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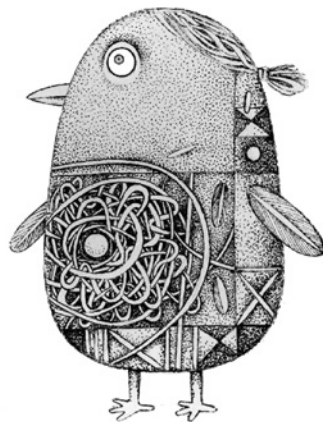
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Don't fear more serious and mature children's books

An interview with Piret Raud

by Eva and Indrek Koff

Last year alone, seven books by the children's writer and artist Piret Raud were published in languages other than Estonian. Since 2009, her works have appeared as 24 works of translation in 12 different languages, which makes her the most-translated Estonian writer of recent years. We spoke with Raud about her journey through the world of art and writing to find out her opinions on illustrations and literature created for children, as well as how she sees her role in that world.

"I don't write for children," Maurice Sendak said. "I write and I'm told: 'That's for children.'" A few generations earlier, J. R. Tolkien asserted there was no such thing as "writing for children", and even C. S. Lewis did not agree with regarding children as some kind of unusual breed of human. Despite statements like this and the richness and depth of important works of children's literature, one still encounters the attitude that children's literature is the poor cousin of "adult" literature: a type of art that hasn't reached its developmental peak, and is therefore unworthy of the full attention of those who admire serious literature.

In your opinion, is childhood a temporal concept that designates a certain

period in a person's life that comes to an end at some point, or is it a condition in which you can exist, to which you can return over the course of your life, or which on some level actually lasts your entire life? Jacques Brel, for example, said that for him childhood was above all a geographical concept: a place.

Childhood is one part of a person's life. What comes to an end someday is life itself. A person changes over his/her entire lifetime, while at the same time always staying him- or herself, both as a child and as an adult. Childhood is a time when a person is just starting to get to know life: children possess fewer experiences, and that's what



sets them apart from adults; in other ways, a child is a person just like all of us.

What is children's literature, and who is a children's writer? Is that kind of genre- and author designation important to you?

I have no problem with children's literature as a concept. I believe that a children's writer should always consider his or her audience so that the writing is understandable to the child. But speaking more generally, a distinction should be drawn between a children's book and children's literature. Not all children's books are literature. A lot of educationally oriented texts are products connected with a toy series or a film written for children. When I write for children, I give thought to the pure technical details: the idea has to be clear, and I don't use very complex sentence structures, either. I take a child's reading ability into account, as well as the fact that they read more slowly than adults, and so the plot moves relatively quickly in my books. If I were to write for adults, I might pause and debate some idea or topic at greater length or describe a situation. I consciously avoid that in a children's book. My books definitely contain things that might easily go over a child's head: situations and scenes that he or she will have a completely different understanding of as an adult. I personally hope that my books have multiple layers that they can be read on several levels. It's important to me for a book to also touch children emotionally.

What kinds of ideas and feelings did you have when you started writing for children? Was it a conscious decision: I want to write for children and not for

adults? Has it limited you or, on the contrary, has it had a liberating and enriching effect?

I wasn't a writer at first; I didn't choose the writer's path at the beginning of my creative journey. I personally still regard myself as more of an artist. I started writing a while after I began to illustrate. At one point, I felt I wanted to write the texts for my pictures myself or, rather, I wanted to personally come up with the story and draw the pictures for it. At first, I collaborated a lot with my mother, Aino Pervik, who is a writer, and that went really well; then I felt that I wanted to try writing on my own. I was in awe of writing for a long time. To me, it seemed that everyone who wrote wrote very well, and that you had to have a great deal of talent and definitely also an education in linguistics in order to write. Even now, I sometimes wonder what kind of a linguist or writer I am. My parents, Aino Pervik and Eno Raud, both wrote for children, and both were linguists, too. My mother's books are characterised by very rich and nuance-heavy language. I think that the language I personally use in my books I acquired from home. I often give my texts to my mother to read: she is definitely a very unassuming critic, but even so, she gives me useful hints here and there. Some critics have indeed compared my books and style to Aino Pervik's works and language. I didn't like that at first, but then I started to think that maybe it was true that there was a certain similarity in our texts. The language in which I write is, in fact, my "mother tongue"; we all acquire our language from our mothers, and therefore it's natural for there to be similarities in speech and thought between our mothers and ourselves.



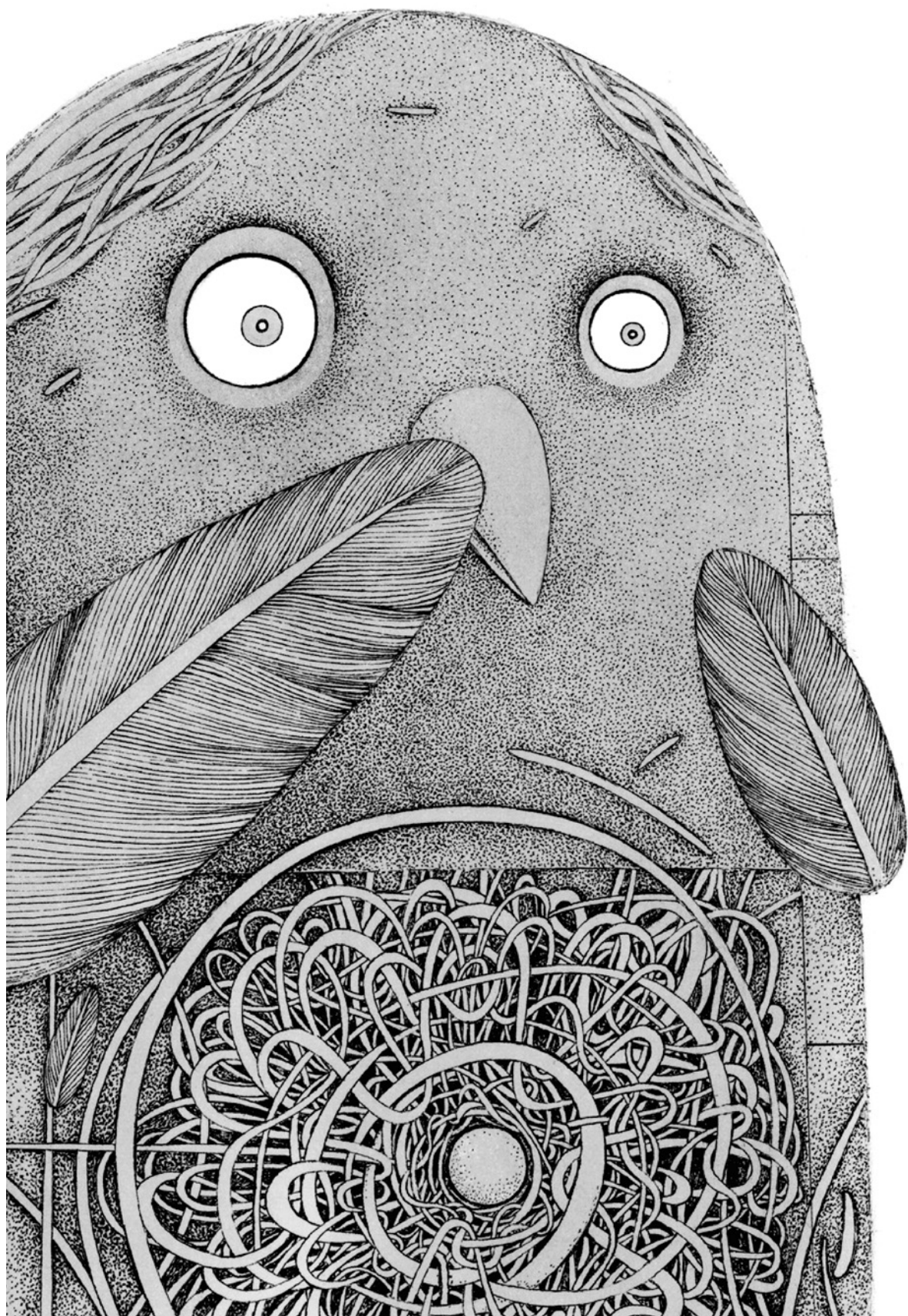
PIRET RAUD · PHOTO BY INGRID MAASIK

As for freedom as a writer and an artist, I feel that for me there's more freedom in pictures – in imagery – than there is in words. An image can express something that I can't touch in words. When I address a grim topic, for example, I can use grim colours in a picture. I can even paint everything black. What I like about writing for children is that you can talk to them about complex things in a simple way, and that doesn't have to mean simplification. I remember when I was doing my master's degree at the Estonian Academy of Arts, I thought about how in arts academia, people endeavour to talk about simple things in a complicated manner, and sometimes I also came up with how to say one thing or another more complexly, more academically, in a more "distinguished" way. The charm of children's literature lies in the very fact that you can do the opposite. At the same time, the world of children's literature isn't predetermined as "bright": in my opinion, you can write about anything for a

child. Even so, there are topics that are taboo for me and I stay away from. In my works, I enjoy handling topics in relatively pleasant tones. For me, sadness can lean towards the positive side, too. Of course, I am influenced by all kinds of social upheavals – everything negative that goes on in society or in the world – but I don't want to bring that with me into my work. At the same time, there are sad, melancholic and sharper moments in all of my children's books.

You mentioned taboo topics in children's literature. What are those for you?

Sexual self-gratification, torture and rape. Every one of my books has someone who is safe for a child: a supportive person. For instance, I don't like to portray a mother as a complete deadbeat in any book. But death and illnesses aren't taboo for me: they're a natural part of life. There are children's



books on the topics that are taboo for me; there are writers who write about those topics, and so I don't necessarily have to. I haven't kept a single book away from my own children, although it's been the case that I give my child a book and later, when I read it myself, I'm shocked at how cruel and bleak the world is that I sent my own child into.

You've illustrated the majority of the books you've written. How has being an artist and having started out as an artist affected you as a writer? You said something before to the effect that you're an artist, but writing seems like nicer work. Why?

I like to imagine things, to create new worlds, and that happens in the field of writing. Drawing is more like a craft. My family tells me that I'm a more pleasant person in writing than in drawing. As for writing, I most enjoy making a story's first draft: there's a feeling that sometimes your idea moves so fast that your hand can't keep up. I don't like fine-tuning a story as much. It's the opposite for my mother: polishing and fine-tuning are her greatest joys. Doubts arise when I'm formulating the text's linguistic side, probably because I lack an education in linguistics, and that creates doubts, which isn't the most pleasant part of my work. Although I envision characters first in images and only later in words, my moments of visual and linguistic creativity often coincide. For instance, when I get an idea for a scene and write down the initial version, I also illustrate next to the text right away: I "doodle" alongside my work. I sketch the character, but only start drawing the final pictures once the text is complete. I have different processes for writing a picture

book and a story book. With a picture book, the number of pages is important: I draw my 32 or 40 pages as rows of little pictures on paper. There's more spontaneity in writing a story book. For instance, some new character whose appearance I hadn't intended at all can charge in and affect the course of the story in the middle of the writing. Those are wonderful moments. At first, I have a general idea and know where the story should end up, but how exactly it ends up there becomes clear only over the course of writing. A character might grow and develop into something other than I had initially intended: for example, I might plan for a character to improve during the story – to develop in a positive direction – but while I'm writing it turns out it just can't be that way; a change like that can't come from a real-life, story, or literary standpoint, and in that case, I go ahead and leave the character the way it was in the beginning. Because what's a good, true character like? It's a living character, its nature has to be lively, spatial; it can't be a flat, two-dimensional cardboard creature. I believe this condition also has to be met in the case of characters meant for adults. There seem to be a few more two-dimensional figures in children's books, but you can't forget that the world of children's books – just like the world of books for adults – has its own crime stories and "girly" works.

Talk a little about your work process. Do you devise a mental plan a long time before starting to write your books, think about the story and the characters, hatch the chick from the egg, and only then start writing, or do you instead seize upon a little inspirational fragment and start to expand it by writing and drawing?

Both ways. Some books come abruptly, driven by a strong momentary emotion. For example, *Emili ja oi kui palju asju* (*Emily and Oh-So-Many Things*) was written when I was on the brink of a change in life and was moving and threw away a huge amount of junk that had collected over the years. The picture book *Kõik võiks olla roosa!* (*Everything Could Be Pink!*) was done in a single evening, when my youngest son was a few months old and I was awfully exhausted, like mothers of infants often are. I received an e-mail that evening from a friend, who comforted me and gave me strength and attached a lullaby for my tiny son. It moved me so much that I wanted to return the favour for my friend (who, at the time, was the father of a four-year-old girl). I can remember clearly how the entire story, together with illustrations, appeared in my mind in a couple of minutes while brushing my teeth that night. I planned to make it into a hand-drawn book with a sewn spine for the friend's daughter, but I never got around to it. The book was made instead into an app for a small British publisher, which was noticed in turn by some Japanese at a conference on e-books, and they wanted me to make it into a paper book. As of today, the little story has been published in Japan, Italy and Estonia.

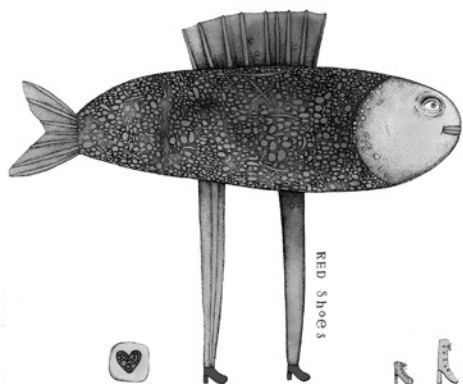
Emotional moments and clear memories that I encounter in life often find places in my books. Sometimes, when I see or experience something, I realize right away that

it should definitely be recorded in a book. One time, on a dark and rainy autumn evening, I walked past a cellar café where I saw a cake-making course going on. Young women, as beautiful as if they had stepped out of Renoir paintings, were gathered around a long table and decorating cakes. I stared at them in appreciation for a while, until one of them noticed me and smiled, at which point I shyly turned and walked away. That moment when I was standing in front of the window is written about in my latest book, *Lugu Sandrist, Murist, tillukesest emmest ja nähtamatust Akslist* (*The Story of Sander, Muri, the Tiny Mommy, and the Invisible Akse!*), only that instead of me, a stray dog stands and watches the cake-making.

Do you derive inspiration and ideas more from your own childhood, or by observing children today, including your own? Could you highlight some topics that reoccur in your works, that are continually on your mind, and that seem the most important to you?

I get inspiration from my own childhood and my own children, but mostly from life itself. I don't think a children's writer necessarily has to have his or her own children, because every writer has been a child and might simply be very comfortable with that world.

I'm not a very theoretical person and haven't thought about my books in that way. But to me, it seems like my latest books often depict the friendships between mothers and sons, especially between single mothers and sons. The "ideal" family is widely depicted in Estonian literature, but in real life there are actually very many children living with





PIRET RAUD WITH SON JULIUS · PHOTO BY INGRID MAASIK

single parents. Children's books frequently treat the topic as a problem, a sad topic, a situation that causes a child hardship, but we see in real life that a child can often be very happy in a single-parent family. Also, there tend to be a lot of characters in a large family, while in the case of just a mother and her child, you can delve more deeply into the two characters. Critics have said that in my books the reader often encounters the topics of finding and being oneself, as well as making the world a better place.

How important to you are style, words and the power of the word when you write? Do you search a long time for the “right words”, for expressions that are as precise as possible? Do you use dictionaries, or are you a more spontaneous writer?

I write relatively spontaneously and work on language more in the course of fine-tuning. I believe that a final text should be natural and not excessively polished; otherwise, it acquires a kind of cramped feeling, a rigour, an artificiality that doesn't come off as being natural or alive. For instance, you shouldn't be too afraid of repetition when writing and keep searching for synonyms. As for the choice of vocabulary, with some words I sometimes stop and think that a child probably won't know its meaning and that maybe I should replace it with a simpler word, but then again I might decide that it can stay just like that: let children learn a new word or two when they read! Of course, you shouldn't go overboard with complex words in a children's book. As for editing, I don't especially enjoy someone coming and “tampering” with my texts.

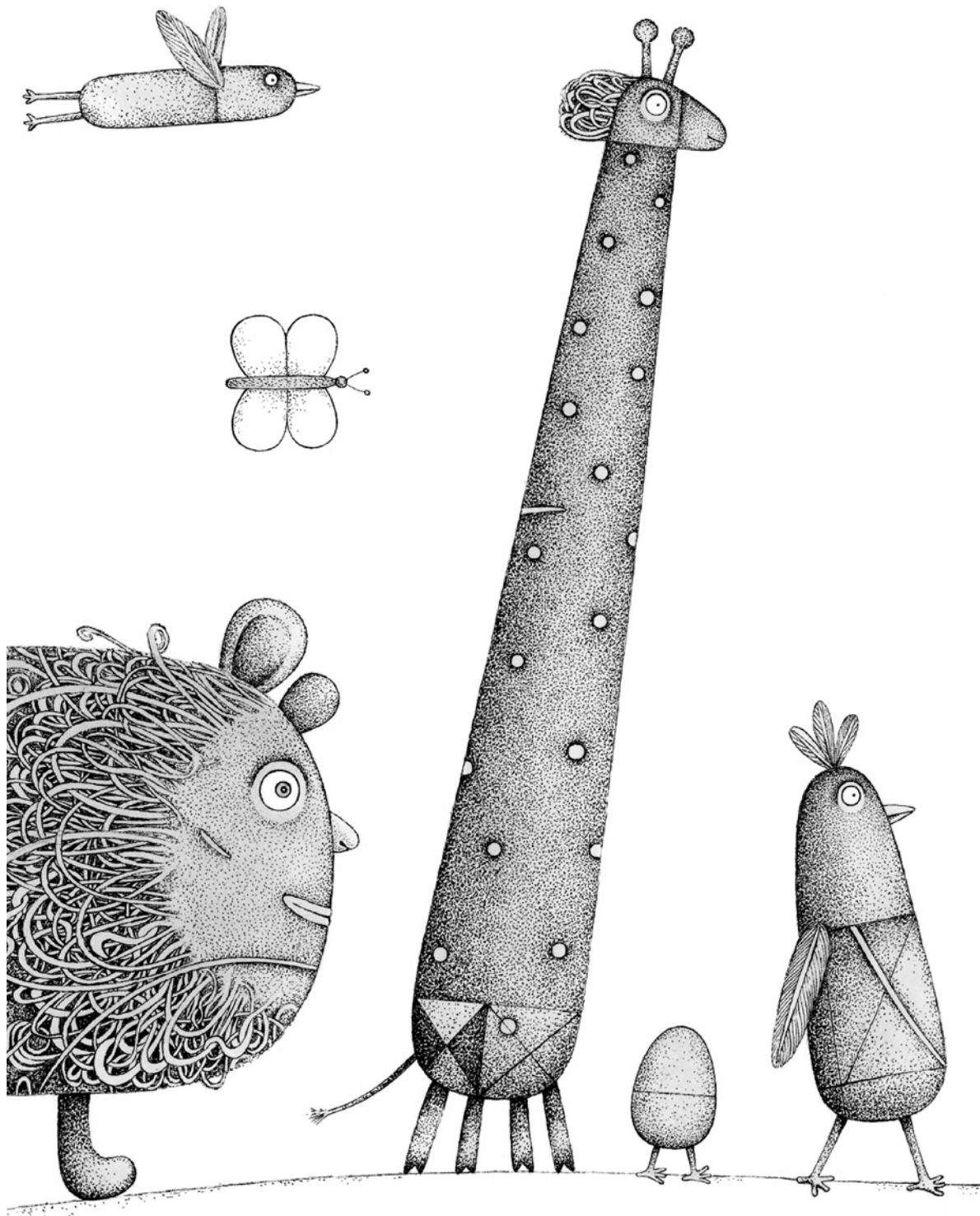
I have a wonderful editor – Jane Lepasaar – who highly respects the author’s style and often says something like “if you’d like, you could write this part here a little differently”, but you have the opportunity to decide if you want to do so or not: the writer is always the one who creates the language. But if the text conflicts with the rules of Estonian, then she doesn’t overlook that. I find that some mistakes can be so characteristic of a writer that they’re a part of their style. Dialogue and colloquial language are important to me but, at the same time, I find that I can’t quite write in “kitchen language”.

What has interaction with your translators and foreign readers given you as a writer? Has it changed you or caused you to move in any directions that you wouldn’t have without those contacts? What interesting or unexpected feedback have you received abroad? In what other languages would you like to see your books published?

I’ve gained a great deal through interaction with foreign publishers and readers. I receive much more feedback from abroad than I do from Estonia: more children’s literature reviews are written abroad than they are here. You can often even receive supportive feedback from a foreign scanner who scans your pictures into a computer, for example, and that’s brilliant. As a writer, I dearly need those kinds of hugs and pats on the back. When an Estonian editor half-grunts “I really liked it” to me, then that’s really something. You’re often pretty alone when you write and illustrate. I discuss draft versions with my mother in the case of longer texts, but with picture books, there aren’t that many people to consult.

In France, though, I’ve felt like I’m not the only one interested in my work: the editor and publisher are really keen to see it and they’re very intrigued by what I do. And the French are very good at giving compliments, although I suppose publishers vary in France, too. The publisher I collaborate with, Rouergue, is able to encourage me to try new things, to develop: they help me to progress artistically.

There’s also more reader feedback abroad. For instance, people send me messages on Facebook saying they really enjoyed this book or that one. I feel that the abundance or scarcity of feedback also depends on the publisher. I’ve been very lucky with my French publisher, and people notice and look forward to the books they publish in France: the books of mine they publish don’t fall into a “vacuum”, but rather receive readers’ attention quickly. French booksellers read a lot and are able to recommend works to readers. Actually, it’s not necessarily important that this involves a French publisher in particular, but rather that I’ve had the fortune to work with people with whom I’m on the same wavelength, and who – right from our first meeting – were able to spot in my pictures what I personally regard as important. As an illustrator, I have a portfolio that I’ve shown to several publishers. It has pictures that I know are professional and please the experts, as well as pictures that I personally think are very good, but which might not speak to just anyone at first glance. Rouergue’s artistic director was the first publisher whose finger, when he was flipping through my portfolio, fell unmistakably upon those latter pictures, and he said “That one!” and “That one!” That decided everything for me: I sensed immediately how very much I wanted to collaborate on something with them.



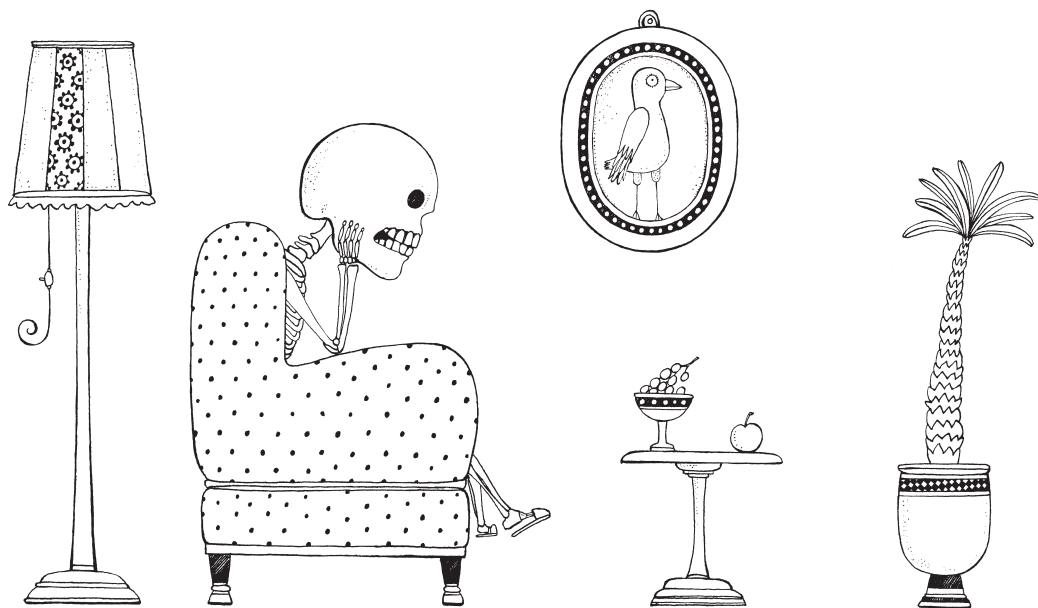


ILLUSTRATION BY PIRET RAUD

I have an education in graphic design, and I've always really liked the world of black-and-white pictures, where texture and lines play a more important role than colour. Rouergue encouraged me to make black-and-white picture books. In Estonia, the publisher and the purchaser prefer colour pictures in children's books, even when it's a story book (the fact that the story books I've published here [in Estonia] have black-and-white illustrations has been my own wish: the publisher has always been rather against it, saying that some people in Estonia won't buy books with black-and-white pictures on principle). So, I can say with certainty that the book about a fish named Emili, and especially the story about Eli, to be published this spring, wouldn't have come about without the French. At the same time, after doing two mainly black-and-white books – which I greatly enjoyed making – I felt like using colours in my next book. I spoke to the publisher about my new plans and proposed several options without emphasising my own preferences, and once again, the publisher suggested the same direction that had

been my own deepest desire. So, I've simply been lucky that my own wishes and the publisher's vision have corresponded, with the publisher encouraging me to take the direction I personally want to go in.

I've also received good feedback from Japan and Italy. I'd really like my books to be published in Portuguese and Finnish, too. Unfortunately, that hasn't happened yet, and it seems like in Finland they prefer native literature to translations.

As for what I write, I see judgement differences in terms of the texts. What people in Estonia notice most is my sense of humour and the inventiveness of the plot and my tempo. These things haven't gone unnoticed in France, of course, but my texts have additionally been called poetic and philosophical there, for which I'm very grateful. I've consciously wedged more lyrical points in between the jokes and cheer in each of my books, and those are the places dearest to me as an author. I believe that a children's book doesn't have to be charged with

positivity and liveliness from cover to cover: other types of moods are necessary, too.

What do you think of the concept “children’s literature for adults”?

You can understand the concept in several ways. “Children’s literature for adults” can be seen as a writer doing his or her own thing under the guise of children’s literature, and writing over the audience’s heads. Another possibility is that it is literature that’s meant to speak to children, but a very great part of which doesn’t. The same phenomenon exists in the case of picture books. You could ask whether a picture book should really only speak to a child at the point in time when he or she is a child, or if book illustrations also play a preparatory role. Can you draw pictures with the idea that the child will become a reader of higher literature, a museum-goer, etc.? At an early age, a child’s bookshelf could include books used to guide him or her towards art meant for adults, because you do take the child to art museums and art galleries. They shouldn’t be short-changed on art, just as we don’t turn off a symphony playing on the radio when a child is around and insert a CD of children’s songs instead. So, why should we act that way with literature? For example, there was a wonderful instance in France where a teacher told me she read my book *Härä Linnu lugu* (*Mr. Bird’s Story*) with her students and then took the class to the Dalí museum. For her, those two worlds were connected in some way. In my opinion, one shouldn’t be afraid of more serious and mature children’s book. You don’t have to keep a child solely in a childish “circus world”. The fact that a child also takes part in adult art, music and literature – and in the adult world – is natural and developmental.

Finally, please describe your ideal creative day. Where are you, what’s around you, what are the weather and lighting and sounds, what kind of work are you doing, and in what quantity and rhythm?

I imagine my ideal creative day as the children for whom I write being somewhere else: in day-care or school. I’m home alone. There’s good lighting outside – the sun isn’t shining directly indoors, but it spills into the room and fills the entire space with light. Peace and quiet. I’m working on something captivating. I make a cup of coffee, and I feel good. I work most every day. I can sometimes get edgy if there’s a break between books. I like doing work more than other activities, so self-discipline doesn’t take all that much effort. And even in the evening when I’m feeling tired, taking a shower or before going to bed, I sometimes come up with really good ideas.

Read more about Piret Raud on the Estonian Children’s Literature Centre web page: <http://www.elk.ee/?profile=6867>

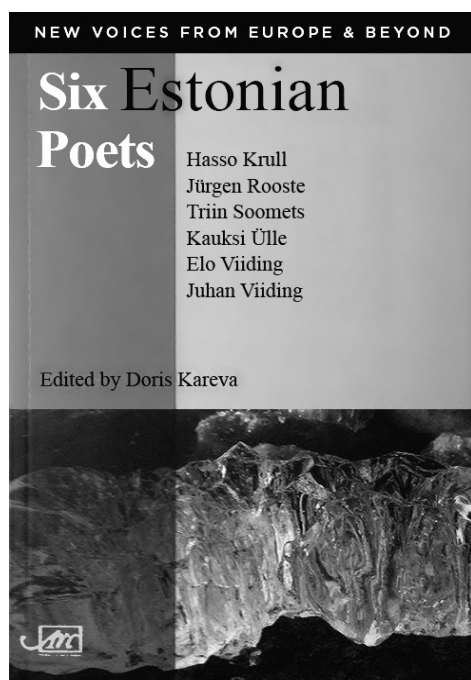
EVA KOFF (1973) is a writer and instructor. Koff’s play *Meie isa* (*Our Father*) won the 2001 Estonian Theatre Agency’s Play Competition. She is also a screenwriter for the Estonian Television children’s programme Lastetuba.

INDREK KOFF (1975) is a writer and translator. He has translated French literature and philosophy into Estonian, including works by Michel Houellebecq and Michel Foucault. Koff’s genre-bridging work *Eestluse elujõust* (*The Vitality of Estonian-ness*) won the Cultural Endowment of Estonia’s Award for Poetry in 2010. Koff is also the author of several children’s books.

Six Estonian Poets: Juhan Viiding and others since him

by Jan Kaus

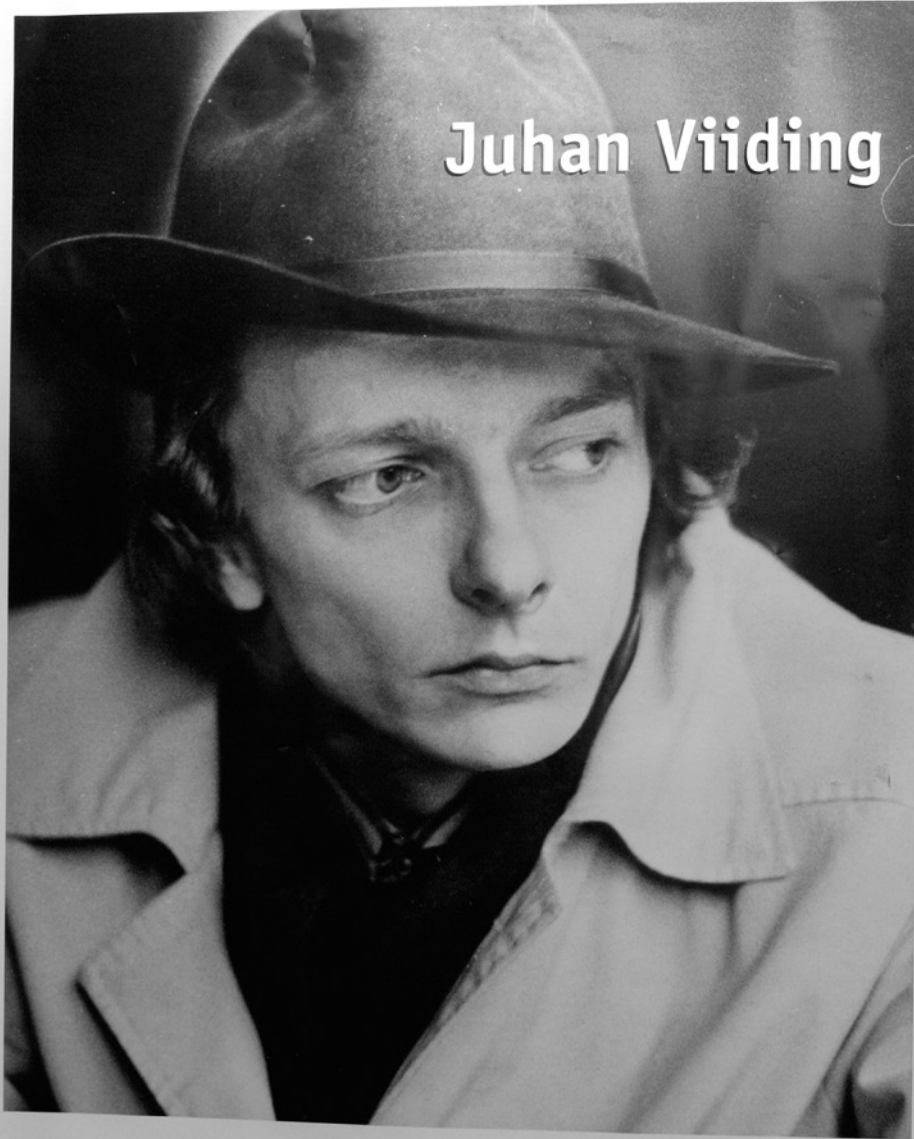
When the writer and literary critic Igor Kotjuh posted on his Facebook account the top ten events in Estonian literature in 2015, one of them was: “the year of translation anthologies”. According to Kotjuh, at least six different anthologies or special publications of Estonian literature were published in other languages.



Two of these were released in English: the online magazine *Words Without Borders* published a special edition on Estonian literature featuring the works of nine different authors, and the British publisher Arc Publications released the sampling of Estonian poetry *Six Estonian Poets*. The latter is no ordinary work, thanks to the fact that it was compiled and edited by **Doris Kareva** (1958), one of the most popular poets in her homeland.

As the compilation's title declares, its selection includes the works of six Estonian poets. Five of them are still active, and each has played a very significant role in contemporary Estonian poetry. Although the selection is not extensive, the main trends of newer Estonian poetry nevertheless stand out. Three of the authors were born in the 1960s, and so the start of their

Juhan Viiding





ELO VIIDING · PHOTO BY ANNIKA HAAS · EESTI EKSPRESS/SCANPIX

respective creative paths coincided with the restoration of Estonia's independence. Even so, temporal coincidence does not necessarily mean a parallel in terms of content. Poetry may certainly flow along with an era during turbulent times, but it may still contain that level of language in which one can speak on timeless topics. Thus we don't, for instance, encounter any overt social tones in the works of **Triin Soomets** (1969). Some may certainly regard her as a feminist author, as she speaks from the female position in many of her poems. Still, if we were to tie Soomets' works to some greater conceptual trend, existentialism might be most suitable. She is intrigued by the eternal tensions in human relationships, as well as their reflections in our own consciousness, a recording of them that is both as emotional and as precise as possible.

Although **Hasso Krull** (1964) has written quite a few pieces of social criticism over the years, his creative reach is too broad to be captured fully in one or two sentences. Krull's poetry is characterised by his generous use of

references, the placement of singular texts in a broader context, and the connection of ideas to other texts, all resulting in personal experience being joined with some greater whole and a quest for wider unity. While French poststructuralism and postmodernism had a more extensive influence at the beginning of Krull's artistic career, his interests have since focused on heritage, mythology, folklore and nature. Spiritually akin to Krull's poems are the works of **Kauksi Ülle** (1962), which likewise derive from folklore and Estonian nature but are more specific in terms of location, focusing on Võru County in south-west Estonia. Kauksi Ülle writes in the Võro language, not in Estonian; her inspiration springs from local beliefs and Estonian runo songs (*regilaul*), through which she is best able to describe the perseverance of old traditions and of the trials faced in the crosswinds of history.

Looking at the collection's two authors born in the 1970s, their styles are characterised by a different kind of mind-set: one that is

much more active, an attitude that echoes social events and moods with greater immediacy. The collection's youngest author, **Jürgen Rooste** (1979), is probably the frankest poet of his generation. Rooste is a romantic rover of city streets, who – in addition to his self-sardonic confessions and love for women, beatnik literature and music – perpetually criticises his country's politics and the Estonian mentality. **Elo Viiding's** (1974) criticism goes even deeper, uncompromisingly detailing the inner logic and contradictions of social norms and ideals. Once again, it would be too restricting to label Viiding's work as feminist, since she is interested not only in women's position in society, but also in how all kinds of positions are formed and adopted in the first place.

However, standing in an echelon of his own is the collection's sixth author – Elo Viiding's father, **Juhan Viiding** (1948–1995). One could say that he doesn't stand apart from the other poets, but rather above them. The late renowned poet, actor and singer has become an Estonian legend. This could partly be due to the fact that Viiding was a colourful character, and was known for his witty social spirit. Since Viiding was an actor, he was unsurpassed in performing his own texts, especially since many of his poems were seemingly written to be read and even sung aloud. Viiding's personality and fate added a dramatic, "larger-than-life" shade to his works. Most Estonians are familiar with his lines: "What is this poet's poetry? // It is: when you think about life / and something else besides." It is this "something else" that formed the core of Viiding's poetry: an obscure longing that is reluctant to yield to formulation in words, that entices and challenges life. Viiding accepted the challenge and became one of the most outstanding experimenters of Estonian poetry. His most famous

experiment was Jüri Üdi. It is hard to say that Üdi was merely Viiding's pseudonym: Üdi's works were far too independent. Üdi was like a separate personality: a sarcastic and artistic figure, for whom language was no longer a tool of expression, but rather a manner of expression. Üdi loved to switch linguistic registers and meaningful tones within a single poem, as a result of which many of his texts come off as both humorous and melancholy. There was always seriousness in play, always play in seriousness. The extent to which the severity of Viiding/Üdi's poems conflict with the inner mobility of their message is remarkable. The sense of freedom in Viiding's poetry no doubt cast a shadow over his unexpected death, but he personally would hardly have treated his posthumous stardom with saintly seriousness.

Juhan Viiding was a true linguistic master who brought the balance between a poem's polished form and the density of its message to perfection. He found in the Estonian language the exact rhymes and phonetic compositions which, when crafted into poetry, cause the reader to feel that the words were invented precisely for that text. Estonian language and Estonian poetry have not been the same since Viiding's death, and his works had a more-or-less direct effect on nearly everyone who grew up to the music of his words.

JAN KAUS (1971) is a writer and musician. He has published five novels, and has also authored poetry, essays, novellas and miniatures. In 2015, Kaus' novel *Mina olen elus* (*I Am Alive*) and miniature collection *Tallinna kaart* (*A Map of Tallinn*) won the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Prose.

Poetry by Juhan Viiding

Translated by Miriam McIlpatrick-Ksenofontov

SIMPLE POEM

happiness once came into the yard
and the yard was ever so happy
then happiness came into the room
and the room was ever so happy

lastly happiness came into the larder
and the shed and the barn as well
clothes found some space in a suitcase
and then it was time to go

QUESTION OF LIFE

If people are only anti,
it's no-go for the pro side.
And yet we have clouds
and light from both sides.

Mean thoughts inside me
no bloom, no stem.
Blood might well curdle
just for them.

So much is given to us –
and still we are perplexed.

To see what is alive.
Is that too much to expect?

We make, make up for our life
a huge people-packed wall.
Not even the tall can reach over.

When a stone has fallen outwards,
making way for a gap as it goes,
whoever chanced to see out
has spoken of *la vie en rose*.
Meanwhile he too is seen through

and there is no place for feeling distraught.
A secret is now the only life he knows,
being himself through and through is his lot.

MORNING

In the black night I see a white songbird,
sometimes it enters my heart unheard.
It pecks the heavy stone from my heart,
that's when I feel the No-Name Bird.

In the black night I see a white song-ship,
the bird holds the ship from on high.
Sometimes the ship glides into my eye-sea.
That's when it opens the No-Name Sky.

In the black night I see white candlelight,
and bird and ship have flown from my mind.
And in the light a white breath appears,
black night and candle are blown aside.

wishing is the kingdom of heaven
and getting is the state border

a long slanting beam of light
of this our earthly Eden

In the long grass in a great calm a tiny man
listens to the flow of time and eyes the clouds.
Summer is great, the sky is bright, all is still there,
but already in another calm ----

Utterly other. And he notices: in the grass lies a man
like a dark dot or a comma in a picture of time.

A tiny regret
that not every notion
translates to another tongue.
This sets many thoughts in motion.
Everything enters everyone's head,
everything fits every tongue.
If only it came more quickly to mind.
It will, it will, in its own time.

The Man Who Spoke Snakish: Andrus Kivirähk in English

by Peter Blackstock

As an editor, you never know when you are going to find an interesting writer. Of course, manuscripts usually come from literary agents, but there are those wonderful times where you independently come across something that intrigues you, and end up publishing it.

“This is the story of the last man who spoke the snake language; of his sister who fell in love with a bear; of his mother who had a compulsion for roasting elk; of his grandfather who went to war despite having no legs; of his uncle whom he loved very much; of a young girl who believed in love; of a sage who wasn’t as wise as he seemed; of a peasant woman who dreamed of a werewolf; of an old man who pursued winds; of a salamander who flew in the air; of Australopithecus who raised giant lice; of a titanic fish from a far-away world; and of Teutonic knights who were a little horrified by all of the above.”

I read the above words in a bookshop in Bordeaux, struggling with some of the more taxing French vocabulary but understanding enough to realize that this book was something very unusual indeed. I could tell that just from the cover, a beautiful illustration of a giant winged fish, and the title: *L’homme qui savait la langue des serpents*.

Next to the plain white books beside it (the simple design favored by many French publishers) the book stood out all the more. What was this novel, by a well-regarded Estonian writer, that spoke of bear-love, giant lice and werewolves? Intrigued, I took a photo on my phone and left the bookshop.

This was August 2013, and I was on my honeymoon. My husband and I were visiting southwest France on a much-too-short tour, enjoying great meals and good wine in various places in the Dordogne, Cahors, Armagnac, and, finally, Bordeaux, where I’d decided to pop into a beautiful independent bookstore, “*La Machine à Lire*”. (An appropriate epithet for the kind of person who goes into a bookstore on their honeymoon, as it happens.)

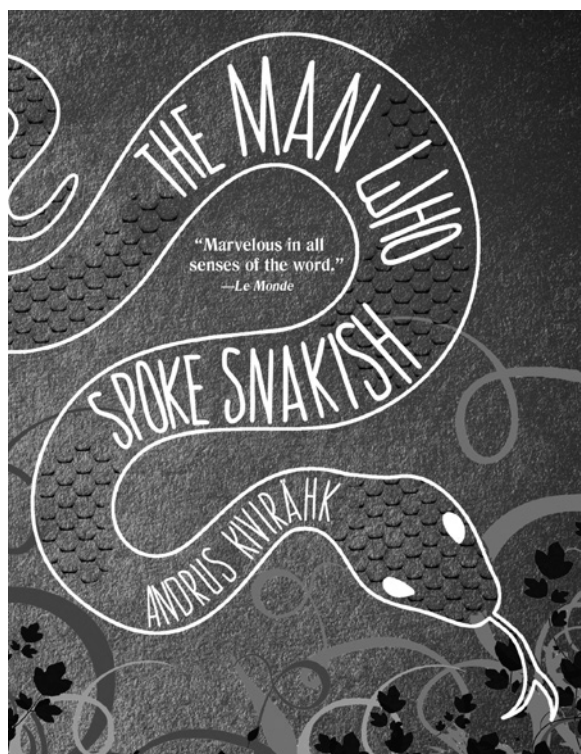
My second encounter with the book, the one that proved to be decisive, was second-hand. Morgan Entrekin, the publisher of Grove

Atlantic, has built a reputation on publishing literary fiction and serious nonfiction by talented writers from America and all around the world. Many of the non-American writers that come to his attention are recommended by his editor and agent friends from Europe and beyond. These are relationships that go back decades, built on a knowledge of each other's taste and on reciprocity: Morgan is equally happy to hear about an intriguing foreign-language book from another publisher as he is to tell them about his own American writer that they might want to acquire.

Morgan heard about Kivirähk's novel from a Dutch publisher friend, Job Lisman of Prometheus, while at the Frankfurt Book Fair, which he attends each year. Job told Morgan that he had just acquired the Dutch rights to a book set in a fantastical version of medieval Estonia. Just from the title, *The Man Who Spoke Snakish*, Morgan was intrigued. He called me and asked me to look into the book, which I remembered from the bookshop in Bordeaux. I wrote to the French publisher to find out more information.

As it happened, it was this publisher, Frédéric Martin, of the small press Éditions Attila (since split into Le Nouvel Attila and Le Tripode, the latter of which Martin runs), who controlled the rights. He sent along a PDF, as well as a review from *Le Monde*, "in my opinion the most accurate one about the book". I started reading, mustering up my rusty French, and occasionally turning to the dictionary for help with some unusual words: "élan—elk"; "siffler—to hiss"; "la soupe d'orge—barley gruel."

As an editor I look for many things when reading a book, but perhaps the most immediately critical is "voice". It's something



COVER ILLUSTRATION OF THE NOVEL

that's hard to pin down, but you know it when you read it – a narration that feels fully formed, a focalizer that gives the text color and shape, a freshness of style. For my taste at least, this novel had voice in spades.

And the characters and setting were so intriguing! Young Leemet is a pagan boy living in the forests of Estonia in the twelfth century, just after the invasion of the country by the Teutons, who set about converting the Estonian people to Christianity. Banished from the village (a Teuton innovation) after his mother sleeps with a bear who kills his father (in the novel, bears are quite the lotharios), Leemet grows up in the forest, living a hunter-gatherer lifestyle with his mother and sister, and going on adventures with his friends.

Leemet and his forest-dwelling peers are aided in their hunting by a unique skill: the

ability to speak the language of Snakish, which gives them power to control animals. When an animal hears a correctly spoken Snakish word, it is forced to give itself over to be killed. But the people who have moved to the villages to become peasants, tilling fields under what we know as the feudal system, have forgotten the Snakish words. The language is dying out. The village way of life frightens Leemet, and also makes no sense to him: why toil in fields and struggle to hunt when you can just learn Snakish and eat your fill of meat? Thanks to a young viper called Ints whom he meets and befriends, Leemet begins to truly master Snakish, and is thrown onto a path where he will become the sole defender of an entire ancient way of life.

The novel is many things at once, but at its heart it is perhaps a Bildungsroman of a boy whose Bildung ends up being useless when the society around him changes so dramatically it leaves him completely behind. In this way, it's a book about war, violence, and occupation, as well as magic and tradition. But although there is much in the novel that explores ideas about modernity and existential questions of change, the book surprises with its tone of lightheartedness, of humor. Some of this comes from the ridiculous things that Leemet witnesses, and from his lack of understanding of then-modern human ways—for one thing, he is deeply fearful that if he tries to eat the evil substance known as “bread” he will die. Some minor characters serve as subjects of satire, including the falsely pious Ülgas, Sage of the Wood, who pretends to see and hear sprites and fairies in order to cement his position at the heart of the forest's social order. I was at times reminded a little of Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, but the humor of the book is quite unique. You never feel you

are reading a “straight” fantasy or historical novel—there is a tongue-in-cheek tone maintained at a low level throughout—but the novel is nonetheless neither a postmodern game of style, nor a parody.

It seems that the main impetus for Kivirähk's humor is to satirize the way that Estonian nationalists have idealized this prehistoric period in Estonia's history, imagining that there could have been El Dorado-esque wonders that were wiped out by the conquering Germans. Kivirähk, who, it is clear, has little patience for noble myths dressed up for political ends, paints a much more bawdy and fanciful portrait of the same period, while retaining a deep fascination for these historical times and the connection with the land that has now been lost. The book, by turns humorous, rollicking, and tragic (a mix that is not exactly simple, and not for every reader), reveals itself to be a profound and deeply unusual depiction of an ancient world.

*

When Morgan was back from the Frankfurt Book Fair, and I'd had a chance to finish the manuscript, we discussed the book, and I told him that I'd been intrigued by it months before, when I saw it in a bookshop in Bordeaux. Somehow the book felt fated to be published by us. We were both very keen to acquire it, even though at almost 500 pages, the translation cost would be quite significant. But despite the challenges, we made Frédéric Martin an offer for World English rights, and he accepted. In an email he wrote to me: “As Humphrey said by the end of Casablanca: I believe this is the beginning of a long friendship.”

Having acquired the rights, the next step was to find a good translator. Grove Atlantic

publishes quite a large number of books in translation, and we have good relationships with many established and newer translators, but we had never before published a book translated from Estonian. I commissioned samples from a number of translators. All of the translations were strong, and had different approaches to and renditions of the text, but it was Christopher Moseley's that I felt most drawn to—it seemed to feel the most similar to the text I had read in French, and, more importantly, the English felt writerly, the tone well-maintained. Christopher, a Baltic Studies professor at University College London, had already read the book when translating a chapter for an online literary publication, and had been in touch with the author. This was Christopher's first book-length translation into English and I hope I'll have the chance to work with him again.

A few months passed, and the translation arrived. It was just what I had hoped it would be. A healthy line-edit changed some phrasing for an American audience and altered syntax and word-choice in order to help the translation sound smooth and natural in English, while retaining the tone and the various oddities of the original. Christopher was a joy to deal with throughout, and kept Kivirähk in the loop. In the meantime, I wrote descriptive copy that I hoped would be as enticing as the description on the French edition that had intrigued me in the Bordeaux bookshop.

The initial reaction from my colleagues was very positive – many of our sales team fell in love with the novel, and Morgan and others who were now able to read the book in English were charmed and impressed. We had good initial orders from bookstores,

including a positive response from Barnes & Noble, orders from the airport bookstores, and a lot of early buzz from the independent stores, which are always absolutely key to all of the fiction we publish, and particularly so for our books in translation.

The book came out in November 2015, and early reviews have been strong. The book was featured in *Entertainment Weekly's* Fall Fiction Preview, calling it a “translated Estonian treasure”; it was later reviewed by the same publication. Quite a feat for a book in translation! Excellent pieces in the *New York Journal of Books*, *Toronto Star*, *Full Stop* and other publications followed. We reprinted just a week after publication and will have to reprint again soon. It's very heartening to see how the book is reaching an audience here. We will publish an edition in the United Kingdom in September of this year, and hope for much more to come for this wonderful novel.

It's been fantastic to see this book reach thousands of English-language readers. An Estonian novel discovered by a French publisher, now reaching an audience in America: perhaps this represents all of the best things about globalization.

The team at Grove and I are delighted to give Leemet a chance to tell his story to English language readers around the world. He may be the last speaker of a dying language, but at least we can all hear what he has to say.

PETER BLACKSTOCK is the Associate Editor of Grove Atlantic in New York City, and has a special interest in translated literature.

The many voices of Estonian drama

by Heidi Aadma

Ten years ago was the one-hundredth anniversary of professional Estonian theatre. To celebrate the grand occasion, Pärnu's Endla Theatre made the unusual decision to only stage plays by Estonian authors that year.

The proportion of Estonian drama in Estonian theatre repertoires has grown steadily over the years since (although certainly not as a direct result), and the grand leap that was taken then has today become the normal condition. Ten years later, freshly-penned scripts by Estonian playwrights make up at least one-third of repertoires, and often much more. These Estonian plays are by contemporary authors, for the most part: classical scripts are rarely staged. Skimming over the list of plays that reached the stage in 2015, over one hundred were based on original Estonian dramas. The staging of Estonian classics (such as **A. H. Tammsaare**, **August Gailit**, et al.) happened on fewer than ten occasions, and were done more to gain inspiration and break free of fixed translations than to merely re-stage well-known scripts.

Estonian playwrights are, for the most part, authors and directors focused solely on theatre. This was confirmed by the Estonian

Theatre Agency's 2013 Play Competition, all five winners of which write only drama. Exceptions to this general trend include **Andrus Kivirähk**, **Mart Kivastik** and **Urmas Vadi**, all of whom have written prose as well as screenplays, children's books and radio plays, but have returned to stage plays time and again. While Kivirähk's novels are rapidly crossing national boundaries, the plays by this local author – who has been called the “grand young man” of Estonian drama – are still waiting to be discovered outside Estonia. Nevertheless, many of them have already been translated into English, Russian, German and other languages (existing translations can be accessed at draamamaa.ee, the “Estonia, Land of Drama” web site). Kivirähk trusts actors as the carriers of his scripts to the audience, and especially considers them when writing his texts. In his latest dramas, Kivirähk places two extreme characters in confrontation in an unexpected space, and gives them time to get comfortable in the



HARAKALE HAIGUS (CANDLE BURN) · TALLINNA LINNATEATER · PHOTO BY SIIM VAHUR



HARAKALE HAIGUS (CANDLE BURN) · PHOTO BY SIIM VAHUR

situation. The characters' forced meeting leads to friction between their personalities as well as comical outbursts. In Kivirähk's play *Kaheksa varbaga kuningas* (*The Eight-Toed King*, 2011), he gives voice to a hospital orderly and an actor being treated for frost-bitten toes. The night-time hospital becomes a stage, the patient a king, and the orderly an actor. Shakespeare's *King Lear* is acted out between the two characters and complemented with commentaries, digressions and slight adjustments: the human and superhuman interweave. In Kivirähk's plays, real-life situations are blurred, with references to the fantasy world, although his characters remain personable and close to the audience.

Summarising the year 2012 in drama, the theatre critic Meelis Oidsalu said that contemporary Estonian plays stood out for their topicality, and social and political nature. He also noted an abundance of location-specific and folk-theatre texts, as well as meta-theatrical and cultural-mythological, semi-documentary dramas (Oidsalu, 2013). Analysing Estonian theatre a couple of

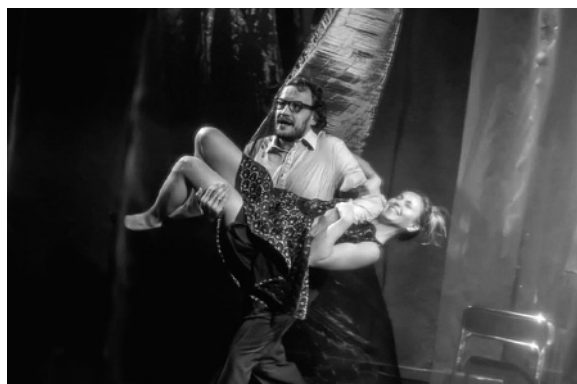
years ago, the Estonian Drama Theatre dramatist Ene Paaver highlighted the fact that several significant prose writers had suddenly joined the local theatre scene: **Tiit Aleksejev**, **Indrek Hargla**, **Tõnu Õnnepalu** and **Rein Raud**. Among other points, Paaver considered what prose writers bring to playwriting. "I hope I am not being unjust, but it seems like it is authors from stricter writing schools who bring richer language to theatre" (Paaver, 2014). In addition, Paaver drew attention to a number of individuals: the director of the Tartu Uus Teater and theatre critic **Ivar Põllu**, whose latest plays have approached Estonia's historical cultural greats from a novel angle, **Eero Epner**, who has an art degree, co-authors almost all of NO99 Theatre's works with a sharp take on modern society, and has been awarded as both a theatre critic and a dramaturg, and the trained actor **Martin Algus**.

Martin Algus is, at the moment, Estonia's most highly awarded playwright, having won prizes in the last three Estonian Theatre

Agency Play Competitions. He is a freelance actor, translator, dramaturg, screenwriter and playwright, and has translated over twenty plays. His efforts to find theatre works suitable for the Estonian stage by way of translation evolved into a desire to write plays himself. Behind a human element of sadness in his scripts, there is always a significant dose of humour and absurdity. In addition to winning an international award, Algus's play *Kontakt* (*Contact*, 2010) received the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Drama. The work deals with distancing and encapsulation, as well as the need to establish contact with oneself, with others and with life. Stories unfolding independently in cities along the Baltic are woven into a common sea, which separates its characters by way of reality at the same time as it connects them with poeticism. The family story *Väävelmagnooliad* (*Sulphur Magnolias*) won second place in the 2013

Estonian Theatre Agency's Play Competition, and later also received the Estonian Theatre Union's Award for Original Drama. In the work, Algus, who offers something new in terms of genre and form with every new play, has crafted succinct, poetic and metaphorical dialogue. The main character, a career woman applying for a better position, finds herself in a situation that leaves her with no choices. She is required to care for her invalid father, whom she remembers only in terms of the childhood violence she endured. The story juxtaposes modern-day relationship patterns with forced family continuity. Algus's linguistically sparse dialogue melts into the realistic plot to form a poetic realism that keeps suspense high.

It's interesting to note that the nominees for Best Director of the Year, chosen by a jury of the Estonian Theatre Union, include a wealth of directors who chose local works as





material for their plays. Estonian directors often personally write their scripts, or else a playwright undertakes the direction of his or her own play. Ever more often, Estonian theatre repertoires are comprised of works written by a group of authors assembled around a production. It is nearly impossible to thematically link the plays that have emerged as a result of group work, since the impetus could be a specific, central problem that concerns the given director and troupe, the history of the site where it is staged, or an historical event and its interpretation. However, in all of these cases, there is a personalisation of topics and a shifting of characters closer to the present. This can certainly also be explained by the younger average age of the authors, which begs the question: What is the path a contemporary Estonian playwright traverses to reach theatre? Currently, one can study playwriting intensively at the Estonian Music and Theatre Academy's (EMTA) Drama School by majoring in dramaturgy, as well as at the private Drakadeemia, which offers courses in creative writing. In addition, young playwrights have a good opportunity to present their plays to the public through the biennial Estonian Theatre Agency Play Competition, to which almost three hundred scripts have been submitted over the last five years.

Although the majority of Estonian playwrights are men (and this is not only true for drama), the 2015 Play Competition showed a shift in this trend, with all five awarded playwrights being female. In 2011, **Piret Jaaks**, a student at Drakadeemia who recently received an award for the best debut work for her short prose collection *Linnalegend* (*Urban Legend*), won first prize in the Play Competition with her work *Näha roosat*

elevanti (*To See Pink Elephants*). The relationship story closely and delicately guards a secret until the final, surprising scenes. Perhaps only the play's third character, Katriin, knows the answers to whether the two main characters' (Levi's and Simona's) cohabitation is actually what it seems to be, and why it can never actually end. The love triangle is resolved only when Levi's and Katriin's child enters their increasingly agonising world and they must shed the dream-like torments of their past in the name of the child's future: both acknowledging the truth and shattering the identity game that they've been playing. **Mari-Liis Lill**, who studied acting at the EMTA Drama School, and **Paavo Piik**, who majored in dramaturgy at the same institution, co-authored the documentary plays *Varesele valu...* (*Magik Mend...*) and *Harakale haigus* (*Candle Burn*) in 2014, which were then staged in two different theatres simultaneously. In the two plays, which comprise a series of monologues, there are twenty-one interviews conducted with young people who have all grown up in a free Estonia, and who have all personally suffered and also recovered from depression, an illness which is estimated to affect one-sixth of Estonia's population. Delving into the subjects' life stories, the directors ask why the percentage of those suffering from depression has grown in Estonia over time despite the rising standard of living, and also highlight opportunities to triumph over the disease. These moving stories, which in retrospect are liberating, call on the observer to notice and to understand.

The last decade of Estonian drama is strongly interspersed with histories and personal stories, as well as experimentation with the boundary between reality and

imagination. Almost a third of scripts that reached the stage over the last few years deal with documentary materials, including glimpses into the past and critical contemporary plays. The documentary play *45 339 km² raba* (*45,339 km² of Bogs*), by the EMTA Drama School dramaturgy graduate **Andra Teede**, was staged in late 2015. Whereas Teede's play *Estoplast. Näidend valguse tegemisest* (*Estoplast. A Play About Making Illumination*), which won a prize in the ETA Play Competition, presented stories based on interviews done with workers at a Soviet-era lamp factory, skilfully interweaving the everyday with poeticism, the real with the abstract, and nostalgia with criticism, in *45 339 km² raba*, the materials used were statistics on and interviews done with Estonians who have emigrated. The play, which refers to the country's total area, poses painfully personal questions about the location of "home" for an Estonian living outside of Estonia, and asks what things cannot be taken along but remain important even when one is gone. These things are hardly likely to be power-hungry politicians or the chilly climate, but rather something totally unique: perhaps Estonian theatre as a whole.

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HEIDI AADMA (1976) is a drama researcher and critic. She is a dramaturge with the Estonian Theatre Agency and has compiled a number of works on theatre.

Insanity in Estonian literature

by Maarja Vaino

According to the US literary critic Shoshana Felman, insanity is an obsession of contemporary literature: stories being told are almost exclusively those of madness. Is this the case with Estonian literature, also?

The New Devil of Hellsbottom (*Põrgupõhja uus Vanapagan*), the last novel by the Estonian literary great **A. H. Tammsaare** (1878–1940), was published in 1939. The author once explained to an astonished journalist: “It may be true that at first it appears to the reader that the author is insane, but as soon as he reads on, he finds that he himself is insane. And when he reads even further, then it appears to him that the whole world has gone insane!”

The New Devil of Hellsbottom is Tammsaare’s most mysterious and social-critical novel. In it, the author is intrigued by theological questions (“Is redemption possible?”), as well as by what becomes of a society led by greed, one that no longer possesses ideals or spiritual foundations. The main character, Jürka, claims to be Vanapagan (the “foolish devil” of Estonian folklore), who wants to continue running Hell and has therefore come to redeem mankind: this in order to prove it is possible to live in a way

where one achieves eternal bliss. Naturally, the other characters assume he is off his rocker when they hear this.

Tammsaare-era readers were unaware that the author also wrote a prologue to the novel, in which he reveals the backstory. Specifically, Jürka goes to speak to St. Peter in Heaven, where they agree that if he manages to live his life and achieve eternal bliss, then he can keep running Hell. Readers of the time thus faced a conundrum: they hadn’t a clue whether Jürka was merely a dim-witted peasant or the true Vanapagan. It was up to each reader to decide for him- or herself.

Why did Tammsaare decide not to publish the prologue? Perhaps it was to test readers. If the reader deemed Jürka insane, then his or her own value judgements were obviously misaligned. For, in spite of his “insanity”, Jürka embodies the almost sole element of normality in the novel: he attempts to live according to the right ideals and values,



while most of the other characters are heartless and unethical. On the one hand, Jürka is like Faust turned upside down (whereas Faust sells his soul to the Devil in order to achieve his aims, Tammsaare has the Devil sell his soul to God), or a dislocated Christ, who declares truth and wishes to redeem humankind. On the other hand, Tammsaare uses Vanapagan to criticise an upstart society that values vapid and bad-natured individuals while regarding someone who lives in the name of ideals as “bizarre”. Either way, by writing the novel – published on the eve of the Second World War – Tammsaare intended to draw attention to his view that everything in society had seemingly flipped upside-down, that the world had gone insane. And, as history showed, he was right.

One “madman” character somewhat similar to Jürka is the Livonian nobleman Timotheus Eberhard von Bock of Võisiku Manor, who appears in the novel *The Czar’s Madman* (*Keisri hull*, 1978) by Estonia’s most internationally-renowned writer, **Jaan Kross** (1920–2007). In Von Bock’s case, readers and the other characters are unsure whether the man is pretending to be insane or is indeed mad. In truth, Von Bock represents the same kind of social-critical attitude as Jürka, since he also strives to behave according to his ideals, and he is therefore seen as insane in the eyes of the rest of the world. Kross’ Von Bock has been compared to Shakespeare’s Hamlet: both men’s insanity is associated with speaking the truth; both behave provocatively and ironically in their madness. The relationship between deception and truth is similar in the cases of Jürka, Hamlet and Von Bock. All three are convinced that they themselves represent the truth. Or does it only appear that way to them? In any case, the characters raise the question of where

the line between insanity and sanity runs. Up to what point are a man’s actions “sensible”, and is progressing further in the name of his truth then perhaps “insanity”?

Yet the issue of insanity vs. normality has not been left to mere theoretical discussion in Estonia. During the 1970s and 1980s, one of young men’s greatest fears was conscription into the Soviet Armed Forces, which could mean being sent to the Afghan front or simply having to endure daily physical and psychological violence. In 2014 Jaan Kross’ son **Märten Kross** (b 1970) published *The Insanity Game* (*Hullumäng*), a novel describing how the only way for young men to avoid Soviet military service was to get themselves a “diagnosis”. This meant months, if not years of “playing insane”: faking a mental disability in order to convince the authorities that one was unfit for service. Many Estonian cultural figures received the proof of their “insanity” to get out of military service from accommodating doctors.

However, the “insanity game” not only concerned young men fearing Soviet conscription. One of Estonia’s most famous writers who acquired “crazy papers” to save his life was **Aadu Hint** (1910–1989). The KGB found out that Hint, who up to that point had been loyal to the Soviet regime, planned to escape to Sweden by boat in 1946, and the writer was issued a harsh warning. The literary critic Toomas Haug writes: “It’s possible that after being caught with his escape plan, Hint was so overcome by fear that he saw it necessary to acquire a certificate of insanity. The writer’s home archive contains a few papers filed under the keyword “Insanity”, one of which – in Russian and almost illegibly written in pencil – is a questionnaire for one “Mikhail

Mironov". It's possible that this was indeed Hint's "alter ego", whose life-story he created while in the loony bin. Ralf Parve has recalled how, one morning, Hint entered his editorial office at the *Pioneer* and announced that he was actually a Russian, claiming you could tell by his hair."

It's said that Hint pretended to be schizophrenic with terrifying believability, and he wasn't the only person who hid himself away from repression in an insane asylum. One of Estonia's most well-known pre-WWII novelists, **Karl August Hindrey** (1875–1947), sequestered himself at the Iru Care Home under a false name as mentally unstable. Hindrey died there in squalid conditions, and was buried in secret at the Metsakalmistu Cemetery.

But those who truly couldn't cope with the atmosphere of Stalinist terror also ended up in asylums. For example, the poet and prose writer **Jaan Kärner** (1891–1958) suffered an actual mental disorder that developed in 1946: he began sensing he could hear in his own home everything being spoken about in the government. With the short-story writer **Piet Vallak** (1893–1959), his inability to come to terms with the conditions of Soviet occupation brought mental ruin along with brain damage, which made him severely disabled and ultimately led to his death. The communist poet and Deputy Secretary of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Estonian SSR, **Johannes Vares-Barbarus** (1890–1946), could not endure the pressure from Moscow and committed suicide.

Perhaps the most legendary "insane man" of Estonian literature is one of its national treasures: the poet **Juhan Liiv** (1864–1913), whose extremely sensitive psyche shattered

under life's pressure. Liiv had delusions of royal heritage (a claim on the Polish throne), chronic paranoia, heard voices in his head etc. His classic story *The Shadow* (*Vari*) depicts an Estonian peasant who suffers a severe state of confusion after being flogged at the local manor. In Liiv's patriotic lyrics, his illness and personal tragedy are heightened into worry for the fate of his homeland.

Estonian literature has also had its own "shrink": the psychiatrist and prose writer **Vaino Vahing** (1940–2008), who enriched the country's literary scene starting in the late 1960s. Vahing's parlour was famed for its experiments, which included human psychological testing and the sampling of psychotropic substances. It was through Vahing that various psychoanalytic ideas and related literature spread and influenced the development of Estonian literature.

Perhaps this brief excursion into the discourse of insanity may be concluded with a quote from Tammsaare. In Volume II (1929) of his *Truth and Justice* pentalogy, the school headmaster Maurus has the following words of warning for his pupil Indrek: "You think that you're not the one who is crazy, but that it is those others; that makes it certain that you are insane."

Doubtless, it is worth keeping Maurus's words in mind.

MAARJA VAINO (1976) is a literary scholar and Director of the A. H. Tammsaare Museum. Her doctoral thesis, *Poetics of irrationality in A. H. Tammsaare's work*, is an outstanding study of the Estonian classic's writing.

The irony of hope

by Adam Cullen

Mihkel Mutt's account of life behind the Iron Curtain before, during, and after the restoration of Estonia's independence observes and embodies the absurdities in mentality that the Soviet regime bred. And in recording these phenomena that are so exotic to the Western world, Mutt re-lives the era(s) through a prism of sarcasm and irony; through the language of the time.

"How's that—we do have freedom now, don't we?" Sõrgats insisted.

"Well, we do," Lumepart said, "but what am I supposed to do with that?"

The Cavemen Chronicle, Mihkel Mutt

Translation is mediation. It is brokering. It requires immediately coming to terms with the fact that what you ultimately write will not be the original manuscript reproduced in your native tongue – not merely, and not entirely. It is an echo, a reverberation. Expanded, oftentimes amplifying certain unexpected aspects and muffling others. History is much the same when absorbed by individuals of backgrounds and cultures alien to the place, in which that particular history occurred. The immediacy is inevitably lost, but new facets may gleam like flecks in a gold pan upon its retelling.

Language itself is steeped in history. During the Soviet occupation, this meant for the

Estonian language not only the adoption or abandonment of words, rising and descending as itinerant jellyfish. It meant – at least in literature not commissioned and implicitly aiming to fawn over the regime – a certain recalibration of the language; the implementation of alternative, non-direct means of expression and resistance. It meant writing "between the lines", sometimes in the form of hyper-irony, in order to honestly and accurately convey social and political criticism. To pervert the words of Dr. Ian Malcolm: "Language, uh, finds a way."

Irony is a tool that most Americans mildly appreciate, residents of the British Isles actively implement, and Estonians employ unconsciously. Estonian literature, especially that penned over the last 60-odd years, is oftentimes filled with it – irony wraps itself around the reader like seaweed around ankles. Why? If you can't state something directly and could be facing a future of ushanka-clad Siberian winters for even veiled or indirect references, then



MIHKEL MUTT · PHOTO BY KRISTJAN TEEDEMA/SCANPIX

embellish its opposite. True, even the classic Estonian writer A. H. Tammsaare practiced its use well before the first Red Army troops crossed the border, and wry dispositions have likely been a facet of Estonian nature since time immemorial.

How can such a witch's well of sarcasm be translated? In Estonian practice, it is not merely a nuance embedded in a complex language – in it lies a sub-linguistic river of context; another language in and of itself. Language is not only grammar and syntax – it is stratified and mixed, geologically compressed. To truly grasp the substance of speech, the speaker – and the translator – must grasp its respective culture. This is also the most difficult task of a translator, and a cause of chronic sleep loss. It is impossible to inform and instruct an audience to “speak” an entire, richly multi-layered culture over the course of one work of prose while maintaining a sufficient level of interest, and no work can (or should) contain a dense roost of accommodating footnotes, either.

As a translator, Mihkel Mutt's writing has stood as one of my greatest challenges and conundrums in meditating the culture of sarcasm – one, which gnaws at me even after the books have been shipped from the printers. Last summer, I received the edited manuscript of *The Cavemen Chronicle* from its acclaimed publisher, Dalkey Archive Press, and was asked to review the slew of corrections, proposals, and questions. In addition to minor adjustments in grammar and syntax (it's not uncommon for fluent speakers of foreign languages to find themselves unconsciously lapsing into odd, mixed-blood structures), I began to encounter a recurrence of: “What is this supposed to mean? Why would the character do that?

This seems odd – is it really in the original?” Initially, I reckoned that my wording must have been unclear or the editor was just too rushed to give the work a thorough twice-over (which wasn't all that unlikely, given that – as a consequence of “financing deadlines” – I was also forced to review the edits unexpectedly and with a deadline more rapid than Arctic summers). But as I made my way deeper into the manuscript and found the editor repeatedly requesting that I expound on plot points and elucidate characters' trains of thought, I surmised the problem lay not in my nor the author's writing. Mutt's semi-fictional account of life behind the Iron Curtain before, during, and after the restoration of Estonia's independence hardly touches upon the deficits and the censorship, the repression and the hardships so present in other accounts of life under the Soviet regime. Rather, he observes and embodies the absurdities in mentality that these conditions bred. And in recording these phenomena that are so exotic to the Western world, Mutt does not just bluntly gesture towards the situations and the mind-sets – he re-lives the era(s) through a prism of sarcasm and irony; through the language of the time.

To illustrate: in one section of *The Cavemen Chronicle*, the narrator – Juhan Raudtuvi (an unusual name that translates directly to “John Irondove”; yet another playful quirk of Mutt's humour) – begins to question the credibility of his own memory. He recognises that his recollections of certain events or people and the connections his brain draws between them might, in fact, simply be slight unconscious adjustments meant to tailor the story to his ultimate point. After giving an account of a particular evening, Raudtuvi steps back to briefly review the story, and

realises that he inadvertently confused most of the details. He remembers that the youth performance given during a classic's birthday celebration held at the Writers' House, before which the performers changed into light costumes behind a curtain in the auditorium, was actually on a ferry to Saaremaa, where "many people are naked [...] in summer." Cue the editor's red flag! *Are they really?* The narrator then comes to realise that his story's climax had been from another time (or other times) entirely – specifically, someone drunkenly careening out of the Estonian intellectuals' stomping grounds (*The Cave*) and into a snowbank, all the while shouting anti-Russian slogans. Raudtuvi rhetorically concludes: "But where did the pyramids come from? Was it really from the Discovery Channel?" The irony is thick enough to cut with a spoon – however, many a Western reader's brain may have already short-circuited by this point. "What pyramids?" the mystified editor asked.

Is this "third language", one so culturally embedded, ultimately a translatable one? More importantly – should it even be translated (or, more accurately, interpreted)? A perennial question for translators is how much of the inherent culture nestled within

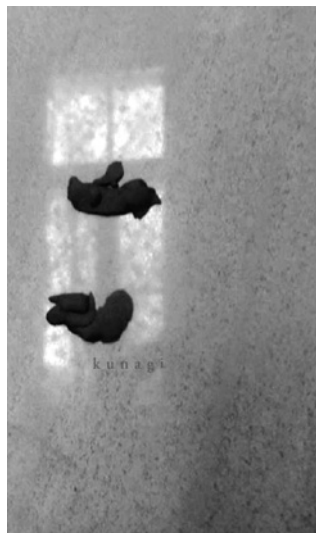
words and phrases, within tone and structure, can be conveyed while retaining readability and unaided comprehension. Yet in my personal opinion, literature in translation should also enrich the target language and culture. That is the point of translating literature and poetry in the first place – the belief that the text contains something that could be of interest to foreign readers; something that might lead to new, hybridized ideas and an enriched understanding of the greater world.

Naturally, the translator asks: Is this all futile? Can the author's intention and vehicle be kept more or less intact without alienating the reader, or can the reader be gently guided to recognize and appreciate what at first seems so foreign? Practice, I would say, is the only key to fluency in any language. And for readers, this also applies to literature – and irony – in translation.

ADAM CULLEN (1986) is a translator of Estonian literature and poetry into English. He has translated prose by Tõnu Õnnepalu, Mihkel Mutt, Indrek Hargla, Armin Kõomägi and Rein Raud, among others. Originally from Minnesota, he now lives in Tallinn.

Book reviews

by Carolina Pihelgas, Peeter Helme and Jan Kaus



LAURI SOMMER · PHOTO BY ELMO RIIG/SCANPIX

LAURI SOMMER

KUNAGI: 2008–2015

(ONCE: 2008–2015)

Räestu, Tiivaalune, 2015, 86 pp

ISBN: 9789949385355

Although Lauri Sommer (b 1973) made his debut in 1998 as a poet and has published five collections, he has mostly gained acclaim and recognition as a prosaist over the last few years. Sommer's first work of prose – *Kolm yksiklast* (*Three Hermits*, 2010) – tells the stories of three recluses through

intuitive visions of the lives of the Seto healer Darja, the musician Nick Drake, and the theologian and poet Uku Masing. Two years later, he published *Räestu raamat* (*The Book of Räestu*), in which he writes about his maternal lineage and his Viru County roots. Both works received the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Literary Award for Miscellanea. Sommer's fiction *Sealpool sood* (*Across the Mires*), a portrayal of his paternal relatives and Viljandi County, was published last year. His prose is highly poetic, but also fragmented: it progresses by

way of scents, snippets of conversation and shards of memory. Landscapes and descriptions of Estonian nature are integral parts of Sommer's writing, but of paramount importance to him is the spirit of a place and how it reveals a person's inner workings.

Sommer's *Once* is comprised of poems written in 2008–2015, but it is not an extensive selection of his poetry. *Once* is like a diary or a notebook, which he has been keeping steadily alongside his prolific prose-writing. While Sommer's prose attempts to record all the fragments of memory associated with particular people or places, *Once* is less focused on the self, with Zen-like attempts to capture moments, perfect little pictures and recognitions. It contains reflections on nature and an animist perception of the world: for instance, the poet happens to witness a wedding of reeds and later washes his face "with the pond water this wedding / made holy". He makes sacrifices to the birds and the beasts during the autumn folk holiday for venerating the dead. Nature is not merely what surrounds the space where we make our homes, but also a kind of communion. In a piece awarded the 2014 Juhan Liiv Award for Poetry, Sommer transforms the burial of a boar carcass into an inner purification: "I scoop it into my arms to alleviate. / The half-moon casts dual shadows / that I carry down to the valley. I leave / the worst of me in the carcass".

The pictures Sommer paints are like calligraphy: one slight flick of the brush conveys a larger stroke. Even when the days pass gradually and nothing special happens, anguish and salvation are always present. Common, everyday moments and observations can achieve a sacral dimension. For Sommer, time is not linear, but cyclical:

eternally repeating, just like the seasons. It progresses steadily and unhurriedly: a book your darling left on the bed can stay there for days, "corners of the pages remembering / the blissful stillness of your fingerprints". And yet, the passing of time is not all that tragic or even entirely irreversible, since a connection with those who came before us lives on through memories and reoccurring events. For instance, if you rest in the ruins of an old farmhouse and see a large forest creature in the distance, you might believe it is the soul of the former farmer's wife coming to survey the guests. You can establish a connection with ancestors even by way of an old threshold: "I'm a millimetre away / from those who a century ago went / to the sauna, shed, laundry, house / their feet just as bare, summer-night tranquillity all around / ever more hidden in my footsteps". Reflected in these understandings are an indigenous perception of nature and the soul, as well as respect for one's ancestors.

Lauri Sommer's poems deal with stillness and presence; they contain the briskness of the north and succinctness of the east. The author himself is a traveller, a traverser who muses: "These days watch me like woodlarks. / I wonder which will take flight first." **CP**

JÜRGEN ROOSTE

IDEAALNE ABIKAASA
(*THE IDEAL HUSBAND*)

Saarde-Pärnu, Ji, 2015, 107 pp
ISBN: 9789949519552

Jürgen Rooste (b 1979) is one of Estonia's "wildest" current writers, right behind Valdur Mikita. He is the country's loudest,



JÜRGEN ROOSTE · PHOTO BY ELMO RIIG/SCANPIX

sincerest, and most exuberant and (social-) critical contemporary poet. Rooste has written 15 poetry collections and several children's books, has co-authored literary textbooks, has published a wealth of reviews of literature and cultural events, and has worked as an editor. He has feverishly organised poetry readings, festivals, and events to make Estonian literature better known both at home and abroad. Rooste often writes opinion pieces, sometimes in poetic form. He is a remarkable performer, and several of his poems were written with live presentation in mind. He frequently takes the stage with musicians, and is just as convincing with a big jazz band as he is with solo accompaniment: his texts may be bluesy or meant to be rapped. In short, Jürgen Rooste is an extremely productive and wide-ranging author.

The Ideal Husband is composed of an impressive spectrum of topics, but love poems form its core. Readers met the poet's sweetheart Sveta in his 2014 collection *Suur sume, suur tume* (*Great Dusk, Great Dark*), which hints at the delicacy

and fragility of their initial meeting and the process of falling in love. In *The Ideal Husband*, Rooste declares frankly: "the centre of this world is / you". He literally idolises his girlfriend: in the cycle "Jürgen's Gospel", the poet becomes a mere predecessor of his beloved, a "baptiser and healer", whose task is to proclaim and "cast verses / about the girl of light". His love is so great, so encompassing and overwhelming that he starts to suspect "that maybe this love // has even replaced my art my poetry / that which has been most important / to me".

But that doesn't quite seem to be the case. Rooste is still (as in his best books) both sincere and sarcastic, serious and playful. He can exclaim that "all Estonian culture's just / Juhan Liiv's coat / -- / threadbare and worn / a jacket that's of no use / at all"; or he can prowl the city animal-like and bare his teeth: "this animal's called / the social poet / and he smells // the proper bourgeois' fear". One of Rooste's most important tools is his sustaining of his childlike nature, his occasional downright naiveness, which gives the texts a

light and playful tone and prevents the poems from turning bitter. *The Ideal Husband* additionally contains good old Bukowski-like poesy: almost sleeping with his ex-wife (“almost”, because his daughter walks in on them), making pancakes in a bachelor pad and turning the kitchen into a war-zone, boozing with his sweetheart’s father, which allows language barriers to be overcome, etc. The images are humorous, things are described... just the way they are at a particular moment. Worthy of special note is the author’s use of language, which is completely free and fluid. Rooste’s language has evolved in its own space, where he plays with words, but it is all entirely natural and compelling.

Has the former “ordinary Estonian idiot” (the title of Rooste’s 2008 poetry collection, *Tavaline eesti idiot*) finally grown into an “ideal husband”? Apparently not; at least the poet sees himself as being anything but ideal. And can any marriage, any life ever be ideal? What is crucial is the effort: the desire to be a smidgen better. You just need to love as well as you can, however it turns out, and that love will cast a little ray of light into dreary everyday life. **CP**

OLAVI RUITLANE

VEE PEAL

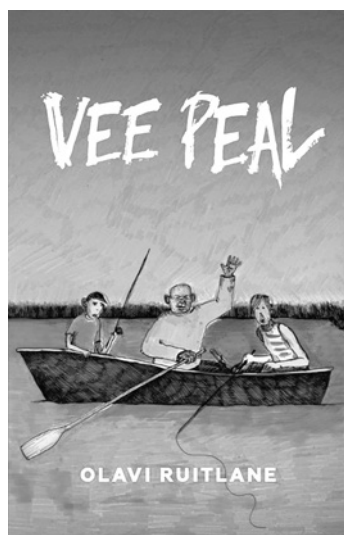
(ON THE WATER)

Tallinn, ZA/UM, 2015. 196 pp

ISBN: 9789949384693

Olavi Ruitlane (b 1969) is a southern Estonian writer who rarely publishes. Even so, each work of his prose is an event. *Kroonu* (Conscription, 2005), which describes the absurdity of the Soviet military, received many awards, and *Naine* (*The Wife*, 2009) is an unconcealed personal “settling of scores” with his wife. It turned out to be the best selling and most hotly debated book of that year. Ruitlane’s *On the Water* is a work of prose that tells of his childhood. It has received almost unanimous acclaim from readers and reviewers.

On the Water is clearly impressive due to the fact that it is an overtly autobiographical novel. The narrative substance is simple, which is likely also a reason for the book’s popularity. It describes the life of an early-teenage boy, an avid fisherman, over the course of a year. Ruitlane has remarked in interviews that he initially intended to write a book about fishing and fish, but things got out



OLAVI RUITLANE · PHOTO BY EERO VABAMÄGI/SCANPIX

of control: one memory evoked another and, before the author realized it, he was already diving deep into his childhood. There's no doubt that the work benefited from this as, through his descriptions of fishing, the author brings to life the small southern Estonian town of Võru in the 1970s. The rural outpost's colourful characters come to life, amid the meagre conditions, smells, colours, sensations and absurdities of the era, on the shores of Lake Tamula. *On the Water* is also capable of speaking to today's readers, since the lives of 12-13-year-old boys are much the same in any time period, whether in the last year of Brezhnev's rule or the mid-2010s. Furthermore, it rapidly becomes clear that, for the narrator, true reality is revealed most clearly when he is out on the lake. Away from his insufferable grandparents, away from his violent schoolmates, away from general human stupidity and trite lives lived strictly according to standards. On the lake one finds silence, freedom and – of course – fish.

Ruitlane captivantly describes the fine points of fishing, the particular aspects of fishing at different times of the year, and specific methods for catching various types of fish. The author is capable of infecting even those most distant from the activity with the fishermen's ancient approach: "I hold my breath. Too early, still too early. The pike takes the bait in its jaws, pulls it a few metres away, and only when it stops can I start counting to ten. At least to ten.... The line is still slowly disappearing between my fingers. There's not all that much left...."

Ruitlane's nostalgic work also features the opposite sex. In this sense, *On the Water* is a proper coming-of-age story: it contains the audacity of youth and the ability to perceive the world as a clear, complete whole, as well

as the complicated way of life that forces itself upon you as you discover your own sexuality. Ruitlane holds these topics in balance and conveys conflicting emotions with the right amount of empathy: the bliss of a summer afternoon for a young person, the exotic excitement of a first kiss, and the inner mingling of self-confidence and doubt. *On the Water* will awaken slumbering dreams in even the most hardened reader, and all of the appetizing little fish that Võru's intrinsic Lake Tamula generously shares will make your mouth water. **PH**

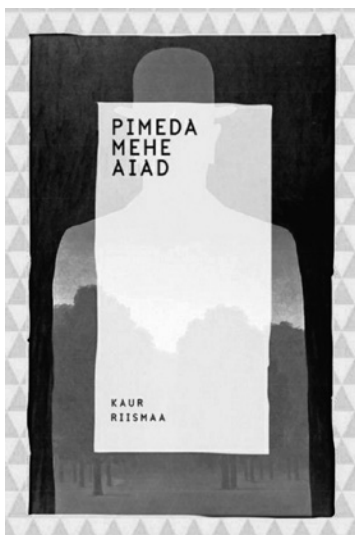
KAUR RIISMAA
PÜHAMÄGI
(*THE HOLY MOUNTAIN*)

Tallinn, Verb, 2015. 109 pp
ISBN: 9789949947393

KAUR RIISMAA
PIMEDA MEHE AIAD
(*THE BLIND MAN'S GARDENS*)

Tallinn, Tänapäev, 2015. 222 pp
ISBN: 9789949277391

Kaur Riismaa (b 1986) debuted as a poet with the 2011 collection *Me hommikud, me päevad, õhtud, ööd* (*Our Mornings, Our Days, Evenings, Nights*), which critics almost unanimously declared a very mature work. In 2015 Riismaa suddenly showed himself to be very mature in his prose debut. Last year, two highly different but equally strong works appeared from his desk in quick succession: *The Holy Mountain*, both melancholic and amusing work, which evokes thoughts and emotions, tears and laughter, and *The Blind Man's Gardens*, a philosophic look at one man's life in an entirely unique style.



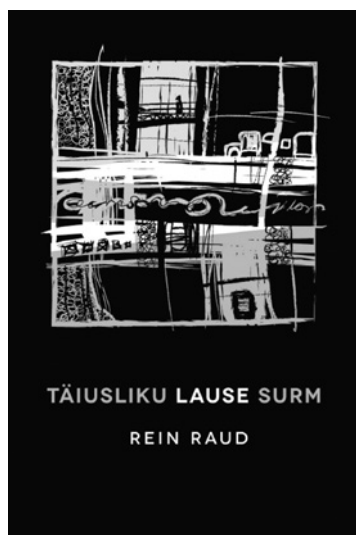
KAUR RIISMAA · PHOTO BY MARGUS ANSU/SCANPIX

The Holy Mountain resembles Riismaa's poetry debut in some respects, telling stories of imaginary characters at length and at a leisurely pace, weaving into them both history and modern life. Even the manner of treatment is similar. Riismaa's poetry has always verged on prose, with its storytelling quality, while *The Holy Mountain* resonates with the poetic. Although Riismaa's short novel blurs the line between prose and poetry, the work does not come off as a poet making his first unsteady steps in the world of prose and trying to prove himself as a prosaist. On the contrary, the writing is completely natural. The reader finds a logically assembled novel with intriguing plot developments about an odd friendship, which includes a love-triangle component and a few "coming-of-age" elements. There is also a philosophical undertone to *The Holy Mountain*, which emerges through its original spatial poetics. Considering that the first-person narrator relates the story while talking to his house plants, one can say that the author's sense of (self-) irony has reached a certain peak.

The Blind Man's Gardens (which was published at the same time, but according to

the author was written later) is an entirely different kind of work. In the book, Riismaa shows he is not interested in mere sarcasm and that he truly has decided to remain a player in the world of prose. One sign of this is the recognition the work received: first prize in the Tänapäev Novel Competition.

The Blind Man's Gardens is not revolutionary, nor is it a break-through in Riismaa's own development or contemporary literature in general: as in the author's poetry and in *The Holy Mountain*, we encounter life-stories here. Riismaa is able to tell such tales in varying ways. In *The Blind Man's Gardens*, the author endows different characters with playful ease, adopts various positions and roles, and speaks in different voices. He seems at ease speaking from the main character's point of view when the man is 30, then loading a little more life experience by delivering a 45-year-old's monologue, only to ultimately speak convincingly as a 60-year-old. And what's more, the author also brings in a female narration. *The Blind Man's Gardens* is consummate writing, and at the same time a light, reader-friendly work. **PH**



REIN RAUD · PHOTO BY TIIT BLAAT/SCANPIX

REIN RAUD

TÄIUSLIKU LAUSE SURM (THE DEATH OF THE PERFECT SENTENCE)

Tallinn, Mustvalge Kirjastus,

2015. 176 pp

ISBN: 9789949947386

Rein Raud (b 1961) is one of Estonia's most influential and esteemed intellectuals, whose opinion pieces generally have strong social resonance. Although Raud's public activities – including serving as the rector of Tallinn University from 2006–2011 – sometimes tend to overshadow his literary contribution, he is clearly regarded as one of the country's most appreciated and highly awarded prosaists. Two of his novels – *Hector ja Bernard* (*Hector and Bernard*, 2004) and *Rekonstruktsioon* (*The Reconstruction*, 2012) – have received the Cultural Endowment of Estonia's Award for Prose.

Raud's newest short novel, *The Death of the Perfect Sentence*, is an example of his continued superb writing. In it, Raud addresses a subject that has seldom been

dealt with in recent Estonian literature: the final moments of the Soviet occupation. Yet Raud, a professor and expert on East Asia, wouldn't be Raud if the book didn't bring in other elements. *The Death of the Perfect Sentence* can be seen as a spy novel mixed with memories, in which young resistance fighters endeavour to out-smart the KGB. Yet, it is also a story about bungled opportunities, the destruction of love, and the death of trust. The latter is perhaps the work's central message, and the discussion of a trust deficit also seems to refer to the present: modern-day Estonia and Western society as a whole are struggling with the same problem. The reasons for this are certainly different than they were under communist totalitarianism but, as Raud points out, these are only surface differences: people today are also alone, cut off from others, and can only be guided by their best judgments, which may benefit them, but which may also lead them into paranoia. In Estonia's case, though, the baggage of history is always there: it may not be entirely visible any more, but that just makes shedding it more difficult.

The Death of the Perfect Sentence is definitely stylish. Raud's stylistic mastery has been highlighted before, but he re-confirms in his newest work the fact that he is unsurpassed in the short-novel genre. Raud appears before the reader as an inventive author, whose outwardly simple and concise style is always brimming with various stances and critiques: sometimes observing his characters and developments from a distance, and other times seeing things through their eyes.

One interesting trick that Raud employs is the insertion of remarks and digressions between the lines of the main text, presented in isolated boxes. Occasionally, he uses these to comment on the text (for instance, one box answers a question he was asked by a friend who read the draft manuscript: "On what occasions were ties worn in Soviet society, and on what occasions weren't they?"), while other times he tells stories that are loosely tied to the general topic but do not fit into the central narrative. This gives the novel a unique rhythm and makes the story (which generally is grim: think KGB, arrests, painful memories and forced choices between conformism and imprisonment) not only thrilling, but also witty and an enjoyable reading experience, which in addition to its detailed recollections leads thoughts back to the present. Although the story contains imaginative details, it is, in terms of atmosphere and description, about everyday life, a realistic glance into Estonia's past that offers an explanation for why Estonians are exactly who we are today. **PH**

PAAVO MATSIN
GOGOLI DISKO
(*GOGOL'S DISCO*)

Viljandi, Lepp ja Nagel, 2015. 144 pp
ISBN: 9789949386918

Paavo Matsin (b 1970) is a lecturer and critic whose literary activity began in the experimental group "14NÜ", which focused on expanding the possibilities of literary form: starting with the unusual design and topics of the books that the members published, and including colourful book releases that can be best classified as performances. Matsin's "solo career" has likewise been characterised by experimentalism and a playful approach. When his first work was published in 2011 – *Doktor Schwarz. Alkeemia 12 võtit* (*Doctor Schwarz. The Twelve Keys to Alchemy*) – it was seen as his first attempt to unite two extremes: an experimental writing style with traditional storytelling. However, it turned out that the former overshadowed the latter, and so Matsin's debut received a mixture of enthralled and sceptical reactions. His *Sinine kaardivägi* (*The Blue Guard*, 2013), an adventure tale set in Riga, proved that Matsin is more than a gleeful eccentric. In his third novel, *Gogol's Disco*, the author achieves a perfect balance between literary games and skilled storytelling.

Gogol's Disco is undoubtedly Matsin's strongest work to date. His characteristically cryptic, erratic plot and intertextuality, which can be difficult for the common reader, has receded, though it hasn't completely disappeared! The strengths of Matsin's energetic inner world are amplified in *Gogol's Disco*: a bizarre, dream-like atmosphere populated with colourful characters and absurd situations. Absorbing influences from history, alchemy, mysticism, and literature, Matsin



PAAVO MATSIN · PHOTO BY HENDRIK OSULA/SCANPIX

here offers a clearer text, while not losing his ability to create a magical and grotesque world: one which won't submit to classification by genre.

Gogol's Disco is set in a near-future (or a parallel existence) in which Imperial Russia has put an end to Estonian independence, and Estonians have become a tiny minority in their own homeland. Yet the work does not focus on national apocalypse, but rather on how the Russian literary classic Nikolai Gogol (who has risen from the dead) goes to visit the pastoral town of Viljandi in southern Estonia, where he brings local intellectualism to a boil and, in some instances, flips it upside-down. It should be noted that Gogol – in whom the author has added elements from Jesus, Woland and even the Golem – is not the work's main character. On centre-stage are Viljandi's harlequin community of mainly Russian-speaking intellectuals and miscreants, whose already odd lives intersect with that of the parable-speaking Golem-Gogol and are changed forever. For lack of a better description, *Gogol's Disco* can be called a romping

dystopia or an allegorical grotesque. A book which is both anti-utopian and its parody. In any case, Matsin's spiralling fantasy leaves most Estonian science-fiction writers standing flat-footed.

A clear added gem in *Gogol's Disco* is Matsin's rendering of Viljandi, a town nestled in the hills of southern Estonia, which is blessed with views that resemble Norway much more than Estonia. Matsin makes the town both a modern and backwater place, although his descriptions of certain sites are sources of happy recognition for readers familiar with Viljandi. The authenticity of the book's social circumstances and its incredible events provide a basis to classify it as magical realism, but the images Matsin conjures are too restless to be limited by such a designation; the sense of liberty bursting from his writing is too strong.

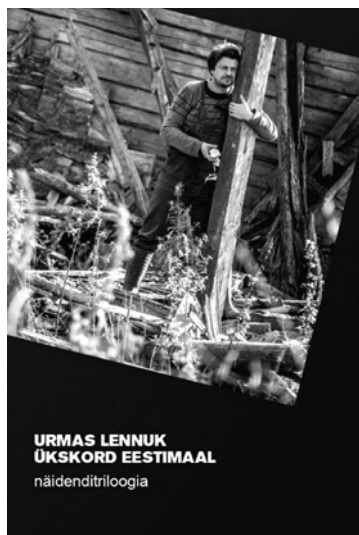
By combining his sense of humour, absurdity and erudition, Matsin has created an original and liberating vision that even offers a moral: even when situations or conditions change drastically, life tends to go on and surprise us. **JK**

URMAS LENNUK
ÜKSKORD EESTIMAAL
(ONCE, IN ESTONIA)

Viljandi, Ugala teater, 2015. 294 pp
ISBN: 9789949387342

Urmas Lennuk (b 1971) has been one of Estonia's chief playwrights in the new millennium. Although he stands out as a highly accomplished director, a script-writer for several well-known Estonian television series (including the country's most long-running and popular soap opera, *Õnne 13*), and the author of one children's book, he is known mainly as a dramatist. He has twice won the Estonian Theatre Agency's Play Competition, which highlights new works of Estonian drama. His first win came in 2001 for the play *Rongid siin enam ei...* (*The Trains No Longer...*), the opening performance of which took place at Viljandi's Ugala Theatre a year later. The same theatre has now published Lennuk's first book of plays, *Once, in Estonia*, which includes three texts: *The Trains No Longer...* and two conceptual sequels titled *Päeva lõpus* (*At the End of the Day*, 2008) and *Ema oli õunapuul* (*Mother Was an Apple Tree*, 2015).

The drama trilogy's title seems vague, but its meaning becomes clear when one reads through the texts. Lennuk attempts to map out Estonia's mental state in the early 21st century, selecting a typical Estonian village as the setting for his works. The dialogue is colloquial: Lennuk's style of writing avoids postdramatic theatre games. The content and attitudes presented in the three plays are in clear harmony with Lennuk's description of himself on the inside of the front cover: "Urmas Lennuk is certainly not an innovator. He is not a revolutionary, a dissenter or a reformer. Urmas Lennuk is a typical middle-aged father who lives on a quiet street in a small town." The two main characters – the brothers Peteri and Jakobi – resemble Lennuk's description of himself. They are simple and ordinary men who aren't endeavouring to save the world, because their hands are full dealing with themselves, each other and their loved ones. The trilogy's cast is limited, with only nine characters in the three plays. In the first, *The Trains No Longer...*, Peteri's and Jakobi's lives are rocked by the death of their mother, Hellen. A woman named Marion plays an important role in the



URMAS LENNUK · PHOTO BY ARVET MÄGI/SCANPIX

second and the third plays, with romantic interest (or the impossibility of it) connecting her and the brothers. In addition to Peteri and Jakobi, there is Marion's daughter, also named Hellen.

The eloquence of Lennuk's three plays is revealed through reoccurring plot motifs: one of the brothers is leaving the gradually dwindling village, the other returning, and then vice-versa. The motif of leaving and returning was not chosen randomly. Although Lennuk's dialogues are fluid, light and interspersed with warm humour, there is a rather sombre undercurrent: life in ever-more-peripheral rural Estonia, which is slowly but surely dying out. As opportunities arise, its natives move away to bigger cities, and from there on to other countries. Those who remain are preparing to die, one by one. The village is composed more of memories than inhabitants. Recent Estonian statistics form a backdrop to this consciously amplified motif: a negative birth rate, tens of thousands of Estonian working in Finland and dreaming of Australia, the irrefutable withering of rural life, alcoholism.... Schools, post offices and local shops

are being closed or moved to larger urban centres. Although, it is possible that the trends could shift in the near future, maybe even a handful of years after the publishing of Lennuk's trilogy, and rural immigration will start to exceed emigration, Lennuk has managed to convincingly conjure this very moment in time. At the same time, his view is not totally dismal or hopeless: although the brothers take turns seeking and losing their fortune in the greater world, something keeps them tied to their home in the middle of nowhere, and at the end of the trilogy they go fishing together, their pockets filled with steaming boiled potatoes. **JK**

PEETER HELME (1978) is a writer, essayist and journalist, and has published five novels. Helme works at Estonian Public Broadcasting, where he edits and anchors radio programmes on literature.

CAROLINA PIHEL GAS (1986) is a poet and translator. She has published four poetry collections and translated poems into Estonian from Spanish, English, Greek and Norwegian. Pihelgas became the editor of the literary magazine *Värske Rõhk* in 2011.

Estonian culture and literature

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What is this poet's poetry?

It is: when you think about life
and something else besides.

What is the human's part

in this wide world?

Not to get slept away.

Keep an eye on that.

JUHAN VIIDING

Translated by Miriam McIlfatrick-Ksenofontov