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Ellen Niit (Photo by Marko Mumm / Delfi)

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# Ellen

## a lyricist by nature

Ellen Niit is a classic of Estonian children's literature, mainly as a poet. The author of the hugely popular *The Train Ride*, which has been read by Estonian children for more than sixty years, she has written a large number of easily memorable poems and prose works for children. Niit has also written outstanding poetry for adults, and was one of the three writers who at the turn of the 1950s and 1960s caused radical changes in Soviet Estonian literature and re-introduced poetic and aesthetic values into poetry which had been neglected during the Stalinist years.

Ellen Niit's work forms a significant, even central part of what we in hindsight can call Estonian literature in Soviet Estonia.

"Disrupted human relations, forbidden contacts, ridiculed convictions, derided ethical values, destroyed continuity and torn roots – all this has been inescapable part of everyday reality for my generation. In such a situation, everyone had to find his own balance; in order to survive, we had to pull ourselves together and try to remain true to ourselves. To me, poetry has always provided balance and strength." With these words, Ellen Niit begins her introduction to her poetry collection in Finnish, *Maailman*

*pysyvyyks* (Continuity of the World), published in Helsinki in 1994. It was a selected collection of her work. The title is significant: having lived through the destruction of the Republic of Estonia as a teenager, and the subsequent years of Stalinist persecution, the continuity of the world and her life were crucial. In the reality of that era, young people could get a sense of continuity and constancy via the simplest and most human things: home, love, children and creative work.

# Niit

by Sirje Olesk

Ellen Hiob (Niit in her first marriage, and since 1958 Kross) was born in 1928 in Tallinn and graduated from secondary school in 1947. She started writing poetry at an early age and, thanks to encouragement from teachers, her first poems were published when she was still a schoolgirl. She was thus already a poet when she became a student at the University of Tartu during the darkest years of Stalinism, in 1947-1952. Her specialty was Estonian language and literature and she decided to continue with a degree course after graduation. Her research topic was Estonian children's literature. Ideological pressure at the time, however, was so strong that her initial plan to write about the development of Estonian children's literature was rejected and another theme was suggested, "The development of Soviet Estonian children's literature" (at that time, Soviet Estonian children's literature hardly existed!). Ellen Niit thus left Tartu in 1956 without her degree and got a job as a poetry consultant at the Writer's Union in Tallinn. This experience was not totally negative: during her Tartu years she had thoroughly researched children's literature and also how to write it. It is quite ironic that, according to Niit, her first highly popular verse tales were in fact written following the theoretical instructions to think rationally. She had just got married and had had her first child. The children's writer Ellen

Niit grew out of the practical experimenting of a young scholar researching children's literature theory and the experiences of a young mother. The ease of writing poetry, inventive rhymes and memorable images could only have happened to a truly gifted person. The ideologically unsuitable time disrupted the natural poet's path of the young Ellen Niit, which had started with such promise. Already in her school days she had published the optimistic and beautiful poem Õnn (Happiness), where she wrote that "happiness is up to you...", which became a song for mixed choirs at the first Stalinist-era song festival. During this harsh time, Ellen Hiob was a Wunderkind in Estonian poetry, a young and promising talent, and by 1950 she already had enough poems for a collection. She could not, alas, get it published then and looking back many years later she thinks it was just as well. This was the time when many Estonian writers were expelled from the Writers' Union for being "bourgeois nationalists" and those who wanted to publish their work had to produce ideologically "correct" literature. Niit remembers how naïve she was and that she might easily have written ideologically correct and hollow poetry and been ashamed of it afterwards. Instead, she stopped writing poetry. However, as she already had the reputation of being a young talented poet, the youth communist faction (to which





Ellen Hiob did not belong) at the university department decided that she had a duty to write poems, i.e. correct poems, and if she failed to do so, she would be expelled from university. Today such an approach seems totally absurd, but during the last years of Stalin, ideology was heavy-handed in the Soviet Union. The experienced and trustworthy lecturer of literature and university dean Karl Taev saved his student. He said she would not be expelled for not writing poetry, but she would be carefully watched so she had better not do anything silly. In her later interviews, Ellen Niit often recalled this incident, which hindered her development as a “real” poet, but it did lead her to children’s poetry. Thus was born what the poet Veronika Kivisilla calls “the long and happy union between Ellen Niit and Estonian children’s poetry”.

Ellen Niit has been writing for children for over sixty years and has published over forty books of poetry and prose. Characters created by her, especially Pille-Riin and Kröll, are familiar to several generations of children, who grew up with the characters and later, as parents themselves, read the same books to their own children. The style of Ellen Niit’s children’s poetry is, according to Kivisilla, “genuine, cosy, sweet and compact”. Her verse tale *Suur maalritöö* (The Great Painter) is a wonderfully bubbly story of creation; her magical *Midrimaa* (Midriland) opens up a miraculous new world for children, and her poems for toddlers, with their natural plots and memorable rhymes will last forever. Ellen Niit has four children herself and, living with another writer, she consciously pushed her literary ambitions into the background, so that her second husband, Jaan Kross, who had spent eight wasted years in a Siberian prison camp, could fully make up for lost time. Thus children’s poetry, which was obviously easier and quicker to write, was the simplest way to realise her own potential. Her own children helped a great deal, according to Niit. “I have such poor ability in the abstract that I need a specific addressee.

When I write for children, I write for a specific person, either a child of my own or someone else’s nearby whom I know. This provides me with a vital structure. In this way, I can get things right, which may not happen if I write for huge abstract child-people”.

The talented poet Ellen Niit primarily found acclaim in Estonian literature as a children’s writer. The skill of producing poems and a need to use the skill were also realised in translation work. In Tartu, Ellen Niit studied both Finnish and Hungarian and thus has translated extensively from these two languages. At the turn of the 1950s-1960s, Finnish contemporary poetry was mainly free verse, and Ellen Niit, always seeking new images and forms, found free verse conducive to refreshing and expanding Estonian poetry. A large number of poems were written in the late 1950s with rhymes and free verse. Stalin was dead, the new Party leader condemned the Stalinist cult in 1956, people were returning from Siberian prison camps to Estonia, and the limited and strict Estonian literature began to change as well. The changes were initiated mainly by three poets: Ain Kaalep, Jaan Kross and Ellen Niit. The men had been in prison, and Kross had spent years in exile in distant Siberia. Acknowledging them in Estonian literature as permitted and valued authors did not happen easily. Kross and Kaalep first caught the public eye as translators, initially working with such progressive classics as Heinrich Heine and Johannes Becher. After a while they were allowed to publish their own original poems, in periodical publications and then finally in the Writers’ Union’s own publications. They compiled their collections of poetry and submitted them to publishers as early as 1955-1956, but nothing happened for quite some time. After lengthy discussion at the Writers’ Union and negotiations with publishers, Jaan Kross was able to publish *Sõerikastaja* (The Coal Enricher, 1958), Ellen Niit *Maa on täis leidmist* (The Land is Full of Finding, 1960) and Ain Kaalep’s *Aomaastikud* (Dawn

Landscapes, 1962). The titles refer to a new, more optimistic era. The humane, simple poems tackling perfectly straightforward themes suddenly and unexpectedly caused quite a stir. The core of the controversy was an essentially absurd question: did free verse suit Soviet literature? Articles were written, meetings were held, the eminent literary historian and critic Endel Nirk wrote a vicious parody aimed at the three poets, and a literary war was in full swing. Reading these disputes fifty years later, it is obvious that the whole absurd situation derived from political circumstances. Estonian Soviet literature was swarming with mediocre, Party-faithful writers and thus the emergence of new talent endangered their position. Twenty years of ideological pressure had made the literary guardians so cautious that any more liberal idea, along with the free-verse form (which was, after all, nothing new in Estonian-language poetry) made them wonder: was this allowed? What would they say in Moscow? (In Russian, free verse had traditionally been a marginal phenomenon.) Recalling that time in a later interview, Ellen Niit said: "Kaalap, Jaan Kross and I were pilloried as revolting formalists. At least I found myself in good company. I was quite spoilt and took it too much to heart. Jaan Kross, hardened in Siberia, took up translating again and kept his new poems in his desk drawers. I focused on children's poetry, as I already had children of my own then. /---/ I am sure my development would have been much quicker and I could have written much more if I hadn't been trampled on again in 1960."

The thaw of the 1960s made life somewhat more normal and thus innovators got a new lease on life, at least for a decade. After Kross, Kaalep and Niit, the generation of young poets born during and after the war entered Estonian literature, and their work became the core of the canon of Estonian poetry in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Paul-Eerik Rummo, Jaan Kaplinski and Hando Runnel. Still, they were shown the

way by the Kross-Kaalep-Niit trio, who were quietly repressed until the end of the Soviet period (for example, Ain Kaalep, who spoke several languages and translated poetry from many parts of the world, was not allowed to travel outside the Soviet Union until 1984, when he was permitted to visit East-Germany as a writer). Ellen Niit had worked as a poetry consultant at the Writers' Union, but left of her own will under the shadow of being ideologically suspect before being actually sacked. The forceful Jaan Kross was better able to assert himself, amongst other things because after years in Siberia he spoke fluent Russian and performed very well at the festival of Estonian art in Moscow.

Ellen Niit married Jaan Kross in 1958 and from that time onwards they formed such a strong tandem in the Estonian literary world that it was next to impossible to ignore them. Jaan Kross developed into a prose-writer whose historical novels were translated with increasing enthusiasm. While their children were growing up, Ellen Niit decided to devote herself to the home. The life of two freelance writers was not easy during the Soviet era; although the fees were bigger, you had to write on "suitable" topics in order to get published, aiming at a large print run: the bigger the print run, the bigger the fee. Children's literature was a fairly safe bet. Jaan Kross had begun as an innovative poet eager to break traditions, but focused on prose in his middle age. His role in the development of Estonian historical prose cannot be overestimated. At that time, Ellen Niit's role was that of a loving wife who carried the bulk of the family's practical burden and thus allowed her husband to pursue his literary ambitions. She has claimed to be primarily a lyricist in her creative work. In order to write lyrical poems a person needs the right mood and inspiration, and doesn't require long uninterrupted periods. Ellen Niit's poetry





for grown-ups is very Estonian: reservedly passionate love poetry, brief but precise verses about nature and unexpectedly realistic and lengthy poems about family and the daily life of a wife and mother. Her mother's family came from Harju County, near Tallinn, and Niit has said that these quite barren and harsh landscapes became dear to her. A talent for singing and a belief in Christian love, which she received from her mother's side of the family, influenced young Ellen as well: as a child she could recite by heart numerous religious songs and songs performed at song festivals. Subconsciously, this seemed to influence her own work, as many of her poems have become well-known songs. All Estonian children know Gustav Ernesaks's song about a train with a duck driver. Beautiful choir songs have been written using her words

by such composers as Veljo Tormis, Eino Tamberg, Alo Ritsing, Aarne Oit and Valter Ojakäär. Her poems quite obviously had something that inspired both composers and singers...

Ellen Niit's most prolific poetry period was in the 1960s and 1970s; later she published only a few dedicated poems. The most touching of these was the poem for her husband *To Jaan*, written in autumn 2006, where she claims that "love is nothing else but God."

Ellen Niit is now elderly and her health is poor. Her life companion, Jaan Kross, died at the end of 2007. Ellen Niit has not written her memoirs, but there have been many interviews and she took part in long conversations between Jaan Kross and his biographer Juhani Salokannel.

Although Ellen Niit's children's poetry has been published since Estonia regained its independence, and there have been numerous reprints of her earlier work, the bulk of her work was done between the 1950s and 1980s. Now that Estonia has been free for over twenty years, we can look back more calmly at occupation-period literature. To what extent was this Estonian literature? I am quite convinced that after the big struggle at the turn of the 1950s-1960s, Estonian writers were able to express their ideas more or less freely, if of course they avoided the known ideological taboos (e.g. what happened in 1940, the existence of a huge diaspora of Estonians abroad, strict censorship etc.). More distant history, contemporary life, lyricism and children were allowed. Ellen Niit naturally had her own experience of censorship (in her very first poem, the concept of a Christmas tree was forbidden, as the Soviet Union was an atheist country and Christmas was not officially celebrated). Jaan Kross wrote two volumes of memoirs which offer a lot of interesting information about the life of two writers under the Soviet regime. Published writers were not in fact badly off. Still, besides the general hypocrisy of society, they were tormented by its closed nature. In her youth, Ellen Niit had started a correspondence with Raili Kilp in Finland, who became a lifelong family friend and translator and promoter of Estonian literature. The couple had decided that they would only go on foreign trips together (this perfectly normal arrangement was a great exception and privilege in the Soviet empire). True, they had children who constituted a guarantee for the authorities: it was less likely that they would seek political asylum abroad. They were both invited by friends to Finland and Hungary and were able to travel there together; later, when Jaan Kross had become a major writer in Soviet Estonia, they could go to the USA and Canada as well, where they mainly read for Estonian exiles, introducing Estonian literature and contemporary Estonian writers. How limited such opportunities were is revealed in the bibliography of Ellen Niit (and Jaan Kross). Their work was translated quite a lot until 1991, but chiefly into Russian and other languages of the Soviet Union countries. The rest of the world had no interest in a small nation concealed in the vast Soviet empire. And even if it did, translating was an ideological undertaking. When an anthology of Estonian poetry was compiled and published in Finland in 1969 which included work by contemporary exile writers, a huge scandal erupted and the book was included in the list of banned literature.

This was the reality in which Estonian writers lived during the years of Soviet thaw and stagnation. Nobody starved and probably the worst was over, but absurd restrictions and human stupidity caused a great deal of revulsion. Among other things, this was alleviated by literature (and music even more so), for both creators and readers-listeners. Fascinating and human literature, including literature for children, was therefore so much more significant back then than it is today. Still, much of what was written then has survived, and Ellen Niit's poetry certainly has a permanent place amongst our cultural treasures.

Ellen Nitt / 2001 (Photo by Marko Mumm / Delfi)



# Late, late again

## A paradox of Estonian culture

by Janika Kronberg

Every culture has a large number of literary works that only address those who intimately belong to the culture, the country and the people, and have taken in its intellectual property with their mother's milk. It is not easy to write universal works of literature that address other nations via translations, but another skill is no less crucial: to create texts that boost the identity of your own people. References to the earlier canonical literary tradition produce a recognisable and witty wow! Such an impression is made only on people who are well-versed in the domestic cultural legacy, at least within the limits of school curricula.

One such text, the poem *arno apooria*, by Jüri Kolgi (b. 1972), who has published six collections of poetry, received the prestigious Juhan Liiv poetry award this year. The poem is about a schoolboy named Arno, who dripping with sweat rushes to school, but never makes it on time. The title refers to the ancient Greek philosopher Zenon, and the poem probably poses a serious challenge to readers who are not familiar with the novel *Kevade* (Spring, 1912), by the beloved Estonian literary classic Oskar Luts. The very first sentence, "When Arno and his father arrived at school, the lessons had already started" is known to every Estonian, even if he or she has not read the whole book. The poem contains other references to the motif of lateness in the same novel, although the phrase "they bring the first lesson forward" seems to reach

outside Oskar Luts's book into a more distant philosophical tradition.

Being always late and "trying to catch up" are among the paradoxes in Estonian culture, and there are abundant examples in literature. What else is a relatively young culture, largely dependent on European loans, to do for the sake of equality but compete with older and more respected cultures, try to keep up and even overtake them, although intellectual culture cannot really be compared with physical culture.

The paradox of the young Estonian culture and its attempt to catch up with the "old" is perhaps best manifested by the Estonian writer Arvo Mägi (1913–2004), who lived in Sweden. Inspired by the great family novels of world literature, he published the four-volume

ume novel *Karvikute kroonika* (The Karvik family chronicles, 1970–1973) in exile. Through historical events and legends, he offers an overview of a family's destiny in the course of no fewer than thirty-one generations. At the beginning, the author turns to the readers in a slightly old-fashioned high style with the words of Jakob Hurt about Estonians as an ancient people who will outlast all of us, which immediately lifts the reader on a wave of national optimism. Indeed, more than its literary values, the work has been appreciated for its pedagogical significance. Mägi also emphasises historical parallels with the more developed world, occasionally even producing ironic paradoxes. The first known Karvik, a man with an axe called Ool, for example, emerges from the forest in 1187, the year when Sigtuna was destroyed. By that time the Occidental culture had gone through several ups and downs and less than a century remained before the birth of Dante Alighieri in Italy, known as the last medieval and the first Renaissance poet, and to the assembling of the parliament in England. According to *The Karvik family chronicles*, Christianisation was no more difficult for the indigenous peoples than were the raids of alien invaders, wars, waves of plague and famines. In fact, it forcefully helped the rural people to overcome their backwardness compared to the rest of Europe in several ways. And the result: by the early 20th century the Estonian nation had a sufficiently developed self-awareness to demand and realise their own nation-state. In his book, Mägi reaches as far as the mid-20th century, when the country was destroyed and free spirits could only flourish in exile. The Karvik family, however, survives.

The motif of lateness has, of course, often been used in poetry. Ernst Enno, who cultivated Oriental mysticism in European forms, wrote in 1909, thus at the beginning of Estonian professional literature, in one of his best-known poems: "I come late, the last among others, did not make it to the field of poetry before /---/ I'm a dreamer like

a fairy-tale". Although the poem seems to be carried by totally different cultural currents, it nevertheless perfectly fits in our "discourse of being late". Betti Alver's collection of poetry *Tolm ja tuli* (Dust and Fire), published in 1936, contains the poem *Kool* (School), which gives a precise image of trying to give extra lessons of European culture. The poem describes the "now unfamiliar classroom", furnished with ancient cultural items, where the lecturers include "a limping lord" (Byron), Socrates, Trismegistos and the secret emissary Goethe. In the last verse of the poem, we meet the Old Devil, a well-known character in Estonian folk heritage. It is not difficult to recognise a certain affinity with Arvo Mägi's Karvik family:

At the last desk, facing the door / forehead in furrows, an odd husk stuck in eyebrows, / the Old Devil, half asleep, scribbles / letters on a page black with ink.

During the oppressive Soviet period, the legendary poet Artur Alliksaar (1923–1966) produced a brief quatrain about those who were destined to be late and who raced towards destruction on a ship of fools. Whether this shows a lack of hope typical of the era or something much more – a universal warning against reckless rushing – is for the reader to decide.

Is a young culture like Achilles, who according to Zenon's aporia never manages to catch up with a turtle who has been given a head start? Oskar Luts's *Spring* begins with a sentence about being late to school, an experience common to all readers of every generation, which is successfully used in Jüri Kolk's prize-winning poem. However, lateness can also be seen as a virtue, a source of the characteristic Estonian scepticism, which makes it possible to observe the mistakes of predecessors and of the "more developed", learn from these mistakes and not repeat them.



# Eduard Vilde's modernisms and moving towards an

Literary and artistic Modernism is often understood as an elite movement lasting only a couple of decades, about 1910 to about 1930. Instead, it is possible to think about a long series of modernisms lasting from about 1800 until 1945. This would connect works that are more often divided from one another: in Anglophone literatures the comic realism of Dickens from the naturalism of Crane and Dreiser and the experiments of Woolf and Joyce. The many overlapping modernisms proposed here emerge not from bohemian elites but from mass literacy, from people's moves to cities, and from the flourishing of mass communications such as the cheap print of the nineteenth century. Alongside Woolf, Joyce, Kafka and Beckett, modernism seen this way is embodied by Dickens, Zola and a multitude of writers from elsewhere, including Estonia's Eduard Vilde (1865–1933), novelistic realist, journalist, delver in archives and political activist.

In a parallel way, Fredric Jameson, Franco Moretti and others have directed attention to the realisms of multiple regions, languages and cities.<sup>2</sup> They consider not just Proust from Paris and Kafka from Prague, but Galdós from Madrid and Fontane from Berlin. They include, too, the cosmopolitan Portuguese realist Eça de Queirós, long

resident in Paris and before that provincial England, whose career calls to mind Vilde's many stays abroad, the most extended ones in Berlin and Copenhagen. Others, like the Brazilian Machado de Assis, were like Vilde active in the context of nation-forming near the tail-end of an empire. Not that these writers have been obscurities within their own national contexts: any more than Vilde has within Estonia.

A broad, globalized notion of modernity and modernisms, including multiple realisms and founded on the social act of urbanization, is called for. This would call into question global metropolitanism, as exemplified by Walter Benjamin's notion of Paris as the capital of the nineteenth century.

## **Two Modernities: Uses of Vilde the Personality**

Since the Second World War, Vilde has been fitted into two different, even opposed, narratives of modernity. In one of these, he is a man of wit, a cosmopolitan European of the 1880s and 1890s. In the other he is a social democrat and an intellectual forerunner of the culture of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic. The former is the image of Vilde typically conveyed by

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# modernities: urban Estonia<sup>1</sup>

post-Soviet presentations of Estonia to international audiences, but the latter is more multiply present in the visual environment of Estonia, for instance in street names and statuary.

The view of Vilde as a proto-Soviet left-wing artist of the people is present in the use of his name for a Tallinn street. *E. Vilde tee* ('E. Vilde Road') is one of two lateral avenues in the Mustamäe district to be named after Estonian realist authors (the other is *A. H. Tammsaare tee*). Mustamäe is a large residential area in Tallinn planned as a whole and laid out in the 1950s. A similar view is present in several monuments to Vilde from the Soviet period: the statue commemorating him, and in particular the portrayal of workers' struggles in his novels, which stands near the Writers' Union building in the Old Town of Tallinn; the stern, bare-headed bust of him in the grounds of the former Muuga manor house in Lääne-Viru County where Vilde lived as a child, the son of the estate steward.

The other image could be called the decadent or aesthetic one. It is summed up nicely in a pair of statues pairing Vilde with his near-namesake Oscar Wilde, embodiment of fin-de-siècle wit and cosmopolitanism in a way not easily

assimilable to any ideological position.

One of these stands outside a café in Tartu named after Vilde; an identical statue of the pair is in Galway, Ireland. This view of Vilde appears in the image of him as a youngish, dark-haired man with a curled moustache and tinted lorgnette spectacles, looking every bit the contemporary of Proust, which adorns the same Tartu café. Perhaps its most important presentation is to be found in the museum in Tallinn's Kadriorg Park devoted to Vilde, which occupies the large apartment Vilde was given to live in for the last years of his life by the new Estonian state, a museum which focuses very much on Vilde the border-crosser and traveller.

All of these presentations of Vilde have been developed in post-Soviet Estonia. While charming and convincing, they sit somewhat awkwardly alongside the more concrete – or should one say limestone? – presence of Vilde in Soviet statuary. Vilde's presence in the Estonian literary classroom, also, has been as the teller of tales of the workers which seem to match very nicely with Soviet ideology. Standard editions of his works continue to be those produced in Soviet Estonia during the 1950s and 1960s: so that to meet Vilde is typically to meet him between Soviet covers.

In an era which could perhaps be labelled post-post-Soviet, Vilde needs to be recast once again. The contradictory images of him just mentioned, as frontier-crossing dandy and as committed social democrat, should be recognized, as part of what could be called a post-post-Soviet reclamation of him. One way of grasping a post-post-Soviet Vilde could be through a renewed appreciation of the topographic qualities of his works. The rest of this article will be devoted to one example of these, the multiple and specifically tripartite Tallinn of Vilde's novel *Kui Anija mehed Tallinnas käisid* ('How the men of Anija went to Tallinn'; hereafter *Anija mehed*, 'The men of Anija'), published in 1903.

### Modernisms and Border Crossings

Literary urban modernity in Estonia and Estonian began with Vilde's work on the literary image of Tallinn. In *Anija mehed* (1903),<sup>3</sup> he recognized Tallinn's status as a city on various peripheries: that of the Russian Empire; that of the Nordic region; that of Europe as a whole. He also paid attention to Tallinn's own geographical and imaginative peripheries. This novel tells the story of a young rural Estonian, Mait Luts, who as an apprentice woodcarver is transformed into a German-speaking Tallinn townsman. He then witnesses the beating of a group of peasants from his home area (the 'men of Anija' of the title) who have come to Tallinn to protest to the provincial authorities within the Russian Empire about their treatment by their German-speaking landlord in the countryside but are treated as insurgents for doing so.

Classic studies of urban modernity in sociology, literary studies and urban studies by the likes of Walter Benjamin, Lewis Mumford, Marshall Berman, Judith Walkowitz and Franco Moretti have suggested that this was a phenomenon which began in the global capitals of fashion and of colonial empires.<sup>4</sup> But the study of Vilde and Tallinn

tells a different story. And in contrast with the work of the theorists just mentioned, Juri Lotman's account of the semiosphere pays particular attention to frontiers and boundaries, and to relationships between cores and peripheries. For Lotman, city peripheries drive urban change. He contrasts 'the "destructive" zone on the outskirts' of a nineteenth-century European city with 'the town centre, which embodied the dominant social structure', calling the former 'bilingual': both part of the city's order and its opponent.<sup>5</sup> As an 'area of accelerated semiotic processes' the urban periphery, on Lotman's account, is able to develop more quickly than the centre thanks to its less organized and more flexible nature, and the fact that it is in constant contact with other semiospheres.<sup>6</sup> Within relations between core and periphery particularly important are linguistic and sensory 'border points' which act as zones of translation, as well as the physical outskirts of geographical places. In *Anija mehed* the frontiers being crossed are linguistic as well as topographic.

*Anija mehed* is set in the 1850s, half a century before it was written and at the beginning of a time of accelerating change in Tallinn, whose Estonian name it contains and presents in its title. In that decade, following the Crimean War, Tallinn, still officially called by its German name Reval, was reclassified by its Russian overlords as no longer a fortress. More recent outer fortifications were turned into parks. The majority of its medieval walls, towers and formidable gates were taken down too.<sup>7</sup>

Tallinn's physical appearance in the late nineteenth century could seem that of a living museum, calling to mind not London, Paris or Berlin, but cities with a melancholic, decayed atmosphere: throwbacks, in the age of industrialisation and colonial empires. One Baltic German memoirist called it a 'petrified piece of the middle ages'.<sup>8</sup> Such cities would include those described by other European writers of the fin-de-siècle: the Bruges of Georges Rodenbach's *Bruges-la-Morte*,



published in 1892, and the unnamed city very precisely resembling the writer's native Lübeck of Thomas Mann's *Buddenbrooks*, published in 1901. But Vilde's literary Tallinn, while like these cities a once-great northern European port, is unlike the cities of Rodenbach and Mann in that it is a city not frozen or eclipsed but, as Lotman's account of dynamic urban peripheries helps us to see, being reborn into modernity and as a potential national capital, a rebirth encapsulated in its name-change from Reval to Tallinn.

### Multiple Cityscapes and Communities

Vilde in *Anija mehed* describes three cities mapped onto one another. Chapter 4 of the novel describes the entry of the protagonist Mait Luts, into Tallinn, or Reval, where he will seek an apprenticeship with a German master. On Mait's walk into the city, the first border he crosses is that separating the outer limits of the urban settlement from the countryside beyond. But before he even

reaches it, he has viewed from Lasnamäe hill 'Toompea haughtily on top of a cliff, the Lower Town as if bowing and crouching at its feet' (p. 48).<sup>9</sup> These two, built of stone, were in the 1850s the two formal elements of the city. Toompea, indeed, was in the 1850s still not officially part of Tallinn, but a separate city.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, and while it was physically detached on its clifftop, it had always also been at the heart of Tallinn.

Together with aristocratic (German) Toompea and the mercantile (German) Lower Town, Vilde indicates that a third element already existed then. Mait descends, walking 'along the broad, straight Narva Road towards the Viru Gate', then stops briefly at 'a lodging house in the suburb known as Slobodka'. This site is in the built-up area of wooden dwellings surrounding the walls but in the 1850s not yet, formally, in the city. Mait then approaches and enters the city proper:

Filled with awe, he approached the Viru Gate across the Russian Market. To the

right and left there were mighty ramparts with wide and deep ditches in the bottom of which was water covered in a thick layer of green scum; on the ramparts were long black cannons whose dark mouths were pointing out through embrasures in a threatening fashion. Here and there were guards, guns with bayonets on their backs. Behind and beside the ramparts old medieval defence walls loomed up, with their round towers, embrasures and galleries. Then came the heavy vaulted gate, which rumbled darkly when carts rolled through it.

Soon Mait reached Viru Street and was thus within the town and its fortifications. Around him were dark and stern buildings with staggeringly tall tiled gabled roofs, heavy arched carved doors in vaulted recesses with square hatches on the front and huge entrance halls with barred windows.

This brings Mait into the German-speaking merchant city, the second of its three parts. The third portion of it, arrogant Toompea, has for now stopped being visible to him.

In Vilde's Tallinn, the social divisions structuring the relationships that Mait will enter into when he becomes a resident of the city are marked out in the physical topography of its three parts as this appears to him visually – and so as it is described to the reader – upon his entry into it through the Viru Gate. The gates distinguish the Lower Town visually from what lies outside it. The clifftop position of Toompea serves to distinguish it both from the city of merchants and artisans at its feet, and what lay beyond the gates.

By the 1850s, outside the city wall, a number of settlements chiefly inhabited by Estonians had grown up. Regulations in force until that decade prescribed a distance beyond the walls in which, for defensive purposes, there could be no building. The timber buildings of these settlements formed a horseshoe of suburbs surrounding the city walls to the east, south and west. Such a

wooden-house settlement, built amongst trees, is often known in Estonian as an *agul*, a word sometimes translated into English as 'slum', but with somewhat different connotations.<sup>11</sup> In earlier times often burned down during wars or cleared before a siege, these neighbourhoods had until the 1850s not only a peripheral status – or even a status as places beyond the city periphery – they and the network of lanes which formed within them also had an air of the temporary.

It was in the decades between that in which *Anija mehed* is set and that in which it was written, the 1900s, that this area became formally part of the city, and that it acquired a number of more durable buildings including hotels, warehouses and grander houses. Then, the dividing lines between Toompea and the Lower Town began to vanish as the tripartite 1850s city Vilde presents became a single growing entity with Estonian speakers in the majority of its population and therefore able to conceive of themselves as, potentially at least, its rulers.<sup>12</sup>

In the course of the novel, Mait moves from east to west: from the countryside into the city along the highway from Narva, westwards from Lower Town to Upper Town and westwards once more to the far north-west corner of Tallinn on a peninsula surrounded on three sides by the Baltic Sea when his corpse is taken from Toompea to the graveyard at Kopli. Estonians crossing the border separating the Lower Town from Toompea in this novel – the Anija men, Mait, Leena (a young woman raped by her landlord) – are always physically punished for doing so. The peasants of Anija, like Mait, come in from the east, but they are driven out beyond the eastern side of the walled city once more, to be beaten on the Russian Market. Their miserable procession down from Toompea to be beaten grasps and spatially links the components of the tripartite city, as it passes eastwards and



spatially downwards. When the men are beaten, the entire Lower Town protests. They cannot prevent it from happening, but the citizens object to this demonstration of arbitrary aristocratic power and this brings Estonians and Germans together, their voices at times indistinguishable in Vilde's text. A German apprentice stands side by side with Estonians. It is an expression of class solidarity based on a shared urban identity: 'This should not be happening in the heart of the city' a voice 'from the heart of the crowd witnessing the punishment calls out, 'booming with anger' (p. 127). The act is said to humiliate or violate the city.

At the centre of *Anija mehed* is not Mait's social position in relation to other characters, but their shared being as parts of the material and topographic city. Introducing the novel, in the context of a post-World-War-One independent Estonia, Vilde wrote that his objective was to awaken and animate the history of the city through the bodily memory of past physical punishment and use this to demand action in the present.<sup>13</sup> This novel thus exemplifies the use of the historical novel genre in western parts of the late Russian Empire to address matters whose public discussion was forbidden by censorship and other forms of political repression.<sup>14</sup>

In the novel, Vilde insists that Estonians must melt into the city population: not distinguish themselves from urban people, but join them. He supports the idea of the Estonian city, which had hardly been present at all in the Estonian National Awakening of the 1860s and 1870s, predicated as that was upon an idea of the Estonians as the people of the land. This new urban idea could emerge from dialogue between the wooden *agul* suburbs and the still largely German-speaking stone houses within the walls, Vilde felt. The novel was also politically effective in a way that was later, in the Soviet era, capable of being defined as socialist, and this is one reason for the ambivalent reputation it and Vilde have so far had in post-Soviet Estonia. It is time for a fuller reappraisal of the novel and Vilde's output as a whole in relation to an understanding of modernisms and modernities as multiple.

<sup>1</sup> This article develops from work by the same authors on a book chapter: 'Eduard Vilde and Tallinn's Dynamic Peripheries, 1858–1903', in Lieven Ameel, Jason Finch and Markku Salmela (eds), *Literature and the Peripheral City* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 164–84.

<sup>2</sup> Frederic Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London: Verso, 2013); Franco Moretti (ed.), *The Novel*, two volumes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>3</sup> Eduard Vilde, *Kui Anija mehed Tallinnas käisid* [1903]. Tallinn: Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus, 1955.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* [1982], translated from German by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1938); Marshall Berman, *All that Is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London: Verso, 1983); Judith Walkowitz, *City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual Danger in Late-Victorian London* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Franco Moretti, *Atlas of the European Novel, 1800–1900* (London: Verso, 1998).

<sup>5</sup> Juri Lotman, 'On the Semiosphere' [1984], *Sign Systems Studies* 33 (2005): 205–29, here p. 208.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 212.

<sup>7</sup> Karsten Brüggemann and Ralph Tuchtenhagen, *Tallinn: Kleine Geschichte der Stadt* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2011).

<sup>8</sup> Otto Ernst Eduard Jakob von Ungern-Sternberg, *Erinnerungen eines alten Estländers* (Berlin: E. Runge, 1902), p. 58).

<sup>9</sup> All translations from Estonian to English by Eva Finch and Jason Finch.

<sup>10</sup> Raimo Pullat, *Brief History of Tallinn* (Tallinn: Estopol, 1998).

<sup>11</sup> Maie Kalda, 'Estonian Literary Slum', *Koht ja Paik / Place and Location 2* (2002): 389–404.

<sup>12</sup> Brüggemann and Ralph Tuchtenhagen, *Tallinn*, p. 192. See also Ea Jansen, *Eestlane muutuvast ajast: seisusühiskonnast kodanikuühiskonda* (Tartu: Eesti Ajaloo Arhiiv: 2007), p. 381.

<sup>13</sup> Vilde, *Artikleid*, 271–3.

<sup>14</sup> For comparable use of the genre in Finland: Lieven Ameel, *Helsinki in Early Twentieth-Century Literature: Urban Experiences in Finnish Prose Fiction 1890–1940* (Helsinki: SKS: 2014), p. 70.

# Some things cannot be helped

b y R e i n R a u d

One of my unwritten novels speaks about a young man, a sort of a self-educated seeker of truth, who had gathered himself a considerable following in Tallinn, 1970s, and then one day takes off to Siberia. There, he soon finds himself living in the household of a man nicknamed Yanyg-nyavram (which means “the great child” in the Mansi language, a far relative of Estonian) and becomes his disciple of sorts. After returning home, however, he is almost immediately killed in a traffic accident, when the driver of a tram is stung by a wasp in her face and runs him over. The story was intended to be written, on the one hand, in a mock academic style, as a researcher’s effort to reconstruct what he had been trying to teach, from the notes and diaries of his friends and admirers, and on the other, as an emulation of Zen Buddhist lore with its anecdotes of teachers uttering cryptic statements on the nature of reality and other teachers commenting on them later.

The crucial message that the man in my unwritten book had tried to get across to anyone who was interested, had apparently been this: for ages, humanity has been concerned with turning literature into life. From social utopias to romantic love stories, literature has always depicted the ideal upon which societies and individuals have patterned their own being. And they have always failed. It is therefore time to reverse the effort — to turn life into literature. This, of

course, did not mean producing literature out of life, creating stories of what has been. The idea was to live so that every single experienced moment would already be literature already when it happened.

At the time when I was thinking about this book, I only had an intuitive idea what this meant. I understand it much more clearly now. The roots of the problem were in our relationship with our surrounding reality itself. I am writing “our”, because I believe it was a common problem for many, even though perhaps not everyone was as conscious of it as were those who tried to capture their world in words. It was simply not possible to write adequately about the reality where we were living. Reasons for that were manifold. For example, there was censorship. I remember that once, in a book by my mother, during an episode that took place in a cafe, she mentioned that two Russian girls were sitting at the neighbouring table. An innocent enough occurrence, and quite true to life. But no: the editor told her to take them out, because otherwise this spot might have been interpreted as a protest against the Soviet government’s policy to settle Russians into Estonia in order to undermine the cultural identity of Estonian society. Well, even mentioning a salami sandwich could have been problematic, as salami was hard to come by because of the constant shortage of meat products. So certain slices of our life were



cut out of it, at least as far as literary representation was concerned, and there were blank spots around us constantly. Not only because of censorship, by the way. People in books seldom spoke as real people did, for example, they almost never swore. It seems that back then people actually swore less than they do now, but swear they did nonetheless — though not on paper. Editors and censors might have had their problem with indecencies, too, but somehow this part of language was also not considered “literary” enough by the authors themselves. If people in your book were crudely swearing — as their real-life equivalents, in some situations, most certainly did — then you were not doing right by them. For particularly repulsive types, some artificial swearwords had been invented, so that this aspect of linguistic reality, even if included, would still stay out of direct contact with life itself. And the reason why the extremely voluminous “Brave Soldier Švejk” was so very popular with (mainly teenage) male readers was obviously not its humanist and anti-military ethos, but that Jaroslav Hašek as a classic of the friendly socialist Czech nation enjoyed the almost exclusive privilege to use words such as “shit” more liberally, even though some of his phrases, too, were left in place in their original form as “untranslatable wordplay”.

But, difficult though all of this was, the real problem lay elsewhere. It was impossible to capture the core sentiment of our life in realistic description. There were, sure enough, writers who were producing rather successful narratives for popular consumption entitled “The Private Life of Comrade Director” or some such, but most authors with serious ambitions never descended so low. Words such as “regional committee” [of the communist party] or their newspeakish abbreviations, common enough in everyday use, were quite as “out” on the pages of a text with literary aspirations as were swearwords or political undesirables. You just didn’t allow into literature all this stuff that should not have been there in reality either.

Some writers, such as Jaan Kross, exiled themselves into remote history, where they could speak about the immediate present through similes — thus “The Madman of the Czar”, even though it tells the story of a historical person, is actually about the conflict of a free mind with the political system. Some others, such as Mati Unt, created imaginary realities that, even if they purported to be realistic, described the problems of a world that we would prefer to have instead of those we actually had. Thus “The Autumn Ball” now reads as a realistic description of a world that makes sense — because in our present world, it does. Yet other writers, such as my parents Eno Raud and Aino Pervik, opted for children’s literature, where fantastic imaginary realities could serve for the discussion of serious and real problems without clashing with a world they did not even claim to depict. Thus the “Three Jolly Fellows” could speak about ecological problems and “Arabella, Pirate’s Daughter” about the irreconcilability of love and evil.

In short, life and literature had been separated. While life was not such as it was supposed to be, literature was guarded, by ingenious devices, from the intrusion of that not-supposed-to-be stuff, because otherwise it would have lost its ability to remind people of the unnaturalness of the situation. However, all of this did not go away, when freedom was restored. Yes, we felt now that we were living a life that was ours, but for quite some time we remained incapable (well, I did, anyway) of representing it on its own terms. Of course, there were no more political rocks to be steered clear of and swearwords gradually made their appearance, but the first books of literary quality to actually address the realities of the new era, with ruthless businesspeople, cynical PR professionals and criminal gangs started to appear only toward the end of the 1990s, or about ten years later than the world they depicted. Literature was slow on the uptake, so to say. Even though quite a lot of what had been only known from books and films was now actually happening,



The Brother. Rakvere Theatre, 2013. TThe Brother (Üllar Saaremäe) is having dinner with Dessa the Seductress (Ülle Lichtfeldt). Photo by Oksana Nakorchevska

our own literature still continued to look down on it as not quite worthy of its effort. After all, it had accustomed itself to the role of the moral beacon and upholder of memory about how things should be. Bombs exploding in the street and murders by hitmen from Russia were definitely not its thing.

It seems to me it took close to 20 years for literature to catch up on life. During this time, it may have lost some of its prospective readers, who had found life to be more interesting, surprising, challenging and inspiring — more surreal, fantastic and full of space for imagination — than literature, at least the literature written by other people experiencing the same things as their immediate present. These were the 20 years formative also

of myself as a writer. Some of the books I like best among my work are indeed placed at a distance from the immediate realities, looking at them, as it were, through a glass, darkly.

For example, this is what goes on in “The Brother”, a poetic western about a stranger arriving in a small town held tightly in the fist by a few corrupt men of power, the Banker, the Lawyer and the Notary, who have cheated an innocent heiress out of her home and money. And even though the stranger does nothing to disturb them, their good fortune somehow starts to decline — his very presence in the society, the possibility of him as an idea seems to be enough to set things right. But perhaps more important than the

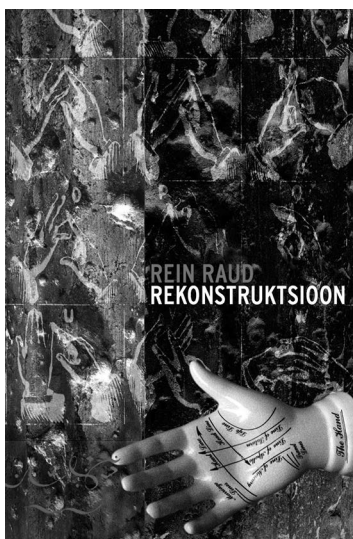


story itself is its language. The Banker, for example, is “a strong man, who had already begun to take note of his health, and had achieved enough in his life to answer yes/no questions with one word”, and when the Brother learns that a beautiful girl whom he had mistaken for one of the idle rich is actually a music teacher, she asks him: “Am I now different in your mind? When you know that the option to let time pass senselessly does not soil me?” These, as you can easily see, are not the words of real people made of flesh and blood, but precisely that made them, for me, much more adequate depictions of what was really going on than literary copies of persons you could see moving around in real life. Therefore, even though its apparent lack of immediate references, I think it is a very Estonian story, but not on the face of it, because it could happen anywhere, and I have only one instance in it where a mobile phone rings, reminding us of the time.

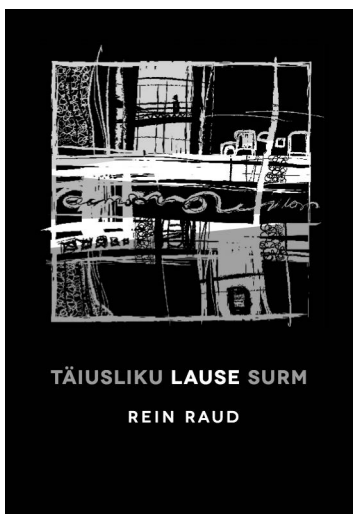
But, as said, life finally caught up. For me personally, the gap closed somewhere in 2011. Courtesy of the Väino Tanner Foundation, I spent the month of November of that year in Mazzano, a small town in Italy, in a writers’ residence, or actually a nice flat of which I was the only inhabitant. My initial idea had been to use this time to write up a story that had been haunting me for two years, after I had seen it in a dream — a story of two people falling in love without knowing that both of them are actually links in the same spy network of passing on sensitive information. I even jotted down the draft of a first chapter, but it was no good. The lense of literature was so strongly between me and what I was trying to write about that I could not see as clearly as I wanted. But then, another story took over. This was something I had also been thinking about for some time, a story of a sick father trying to understand her daughter, who had died a few years before in a collective sectarian suicide. This story was not altogether improbable in the new reality, as so many previously unimag-

inable things now are, and something I would know more about, having been teaching at various universities for about twenty years and constantly in contact with younger people inspired by all kinds of ideals. As the time for the other story had clearly not yet arrived, I decided to try my hand on this one, and in a month I had written up the first draft of “The Reconstruction”, my longest novel to date. It contains the story of both the father, who was a bit older than myself (and quite different as a human being) and the daughter, who had been slightly older than my children (again, resembling neither) — in other words, the stories of the world that was and the world that is now. It was also the first piece of fiction where I could place every single event on an exact spot on a timeline. I even checked the weather forecast for some days, when some important events took place, for example, the concert of Rammstein in Tallinn, so that if anyone who had attended were to read my book, they would not have it clash with their own memory of the event. Shared reality had found its way back onto my pages in a relatively undistorted form.

I also knew now what to do about this other story. It had grown, as stories often do, and when I finally wrote it down it was with a mix of my own memories about the end of the 1980s. The book, called “The Death of the Perfect Sentence”, is important to me in many senses. Most significantly, it was a possibility for me to go through (and thereby, to get “out of my system”, as they say) that period of enormous change, the hopes and fears and illusions that guided us from one world to another. I am still not sure it is at all possible to do a proper job at this any longer, because the words mean different things now than they did then. This must be a problem for anyone trying to mediate as authentically as possible their experiences from times past or spaces far away, and the easiest way to success they can take is to rely on the universally human. For me, the task was quite the contrary: to capture the opposite, the particularly human, the now



The Reconstruction  
(Cover by Mari Kaljuste, photo by Peeter Laurits)



The Death of the Perfect Sentence  
(Cover by Asko Künnap)

vanished way of being alive in a timespace that was once also my own.

There are quite a few tragedies in the book. Some of these are caused by betrayal, some by the inability to commit it. The loves it writes do not acknowledge any borders, as loves often don't, and therefore have no future. But what mattered most to me here was the "banality of evil" of the system itself. To put it simply: what would have become of the people, who chose to serve the repressive system in some not-so-innocent capacity, if the Soviet occupation had never taken place? Would they have been ordinary citizens, respectable pillars of a different kind of community? Were they turned by the system into its minions? So that they were also victims of a kind? Or did they have it in them from the beginning? Or did they just think they were doing their job? I cannot say with any certainty that the different motivations I have ascribed to KGB officers, informers, underground activists or just people caught in the whirlwinds of history were in fact the same terms in which such people thought of themselves at the time. No one can: the memories of everyone concerned, constructed in our present, have inevitably been shaped by what we now know would happen.

When I had finished the first draft of the novel, I was not able to get out of it for quite some time. Under the pretext of rewriting some passages I kept returning to it, but in truth I knew better: a certain part of my world had now acquired an independent existence as a text and it was not so easy to let it go. Of course, this always happens when you finish a book, but I have never felt it so strongly. I still do. I am not sure how the book will be met — it does have its clashes with the official narrative of how independent Estonia came into being, in addition to obviously presenting just a particular point of view, and quite possibly missing something essential seen from some other one.

In other words, a distance will inevitably remain between life and literature. Well, some things evidently cannot be helped.

# Novel competition

Clowns and schoolboys,  
not to mention a footballer in love

b y K ä r t H e l l e r m a

**The novel competition 2015, with its 94 submitted manuscripts, is over. The jury had a hard time selecting the best of the best. Now that the awards have been distributed, it is time to cast a brief glance behind the protocol and see what themes and manners of treatment prevailed, what the general stylistic picture was and what aims were set.**

## **From spiritual traumas to killing fantasies**

The range of manuscripts was broad: from authentic biographies to imaginative adventure novels. As for form, on the one hand, there were realist, mundane ways of depiction, which could be rich in events and characters, but where the culture of expression did not quite meet the requirements of a novel. On the other hand, there were fantasy novels where the authors' imaginations worked overtime, but which seemed to be appealing to youngish readers. They were full of oracles and magicians; good and bad characters fought one another, although in the end it all seemed like a computer game where you proceed from one level to the next. Consumers who only ever want action-filled plots obviously form a target group of their own, but a more demanding reader is not going to get emotionally involved.

It could thus happen that among the four or five manuscripts every jury member was given at one time, there was at least one that contained existential confessional tales and text constructions with incessant massacres, where characters talk to one another in short sentences about absolutely nothing, page after page. This is quite instructive in itself: dialogue is certainly a necessary form element, but it is not enough in a novel for fictional characters to simply address one another.

A large number of the manuscripts were biographies, confessions, memoirs and diaries, quite a few of which were painfully revealing. There was also cultural-historical material written with a fine poetic ear. Had the competition been for biographies and diaries, the result would have been clearly different. The tendency of the novel's genre boundaries getting increasingly vague has been going on for some time, but we decided

# 2015

that the genre of the novel should still include a story and compact composition. Accumulated heaps of material, fascinating but presented in fragments, are not enough for a decent novel. The understanding of composition and style was the biggest stumbling block for the writers.

Besides a large number of fairy tales, there was a great deal of violence and an abundance of historical murder fantasies. If someone bothered counting all the slain characters or heads stuck on poles or bodies pierced by bullet holes in the manuscripts, the number would be staggering. This is in fact not totally surprising if we consider the characteristic tendencies of today's popular culture, which highlight the devaluation of human life and make death a natural part of the entertainment genre.

If something was missing, it was utopias in the form of cities of the sun: these were replaced by horror mystery dystopias and sci-fi fantasies depicting life after huge catastrophes.

## **With the eye of a clown**

The winner of the novel competition was Armin Kõomägi's *Lui Vutoon*. It is a witty modern Robinson-esque work in an ironic key, which tackles the good old 'home alone' archetype in a novel way. A young man

aspiring to become the marketing head at the vast Ülemiste shopping centre turns up there and finds his boss's office and then the entire place totally deserted. All of his friends and relatives have vanished as well. There are no people in Tallinn, nor seemingly in the whole world. Here the survival course commences.

This is a witty parody of capitalism, ridiculing all the aspects of consumer society, from the sex industry to life stories circulated as literature (a memorable detail: in a bookshop, vomit bags are attached to the back covers of biographies). The author cleverly derides the whole entertainment industry. The adventures of the enterprising protagonist, e.g. travelling to Pärnu for a holiday in a cabriolet, and celebrating Halloween where his only friend and companion is the sex doll Kim, are truly hilarious.

The plot of the novel demonstrates how the power of money crumbles when there is no one to spend it. In addition to numerous succinct cultural hints, the novel contains more serious aspects: the author superbly describes the total sensation of emptiness and solitude a man can feel amongst a wealth of things and food. We see how enormous the extent of self-delusion can be when adapting to the market ideology and how easy it is to lose yourself in the labyrinth of things.



Armin Kõomägi (Photo by Tiit Blaas / Scanpix)

This story, with its sad-tragic undertone, had an outstanding character, a strong plot and an impressive image. 'Almost shockingly topical' was the jury's general view of the book. By genre, *Lui Vutoon* is a social-critical novel, a hyper-parody, whose satirical approach can be compared with Michel Houellebecq's. Kõomägi's creative hand-writing has been juxtaposed with the Frenchman's before. We could add here that the protagonist of the novel somewhat resembles the clown caught in the cog-wheels of life in Heinrich Böll's grotesque novel *The Clown*. Parallels are not so much

essential as conceptual, considering that the protagonist of *Lui Vutoon*'s protagonist is listed in the marketing head's smartphone as 'young clown'. The identity of a clown allows for ambivalence, and playful relations with roles from real life: these days a clown is also a character who uncovers hypocrisy. A clown possesses methods that help reveal the envy on which the modern welfare society relies. Via the figure of a clown, the illusory nature of the world of money and the maze of false values where today's people aimlessly wander are seen as if in a distorting mirror.



If *Lui Vutoon* were a musical piece, it would be called 'Sardonic Symphony'. Every potential anti-capitalism demonstrator should own this book.

## Estonian story

The second-place award went to Märt Laur's *Lahustumine* (Dissolution). This is a bulky manuscript which has all the features of an epic: numerous characters, several plot lines, a smooth style and decent composition.

The book is set in an imaginary village in the Estonian hinterland, near Lake Peipsi. This location enables the author to examine various aspects of the recent history of Russian-Estonian relations. Political ideas clash with an understanding of the history of border-area people of different nationalities.

From the moment when a Russian military base is established in the village, the dimension of the hidden political allegory becomes clear. It is in fact a political novel that analyses Estonia's chances on the basis of its geo-political position and the ambitions of the neighbouring big country. On the other hand, it is an artistic adventure, which describes one possible historical development of an Estonian village.

Authentic motifs from recent history – such as the rioting caused by the Bronze Soldier – are mixed with inventions, and historical parallels with real developments in Estonian life. The focus of events shifts to the past and back again to the present. The author analyses various psychological traumas on the basis of painful examples. He is keen on the impact of extreme situations on the human psyche.

The story concentrates on the destiny of four generations of the men of an Estonian family. The father fought in the War of Independence. When the Soviet power is established, his son Nikolai, recently released from a prison camp, grasses on his

father to the authorities. In order to survive in the camp, he betrayed some other prisoners who planned to escape.

The scenes where the KGB interrogates Johannes are not for the faint-hearted.

We see how history has scattered people in all directions and shaped their personalities. The influence of the Soviet era on the morale of village people is destructive.

What makes the novel fascinating is that no character is thoroughly good or bad. For example, the former KGB man and current writer Griša is a humanly understandable type. Nikolai's son Ants desires revenge for all the injustice done to Estonia. He raises his stepson Taaniel as a macho man and gives him 'lessons in hatred'. As a result, the boy becomes a bully at school and later turns to crime. At the same time, Ants turns out to be a strong and peaceful Estonian man.

Besides the revenge-soaked life philosophy of Ants and Taaniel, the ideas of the pastor Martin, who suffers inner conflicts about the possibility of trust, are constructive and add another layer of meaning to the novel.

*Dissolution* is a novel that is well realised both figuratively and conceptually, where the author provides an acute analysis of possible development perspectives in Estonia.

## Is it easy to be young?

Third place was awarded to the novel *Kehade mets* (The Forest of Bodies) by Jim Ashilevi, although the jury's opinions were quite contradictory. The text is, in fact, contradictory: it creates an original poetic atmosphere, accurately describing the growing pains of a young man, but with its intriguing outspokenness it teeters on the boundary of readers' ability to accept and absorb. To one jury member, for example, the manuscript resembled Johann Wolfgang Goethe's *The Sorrows of Young Werther*,

while another member considered the protagonist to be an A-type sociopath whom we should only feel sorry for.

The author produces a convincing picture of contemporary family and school relationships, his childhood friends and desirable girls who remain unattainable. The theme running through the novel is the merciless self-examination of a young man, primarily his sexual awakening and the impact of pornography, only a computer click away. There are more painful topics: major social differences, school bullying, misunderstandings between children and parents, the inability to establish real contacts with the opposite sex, disappointments in intimate relations, general alienation and loneliness.

Today's young people have nothing but frustrating routine lives, claims the protagonist,

who is envious of the father of one of his friends because the older generation had a chance to test themselves in difficult circumstances.

As for form, the text is excellent, written with a good perception of language, by means of succinct and effective metaphors and precise dialogue. Descriptions of routine, inescapably mundane life and its highly subtle analysis – a peculiar cross between anxiety and lyricism – plus the superbly depicted inability of the protagonist to adapt to people and the world in general could have easily earned the author a higher prize.

### A love story

The novel *Suluseis* (Impasse), by Helen Eelrand, came in fourth. The plot unwinds on two levels, in the 1990s and today. The novel is fluently written, dynamic and lively.

Despite some sketchiness in the text construction, the theme of lost love provides it with a backbone and makes it captivating.

There are sincere emotions, a search for true love and faith in the power of love. Sounds too sentimental? The technique of the novel occasionally wobbles, but the faith in love is a special value in the book. It does not come up in such a pure form that often in today's literature.

The jury was quite surprised when the author's envelope was opened: it is rare that a female author can so smoothly depict a male character, especially that of a footballer. She has succeeded brilliantly.

### The rest of the best

*Ära armasta mind enam* (Don't Love Me Any More), by Tea Lall, is a novel where today's family issues are seen through the eyes of three teenagers: at a time when mum and dad find work in Finland and families fall apart, children are left on their own and must grow up too soon. Another huge problem is the parents' alcoholism. The novel examines a drastic case: how a daughter is forced to look after her alcoholic mother and make her presentable for the social worker, or the daughter will be taken to an orphanage. There is no happy ending.

Alcoholism as an acute problem in Estonian society is also tackled in *Tähe lend* (A Flying Star), by Ilmar Särg. The novel uses economic language, seems a bit like reportage, occasionally falls into caricature, but offers eloquent descriptions and characters: it is both instructive and exciting. It could in fact be taken as a medical novel, because the characters are doctors and nurses, and the plot revolves around their relationships. The protagonist, a talented surgeon, becomes a tragic wreck as he cannot control his vice.

Another novel worth mentioning is the historical adventure fantasy *Puud kasvavad kõigile* (Trees Grow for Everyone), by Tamur Kusnets. The novel is well characterised by its subtitle: *A historical-humorous dreadful*

*tale, a confession of a warrior.* Also notable was the fairy-tale *Kellest luuakse laule* (Of Whom Songs Are Written), by Mann Loper, which uses both Germanic and Old Norse mythologies, with familiar motifs taken from epics of various nations.

Among women's diaries, *Mõtetes elatud elu* (Life Lived in Thoughts), by Helve Undo, stood out. The book has two main characters: Dull Everyday and Great Love. The protagonist is the lover of a married man; she raises his children and ends up alone. Love turns out to be an illusion, but there is more than enough dull routine.

Of all the sci-fi stories inspired by post-apocalyptic worlds, the jury noted the manuscript *Süsteem* (System), by Mairi Laurik.

### When ideals are in short supply

What was the artistic standard of the manuscripts? It cannot be denied that the era of hurrying and brief messages has left its impact on general literacy.

After all, blogs do not need to be polished, and their charm lies precisely in light-hearted chatter, or at least trying to seem light-hearted. The charm of tweets is also their brevity. Effective terseness is often outweighed by uncontrollable and non-artistic waffling. Besides the mundane forms of expression, what struck the jury was the carelessness: if an author spells the same name three different ways on the same page, he or she cannot be taken seriously.

What did we find least in the manuscripts? Honest searches for truth and ideals. Does that mean that there is now a general shortage of idealists? If there are no ideals to rely on and no happiness to fight for, the vacuum is filled by anti-ideals, anti-heroes and infinite variations of existential states of anxiety. The thinking person is replaced by the acting one: often thrashing about quite

aimlessly. A sign of the times? Probably.

Just like in modern high literature, the prevailing attitude was ironic and blasphemous, depraved visions were produced with ease, moral categories were defined as enforced mechanisms that a free man does not need, everything was ridiculed, and people tried to outsmart one another in vulgarity and/or witticisms.

A typical issue was increasing loneliness. This theme produced various transitions: some characters were left on their own after a world war, some after the end of the world, some after the death of the nearest and dearest. In the winning novel, the protagonist was left alone amidst all the abundance of goods and food offered by a welfare society.

### Sociological mirror

Rumour has it that professional writers are afraid to participate in novel competitions because they do not want the embarrassment of losing. It is difficult to prove this. At a time when there seem to be more writers than readers, the level of professionalism of writers is not easy to determine. In any case, the names of the winning authors are not entirely unknown.

In terms of Estonian literature, the nature of novel competitions has varied over time, depending on the changing meaning of literature and culture in society.

The results of novel competitions tend to show what is going on in the lower sections of the cultural pyramid: the manuscripts reveal an exciting sociological mirror which tests painful social issues, maps certain values, attitudes and mentalities, and tells us a few things about today's people and our era.

If novel competitions produce top literature which enriches Estonian literature with new themes and ways of tackling them, they are certainly to be welcomed.

# 2014

## Estonian Literary Awards

b y P i r e t V i i r e s

The Cultural Award of the Republic of Estonia in literature for long-time creative work went to **Ene Mihkleson**. The translator of Polish literature **Hendrik Lindepuu** received another cultural award for his achievements in 2014.

**Hasso Krull** received the annual award of the Estonian Cultural Endowment in 2014 for his books *Pesa* (Nest) and *Muna* (Egg), which create links between the present and timeless traditions.

The genre awards of the Estonian Cultural Endowment's Literature Foundation in 2014 were distributed as follows.

**Jan Kaus** received the annual prose award for his novel *Ma olen elus* (I Am Alive) and for the collection of miniatures *Tallinna kaart* (Map of Tallinn).

The poetry award went to **Kaur Riismaa** for the collections *Teekond päeva lõppu* (Journey to the End of the Day) and *Merimetsa*.

The drama award was given to **Tõnu Õnnepalu** for his play *Vennas* (Brother).

**Contra** received the award in literature for children and young adults for his poetry collection about various aspects of life at school, *Kõik on kõige targemad* (Everybody is the Wisest).

The essay prize went to **Mihkel Mutt** for his book *Õhtumaa Eesti I* (Occidental Country Estonia, I).

The award for translating from a foreign language into Estonian was given to **Märt Läänemets** for translating from Chinese *Punane sorgo* (Red Sorghum), by the Nobel prize winner Mo Yan.

**Krisztina Lengyel Tóth** received the award for translating Estonian literature into a foreign language. She translated Tõnu Õnnepalu's novel *Mandala* and co-translated Jaan Undusk's *Lühiproosa* (Short Prose) into Hungarian.

The jury also gave an award outside the genre specification, this time to **Udo Uibo** for his book that gathered etymological yarns, *Sõnalood* (Word Stories).

The awards for literature in Russian were received by **Jelena Skulskaja** for *Marmorluik* (Marble Swan), and **Nadežda Katajeva-Valk** for *Seal, kus ma sündisin* (Where I was born).

The award for best article was given to **Leo Luks** for the article *Eesti kirjanduse kadunud kodu* (The Lost Home of Estonian Literature, in *Keel ja Kirjandus* 2014, no 10).

The Betti Alver award is given every year for a remarkable debut. In 2014 it was

given to **Taavi Jakobson**'s novel *Tõeline jumalaosake* (The True God Particle).

The recipients of the 2014 Friedebert Tuglas short story award were **Mart Kivastik** for the short story *Õnn tuleb magades* (Happiness Comes in Sleep, Vikerkaar no 12, 2014), and **Mait Vaik**'s short story *Puhtus* (Purity).

The A.H. Tammsaare award is given each year for a work about the contemporary world or a work tackling the life and literary career of A. H. Tammsaare. In 2014 the winner was **Aita Kivi** for her novel *Keegi teine* (Someone Else).

The Eduard Vilde Award of Vinni Parish for the best literary work that follows Eduard Vilde's traditions went to **Toomas Vint** for the collection of short stories *Mõned kummalised naised* (Some Peculiar Women).

The Virumaa literary award is given for the best artistic interpretation of the history of the Estonian people in poetry, prose or drama. In 2014 the winner was **Alo Lõhmus**'s *Priius, kallis anne. Elu ja surm Vabadussõja kõige raskemal ajal* (Freedom, precious gift. Life and death at the most difficult time in the War of Independence).

The Võru County government established the Bernard Kangro award for authors from Võrumaa or authors who are connected with it, or for a work dealing with Võrumaa-related topics. This time it went to **Janika Kronberg**'s essay collection *Rännud kuue teejuhiga* (Travels with six guides). The same book also received the best travel book of the year award, issued by the Go Travel agency.

The Jaan Kross literary award is given by the Jaan Kross Foundation with the aim of recognising remarkable literary achievement in areas associated with a writer's diverse creative works which display ethical and aesthetic standards typical of Kross's own work. The award went to **Ants Hein**'s book about history, *Õisu. Ühe Liivimaa mõisa ajalugu ja arhitektuur* (Õisu. History and architecture of a Livonian manor house).

The Juhan Liiv Award goes to the best Estonian-language poem published for the first time during the last year, and is awarded by Alatskivi Parish, together with the Alatskivi Secondary School and Liiv Museum. The winner was **Jüri Kolk**'s poem *arno apooria*.

Another poetry award, named after Gustav Suits, has been given since 2004 by the Tartu city government and the Cultural Endowment of Tartu and is given to a poet who, during the past year, published at least one excellent, philosophically profound collection of poetry. In 2014 it went to **Marko Kompus**'s collection of poetry *Poeedinahk* (Poet Skin).

The Tallinn University Literary Award was established in 2007 with the aim of acknowledging and introducing Estonian authors who study or teach at Tallinn University or have graduated from it. In 2014 there were two winners: **Jan Kaus** and his novel *Ma olen elus* (I am Alive) and **Alari Allik**'s collection of poetry, with comments, translated from the classical Japanese *Sada luuletust, sada luuletajat* (One hundred poems, one hundred poets).

The literary award The First Step was established to advance Estonian literary life. The jury chooses the winner among literary debut texts published in print media. In 2014 the winner was **Hanneleele Kaldmaa** for short prose in the magazine *Värske Rõhk* (no 37, 2014).

In 2014 the Writers' Union announced a novel competition, which continues the tradition established in 1926. The sponsors included Go Travel, Liviko and Penosil Estonia. The winner was **Armin Kõomägi**'s novel *Lui Vutoon*, which excelled in linguistic imagery and freshness, self-irony, style, power of generalisation and quite shocking topicality. Second prize went to **Märt Laur**'s *Lahustumine* (Dissolution), third prize to **Jim Ashilevi**'s *Kehade mets* (Forest of Bodies) and fourth prize to **Helen Eelrand**'s *Suluseis* (Impasse).



Krisztina Lengyel

Tóth

## Plays with cats and words

Krisztina Lengyel Tóth is a translator of Estonian literature into Hungarian who earned a golden egg for her work last year – the Estonian Cultural Endowment's annual translation award for best translation of fiction from Estonian into a foreign language. Kerti Tergem attempts to find out who this person is sitting in the catbird seat.

### **You work as a teacher. How do you identify yourself?**

To put it briefly – a wordcracker.

I am a teacher of Hungarian literature, a freelance storyteller, a translator of Estonian literature (plus a professional caresser of cats, wanderer in forests and jam-maker, although the last activities do not, unfortunately, count as serious jobs). The serious jobs are not really that far apart from one another, as they are different facets of the same activity. Sometimes one prevails, then another, although on the whole they all strive to bring stories and living words to people so that the power of stories and

words can help human beings to remain human beings in today's dazzling world, which spins on a duck's leg, filled with dragon-like creatures.

I work at an institute where foreign students come for a year to study the Hungarian language and culture. My company, which means me (Cat's Scratch Ltd.), deals with Hungarian language teaching, editing books, telling stories, and translating mainly non-fiction texts from Estonian and occasionally from English. Besides all that, I translate Estonian literature.

I am trying to keep activities related to words and language in balance: the

limited language used as a teacher is balanced by the colourful language of a story-teller; the story-teller's freedom is balanced by discipline, absolutely crucial to a translator; the translator's incessant uncertainty ("Was my translation correct?" she thinks, frowning...) is balanced by the editor's merciless pen; the editor's solitude is balanced by the teacher's openness to people.

I am not a professional translator, and translating does not earn me my daily bread. Luckily! Considering the speed of my translating, that would mean starvation. For me, translating is like the craft of getting a model ship into a bottle: a fine undertaking that requires devotion and concentration and at the same time intellectual lightness, something that cannot be done heedlessly, as it would only end in breaking your neck and all manner of other problems and misery.

### **Why did you decide to learn namely Estonian and translate literature from Estonian?**

It all happened rather quickly: I fell head over heels when I first heard the Estonian language at the university. Such a charming language simply had to be learned. Alas, the longer our relationship lasts the more it seems that the love is platonic: I cannot really master the Estonian language. Living in Hungary as I do, my Estonian is totally passive, I merely read in Estonian, watch films, occasionally the telly, and translate. I use Estonian actively almost only in writing letters. My language usage is therefore creative rather than based on rules, and it is crucial for me to be able to occasionally travel to Estonia and spend some time in the language environment.

After our first Estonian lesson, a course mate and I decided to become translators of Estonian literature. This was a sufficiently absurd idea for me to stick to my decision. At first, translating seemed just an exciting game which however was jolly only if played

at a high level. Therefore I did not translate seriously for a long time, did not offer my services anywhere. Instead, I kept reading and only experimented with translation, trying to learn how it was done. And when I had become mature enough and almost ready for this wonderful game, various undertakings somehow tracked me down.

### **What captivates you about Estonian literature?**

Probably because it is *Estonian* literature. I am constantly homesick for Estonia (maybe it's the wisdom tooth I left behind in Tartu), but unfortunately I cannot be involved in things Estonian all the time, as I live my daily life in Hungarian. It is quite a "feast of being at home" when I can at least read in Estonian. More specifically, when talking about Estonian literature, it captivates me because it almost never seems to be in a hurry. The texts allow space to reflect on what's been read. Sentences arrive like waves of the sea: the next one will not come unless the previous one has managed to finish its journey.

### **How do you find the author's voice and what are your work methods?**

The basis of translation is reading. A translator who does not read literature in the source language is no translator, but a Christmas tree decoration, as my mentor once said. (Well, of course this is sometimes purely an excuse; it would sound much better if I said I was reading because of professional duty, and not just for the sake of the intellectual pleasure of reading...) Reading begins with choosing and getting the books, which can occasionally be logistically rather complicated, considering the geographical distance between Estonia and Hungary. Although I am an old-fashioned book person, I had to make friends with e-books for the sake of logistics. However, there is always help at hand if necessary: the Skilled Book Hunter, the Kind Book Lender, the Traveller with a Half-Empty Case or the Estonian Literature Centre.



Krisztina Lengyel Tóth (Photo by József Boros)

To me the most fascinating part of translating is messing around with language: when I am trying to find the language and voice of an Estonian text in Hungarian. This is a linguistic-intellectual game, which I also willingly play as a non-translator and which for me is the core of literature. This activity, however, is not very visible: I just sit with a book (or at least exist with it in spirit) for months on end, and we gnaw at each another. We circle around each other, like a cat around hot porridge. (Who is the cat and who is porridge? A good question to which I have no answer.) A bystander would think that the translator was not really working at all, just being lazy again, sitting there daydreaming, wasting God's day. It seems to me that every text has its own language and I simply have to track down the right one amongst the legions of Hungarian language registers or create a new one that will precisely fit the Estonian text. Of course I know this is not actually

possible, but I am an idealist and always hope to find at least a close match. I must thus be sufficiently skilled in the chosen Hungarian language variant to be able to write smoothly in it so that the text will also be literature in Hungarian: it must never be just an accumulation of sentences in Hungarian. Still, this is certainly not the same as "my voice", which I use somewhere else, under my own name. My very own language usage, "tóthkrisztaisms", must not interfere with the language of the translated text; it must also be the author's in Hungarian. And it demands strict self-control, or in other words: it is the bottle for the above-mentioned model ship.

Working with checking and language editors is crucial. The most difficult part, however, is the last stage of the birth of a book (actually of any translation text): I have to let the text go out into the world so that the next text may come, and the next world. This goes hand in hand with the book's distribution,

where I take part as well with my rucksack so my friends can get my translated book at the publisher's price.

**Is it important for the translator to communicate with the author: how much does the author in fact influence the translator's attitude towards the text?**

I have no idea whether this matters for every translator, but to me it certainly does. Mainly from the point of view of responsibility. If I am not willing to take responsibility for changing the text's deeper structure, or responsibility for changing metaphors when I feel it is necessary, I will consult the author and let him or her decide.

Translators, after all, are the most thorough readers of all; they cannot convey anything they do not understand themselves. Quite often they meet stumbling blocks which the reader simply ignores, but which means they are unable to push the cart of the text forward. What are such stumbling blocks? The simplest cases are related to language: e.g. brothers and sisters always cause problems, because we have to make clear whether they are younger or older, as Hungarian has different words for them. Or when I do not quite understand the difference between various weapons or can't see how a cat looks spatially on a hayloft trap door... Or when I find contradictions in the text that the editor of the original text has overlooked and feel that they should somehow be coordinated. Or errors, where I fail to decide whether these are truly errors or whether I have just misunderstood something. It feels great when I try really hard to find an equivalent for a strange expression and I succeed, and it perfectly fits into the context. I am pleased and even proud of the solution and give myself a pat on the back, but I still check with the author, and it turns out it has been a regrettable typing error... I am then faced with the choice of deleting the marvellous solution or leaving it in place. (And if the translator decides that this could be one of the three fingerprints in the book

which would later clearly indicate her work, she leaves it as is ... and certainly keeps silent as a grave about it.)

The nature of the author sometimes has an impact on the translator's attitude but, on the basis of my experience, it is not the person him/herself, but how he or she reads out his or her own text. For example, with Tõnu Õnnepalu's *Mandala* I diligently circled around the text, but could not find the right voice, nothing really worked, and I felt that something was still not quite as it should be. At some point, I came across a short film clip on the internet, where Õnnepalu read an excerpt from the book. This somehow provided the correct rhythm for the Hungarian voice of his book.

**What are the works of Estonia literature that you dream about conveying to Hungarian readers?**

I should first mention the biggest, which are probably going to remain dreams: Nikolai Baturin's *The Flying Dutchwoman*, Bernard Kangro's *Seventh Day*, Jaan Kross's *Between Three Plagues*, Aleksei Turovski's *Animal by Nature* and August Gailit's *Too-mas Nipernaadi*. These are improbable either because of their genre or because they are allegedly not contemporary enough for modern readers. My dream of translating Estonian drama texts, e.g. by Jaan Undusk, Jaan Tätte, Mart Kivastik, Tõnu Õnnepalu and Tiit Aleksejev is almost equally beyond hope... I would also like to translate short stories and poetry, which do not sell very well either... Contemporary novels hopefully do better: for example Eeva Park's *A Trap in Infinity*, Rein Raud's *Reconstruction*, Mihkel Mutt's *The Cavemen Chronicle* and Andrei Hvostov's *The Passion of Sillamäe*.

At the moment, I am working on the second part of Tiit Aleksejev's historical trilogy *Stronghold*; perhaps I will be able to translate the third part as well. And then we'll see what interesting things Estonian writers produce in the future, and which ones Hungarian translators will read.

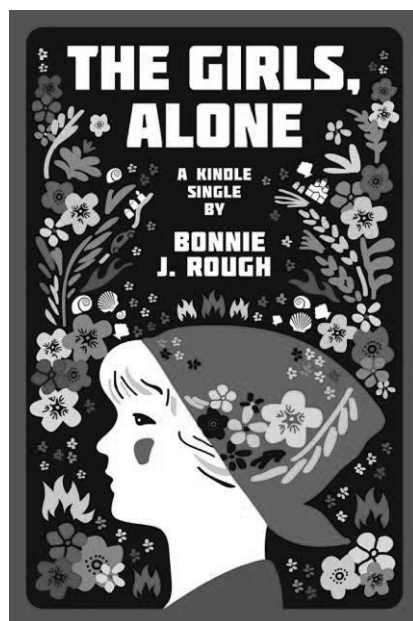
# The Girls, Alone: Six Days in Estonia

A Kindle Single / By Bonnie J. Rough / \$2.99 USD

A resurfacing writer hits the sauna, bares it all, and learns the true meaning of saga. On a mission to learn the fate of her great-great-grandmother Anna, award-winning American author Bonnie J. Rough separates from her family for a surprising journey into the difficult past and precarious present of Estonia, the former Soviet state of her heritage. Accompanied by an old friend and her own self-doubt, Rough hits the sauna, bares it all, and learns the true meaning of "saga" in an adventure that delivers unexpected lessons from her foremothers about happiness, autonomy, women's legacies and the writer's life. With wit, empathy, and humor, *The Girls, Alone* brings its readers to uncharted territory both emotional and geographic, and beautifully answers its own high stakes.

Available worldwide, *The Girls, Alone: Six Days in Estonia* is a 69-page literary travelogue about the unexpected and very contemporary lessons the author learned in Estonia. Shortly after it was released in July 2015, ***The Girls, Alone*** became the #1 bestselling book about Estonia on Amazon.com.

**Bonnie J. Rough** is an award-winning American writer, one-quarter Estonian by heritage. She visited Estonia for the first time last year without no intention of writing about her trip, but when she returned to her desk she could only think of Estonia. She is also the author of the Minnesota Book Award-winning memoir *Carrier: Untangling the Danger in My DNA* (Counterpoint 2010), which also touches on her Estonian ancestry. Her essays have appeared in dozens of publications including *The New York Times* and several anthologies. She lives in Seattle, Washington, USA with her husband and two daughters. Her website is [www.bonniejrough.com](http://www.bonniejrough.com).



## Excerpt

As summer stretched into September and my tomato plants grew up to my chest, the girls played outside and I sat in my cool closet office flipping through digitized Estonian church registers and cemetery records. With enough time, it seemed I could find almost anything I wanted as I reached back along my grand-maternal line. But what did I want? Maybe to visit the oldest ancestral grave I could find? Or to meet a distant relative? I got lost for a while in the Estonian branches of my family tree and discovered how addicting genealogy can be. But I sensed I was wasting time. Even with all the new information, something old and simple kept coming to mind: a photograph of my great-great-grandmother Anna.

The faded gray picture hung in my par-



ents' kitchen above the 1950s diner-style booth where my friends often hung out in high school. In the last decade of her life, Anna stands in a pasture of ankle-deep grass just more than arm's length from a black ox with crooked horns: one points at the sky, and one at the camera. Anna squints in the sun; it has to be midsummer, even though a rough sweater with loose, rumpled sleeves covers her arms and overlaps a long skirt.

The northern sunlight blooming softly on her face was no match for the neon decorations competing with her photo in my parents' café-themed kitchen. But I felt certain Anna had always been there, even before my parents achieved the Fonzie feel, when ours was still just a plain old 1980s American kitchen with brown-and-beige linoleum flooring and I was starting kindergarten.

I never had my own copy of Anna with the ox until the day before I left for Estonia in Fall 2014. It was early on a Saturday morning, and I found myself alone in my parents' kitchen while they slept in. I took the big multi-frame off the wall, flipped it upside down, and pulled out Anna's photo. For the first time in years, I looked closer.

Bright white spots dotted the meadow—maybe flowers, which might explain the choice of background for the picture, taken by her émigré brother who had circled back from Canada to visit Estonia sometime in the 1930s. Over her hair that day, Anna had tied a kerchief with a white pattern around its edges—a bright color, I guessed. I liked the look of her handmade shoes laced in a white crisscross around the ankle, wide and almost playful in their upturned toe. Anna seemed to be trying to smile directly at the camera, but the day was too bright. The shutter captured her in a slight squint, chin-down, tipping her forehead toward the ox. Her lips were closed, her smile was soft, her face was smooth and round even though she was small and thin. She was getting improbably old—nearing sixty when life expectancy for women of her generation was only mid-forties. By this time, she had seen all four of the children from her first marriage, including my great-grandmother Juline, leave to seek new lives in North America. She would never see any of them again. By the time her brother captured the photo, she had

endured a decade of widowhood with young children, and then had remarried and given birth to two more sons. They, too, were about to disappear from her life—and from history, it seemed—in Siberian labor camps as Russian conscripts during World War II.

All of that mattered, but when I took out my iPhone to snap a picture of Anna's photo, something else had my attention. It wasn't her little face or the traditional shoes or the head covering or even the aged-mother pooch of her abdomen. Instead, I zeroed in on Anna's hands. She had long, heavy thumbs with big knuckles like whopper marbles—the same thumbs and knuckles I knew from my own vanaema, who worked as a nurse from the time she was a teenager until she retired, the very thumbs and knuckles that had skipped my mother's slender, delicate hands and arrived again in mine.

Looking at Anna's hands made me think about skills. In my line of mothers, we went from illiterate milkmaid to illiterate farmer to nurse to teacher to writer. I felt there was almost nothing I could do with my hands, aside from prepare food and pill cats and make tiny cute boxes out of old holiday cards. I couldn't knit or sew, I didn't build or repair, I didn't plumb or run wire. I gardened the same way I did my girls' hair: fumblingly, with an aesthetic for wildness because I couldn't bear the fine—or was it brutal?—work of taming. As summer had turned to fall, my tomatoes had been growing and growing, passing the top of my head, leaning against the garage as they vined ever higher, as if in a fairy tale. "A tomato forest," my friend had called it, and it was: dark and tangled with hardly any light and almost no fruit.

Before I put the photo back in its frame, I double-checked to make sure I had a good snapshot of it. Right there in my phone during my travels, Anna would stand with her head tilted down, her eyes glancing up, her hands softly curled at her sides with thumbs facing forward as she smiled softly, against the odds.

I wanted more of her.

And so, in mid-October, with kisses from Dan and the girls and the smells of fresh basil and tomato vines all over my hands, I left.

# Short outlines of books by Estonian

b y B r i t a M e l t s ,

Vahur Afanasjev

## **Tüsamäe tigu**

(Snail of Tüsamäe)

Tartu: Tartu NAK, 2015. 108 pp

ISBN 9789949380299

The collection of poetry Tüsamäe tigu fits pretentiously and stylishly into the trend that has grown more and more prevalent in Estonian literature: the “literature of local colouring”, which usually maps the historical, mental and everyday life of some peripheral or little-known location. Vahur Afanasjev (b. 1979) is a writer, composer and film-maker; he has worked in the fields of journalism, advertising and public relations. Tüsamäe tigu is his sixth collection of poetry among his eleven published books. His wide range of activities has also had some influence on his creative work. Afanasjev knows how to keep up with the times, he has his finger on the pulse of most topical events, he recognises the signs which influence society and, above all, he is able to turn all this, in a more or less critical and provocative way, into creative work. Tüsamäe tigu is his best and most powerful book, a pretentious epic, a poetic history of a peripheral country place. In this sense, Afanasjev has well-known forerunners. One of the most important Estonian poets, Juhan Liiv (1864-1913), came from the same area described in

Tüsamäe tigu. At present, the younger poet Andrus Kasemaa has woven some neighbouring landscapes into an original poetic world. In a wider scope, Valdur Mikita's Lingvistiline mets (Linguistic Forest, 2013) has roots in the same neighbourhood. All of these phenomena together make up the true geo-poetic renaissance of the shores of Estonia's largest lake, Lake Peipsi.

Afanasjev's geo-poetics has numerous branches: it provides a collective image of the daily life, history, people, their heritage and mentality, centring on the borderlines: the borders between cultures (Old Believers vs. modernity) and times; political borders have no less importance. Afanasjev's text also crawls like a snail over the land and its maps, picking up all of the geographical special characteristics of the area and even the smallest landmarks, mostly of human origin, among which are bunkers, “a special hole for blowing up bombs from the last war”, and flour mills or posts that mark the border. Metre by metre, sensitively and emphatically, as if very quietly observing and spying on the landscape, the snail of Tüsamäe maps its environment in time and space and gives an extensive and comprehensive poetic study of the lives of Estonian villagers, as well as the history of landscapes and times. Everything is quite true to life, the place names used

# authors

R u t t H i n r i k u s   a n d   J a n i k a   K r o n b e r g

in the poems exist in reality, the farm called Tüsamäe can be found on the map of Estonia and Afanasjev has never denied that the book is based on the places and people in the neighbourhood of his country home. Besides being a large-scale story about

Estonia, this is also a clearly more private story of the writer himself. Here we can see another aspect which has recently become a characteristic of newer Estonian fiction: the intertwining of the story of the author's life with fiction, mixing up reality and fantasy. Afanasjev bravely sails the waves of literary trends.

Afanasjev's previous collection of poetry, *Kuidas peab elama* (How Life Should be Lived, 2014), was the threshold for this new book, touching upon rural poetics and assuring us that the author does not limit himself to only one mode of writing, but attempts to test various different registers. No matter the mode, he maintains the core of his originality: a mixture of his social nerve and depressive-nostalgic sense of life. The present collection adds the coexistence of archaic elements and modern affairs in the same time and space, connected by the mysterious snail of Tüsamäe as the "model of the times", who carries some existential/ social message. And this image of village life and the study of landscapes made by the snail of Tüsamäe result in a positive message: "Good times are here again [...]" The snail of Tüsamäe as the model of time/ draws whirlingly into itself,/ but good times do not disappear - / they exist all the time." BM



Urmas Vadi

## **Kuidas me kõik reas niimoodi läheme**

(How We All Leave in a Row)

Tallinn: Tuum, 2014. 232 pp

ISBN 9789949960507

The title of this collection of short stories, *How We All Leave in a Row*, refers to death and, considering the context of the contents of the book, this is the only way it can be. One of the eight included stories, a piece that follows the deaths of people based on the list of the members of the Estonian Writers' Union, has lent its title to the book, and no matter which plot line we follow here, the outcome is in one way or another always related to *memento mori*. The subject of death can be found in an almost paranoid fear of death, in a physical meeting with the Grim Reaper, in a character recognising and admitting to a darker state of mind, or in spiritual suffering from morbid thoughts. Besides the constantly haunting and stalking foreboding of death, some stories focus on the subject of fathers and sons (a father is often a problematic, vague or oppressing factor, or he may be missing altogether). In other cases, stories focus on a person's creative blazing and angst, which have been brought to a meta level in the form of the author's comments on his own work and his point of view inserted into the text, which critically evaluates the text unrolling in front of the reader.

This is the third collection of short stories written by the author and radio journalist Urmas Vadi (b. 1977). As an author of prose, Vadi sometimes boldly overturns the screw in his writing. He feels much more at home in the theatre, both as a playwright and a director. His achievements in different fields and genres all bear a connecting unique signature: his enjoyment of playing across genre boundaries, his feeling of the absurd, which cleverly mixes in some realism, the way he adds nuances of light humour to more serious aesthetics, the way he



Urmas Vadi (Photo by Kristjan Teedema / Scanpix)

purposefully undermines the credibility of the world of texts, etc. In both his theatre and fiction texts, Vadi plays with some deeply local specifics, either by messing with the proper names and identities of local cultural figures or by turning national myths into absurdities (the latter was clearly seen in his previous book, the novel *Back to Estonia!*, (2012)). Contextuality is such an important and strong cornerstone of Vadi's work that, in one of his stories, with foresight he talks about the possible difficulties and losses that might happen if his books were translated.

Vadi himself is the protagonist of his short stories, giving them a realistic foundation (the specificity of Vadi's prototypes and locations has been called hyperrealism). He unleashes a dizzying "game within a game" about his own name, where the figure of the author is undermined, on the one hand, by the protagonist and, on the other hand, by the supporting characters, who analyse the one-man-author-and-protagonist Urmas Vadi from the bystander's viewpoint. By using different points of view, in one story the author comments on, explains and criticises his own work and in the same story suggests ways of improving it, which seems to occur when the relations between different stories are examined from different angles.

The author lets the supporting characters express this: "I think that Urmas is in a crisis, he repeats himself, he has squeezed himself dry. But the most annoying thing is that his treatment of people is as thin and transparent as a windowpane. He is no longer a youngster; he should rise above the grotesque and look at what Dostoevsky does."

With such methods, Vadi avoids the possibility of making the morbid undercurrent of his collection of short stories, full of the subject of death, too oppressive. The lifelike angst and the horrors of the afterlife are neutralised by his way of narrating, which first develops the uneasiness, but later slaps on an irrational or grotesque angle, which can, in its strangeness, even have a humorous effect. But even when circling around different hazy situations, he is able to put something into words for the reader to believe in: "I wanted to say in my story that we shouldn't live and die alone in the dark." BM

Mats Traat  
**Kolm Solveigi**

(Three Solveigs)

Tartu: Ilmamaa, 2015 411 pp

ISBN: 9789985775585

Mats Traat is one of the great narrators of Estonian literature, a living classic whose works can stand side by side with those of other great authors and can be compared with, for example, those of A. H. Tammsaare. Traat has published 16 novels, six short novels and a number of collections of short stories and poetry. None of his prose texts, even the weaker ones, can be called a failure. Young Traat started to write because he could not ignore the injustice, stupidity and lies that surrounded him. He found most of his subjects in the country life which had been ruined by the establishment of collective farms. All through his working life he has remained a documenter of country life, even when he discusses the pain and

fascination of human existence in a more general way.

Traat's latest book, *Three Solveigs*, is a thick volume containing seven stories, some of which could be called short novels and the others short stories. This collection is similar to Traat's earlier works, *Carthago Express* (1998), *The Iceland Summer* (2003), *Old Devil's Love* (2007) and some others which contain short stories on historical and cultural-historical subjects and have national and international public figures (such as Jakob Hurt, Edith Södergren etc.) among their characters.

All of the stories describe interesting people from cultural history, some well-known, and others less-known or virtually unknown. The

Mats Traat (Photo by Peeter Langovits / Scanpix)





author researched the lives and personalities of people whom he found to be interesting, reconstructing their personalities from facts, but also adding his own imagination and presenting the feelings and thoughts of these reconstructions from the characters' points of view. Traat does not attempt to drastically change the traditional images of his characters or to expose or re-evaluate them. Rather, he finds new aspects and unexpected points of view and tries to empathise with the people and situations and make them believable to his readers.

The title story of the book, "Three Solveigs", is set in Pikakose in northern Estonia, a place where the famous Estonian actors of the 1920s and 1930s, Erna Villmer and Liina Reiman, spent their summers. The third Solveig of the story is Helmi Viitol, the mistress of the house. This almost novel-length story about unfulfilled dreams, yearnings and the elusiveness of life is related to the title story of Traat's earlier book *The Iceland Summer*.

"Puusepp", one of the short novels included in the book, gives us some glimpses into the life and work of the famous surgeon and researcher Ludvig Puusepp. Traat presents the life of the great surgeon by mixing documented information with fiction, paying more attention to certain periods of his protagonist's life. Traat begins, "Ludvig Puusepp was born in Kiev on 3 December 1875, according to the Orthodox Calendar. This date is the cornerstone of the story". The narrator seems to be browsing through the life of the researcher, searching for decisive moments for more detailed study, such as Puusepp's activities in the Russo-Japanese War. Puusepp's private life is depicted in the most relatable way, especially his relationships with his first wife, who died early, and with his second young wife. The narrator's voice brings the story to its end by evaluating Puusepp's life work, "His life work was an important step on the long road to human self-knowledge. Puusepp lifted brain- and neuroscience to an unprecedented level."

In addition to cultural historical stories, the second half of the book contains two longer and two shorter texts where the novel-size bulk of material is concentrated in a smaller number of pages. The masterful short story "Lionell" is a paradoxical and tragic story of the total injustice which destroys the life of a reckless young man. The last story, "Õllekatel", is probably based on historical court documents, and it impressively completes the book.

The epitaph-like "Histories from Harala", modelled after the work of Edgar Lee Masters, occupy an important place in Traat's work. He continues to add new life stories to his Harala cycles, and the prose genre allows him to explain them in more detail.

Traat is an old-fashioned writer: he does not experiment, but remains true to his subject. He presents cruel and stupid people, and erroneous and weak people who have to face injustice and disregard, as well as the devastating effect of stupidity and greed. "Look at what people can be found in the world!" could be the motto of the diverse gallery of characters Traat sets before us. He is not interested in the noble and tragic beauty of defying fate, but observes the senselessness and price of unavoidable defeat. RH

Mari Saat

## **Matused ja laulupeod**

(Funerals and Song Festivals)

Tartu: Petrone Print, 2015. 168 pp

ISBN 9789949511945

Mari Saat (b.1947) is not a prolific author. During her creative period of four decades, she has published four novels and a few collections of short stories. At the same time, Saat is one of the most fascinating Estonian women prose authors. The world of her works is based on intuitions and her strongly subjective form of expression,



as well as on her wise world-view, which is more or less supported by her education in economics. The routine life described by Saat hides the glow of the immeasurably multi-layered world: this is psychologically intense and existential literature, examining both the elusive spheres of the human psyche and social problems, and exposing the complicated tensions between the rational and irrational, and the rational and the subconscious.

The popularity of memoirs and life stories that exploded in the 2000s is still going strong in Estonia. In her book of memoirs *Funerals and Song Festivals*, Saat maintains the same suggestive intertwining of the analytical and sentimental, the rational and irrational, which forms the basis for her works of fiction. The book belongs to the series *Story of Time*, in which Andrei Hvostov and Kristiina Ehin earlier published the stories of their childhood. *Funerals and Song Festivals* describes living in Tallinn in the 1950s and

1960s, the time of Saat's childhood: an era characterised, in her opinion, by the key phrases "nuclear arms" and "technical progress". But descriptions of memories send out shoots to later periods and inspire the drawing of parallels with the present time. The book gives a subjective picture of Soviet urban society and, with detailed explanations and descriptions of relations and connections, this picture is stretched into a wide and comprehensive record of an era. Saat's narrative is simple and clear: each detail or motif which has a strong additional contextual meaning is made comprehensible even to those readers who know nothing about the Soviet period. Even the title of the book is explained in an interesting and original way, "To preserve itself, a small nation needs to cluster together now and then, like a bee swarm does in its hive in a cold winter; the people need to get this feeling that they are somehow connected, surrounded by others of their kind, to feel the connection .... Estonians used to get this feeling at funerals and song festivals."

*Funerals and Song Festivals* is also a kind of memory study: it does not give a comprehensive and chronological story of a childhood or a family, but the reader can follow the thematic or motif-based order of memory pictures, accompanied by discussions of when events could have happened and how they happened just the way they did. The selectiveness of memory, hidden shadows and provocative questions add some features of literary fiction to the book. In the introductory chapter "Memory", Saat compares memory to a well, which is covered to make it safe for a small child and which makes her look forward, into the future. When one grows old, the memory well opens its depth and shows through the rippling water both the past and the present. "If you try to record the things that have happened based on your memory, you will only see what your memory prompts you to see." There are 26 stories about such "showing" or "prompting". Each memory

picture is centred upon some key image, sense, person, moment etc. For example, there are Tallinn street views, the harvesting of potatoes at a collective farm, restricted border zones and spying, the burning of books because of censorship, toilet culture, the deficiency of goods, fashion, behaviour suitable for young girls, religion, etc.

Saat's view of the past is healthy and easy; she avoids stressing the dramatic or traumatic aspects of the period and she finds some positive features in the complicated context of the time. For example, she says that a marvellous aspect of that period was that there were no cell phones and ordinary telephones were rare: it was not easy to contact people and this provided a certain feeling of freedom. Such memory pictures are often accompanied by a peculiar but not too ironic sense of humour, "It often happened in the Russian time that you bought something but it did not fit its original purpose; in that case, it could be used for some other purpose...." In general, the book is a harmonious intertwining of childhood memories with the world-view that stemmed from these memories, and of thoughts and reflections important for the development of personality. BM

Veronika Kivisilla

### **Cantus firmus**

Näo Kirik, 2015. 109 pp

ISBN 9789949946563

Veronika Kivisilla (b. 1978) is a philologist by education. She has engaged in a wide variety of activities: writing textbooks and compiling children's song books, translating and editing works of fiction, singing and playing musical instruments in ensembles of folk music and early music, performing as a narrator of tales, etc. The Estonian audience used to know her mostly as a singer and story teller. In literature she is still a young author, having only recently

matured as a poet. She started purposefully writing poetry when she was 30 years old, and in 2011 she published her debut collection, *Dear Calendar*, which attracted attention for its tricky appearance (the pull-out accordion-like form of the book!), as well as its unusual content: the text was like a canvas whose harmonious weave was formed by respectfully using age-old patterns as well as adding modern vignettes of the present day. Riding the wave of her creative energy, Kivisilla published her second collection of poems, *Veronica officinalis*, in 2012; its title is the Latin name of the common plant heath speedwell. The titles of these two collections give us a key to Kivisilla's poetry: it is a calendar diary of life spent in humorous intellectual inspection of everyday milieu, as well as a world-view enriched by empathy with even the smallest details of the plant (or insect) realm.

The new collection *Cantus firmus* adds a third basis for the poetry of Kivisilla the singer: the Latin term, originating in early music, denotes the basic melody. In a sense, Kivisilla's method is quite original in Estonian poetry as it is based on her long-polished skills: singing, exceptional sense of language, continuing the mentality and traditions of cultural heritage, and the telling of tales. Threads connecting her with modern Estonian poetry are also firmly interwoven into her work. Kivisilla's poems are often like imagery-wrapped stories, both personal and instructive, not only stylised narratives of routine life moments, but unique "captures of a day", to borrow the words of Jürgen Rooste, who wrote the Afterword of the collection. Her poems have also been called "captures of a moment" and "unique and singular observations" by the poet Kätlin Kaldmaa, who also tends to capture moments and takes a unique and singular look at things; she has a similar special sense of archaicness or primordialness, which forms a connection between her and Kivisilla.



Veronika Kivisilla (Photo by Eero Vabamägi / Delfi)

Kivisilla's unique and singular observations can be seen in the fact that we can find natural objects, natural and random elements, living, seething and breathing in many of her poems, and human beings are not distinguished by their individuality from these elements. "My companions are spiders and fruit flies who do not ask/ why it is not possible to live in the first-person plural". There are also small tiger moths, buzzing mosquitoes, and curious moths in the limitless sky. Kivisilla was born and raised in Tallinn, "in a city you cannot always love". In



her poetry, she repeatedly talks about finding an oasis of quiet and silence away from the uproar, about leaving the centre of attention and sometimes about the incomparable pride of the first-person narrator – herself – coming in from the countryside carrying packages of things she has grown or picked there. Her soul yearns for and pulls her to the forest or to the sea, somewhere in the (mental) marginal land, into slowness and total silence, “To listen to the breathing of stones// in the world/ there is no/ more even/ sound than that.” Kivisilla’s poetry is an integral composition of melodic spirituality and yearning, earthly admiration and everyday bustle; it is about the simple routine presented with seemingly endless curiosity and a healthy child’s mind. A childlike excitement and joy, eagerness and surprise – finding poetry even in a chimney sweep!

This easy joy is accompanied by friendly tenderness and motherly care, but there are also worries and grief. The shimmering outlines of life are shown in the book from such a delicate point of view that the worry about her hospitalised mother and happiness about the funny observations of her small son exist in an admirable balance. “Waiting for the light, hopeful, sanguine humming and buzz in the heavy air ...”, Kivisilla’s poetic journey inspires thoughts and we feel as if it leads us into a better world, a safe and steady world which is extraordinarily thrilling and full of nuances, marvellously fusing together the light of old worlds and the hope of new ones. BM



Jüri Kolk (Photo by Kristjan Teedema / Scanpix)

## Jüri Kolk **Suur võidubooks**

(The Great Race)

Tuum, 2015. 191 pp

ISBN 9789949960545

The author and columnist Jüri Kolk (born in 1972) is known mainly as a poet, but has in the past couple of years also delved into the realm of short prose, which fits with the often prosaic nature of his poetry. Thus far he has published five books of poems and two collections of short stories. His debut work (published in 2009) was nominated for the Betti Alver prize and he won the 37th Juhan Liiv poetry award in 2015. Kolk’s writing style is vaguely humorous, an effect created by an idiosyncratically restrained, sympathetic and slightly (but not excessively) cynical or satirical narration, which is interspersed with witty wordplay.

Kolk’s main themes and features include social commentary, psychological obsessions of various kinds, mythological or religious references, postmodernist-like rewritings of famous texts (tragedies, fairy tales and fables), meta-fictional stories about the process of writing etc. As a writer, Jüri Kolk fits quite well into the contemporary Estonian literary scene, which has lately undergone a vigorous resurgence of socially conscious poetry (e.g. by fs, Kätlin Kaldmaa



and Elo Viiding) and an upswing in short prose (e.g. by Urmas Vadi and Jan Kaus). There are some stylistic similarities between Kolk and these noted authors, yet Kolk's main choice of topics and general worldview seem rather different, resulting in a productive overall diversifying of the literary environment. The short form in general has become quite popular lately: books receive plenty of substantial criticism, are noted positively in annual literary reviews and are often strong contenders for various awards. Suur võidujooks is Jüri Kolk's second collection of short prose and it is the most cohesively revealing example of his overall style and direction.

The humorous nature of Kolk's writing is often boosted by a particular enthusiasm for rewriting culturally relevant local and international texts, which creates a jocularly transgressive undertone. In addition, he sometimes rewrites his own ideas and/or stories, disturbing the sense of a "static" finality, and opening his fiction up to a world of variation. However, behind this amusing façade generally lies a surprisingly tragic undercurrent. The comic element hides a specific tone of sadness and anxiety about the world we reside in, and a large number of his texts also include elements of the grotesque and the absurd, absurd in the sense of the absurdist writings of the early 20th century (Beckett, Ionesco, Kafka, Heller, Camus, Gogol et al.) with a connection to existentialism. All of this forms a commentary for the postmodernist cognition of the 21st century, a new era of existentialist absurdity: his stories, while humorous, are not irrational, nonsensical or simplistic comedies.

The cultural rewritings often engage with classical literature, especially Greek mythology and classical tragedy, displaying a larger sense of the author's overall erudition. Kolk mainly uses the technique of "modernizing" when it comes to popular stories – whether fairy tales or fables – leading to a curious sense of estrangement, cognitive dissonance and a basis for the

"tragic". This twist pulls a fable out of its context, its proper time and place, bringing it into the commonness of the everyday. "Fate", an important element in Greek tragedies, is replaced by the 21st century late-capitalist social structure, which works in a similar manner: as an enormous, unknowable and powerful system surrounding a humanly imperfect hero, who is trying to find his way, yet often fails. Some of Kolk's work is also reminiscent of Venedikt Yerofeyev and his famous poem in prose "Moscow-Petushki" (also titled "Moscow to the End of the Line" or "Moscow Stations"), a brilliant example of how to interweave the amusing and tragic in a text.

These are but a few pieces of the larger totality which summarizes Jüri Kolk as an author. Yet they are signs of a perspicacious and well-thought-out approach to creating fiction, giving hope for more great things to come. Kolk might surprise readers in the future. MR

Mudlum

## **Tõsine inimene**

(A Serious Person)

Tallinn, ZA/UM 2014. 199 pp

ISBN 9789949339792

Mudlum is the latest newcomer to Estonian literature and has earned only words of praise. Mudlum is the pen name of Made Luiga. The name Mudlum first appeared publicly a few years ago when Luiga published the short story "My Aunt Ellen" in the literary magazine Vikerkaar. The fact that "Aunt Ellen" was the last love of Juhan Smuul, the long-time leading author and chairman of the Writers' Union of the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic may have added some interest to this story. But Mudlum does not write about this as the subject does not interest her. She writes about the things that she herself remembers.



Mudlum (Photo from internet)

The book contains 24 stories, all of them about remembering. Besides childhood memory pictures ("Children's Hospital" and some others), she remembers things that become important to a young person and an adult. No matter how unimportant and accidental they may seem, the marks these things and people have left in the person who remembers them are important. At the beginning of "My Aunt Ellen", the author reflects, "Only the one person I am talking about is important, even if it is only a half-truth, even if it is only a miserable pointless tangle of memories." The portrait of the aunt is written with understanding, without hiding sharp angles or the attacks and strangeness of a mental illness. "Ellen – this is a whole world of its own. It is so interesting and I am awfully sorry that I do not remember more and in a better way ... her stories, sayings and jokes. I only remember myself among the things whose centre she was." "I see my room, on the upper floor, behind an oak tree. It was always dusky and chilly there. I look out of the window. I do not see it in my mind's eye. I am truly there. What else is reality if not a memory which has stored each light, shade, smell, sound."

These memory pictures are in more or less chronological order and they could as well bear the title "My Childhood and Growing Years". By describing her childhood in the Soviet period, she also describes the period itself. Or perhaps does not describe so much as present separate pictures *sine ira et studio*, without bias. These pictures of a world that has disappeared are quite eloquent. For example, "The New Year's holiday was the best time of the year. My mother worked at the Party Committee; she was an adviser to schools and the party members received quality food from the meat-processing plant for the New Year/---/ I don't believe that I ate smoked sausages at any other time."

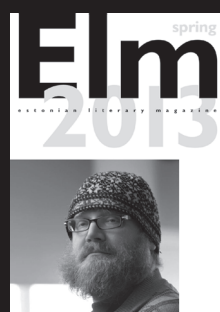
Mudlum's personal micro history contains things as signs, testimonies or shreds of the testimonies of time. These memory pictures are made into literature by the author's sense of language, writing skills and her re-creation of the described objects, people and situations in a manner that is sensual, unmercifully precise and clear, but airy and almost lyrical. Her skill makes us look forward to her next book. RH

# Estonian

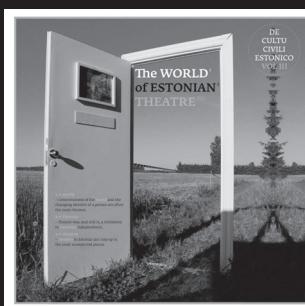
## culture and literature

The Estonian Institute has been introducing Estonian culture to the world since 1989. Besides the traditional fields of art and cultural exchange, we cover society and nature, and the environment more generally. The Institute has representation offices in Helsinki and Budapest.

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The Estonian Literary Magazine is the only English-language publication introducing Estonian literature. The first ELM appeared in 1995 and has since been published twice a year. Earlier issues of ELM are available at <http://elm.estinst.ee/> and <http://www.estinst.ee/est/estonian-literary-magazine>



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