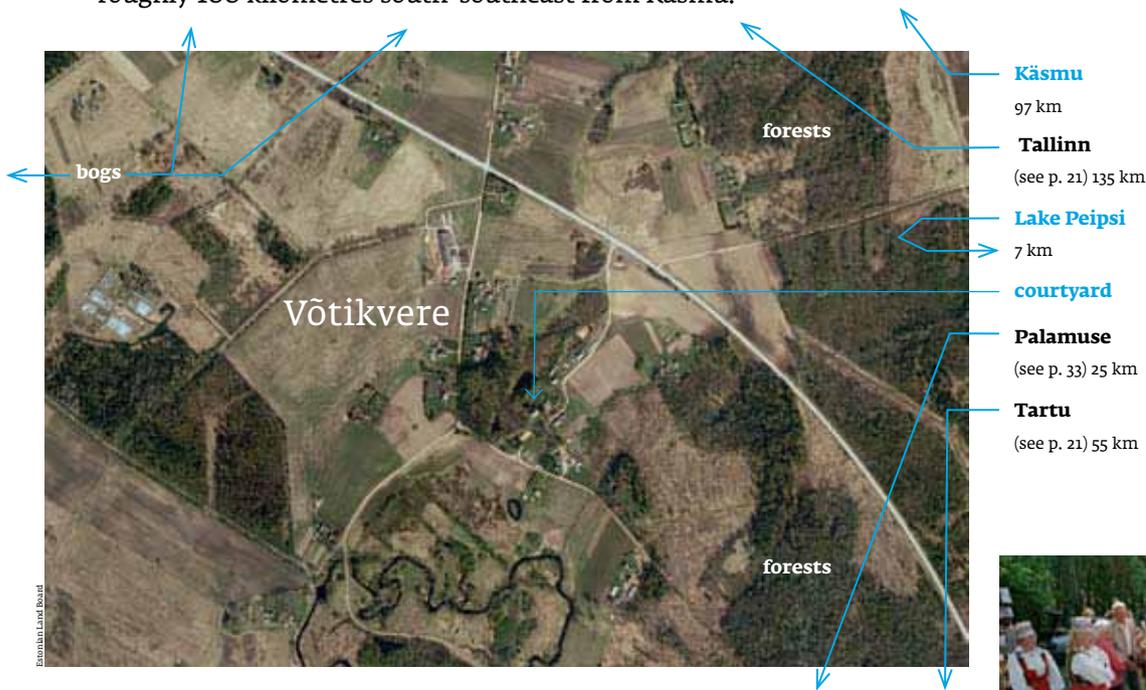


[Käsmu, beautiful house, creative roost](#)



[together for literature, Estonian Literature Centre'](#)
Estonian Literature Centre's poetry translation seminar.

At one stage it was thought that the literary commune could be a year-round thing. The writers would live together and write; people would come from all over Estonia to visit them, buy books and request autographs. Still, in the end this did not appear such a good idea – a group of writers permanently cheek by jowl somewhere where anyone might suddenly knock on the door and demand books. Could there be visiting hours? Now that would be complicated. A couple of days a year is quite adequate. People should gather **together for literature** as if for a party. Luckily enough, such a *fête champêtre* occurs – in mid-August, at roughly 100 kilometres south-southeast from Käsnu.



The village of **Võtikvere** locates some kilometres from **Lake Peipsi**, which occupies fifth place on the list of Europe's largest lakes; about ten years ago a **village literary festival** was inaugurated at the initiative of an indefatigable lady. The lady in question is better known as a journalist and documentary maker although her interest in literature is sincere and direct. When she finds a new favourite there is no doubt that the author in question will be heavily featured at the Võtikvere festival.



village literary festival

Remarkably, the Village of Books draws to Võtikvere a great number of publishers, to offer books at friendly prices – apparently more for fun than any commercial gain.

It is truly amazing how a villageful of people gathered together for a couple of days by the local library under the ancient trees to purchase books and [listen to writers](#). Claims that literature is a minority pursuit are reduced to a bad dream. If the weather's good then 'the villagers' [go for a swim](#) in Lake Peipsi after the official duties are over, and meet up in the [courtyard](#) of Võtikvere's founder to enjoy themselves.

Admittedly, Võtikvere is possibly one of the more comfortable, stress-free ways of having a party. Thanks be to the August air and the energetic people [beyond the forests and bogs](#)!



[go for a swim](#)

Imajke Lodjasta



[listen to writers](#)



[beyond the forests and bogs](#)

Estemari Tõre Eter



The Black Cube – Estonian stand at the 2007 Gothenburg Book Fair, alluding to the topical theme in Estonian literature and psyche.

THE BLACK CEILING

One of the most famous Estonian poems was recently one hundred years old; its title is *Must lagi on meie toal* (*Our Room Has a Black Ceiling*, or, in W. K. Matthews's literary translation, *Our Room Has Soot-blackened Rafters*). The poem is fairly sombre, the ceiling is stained black with soot, there are cobwebs and cockroaches on it. The ceiling is black also because it has witnessed the harsh life of the Estonian people, its anguish and torment, tears and teeth-gnashing. At the end of the poem it becomes clear that the black ceiling is not only an aspect of our room but an aspect of our era, which is writhing as if in shackles. The author of this gloomy vision, **Juhan Liiv**, lends himself to the stereotype of a poet suffering for himself and his people – his career was uneven, and he had mental-health and financial problems. Liiv's poetic genius went largely unacknowledged, but for the young and angry members of the leading literary group of the era, *Noor-Eesti* (*Young Estonia*), who published most of his works. All this provided a **tragic destiny** and awareness described in the poem about the black ceiling, which is also an undying expression of Estonian consciousness.



tragic destiny, *Noor-Eesti*¹

Luuletused (Poems, 1909),
the only collection
published in Liiv's lifetime.



Our Room Has a Black Ceiling

The smoke-filled interior of the kiln room of an Estonian barn dwelling from the late 19th century.

Must lagi on meie toal

Must lagi on meie toal,
on must ja suitsuga,
sääl ämblikuvõrku, sääl nõge,
on ritsikaid, prussakaid ka.

/---/

Must lagi on meie toal
ja meie ajal ka:
ta nagu ahelais väänleb,
kui tema saaks kõnelda!

Our Room Has Soot-blackened Rafters

Our room has soot-blackened rafters
That loom through the smoky air,
And the cobwebs are dense in its corners,
And cockroaches scuttle there.

/---/

Our room has soot-blackened rafters.
This age has such rafters too
That stare down on tangled fetters.
Ah, if it could speak to you!

Translated by William Kleesmann Matthews



Juhan Liiv (1864–1913)

The most cherished lyric poet and tragic genius of Estonian literature. Studied in Kodavere Parish School and at the Hugo Treffner Gymnasium in Tartu; worked as a schoolteacher and journalist. After developing schizophrenia in 1894, withdrew from the public life, to be 'rediscovered' only in 1902 by a psychiatrist cum publicist Juhan Luiga. Yet, many of Liiv's best poems – probably every adult Estonian knows by heart at least one – appeared only posthumously.

Since 1965, Alatskivi Municipality grants the annual Juhan Liiv Poetry Prize for an outstanding Estonian poem displaying Liiv-like spirit.

year 2010 winner ²



It sometimes happens that words and symbols become tangible. There is large room with tall windows called the **Black Ceiling Hall** in the **Writers' House** which was constructed in the heart of Tallinn after the Second World War. The small, low, stuffy room buried in cobwebs has become a handsome hall with central heating, parquet flooring and a black ceiling, although its walls are white. Smoke and fire are not allowed in here, the ceiling is not covered with the soot of the struggle for existence, but with a high-calibre paint in accordance with the architect's instructions. The ceiling is a beautiful arch so it is not to be compared with conditions in a poor cottage room but to the night sky which, when gazed upon, said Juhan Liiv in one of his poems, even made his homeland seem beautiful. Very seldom are cockroaches and spiders to be found in the Black Ceiling Hall. Its function is to act as a **writers' formal meeting place** and **Writers' Union** parties have been held there for some time; revered maestros hold their own celebrations, book exhibitions and literary soirées have also taken place there for years – starting with the **Literary Wednesdays** organised by the Writers' Union itself, which range from dignified discussions with the living luminaries to the noise made by **young rappers**.



Literary Wednesdays

The dispatch of Laika – a poetry performance on a Literary Wednesday.



young rapper

Birmingham-born British-Jamaican poet Benjamin Zephaniah (on the left) performing at the literary festival *HeadRead* in 2010.



Black Ceiling Hall, Writers' House³ (see p. 4)



Writers' Union⁴, formal meeting place

The main literary oasis in **Tartu**, the **House of Literature**, home of the Estonian Literary Society and Tartu Department of the Writers' Union, has also had its share of gloom – it served during the Soviet occupation as the KGB Tartu Headquarters. Bright times only returned with the re-establishment of the Republic of Estonia and the restoration of the House to its original owners in mid-1990s.



dark tones within

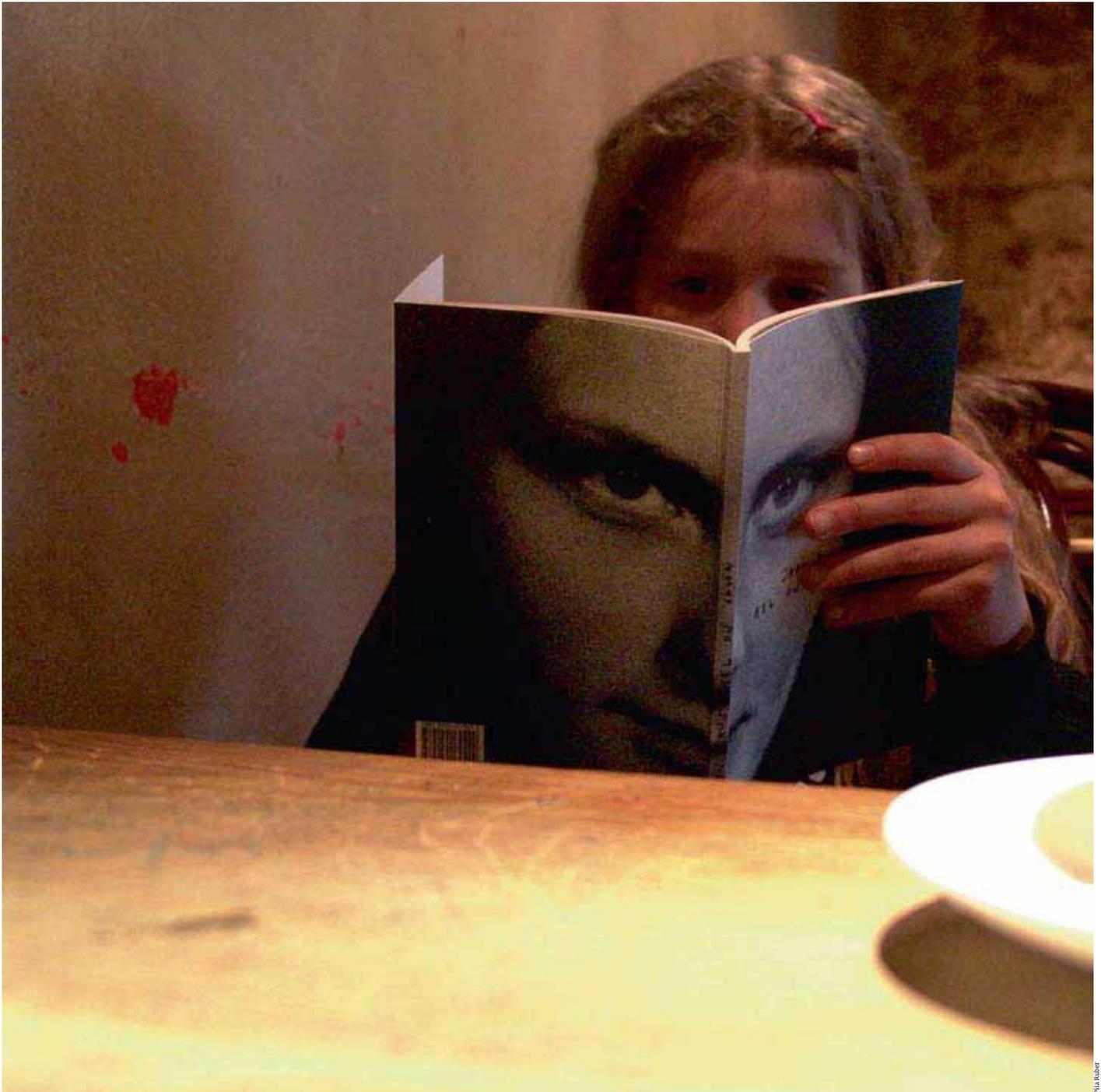
A surprising tie-in: a cake named Must lagi ('Black Ceiling') on sale at the Parish Day of Jõelähtme, Harjumaa.



serfdom has become freedom, Tartu House of Literature

Bright afternoon on the front steps of the Tartu House of Literature.

Times are different – the room has become a hall, **serfdom has become freedom** and the invaders have withdrawn – yet at the same time they have not changed. However, even nowadays lyricists must articulate the **dark tones within** and around freedom, take note of the invisible, secret shackles of the age. They have impressive refuges with interesting histories in which to lament their anxieties.



TIME FOR READING

After the restoration of independence, it has been argued more than once in Estonia that although in the Soviet time people did not have money they had time, whereas now, in the free market economy, people have money but no longer have time. Indeed, one of the most common refrains of the day in popular parlance is “Listen, I just don’t have the time at the moment, I’m incredibly busy!”

It is a truth generally acknowledged that **interest in reading** has fallen over the last twenty years or so, to the extent that even the **skill of reading** is under threat. In the Soviet time Sunday morning television was devoted to an hour-long programme on the glorious Red Army and comedy shows were broadcast chief y on New Year’s Eve. Times have certainly changed quickly, glittering shopping centres await customers and there is somewhat inadvertently even too much humour on television. So much so that it would appear that what with overwork and consumerism people no longer have enough time or mental energy in general to learn anything new. In view of this threat, 2010 has been declared a **Year of Reading** in Estonia, and many writers, including me, will be involved throughout, speaking in schools and libraries about the benefits of reading. This task, of course, leaves somewhat less time for reading. Despite this I like reading aloud, reading good literature to an audience, after all this too is one feasible form of reading.

Year of Reading

The Year of Reading of 2010 strove to remind Estonians of the pleasures of reading, and to encourage them, especially young adults, to read. Events of the Year took place all over Estonia, as well as at Estonian schools abroad and foreign universities where Estonian is taught.

All this continues with the tradition of the Year of the Estonian Book, started in 1935 to celebrate the 400th anniversary of the publishing of Wanradt-Koell Catechism, the first partially preserved book to contain printed Estonian text.

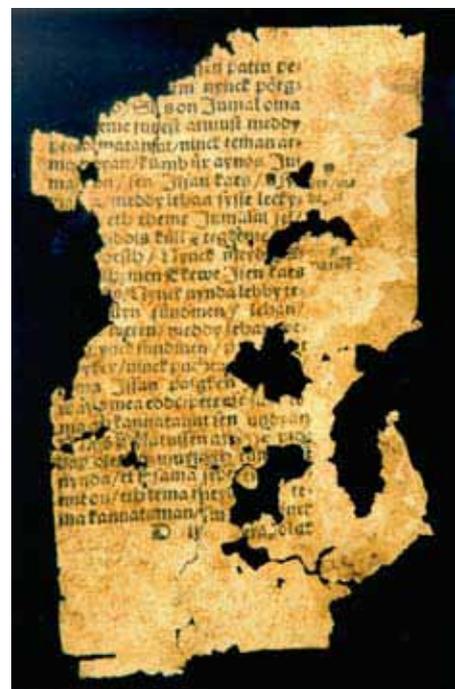


The steady growth of Estonian literature: illustration on a postcard from the set celebrating the *Year of the Estonian Book* (1935).



interest in reading

The portraits of Estonian poetesses (see **unattainable necklace** at p. 12) in the cosy reading environment of a modern bookshop.



A page of Wanradt-Koell Catechism (1535).

Yet nevertheless the question arises now and again whether it is really true that almost no one has **time to read** any more? Is there a basis for the view that readers are also writers and vice-versa? Fortunately the facts tell a different story – never in Estonia’s history have people had such an over owing **abundance of reading matter**.



time to read, abundance of reading matter

The Beach Branch of Tartu Public Library.

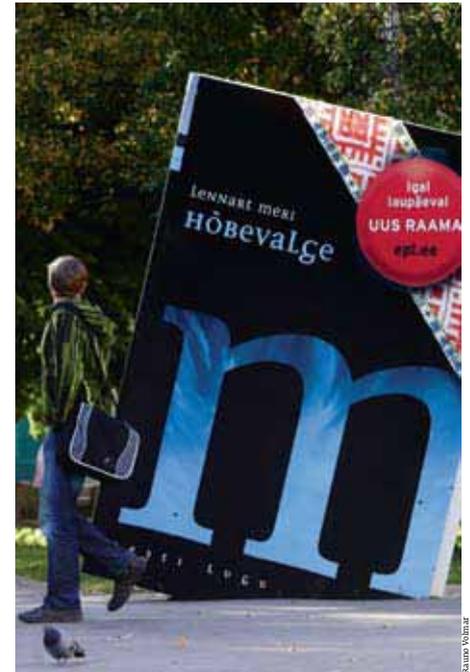


**skill of reading,
Estonian Children’s Literature Centre**

Friendly and fanciful, the Estonian Children’s Literature Centre at the edge of Tallinn’s Old Town has an important role in honing the reading skills of many a small Estonian.

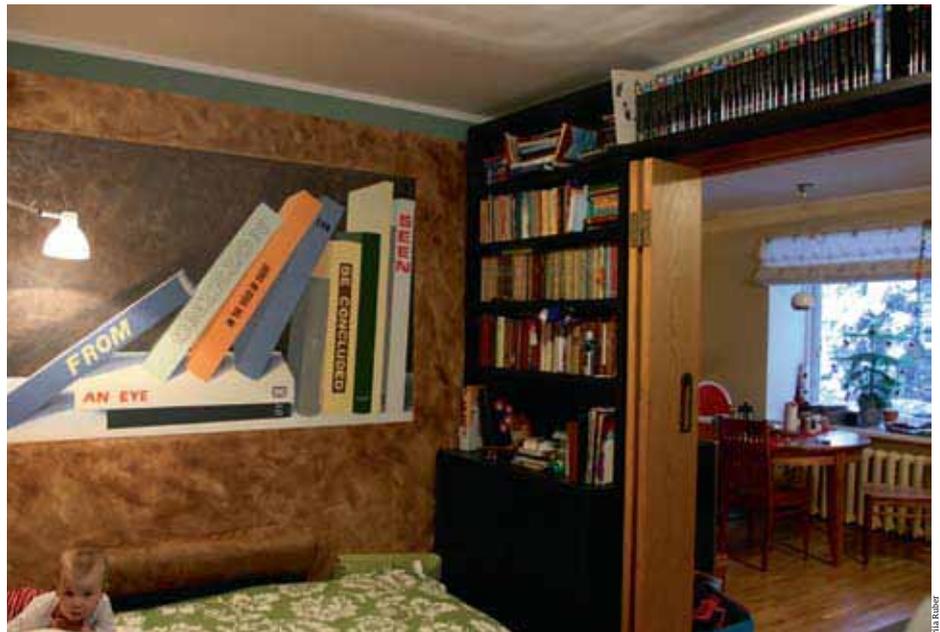


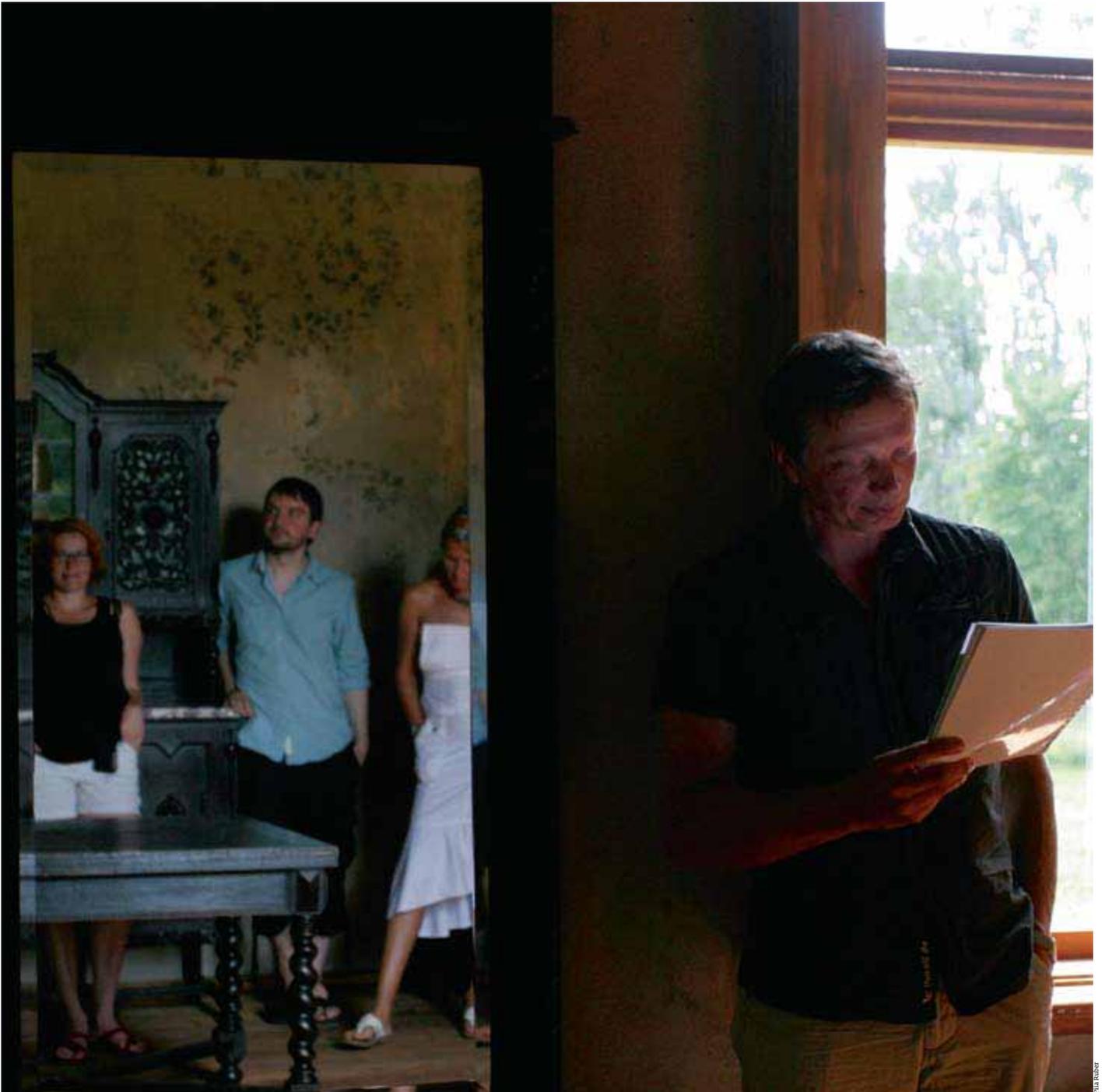
For example some years ago a major Estonian newspaper established a publishing house which began to publish **voluminous** series of **books** among other things – people who bought the newspaper from a supermarket on Fridays were able to purchase a good novel at the same time for relatively little money. Actually this is nothing new, things like this have been done in Western Europe. The publishing house of the newspaper in question published translations of classic world literature in two successive series although hitherto the latter set has been more distinctive. It incorporates **fifty works of Estonian literature**, some of which were, during the Soviet time, unknown, frowned upon or banned and as a result were in effect new to many readers. The print runs for the series were considerable, and it was not the case that boxes of classics were left languishing at the cash registers – quite the reverse, the box was often completely empty before the following Friday. It's hard to say what led people to buy the books – whether they purposely collected them for their shelves as part of the furniture to project an **image of good taste**, or whether many have actually had the time to read them carefully and thoroughly. As most of the books were purchased, these worthy works are in people's homes and even if many of them have not yet been read, they are merely biding their time.



voluminous book

image of good taste, fifty works of Estonian literature





The leading novelist at his former country retreat.

POETRY ON SCREEN

An Estonian writer and translator once formulated the interesting conclusion that poetry means more or less as much to Estonians as football does to the English. And indeed, there can currently be no complaint about the abundance and [standard of poetry](#). In addition to the fact that a large number of anthologies appear each year, the prevalence and range of poetry stands out among the dust jackets. For example several Estonian newspapers have regular *poetry of the week* columns by Estonian poets – and this taps neatly into the conspicuous social vein in contemporary Estonian poetry, and into the power and opportunity to describe and ponder in poetic form the policies and social impediments of the present day. When for example a member of parliament becomes embroiled in a corruption scandal it is highly likely that a poem on the matter will appear in the press some days later.

There's more. At the beginning of 2009 Estonian Television began broadcasting a programme named [Poetry broadcast](#), straight after the sports news to boot, which among other things generally reported the trials of the Estonian football team in its search for glory. In 2009 they managed to squeeze 36 poets onto the screen, with ten or so poems each over as many appearances; 38 poets have already been lined up for 2010 meaning that over a two-year period the national television channel will have broadcast a total of 74 poets currently writing in Estonian, over and over again.

[standard of poetry](#)

... at Prima Vista literature festival in Tartu.



[Poetry broadcast](#)

A poem – the title of the *Poetry broadcast* on screen.



Naturally, probably no programme has been criticised here over recent years as much as this one. What is this and **what does it mean?** Why straight after the sports news? How come – that poem stopped before it started! Why only one poem at a time? That’s perfect – it is now possible to go to the loo after the news! A prime-time slot on national TV every blasted day! Why do the poets **read from a sheet?** Why **that set, that lighting?** According to producers, the annual budget for the poetry slot was comparable to the cost of the bucket-loads of glitter dropped from the ceiling at the end of the final of a glamorous dance show broadcast by a local commercial channel (they began falling during the final credits). But why do the poets use so much obscene language (it must be said that ‘so much’ is a relative concept, as is ‘obscurity’). What’s become of the good old end-rhyme? Naturally the broadcasts included poets whose work **does indeed include rhyme**, although the general tone was strongly towards free verse. In the light of the *Poetry broadcast* it was openly claimed that ‘free verse’ was not poetry, merely **a manner of speaking**. The reproaches might, of course, have been totally unexpected.



what does it mean?



younger poetess (see p. 12)



guardian angel (see p. 12)



does indeed include rhyme



that set



that lighting



read from a sheet



a manner of speaking



Rene Tamme

into the windows
of the local trains

One viewer who complained about a literary effort said he understood the reasons for the obscenities and the absence of rhyme, but there was one thing he simply could not comprehend – why were such poor actors asked to read the poems?

Nevertheless, contemporary poetry continues to nestle itself into the people’s horizon anyway it can. Poems have appeared [into the windows of the local trains](#). What’s next – the windows of the plains?

Last but not least – while free verse takes the [vanguard on the TV screen](#), the internet, which is being used increasingly by Estonians, is largely dominated by rhythmical rhyming poems. Tradition triumphs on-line, or at least the desire for it does! There are room and muses for everyone – although a poetry-writing footballer is something that still eludes us.



Vahur Aabrima

vanguard on the TV screen

“Does television imitate real life, or does real life imitate television?": questions that puzzle graffiti artists in Tallinn.



Esterman Imetere

END NOTES

TRAVELLING (pp. 7–10)

1 **Narva-Jõesuu** – a summer resort in the northeastern corner of Estonia, at the outlet of Narva River to Narva Bay. The spa town is known for its genteel leisure architecture and the 7,5 km long beach of white sands fringed by pine forest. With the opening of the Tallinn–Saint Petersburg railway in 1870, Narva-Jõesuu became a summer destination for the nobility from the then Russian capital, which lies less than 150 km to the east. During the Soviet period, the resort was frequented by tens of thousands of holiday-makers from the same city (renamed Leningrad), among them many artists and writers.

POETESS (pp. 11–14)

1 **Betti Alver** (1906–1989) – the pseudonym of Elisabet Talvik-Lepik (née Alver) – one of Estonia's most outstanding poets and translators. Of the first generation to acquire education in independent Estonia, Betti Alver debuted with the novel *Tuulearmuke* (see p. 6). In verse, she became known in the 1930s – as a member of *Arbujad* (*Soothsayers*), a circle of poets (Alver, Bernard Kangro, Uku Masing, Kersti Merilaas, Mart Raud, August Sang, Heiti Talvik and Paul Viiding) brought together by the literary scholar Ants Oras. While the Soviet occupation abruptly ended the pre-WWII heyday of poetry, the group had a lasting influence upon the post-war generations. Alver's oeuvre, in particular, has been regarded as a paragon of ethical firmness in the face of combined personal and national calamities – her life overshadowed by the death in Siberia of her soul mate and husband Heiti Talvik, she withdrew to translating of what is regarded as the superlative of Estonian literary rendition. Recommencing writing in the 1960s, Alver published her last collection, *Korallid Emajões* (*Corals in an Ancient River*), on the occasion of her 80th birthday in 1986.

In accordance with the will of the **beloved poetess**, an annual prize for the best literary debut – the Betti Alver Award – has been issued since 1990.

2 **Doris Kareva** (b 1958) – poet, editor, translator, mentor and promoter of literature. Born and schooled in Tallinn, Doris Kareva graduated *cum laude* from the University of Tartu as an English philologist. Since 1978, she has worked in different capacities at the Estonian main cultural weekly *Sirp* (*Sickle*), and served as the Secretary of the Estonian National Commission for UNESCO. Publishing her first volume *Päevapildid* (*Photographs*) in 1978, Kareva has since become one of the most popular and influential poets, with a dozen-odd collections, and a number of poetry translations,

e. g. of Beckett, Dickinson, and Shakespeare. On top of that, she has selected and edited poetry anthologies, contributed articles, given talks and poetry readings in Estonia and abroad, as well as encouraged and introduced – as a **guardian angel of poetry** – young talents onto the literary scene.

3 **Kristiina Ehin** (b 1977) – one of the most successful poetesses of the younger generation. Born into a family of poets (father Andres Ehin, mother Ly Seppel), Kristiina Ehin achieved early fame as a member of the literary group *Erakkond* (*Fellowship of Hermits*), made up of fellow students of the University of Tartu, her *Alma Mater* during the M.A. studies in archaic Estonian folk songs. Ehin's continuing interest in the ancestral oral tradition, the celebration of womanhood and the affection for live performances, have combined in an image of young **mother with elfin features**, an attractive herald for Estonian contemporary poetry both at home and abroad.

4 **Elo Viiding** (b 1974) – poetess, prose writer and publicist, the youngest representative of the 'Viiding dynasty' (see **Estonian Writers' House** at back inner cover). Daughter of **Juhan Viiding** (see p. 56), an actor and a poet of the second generation, Elo Viiding graduated also as an actress from the Estonian Institute of Humanities. Debating during her secondary school studies as Elo Vee with a collection *Telg* (*Axis*, 1990), she continued to use this sobriquet until the death of her father in 1995, starting thenceforth to publish under her real name. Described as a **merciless literary surgeon** for her abrupt and ironic style, Elo Viiding is also a Member of Board of the recently restored Estonian PEN Club.

5 **Ave Alavainu** (b 1942) – poetess and prosaist, a trickster and a sprightly granny character of the Estonian literary scene. After the unfinished studies in Estonian philology, Ave Alavainu graduated as an actor from the Theatre *Vanemuine* Drama Studio in Tartu, and has since been working in the press, as a teacher and as head of a school theatre. From 1976 she resides in Kärkla, Hiiumaa island, running an intellectual centre *Ave Vita!* and organising irregular poetry events. She started publishing in the 1960s with her first collection issued in 1971 by a quasi-underground students' press in Tartu. The first 'official' collection followed in 1973.

For a dozen years, Ave Alavainu was the bearer of one of the most symbolic relics in Estonian literary culture – a Byzantine bracelet owned, before her, by the wife of a poet and politician Johannes Vares-Barbarus and **Betti Alver**. In 2009, she handed it down, in her turn, to the **current owner, Elo Viiding**.

6 **Siuru** ('The Blue Bird') – a circle of Estonian writers (named after a wondrous bird of Estonian mythology), involving Marie Under, Johannes Semper, August Gailit, Henrik Visnapuu, Artur Adson and Friedebert Tuglas (clockwise from the bottom right on the **famous photo**). The fellowships intentionally irritating, joyful and erotic poetry, published from 1917 to 1919 under the slogan "Carpe diem!" contrasted starkly with the sombre mood instilled by the aftermath of WWI and the raging War of Independence (1918–1920). This brought about reprints of their collections, but also drew rebuke from the more conservative critics, such as **A. H. Tammsaare** (see p. 16), and calls like "Down with lyrical chocolate!" from the socially conscious colleagues.

7 **Marie Under** (1883–1980) – Estonian poetess and translator, widely acclaimed as the greatest poet from the pre-war period of independence. Born in Tallinn, Marie Under attended a private German girls' school and wrote her first poetry in German. Married in 1902, she accompanied her husband to Moscow, where the couple had two daughters. Upon the persuasion of a friend, Estonia's leading artist Ants Laikmaa, Under returned to Estonia in 1906 and started to publish in her native language. In 1913, she met Artur Adson, a young poet and a companion for the rest of her life.

The pre-WWI poetry of Under was affected by the modernistic style of the *Noor-Eesti* aesthetic movement. Wider acclaim arrived with her debut volume *Sonetid* (*Sonnets*, 1917) – a sensual collection of love poetry that stunned her contemporaries and fascinated her successors. The 'Princess' for her fellow writers from the group *Siuru*, Marie Under established herself as the most **glittering jewel in the chain** of great Estonian poetesses – internationally best known and most translated (into 26 languages as of today), she was shortlisted for the Nobel Prize of Literature on numerous occasions. A founding member of the Estonian Writers' Union, she became an honorary member of International PEN in 1937. Like many Estonian writers, Marie Under escaped from the second Soviet invasion in 1944 to Sweden. She died in 1980 and is buried in the Stockholm Woodland Cemetery.

8 **Lydia Koidula** (1843–1886), the pen name of Lydia Emilie Florentine Michelson (née Jannsen) – a journalist, prose and drama writer, founder of Estonian-language theatre. Daughter of the leading figure of the Estonian National Awakening Johann Voldemar Jannsen, and close friend of **Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald** (see p. 30), Koidula got her sobriquet, meaning 'of the Dawn', from another promoter of the Estonian

national renaissance, Carl Robert Jakobson. Pursuer of the literary tradition started by Kreutzwald, Koidula became an icon of a romanticist patriotic poetess and her oeuvre, consisting of more than 300 poems, some 90 pieces of prose and four plays, a key component of the Estonian national identity. For the first Estonian Song Festival of 1869, two of her poems, *Sind Surmani (To You till My Death)* and *Mu isamaa on minu arm (My Fatherland is My Love)* were set to music. The latter, recomposed by Gustav Ernesaks in 1944, became the unofficial anthem during the Soviet occupation when the national song of the Republic of Estonia *Mu isamaa, mu õnn ja rõõm (My Native Land, My Joy, Delight)* was forbidden. Lydia Koidula died from cancer at the age of 43 and was buried in Kronstadt. In 1946, her remains were reburied in the Tallinn Forest Cemetery.

AT THE PERIPHERY (pp. 19–22)

1 **Tõnu Õnnepalu** (b 1962), pen names Emil Tode and Anton Nigov – Estonia's **leading novelist**, poet, translator, journalist and editor.

Graduated *cum laude* in Botany and Ecology from the University of Tartu, Tõnu Õnnepalu worked as a teacher at Lauka School in Hiiumaa, before becoming a freelance translator, writer and journalist in 1987.

Débuting with a collection of poems *Jõeäärne maja (A House by the River)* in 1985, his breakthrough is associated with the publication, under the pseudonym Emil Tode, of his first novel **Piiririik (Border State)** – merited with several literary prizes, and the speedy translation into more than dozen languages. One of the internationally best known Estonian prose authors, Õnnepalu has continued to publish both prose and poetry – winning the 2007 Juhan Liiv Poetry Prize for his poem *Ootad kevadet ja siis ta jälle tuleb ... (You Wait for Spring and Then It Comes Again...)*, as well as translating several European authors, e. g. Mauriac, Baudelaire and Pessoa into Estonian.

Preferring country living to city life, Õnnepalu has resided for a long while at the Esna Manor in the Järva heartlands of Estonia (see p. 51), and has recently returned to his erstwhile creative sanctuary, the Island of Hiiumaa.

2 **Ruhnu** – an island in the Livonian Bay, about 37 km from the nearest stretch of the Latvian coast; the closest substantial Estonian shore, that of an island of Saaremaa, lies at 52 km, while the Estonian mainland, at 65 km, is even further away.

SONG (pp. 23–26)

1 **Contra** (b 1974), alias Margus Konnula – popular South-Estonian vernacular poet cum folk singer. Contra lives in Urvaste village, Võromaa, occasionally identifying himself as the King of

Urvaste. Indigenous to the region, he has worked as a postman and the head of the local post-office, turning to freelance writing and singing in 1999. A verbally talented master of doggerels, Contra debuted in the mid-1990s and has since published numerous short volumes and contributed diligently to the poetry columns of various dailies. He has also acquired fame for compulsive *a capella* singing – mostly **out of tune** – at literary events, parties, during bus rides, etc.

2 **Juhan Viiding** (1948–1995) – poet, actor, stage director and singer, widely regarded as the greatest modern innovator in Estonian poetry.

Son of a well-known poet Paul Viiding, Juhan Viiding studied at the Stagecraft Department of the Tallinn National Conservatoire, and worked, upon graduation in 1972, as an actor and stage director at the Estonian Drama Theatre. The sensitive and tragic jester in the world of Estonian literature, he took his own life in 1995.

Juhan Viiding debuted under the pseudonym Jüri Üdi with *Närviürikk (Nerve Print, 1971)*; a joint collection with Johnny B. Isotamm, Joel Sang and Toomas Liiv) and continued to publish under the name of his consciously developed and portrayed alter ego until his 1978 collection *Mina olin Jüri Üdi (I Was George Marrow)*. Presenting his works in the distinctively expressive manner, Viiding grew into a living legend, influencing every Estonian writer of his time and becoming an irresistible source of inspiration for upcoming youngsters.

A member of the popular *Amor Trio*, as well as an author of numerous lyrics, Juhan Viiding is also the best Estonian example of the **poet who sang**.

3 **Jaani Pehk** (b 1975) – Estonian poet, singer-songwriter and musician.

Born in Palivere, near Haapsalu, Jaani Pehk completed his secondary education in Türi, Järvamaa, venturing on to try pop-jazz singing at the Georg Ots Tallinn Music School. After quitting his studies, he has worked as a freelance poet and musician. Pehk entered the Estonian literary scene with the Tartu-based group NAK (*Young Authors' Association*), publishing three collections of poetry. Most of his oeuvre consists of brief lyrics performed by his one-man project *Orelipoiss (Organ Boy)*. A guitarist of the highest ranked local indie band *Claire's Birthday*, Pehk represented Estonia with a successor group, *Rufflus*, at the Eurovision Song Contest in Riga in 2003.

ABSURD (pp. 27–30)

1 **Kalevipoeg (Son of Kalev)** – national epic, key stimulus for the Estonian nation-building in the 19th century. The strive towards Estonians' own epic rose from the ideas of the Enlightenment, introduced to

Estonia by the Baltic German Estophiles, and carried by the rallying cry of Georg Julius Schultz-Bertram, a member of the *Gelehrte Estnische Gesellschaft* ('Learned Estonian Society'): "Give people an epic and some history, and the battle is won!" The compilation of *Kalevipoeg*, inspired by the Finnish *Kalevala*, was started by one of the native Estonian members of the Society, a medical doctor Friedrich Robert Faehlmann, and completed, after Faehlmann's death, by his co-fellow, colleague and friend, **Friedrich Reinhold Kreutzwald**.

The epic ballad written in imitation of Estonian **folk poems in song form** (see p. 24) was first published together with a German translation in 1857–1861. The subsequent popular edition appeared in 1862, in Kuopio, Finland.

Together with the renditions in prose, *Kalevipoeg* is by far the most translated Estonian literary work.

2 **Andrus Kivirähk** (b 1970) – Estonian novelist, author of short and children's stories, columnist, scriptwriter for theatre and TV.

A remarkably prolific and innovative figure from among the younger generation, Andrus Kivirähk started to write for newspapers at the age of 15. A journalist by profession, he was noticed in the early 1990s for jocular stories about Ivan Orav ('Ivan Squirrel'), and became acclaimed for his equally absurdist *Rehepapp ehk November (The Old Barny or November, 2000)* – the novel debut that has sold over 30 000 copies and made him the most popular Estonian writer in the new millennium.

Quite prolific, Kivirähk has produced more novels, a number of successfully staged plays, and (co-) authored books and film scripts for children, e. g. *Tom ja Fluffy (Tom and Fluffy)* and *Leiutajatekülla Lotte (Lotte from Gadgetville)*. He is a three-time winner of the Nukits Young Readers' Choice Award of the Estonian Children's Literature Centre (see p. 49).

TRY AGAIN IN A YEAR'S TIME (pp. 35–38)

1 **Looming** – the main literary periodical in Estonia, an almanac-type magazine publishing new literature and overviews of the Estonian literary scene.

Initiated by the fireball in the field, **Friedebert Tuglas** (see back inner cover), and founded in 1923 under the auspices of the Estonian Writers' Union for publication and popularization of the Estonian contemporary literature, *Looming* has had contributions from virtually every known Estonian author.

The publication of the monthly is jointly funded by the **Kultuurkapital** (see p. 14), the Ministry of Culture and the Writers' Union, with the latter also entitled to designate the editor-in-chief. The office of *Looming* is based in the **Writers' House** in Tallinn (see p. 4).

THE VILLAGE (pp. 39–42)

1 **Estonian Literature Centre** (Süda 3–6, Tallinn 10118, Estonia; tel: +372 6 314 870; estlit@estlit.ee; www.estlit.ee) – an independent NGO founded by the Estonian Writers' Union and the Estonian Publishers' Association for generating interest in Estonian literature abroad. Providing all sorts of information and involved in a range of activities, ELC serves as the best entry-point for everyone interested in the world of Estonian literature.

2 **bog** – the most undisturbed of Estonian natural communities, raised bog is a wet mound in the middle of mineral land, rising above the surrounding forest floor by several metres. It consists of water at over 90%, with the remaining one tenth made up of bog mosses and peat produced by them. Quite autonomous from the surrounding communities, bogs can survive for thousands of years, developing into a patterned mosaic of pools, hummocks and lawns, and providing habitat for some of the rarest plant and animal species in Estonia.

THE BLACK CEILING (pp. 43–46)

1 **Noor-Eesti** (*Young Estonia*) – radical cultural movement of the early 20th century, providing creative impetus for a range of original works in literature, fine arts and design, reviving Estonian language, translating contemporary European literature, and establishing new, modernist standards for many an aesthetic endeavour, e. g. literary criticism.

The nucleus of *Noor-Eesti*, including Ernst Enno, Bernard Linde, Johannes Aavik, Villem Grünthal-Ridala and Jaan Oks, grew out of secondary school literary circles, driven by the intellectual leaders of the movement, **Gustav Suits** and **Friedebert Tuglas**.

Appearing before a wider audience in the turmoil year of the 1905 Revolution, the group published five beautifully designed albums entitled *Noor-Eesti I–V* (see p. 36), and brought about a thorough shift in Estonian culture.

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In 1901, two years after debuting with a critical essay and a poem *Vesiroosid* (*Water Lilies*, 1899), he founded a society *Kirjanduse Sõbrad* (*Friends of Literature*), which included **A. H. Tammsaare** (see

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2 **Mehis Heinsaar** (b 1973) – novelist, poet and writer of short stories, a rising star of the late 1990s' literary generation.

Growing up in Tallinn and Karksi-Nuia, southern Viljandimaa, Mehis Heinsaar majored in Estonian literature at the University of Tartu, writing his graduation thesis about August Gailit, a poet of **Siuru** (see p. 55). A member of the literary group

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The critics' opinion of Heinsaar's writing has remained almost unanimously laudatory and he has been awarded almost every literary grant and prize there is in Estonia, the latest one being Juhan Liiv's Poetry Prize for his poem ****Õös mööduja käsi...* (***) *A hand of the passer-by in the night...*) from the collection *Sügaval elu hämaras* (*Deep In the Dimness of Life*, 2009).

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In 1991, the pre-war organisation was restored and in 2000 the members of the dissolved Estonian Writers' Union Abroad in *corpore* (re)joined the EWU. In addition to the department in Stockholm, another department of the Union operates in Tartu (see **Tartu House of Literature** at p. 44). A member of the European Writers' Congress from 1992, EWU has a membership of 300.

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