

10
Books
from
Slovenia

Aljoša Harlamov

Nina Dragičević

Ajda Bračič

Vesna Lemaic

Blaž Iršič



LITERARY CRITICS' CHOICE

Natalija Milovanović

Ana Svetel

Primož Mlačnik

Agata Tomazič

Ana Pepelnik

2026

AJDA BRAČIČ

Fireflies

Kresničevje, LUD Literatura, 2025



Photo by: Robert Balen/Večer

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ajda Bračič (1990) is a writer and an architect. She regularly contributes pieces about architecture and culture to a number of Slovenian media outlets and runs an architectural renovation platform called Kajža. Her short story collection *Leteči ljudje* (Flying People; 2022) won her the kritiško sito and the Maruša Krese Award and a nomination for the Best First Book Award. *Fireflies* is her first novel.

ABOUT THE BOOK

How deep do the roots of guilt run, wonders Agnes as she searches for her sister in a vast forest to resolve their dispute and instead stumbles upon a mysterious community. *Fireflies*, Ajda Bračič' first novel, draws us into its pages like a gentle glow in the ferns, like a piercing call of an animal at night, like a warm fireplace in the middle of winter. The stories of the enigmatic hermit Valentine, the evil comet that is fast approaching, the unusual beech trees and other forest residents spread through space and time like a mycelium. The novel contains elements of horror and ecology as well as motifs from folk literature and medicine. The forest is bigger than the individual fates intertwining among its roots and branches.

EXCERPT

Put a marigold on an open wound, chew sage when your gums are swollen, drink thyme or marshmallow tea to cure a cold, pick the flowers, grate the root, grind, mix, dry, strain, then repeat, repeat, repeat. People have a recipe for everything except for healing their own soul.

No problem starts when we notice the symptoms; it was already there before, waiting and growing, existing as a possibility in our genetic code, a tiny draft in the tissue of our future. We only act when it manifests itself, but the roots of all causes go far back, to last winter, our childhood, the time before we were born. That is why it is so difficult to find the culprit; that is why it is so easy to blame ourselves.

We talk about beginnings, but in the end this is easy to do. We talk about beginnings, but we still don't know which is the right one.

It could be this:

Agnes enters the forest, she has almost entered the forest, she is now in the forest. In the darkness among the tree trunks, her figure hesitates for a while, then slides across the boundary as if penetrating a curtain: palm, forearm, elbow, torso, the back of the head and she is in, when only a moment before she was out.

It is a cold, late March day, one that feels more like gloomy November than spring. That morning, before Agnes enters the forest, sitting on the bus, which is completely empty apart from her and the driver, she slides her tongue over and over across an opening in her gums, left behind by a recently removed tooth root, sticking the tip into the soft and smooth tissue, while mulling over something her sister Klara told her one night before bed, clearly to scare her: that dreams about losing your teeth mean imminent death. From then on, Agnes saw Klara as some kind of wonder-worker; she was always prepared to believe that the world was telling her something and it must be solved like a puzzle, but she was always on the hunt for meaning, searching for patterns in telephone numbers, flocks of crows and traffic jams. Sitting on the dusty, monotonously patterned seat of the bus, Agnes is wondering what the hell Klara would say about this day, this journey: would she see meaning in them, a beginning? *Tooth – bus – forest – loneliness*; she would

undoubtedly decipher an important message from the whole lot. If you start with the outcome, the meanings seamlessly flow back to the source.

They had not spoken for months. Klara left the city shortly after New Year's and would only send a short message here and there, full of resistance, full of coldness, producing a slimy lump of regret in Agnes' stomach, forcing her to doubt her own decisions. In the last message she sent, Klara sent greetings from dad's old cottage in the woods of Koroška.

Then nothing; darkness, silence.

Silence for weeks, for weeks calls went unanswered, in the last few days her number was unreachable. Agnes packed some necessities in her backpack, locked the door of her city apartment and boarded a bus.

Agnes thus enters the forest at the end of March; on the bus, she paints scenes of their meeting in her mind, repeating apologies, repeating the story of her arrival, as if she is already describing it to Klara. She hopes that they embrace, forgive each other between sobs, then sit down for a cup of tea and she would tell her how the bus left the central station in the capital a little over seven in the morning, the passengers kept changing from station to station, letting out their stale breath of black coffee. That she herself rode from the first almost to the last station; there, towards the end of the journey, the road led through narrow gorges, where muddy landslides came tumbling down from both sides, right next to the bus windows; and then past windy industrial halls, tyre repair shops and freshly grown, neatly trimmed hedges lining the countryside, past the houses and fences and trees, past the open shutters of the Saturday morning, past the few road signs. In the end, these too disappeared and the bus started sloping upward until the smoggy lowland haze cleared up and the cold spring sun suddenly peeked through the thick green treetops. On the crossroads of a sparsely inhabited village, perched on top of a hill, the driver called out for Agnes to get off; he smiled at the rearview mirror, revealing a gold tooth on the exact spot where Agnes felt a gaping emptiness in her jaw. Klara would definitely see this as a sign, a secret code; her face would stretch into a smile, perhaps revealing a tiny speck of forgiveness deep in her eyes.

Agnes enters the forest at the end of March; she is out of breath, missing her sister, carrying the gelatinous lump of regret in her guts and pressing her lips together until they turn white. The moment when she fully slides through the green forest curtain, it takes her in.

Translated by
Špela Bibič

NINA DRAGIČEVIĆ

The Impossibles

Nemogoče. Beletrina, 2025



Photo by: Manca Jevšček

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

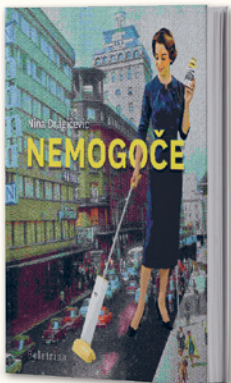
Dr Nina Dragičević is a poet and essayist, author of nine books of poetry, essays and theoretical treatises. Her work is characterised by hybridity in form and style, linguistic innovation and an articulated lesbian and queer-feminist stance. Critics call her work “hard-hitting”, “pioneer”, “glorious” and “forceful, powerful poetry that deserves a lot of attention”. Dragičević is the recipient of the 2025 Lastovka Award, the 2023 Werner Düttmann Fellowship (Akademie der Künste, Berlin), the 2023 Dr Ana Mayer Kansky Prize, the 2021 Jenko Award and the 2020 Župančič Award, as well as a two-time winner of the Knight of Poetry competition. In 2018, she was also shortlisted for the European award Palma Ars Acustica. www.ninadragicevic.com

ABOUT THE BOOK

Zorana is seriously injured in a traffic accident. She is taken to the hospital, where she is stripped and studied and finally declared a man. Zorana initially fights, then falls silent forever. A servant girl accused of murdering her mistress is imprisoned; the servant girl laughs. A scandal breaks out in a concert hall because a female conductor was impersonating a rich widow; everyone gets into a fight. And no one knows where, let alone who Marija Zalar is. And Nina Dragičević opens *The Impossibles* with the following words: “These lives were never meant to be written.”

Before us is a hybrid poetry collection, a love letter to art and the artist in the age of the destruction of sensibility, a neofuturist sculpture made up of archival data and surrealist invention. The common thread in Dragičević’s book is female composers in Slovenia, namely artists that have been systematically erased by the dominant historiography. She brings dozens of them to life – authors and their lovers, professional mothers and professional servants, radio workers, punk musicians, drag queens, trans sound artists. But when Dragičević writes poems about them, she is in fact always writing about us. She thinks about our lives, trials and errors, joy and suffering, our future-building.

Critics have labelled *The Impossibles* a “remake”. The poem *Ena Marija, dve Mariji, nobene Marije* (One Mary, Two Marys, No Mary) from *The Impossibles* received the 2025 Lastovka Award. The book was shortlisted for the Grand Prize of the 2025 Slovenian Book Fair and featured in the list of best books to read in 2025 according to the literary magazine *Bukla*.



EXCERPT

And so, to conclude, as I am known for, as
may be seen with one’s own eyes, as What power as
What force as What truth. It would be fitting
to round off summarise turn the gaze again
to where the spears are flying from to thrust
the spears where the spears are flying from, again
accuse the authorities, say something like »learn
the language of patriarchy so you can curse it«,¹ and
wait for How well you’ve put it, and also
the servants and the all-united authorities, something like
the owl teased the titmouse for having a large head.

¹ Lemebel, Pedro. 2024. *A Last Supper of Queer Apostles: Selected Essays*. New York: Penguin Books.

But I went outside, just before dawn, it seemed
that the day would let us down, there stinking
of hopelessness in the open air the anxiety of walls in
the small street exhausted barely alive in the reflection of a shelter
they stood three motionless one more than the other two pressed
their heads, together, of late more and more together
they grew intergrown mutual unanimous there were
three with my own eyes I saw more and more thin and
withered more and more and something disrupted me
I looked away quickly too long then with my own
eyes I saw: two remained, the calculation was clear:
will there remain only one in the end?

That there were three at first and then two. That they
were dying out through swallowing. No one but them in
the small street, my neighbour lives without electricity, my
second neighbour is on a disability pension and brings lunch
to the first one every day because the first one can't cook because she doesn't have
electricity, the second neighbour says, when passing my
window, bringing lunch to her neighbour, when she sees me, without exception,
says, if you keep on reading so much, your head will hurt, my head
did hurt, that is, they stood there as if
the floor were made of glass, as if of shells, as if it were held together
by the delight of suspense, as if they, if they moved, would
rush where, in the end, they'll arrive anyway. No one
else was there, and so it must have been that
two of them, in the lack of anything else, in each one's lack
ate one.

And if anyone were to be seized by sentiment. It would be fitting
to mourn her, but that never occurred to anyone.
Everyone who found out found it sad, not to
say terrible, cannibalism at the zenith of civilisation,
pigging out in the midst of prosperity, unbelievable, not to say
impossible, I heard that you can't turn
to anyone, I saw that person who fell at the
bus stop, I saw him being seen, I saw her,
I made a note, I saw that lady being heard saying
take care of yourself, they were falling, the people around me, like
dominoes.

But then Anohni, the day before, at the concert,
spoke about groups of women who had, countless times,
built a wall before her a wall of bodies a body of walls when
she was in danger, when she was, by being, risking
her life. With her own eyes she saw them build a circle
wall around her, dominoes falling interweaving, but
no one, not even the lady who saw everything with her own
eyes, saw this with their own eyes. However, Anohni
did survive. She wrote a song about sisters. You are
my sister, she wrote. Sister a metaphor for the one
who forms a circle against danger. But we're working too much
and people are falling like dominoes. You can learn from people
if needed. And so a sister is a circle of falling
dominoes.

Translated by
Barbara Jurša
and the author

ALJOŠA HARLAMOV

The Doctor and the Water Sprite

Dohtar in Povodni mož, Goga, 2025



Photo by: Matej Pušnik

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aljoša Harlamov was born in 1983 in Ptuj. He is a publicist, editor, literary critic and columnist. He studied Slovenian language and literature at the Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, receiving the faculty's 2009 Prešeren Award for his BA thesis on the unreliable narrator in contemporary Slovenian novels. In 2016, he obtained his PhD on the topic of the Slovenian modernist model.

Between 2007 and 2014, he published extensively as a literary critic, contributing to magazines such as *Mentor*, *AirBeletrina*, *Delo*, *Pogledi* and *Literatura*. In 2014, he received the Stritar Award for his literary reviews. He was a member of the *Mentor* editorial board between 2009 and 2014 and its editor-in-chief between 2014 and 2022. He was also on the editorial team of the *Air-Beletrina* literary portal. Between 2016 and 2024, he was editor and for years editor-in-chief at the Cankarjeva založba publishing house.

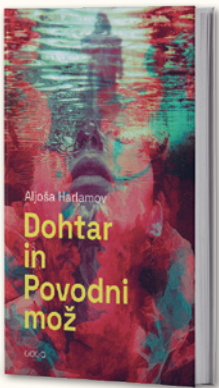
In 2009, he published the novel *Bildungsroman* and later the historical crime novel *Dohtar in Povodni mož* (The Doctor and the Water Sprite). Since 2017, he is one of the three hosts of the O.B.O.D. podcast dedicated to genre art.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The Doctor and the Water Sprite by Aljoša Harlamov is a witty historical crime novel set in 1835, when a sense of national identity is emerging among the more educated members of Slovenian society. The protagonist is a literalised version of the biggest Slovenian poet, France Prešeren, called Doctor, who wakes up by the River Ljubljanica after a night of drinking and sees the body of a strangled young woman lying next to him. As the circumstances of the case point to him, Metternich's mysterious envoy from Vienna gives him an ultimatum: he has ten days to find the real killer, otherwise he will be charged with the crime.

Whether he likes to or not, the Doctor thus turns into a detective. In the course of his investigation, he discovers the dark corners of Ljubljana and the secrets of his friends and acquaintances. The story features real historical figures, such as Matija Čop, Andrej Smole and Stanko Vraz, which gives the novel a convincing historical background. Harlamov masterfully blends fact and fiction, playing with the myth of Prešeren as a suffering romantic genius. He is portrayed as an educated, analytical and creative individual who, besides the investigation, is forced to think about his own position as a poet.

The novel is suspenseful but at the same time ironic and playful. By combining the genres of crime novel, alternative history and literary parody, it brings Prešeren closer to the modern reader, proving that classic historical figures can be presented in a fresh and amusing light.



EXCERPT

Saturday and Sunday, 20 – 21 June 1835

Prologue

Through his damp eyes he just caught sight of her long skirt disappearing around the corner. Pushing himself away from the stinking wall he staggered in that direction. He managed a couple of metres, perhaps three, then he would have fallen had he not caught his balance against another wall. This one also stank of piss. The whole town stank of piss.

Where did she go? He tried to recall where he had last seen her. He called out after her. Or had he just imagined that? Did he even open his mouth? He swallowed. Felt sick. Rashed as he breathed.

His ears still filled with rollicking and drunken laughter, clinking and cheers. He must reek of tobacco and pungent staleness. Perhaps this was why he felt guilty. But he had felt guilty all his

life. Guilty of... everything. Who knows why Carniolans always feel so guilty.

Still, he would apologise to her, if only she would give him a chance. It wasn't his fault. Not really.

Sweat was pouring from him. He felt he was becoming lighter. At least from the neck down. The head remained heavy and bloated, buzzing unbearably.

Through the veil of tears and sweat he then once again spotted her skirt. Was she hiding, fighting him?

Before he knew it, he was after her again. He heard the uneven clacking of his heels echoing along the empty street. Then he saw a new wall approaching him. This one also swaying. It too must stink in this unbearable heat that no longer abated even at night.

He clutched the corner she had just disappeared round, crying out triumphantly – perhaps once again only within. The nausea was already reaching his throat.

He could barely move his enormous head. As if it had gotten stuck somewhere below the low eaves of the slanting house. The entire town was slanting, toppling over. Eventually he made himself look round the corner. *Peek-a-boo!*

Despite the heavy eyelids, the teary gaze and the darkness, he somehow still saw her. Basically not her. All this time, all he had been seeing was the hem of her skirt. And he could not even make out its colour. What he knew was that it was not dirty even though it dragged along the ground. This almost annoyed him. What kind of trick was this?

Once again he merely saw the skirt disappearing behind the corner of the house he was leaning against.

With his small hands, forever stained with ink, he pulled himself around the building, staggering against the wall until his feet somehow found a rhythm. After her. Right behind her. Into the dark narrow street hiding from the moonlight.

The ground swayed left and right, and mostly downward. As he ran he could barely keep his eyes open. The humidity hit his face, panting he tried to blow it aside. His head was now also buzzing with exertion. He waded through open sewers filled with the shit and piss of his respectable fellow townsfolk. His shoes squelched but he did not stop.

Because he couldn't stop.

He crashed into the wall, and immediately after into another one, though it could have been the same one. In his drunken luck he merely bounced off it without feeling the impact. Somehow he caught his step again. Now the slanted streets of Ljubljana actually helped him. He was thrust down them as if on a ship's deck in a storm. Through the darkness and narrow streaks of moonlight and the pitch blackness, further and further down the hill.

He was out of breath. Gasping. Spitting. Emboldening himself. Swearing. Sometimes in rhymes. Overcome by exhaustion, if he were to hit hard against something, he would merely slump to the ground and give up. But the town was thrusting him here and there like children playing with a cockroach in a box, so he was no longer brushing against the walls, merely running forward. Running and stumbling. It didn't matter, as long as she did not get away.

Following his heavy head.

Following the hem of her skirt. Down the hill, further and further down.

After a while – how far had he got? – the cobblestones were replaced by dried out beaten earth. He could no longer hear his footsteps. The darkness here was denser. Bushes scratched his hands as he tried to move forward. He still only glimpsed the hem of her skirt. Still only in the corner of his eye.

Then the rustling that was filling his head was suddenly interrupted by the brassy ringing of bells. He paused for a while in the middle of a clearing, all of a sudden sobered up. It felt as if he had stopped, would no longer be able to move. He knew these bells. Somewhere above him, the Trnovo Church was making itself heard. He felt cheated.

This was enough. No more running further down the hill.

But this was just a moment. With the town toppled, his feet would compulsively not leave him be, and here there was nothing else to grab hold of.

And just as well he hadn't given up because, all of a sudden, he spotted her skirt right in front of him. He almost stepped onto it. It surprised him, made him jump. Half a step in front of him. Or was he already stepping on it?

BLAŽ IRŠIČ

Straight Parade

Parada heteroseksualcev. LUD Literatura, 2025



Photo by: Marko Golja

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR AND THE BOOK

It's a good thing life is so absurd that anyone can write poetry, even Blaž Iršič. In his third poetry collection, he continues to get stuck on the sawtooth edges of ironic reality, picking on everyone, especially those who take themselves the most seriously, without a shred of guilt. The truth remains a problem, even though the angels that come down to Earth are all strange people, like the Eskimos. When the going gets tough and you have no place to go is when poetry begins. The birds are safe from it, but what about the heterosexuals?

EXCERPT

Spanish Song in the Background

I have a hangover,
I need a beer
and all the softness
exuded by your skin.
The universe is one big sadness,
it looks
like Christmas Kentucky.
We stared at Almodóvar's Matador,
lost our greed forever
and returned to the fields
overgrown with soldiers.
I poured wine
into my temple,
longed for less,
the elevator
is
going down!
I feel
as if pulled out of an ass,
the sun is descending into the sea,
among the mullets.
I feel
evil has no value.
I have become a man,
the blood has darkened,
I've danced with the night birds,
I love these warm things
though I tend to lose them.
Poor olive trees,
unable to take their lives,
teach us patience.
Victories are all around me,
it seems I'm a failure.
I didn't fall asleep with the night,
the night and I failed,
we invented each other
and now we're convincing ourselves

that we are awake,
that we are real.
If you want to bury a shovel,
you need a shovel.

The Cukrarna Gallery

Big girls,
yellow balloons,
the cockatoo is a bird.
I took some wine,
I know how to use wine.
Give me back the fearful
answers.
Why did you hide the boys
if the girls are already hidden?
You cover their eyes
when it's too late.
I drank from the bottle.
Fuck wine
if you have to wash the glass.
I defiled your soul
with my soul,
we made love beyond recognition.
And, again, I stand on Earth,
like bare chestnuts in a windless winter.
»Have you ever fucked out of boredom?«
»I've visited the salt pans.«
No one asks the stars
to shine,
twilight presents itself as night,
we are no longer monkeys
but we still love bananas.
»Would you like to rise from the dead?«
»No,
I like a song by Elton John.«



I poured iron and rust
into a tank parked on the chest of my homeland.
We are made of blood
and we get bloodstained.
I remember the toast,
the red wine,
a nose from the coffin sticking up under the ceiling,
the heavy rain falling,
the first piece of childhood getting fucked up.
My muse is lying on the sofa,
doing something,
I don't know what exactly,
but that's what she's doing.
»Have you ever heard of Nietzsche? «
»Fuck him! I'll put a gnome in the garden!«
The cat climbed up the tree,
no one went after him,
I opened the yogurt
and licked the lid.

The Urn

I was returning from a five-minute break.
Five minutes is just enough time
not to rise from the dead.
You say carrots
and I think only of carrots,
I don't think of the rabbit.
If we didn't die,
we would be swallowing the wind, not chains.
A human finds true peace
when buckwheat fields flutter for them
or when sitting on the toilet.
This body
which tries to crawl into bed every night,
only this is me.
Solitude,
I wanted to lose everything
so that I could have
only you.
You know,
we were all making fun of the shepherd
who fucked sheep,
but the truth was that
none of us
had ever tried it.

Translated by
Barbara Jurša
and the author

VESNA LEMAIĆ

The Face

Obraz, Cankarjeva založba, 2025



Photo by: Saša Kovačić

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Vesna Lemaic holds a degree in Comparative Literature. She made her writing debut with the book *Popularne zgodbe* (Popular Stories, 2008). This was followed by the novels and short story collections *Odlagališče* (Dumping Ground, 2010), *Kokoška in ptiči* (The Hen and the Birds, 2014), *Dobrodošli* (Welcome, 2018), *Trznil je, odprla je oko* (He Twitched, She Opened Her Eye, 2022). She also wrote and illustrated the children's book *Slončica in njene savanske pustolovščine* (Elephant's Adventures in the Savannah, 2023). Her latest novel *Obraz* (The Face) was published in 2025. Two of these books have been translated into Croatian and Hungarian.

She has received the Slovenian Book Fair Award for best first book, the Fabula Award for best short story collection, the Golden Bird Award for literature, the Novo mesto Short Prize and the Lapis Histriae Award. The author thinks that awards are also good for filling up empty spaces in biographies.

One of her stories was featured in the anthology *Best European Fiction 2014* and her prose has appeared in other Slovenian and foreign anthologies.

She wrote an audio play for Radio Slovenia entitled *Podpotnik* (Subtrotter). Two short films have been made based on her stories and scripts: *Seveda te ljubim* (Of Course I Love You) and *Taxi*.

Among other things, the author runs creative writing and experimental collective writing workshops. For years she has been involved in organising the ŠKUC literary and music festival *Living Literature*.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The tourists are already here, hungry for sights. Why not squeeze some money out of them to fix a leaking roof? Why not invite them into a room supposedly haunted by Tito, the former president of Yugoslavia, and rake in a few extra euros for souvenirs made of bones? Business is good but inexplicable things start to happen. Bruna, who does not do well in a society of fabricated looks, takes on the role of the guide. She is haunted by the fear of losing her identity and her home. Her body feels off-kilter, her face as something that does not represent her, that is forced upon her, that is slipping out of her control. She feels as though she no longer belongs to herself. Did something foreign enter her from the twilight, or is this the result of social hardship? Contradictions multiply. But things are not what they seem. Perhaps Bruna is not losing touch with herself but rather becoming more in touch with herself..

The novel indirectly addresses issues such as social stratification, gentrification, touristification and access to housing.

EXCERPT

A man in safari shorts was looking at an exhibit under an upside-down vase with particular interest. When they were alone, he knocked on the glass. "Could I take Tito's bone in my hands?"

"No. And it's not plastic. If that is what you wanted to check."

"I want to buy it."

"Buy it? Hm, but it's not for sale."

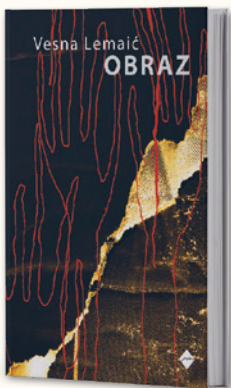
"I would give you fifty euros for it."

"Seventy," she fired back, trying to conceal her excitement.

"Sixty, right down the middle. Final offer."

"Deal," agreed Bruna. "If you tell me what you're going to do with it?"

The man smirked. "Such relics existed back in the Middle Ages. The bones of Saint Lucy, Saint Francis, various saints, mostly, were sold in places of pilgrimage and at fairs. If you put all those bones together, those saints would have had five hundred hands with thousands of fingers."



He let out a smile. "Tourists were already getting scammed back then, only they were pilgrims. They believed that the objects had magical properties."

"I never said that the bone would heal you of anything."

"Yes, we're in the twenty-first century. But people have not changed much when it comes to these things. We are superstitious, just like our predecessors in the Middle Ages."

"What are you going to do with Tito's bone?"

He fished sixty euros out of his wallet. "My aunt has a small museum of celebrity memorabilia in Belgium. I'll give it to her. She will freak out with excitement."

"A lovely gift." She lifted the vase and handed him the bone.

When the tourist closed the door behind him, she leaned her back against it. The banknotes quivered ever so slightly in her hand. It occurred to her that she had just closed the best business deal of her life. Her eyes wandered to the wall covered in spots of mould. But she did not let it get to her this time; the proceeds from the tour were more than good. She rolled a joint on a book about Tito. She leaned over the windowsill, watching the people from a safe distance. They held their heads forward. The upper body was rigid, the walk stiff, as if they were too principled for this town on the periphery of Europe, as if they were different from the residents of other marginal towns. They gave the impression that their life was good, that they did not have kidney stones or scrawny genitalia, that their sleep was peaceful. That they were free of torments and worries, that they were neutral and had no past. Finally, she spat on some businessman's head and retired to the room.

*

They remained standing there, even though the other tourists had already said goodbye. She immediately knew that they were one of those people who needed special treatment. They were around thirty-five years old, well-groomed, muscular and armed with a camera and a camcorder. They introduced themselves as Margie and Tony from Brighton.

"We wanted to ask you something," said the woman.

"Yes, of course," replied Bruna lightly.

Margie and Tony were influencers. They had their own trendy channel on social media. They were going to make a video about Tito's room – to make it more interesting, they would spend the night there and advertise the place, free of charge.

Bruna chuckled at the suggestion. "And you would spend the night here, for free? And take advantage of this scary room to promote your brand?"

They stared at her in disbelief; they had not expected this reaction.

"We don't need that," she said, turning them down.

Now they seemed almost hurt. They probably thought that the locals around these parts had no clue that influencers were the driving force behind modern advertising and were still prejudiced.

"Ok," retorted Margie in a colder tone. "We want to know if you rent out Tito's room. Just for a night."

"No, it never even occurred to us."

"What if you made an exception just this once?" said Tony with a smile, working his freckled charm.

"No, we don't do these things here."

His face immediately grew serious. He unbuckled the bumbag securely fastened around his torso and pulled fifty euros out of his wallet. He held the banknote up for Bruna to get a good look before putting it in the donation box. "We would pay well," he stressed.

"Thank you. But it is not up to me. I would have to ask the team. We have never tried something like this before." She looked around the room. The curtains billowed in the breeze; there was a draught from the open door. "It's one thing being in here for an hour and something completely different to spend the whole night. There are certain risks involved."

"We understand," said Margie politely. "We'll be in Ljubljana for another two nights. Talk to the others. We will stop by tomorrow night."

"Alright, but no promises. As I said, it doesn't depend only on me."

"Of course," nodded Tony. "We're going on a trip to Bled tomorrow. We'll come around on the way back to see what you decided."

They said goodbye.

Bruna counted the money. It was a good yield. She pocketed thirty euros. She blew out the candles and turned off the light with a smile that was meant for the room. She had never felt gratitude towards an inanimate object.

NATALIJA MILOVANOVIĆ

Foreign Softness

Tuja mehkoba. Center za slovensko književnost, 2025



Photo by: Jana Radčević

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Natalija Milovanović (1995) is a poet who writes in Slovenian and Serbian and works as a literary translator. She also organises and moderates readings and acts as the executive producer of the Pranger Festival – a gathering of poets, critics and translators of poetry. Her first poetry collection *Samoumevno* [Taken for Granted] was published in 2021 (Ljubljana, Center za slovensko književnost). It received the Best First Book Award and was a part of the 10 Books from Slovenia 2022 selection. Her second poetry collection *Tuja mehkoba* [Foreign Softness] (Ljubljana, CSK) was published in 2025 and received the Veronika Award and a nomination for the Jenko Award for best Slovenian collection of the past year.

Her poems have been translated into several languages, including English, German, Spanish, Korean and Czech. They are available in English at the European poetry portal *Versopolis*.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Foreign Softness, the second poetry collection by Natalija Milovanović, opens with the images of a (cargo) train and a cargo scale that become a metaphorical intersection, merging into a homogenous whole the motifs of individual compartments *traces, perspectives, scars*. Structurally and thematically, the book therefore represents a journey back – through memories, including traumatic, intimate and collective memories – and a path forward, marked by interruptions, waiting between unexpected closures and delays, being in the wrong place, training patience in the face of all this instability.

The central feeling of passing and the simultaneous awareness of the burdens and scars that we, whether we want to or not, carry with us like emotional baggage – also illustrated by the train journey – are constantly accompanied by a reflection on how to use the poem's language to name the unspeakable extraordinariness of a world that, in the poet's words, *stands, always the worst, always the best that it's ever been*. The lyrical subject is aware that her knowledge of the world is limited while noticing that the social criteria are changing more and more rapidly.

Deep down, imagination, according to Natalija Milovanović, is in fact hope. Despite all types of violence that the world perpetrates or is subject to, this knowledge is imprinted like a survival instinct into the social bodies in the global scatteredness of our time, into all attempts at desertion, into the gaze of a woman from a passing train, holding a happy waving child in her arms, whispering into its *inner ear* the long journey ahead, into the meteor shower washing away the pain upon a loss the lyrical protagonist is going through, and finally into the body of the poem, at least as a hazy premonition of a world we would like to live in.

(From the Veronika Award jury citation)



Foreign Softness

The world for which you were prepared
doesn't exist.

Those who prepared you
have nothing left to say.

They don't know whether it's always been like this,
probably not. After brief reflection
on the shocks of the past few decades
they say, maybe, I don't know.

Everyone feels their own blows the hardest,
every foreign softness feels too hard.
The world stands, always the worst,
always the best that it's ever been.

Foreign Species

(Lyubov)

To depart is to recognize
new species of the unutterable,

running wild amidst the tenses,
rapidly and tenaciously,

like invasive, foreign species
that take no notice of the permaculture.

That doesn't mean nobody's listening,
that nobody's trying to pull out the weeds,

but with each passing day
the past becomes more uncertain,

depending on who tells it
and what they tell themselves.

Perspectives

The neighbor on the balcony is making
a bird house,
a person house,
for the admiration of
the human gaze.

What is a red roof with a grey chimney
to a blackbird or a sparrow or a finch?

Why can't you simply
see beauty,
you ask me,
thinking,
why can't you see, why do you focus
only on the flaws in everything around you?

And then I remember
those sparrows
in Premuda falling
from their nests,
and the waiter on the ladder
returning them to the doorframe,
saving them from the cats,
all the while muttering:
fuck it, little one,
where do you think you're going if you can't fly?

Beauty is easier to see
from a birds-eye perspective
than from a frog's,
revealing the scars.

PRIMOŽ MLAČNIK

Surfing Days

Surferski dnevi, LUD Literatura, 2025



Photo by: Jure Eržen

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Primož Mlačnik (1990) is a cultural studies scholar, researcher, writer, basketball player and... surfer. He currently works as an assistant professor at the University of Nova Gorica, School of Humanities. He is the author of the monograph *Poročilo o melanholiji: primer Kafka* (Report on Melancholy: The Case of Kafka; 2020) and many scientific articles and academic essays. Recently, his writings have been focusing mainly on Slovenian crime novel series from the perspective of cultural studies and critical theory. His story "Tulipanova vest" (Tulip's Conscience) from the short story collection *Šarm* (Charm; 2017) was nominated for the 2016 Best Short Story Award conferred by the *Sodobnost* magazine, and his novel *Otok psov* (The Island of Dogs; 2022) for the 2023 Kresnik Award. *Surfing Days* (2025) is his second novel.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The novel *Surfing Days* explores the subculture of surfing in an era of accelerated capitalism affecting the daily life in a small Portuguese fishing village. The first part of the novel is a first-person narrative by a young soul surfer, Homer Fernandez – all he cares about is the next wave he'll catch. When he and his best friend Marcos Trujillo meet American surfer Garrett McNamara, who rode the biggest wave in the world in Nazaré in 2011, their lives turn upside down. The second part of the novel tells the story of a precarious detective, Caetano Assunto, who investigates a murder while uncovering the social issues facing the local surfing community: gentrification, fast tourism, seasonal work and alienation. The novel transports us into a world where every moment is dictated by the rhythm of the ocean, whose currents pull us back to where the wave first broke.



EXCERPT

Surf Days

There was not much gardening to do; I helped my mum with housecleaning a few times a week, there was no work at the neighbours'. My parents let me be and my old man was dead set on digging that fucking hole by himself, even though he took me with him on almost every job: painting boats, digging fields or building wall mosaics from flat beach pebbles. My forgotten and suppressed guilt, left unfinished like my dad's attempt at digging an impossible, three-by-three-by-twelve-metre hole of despair, was coming back because, just before my dad died, I discovered my favourite thing in the world. The time spent in Arrifana seems endless to me. Almost at the same time, I discovered death, failure, pleasure and truth.

I look back on this period with affection and melancholy, with profound happy sadness, as a real Portuguese would say. I got to know true death when I started playing with it. I needed some time to figure out how the wheels in my head spin. When I felt guilt, I wanted to know the boundaries between life and death. It sounds pathetic, but I always turned by debt into pleasure. I surfed, gliding on my board shaped like a dead dick that has to be mastered and subjugated to the unyielding force of the ocean before liberation. Before you manage to ride out a wave, you have to accept the fate of unavoidable failure. The first time is a fight between potential death and pleasure. Waiting for a real wave goes well with hedonistic stories about war scars, abrasions, tears, bruises, sprains, fractures to secondary drownings, pneumonias, bronchitides and traumas. The first wave is a matter of skill and coincidence and its rare gambling extension in surfing –happiness. This strange enjoyment of failure, of painfully funny and funnily painful stories, is joined together with the magnetism of repetition and returning to the waves that caused you pain.

Surfing became my obsession. Waiting for the waves or gliding through the foam, I forgot about my dad who sat in the kitchen every night, reading an old newspaper and chain-smoking, as my mum kept telling him to get a real job or at least sell some copies of his book because we would soon run out of food. When I was surfing, I would forget the humiliations my mum endured as a cleaner at the hands of greedy bastards. Surfing was the first thing that put me in a state of extasy and catharsis at the same time. The bigger the wave, the more beautiful the whirlpool of wellbeing I found myself in. I made peace with the world as it was. Sometimes the calm lasted a day or two. If it seemed as if I was pushing the boundaries of what was possible on my board, I was blissful all week. When I was no longer able to get this feeling a few months ago, I took Fresco's advice and moved to Nazaré, where the waves are much bigger than in the area of Arrifana. Unlike Marcos, I didn't have a phone, computer or internet. The board became the extension of my body. This pathetic statement can often be heard from surfers, but to me, the board really did represent the only extension that I felt would take me someplace else. It felt as if I was extending my life through surfing.

Fresco knew me through my dad who sometimes got him some cheap varnish or epoxy resin for shaping sticks. He gave me my first pear-shaped board with a slight dent on the bottom, made from foam and glass fibres.

Because it was painted over in white, blue and yellow, Fresco told me that it was washed up to the shore of Arrifana from the Canary Islands, as these were the colours of the Canary three-colour flag.

I rode it until water came seeping through its cracked rails. It became too heavy, unbuoyant and unusable. I had to toss it.

When Fresco saw me moping on the beach with no board, he gave me a new one – a worn-out, soft-railed but very similar two-and-a-half-metre-long colourless *gun* that had been through a lot. I was probably in Fresco's good books because of my dad, which I found strange. I felt guilty, but it wasn't my fault that I felt that way. He always gifted me old boards, even if I lost or cracked some of them. So I could ride carefree past the kooks and rocks all the way to the sand, while Marcos – always on a good, shiny, undented board – kept to the blue walls.

Sometimes Fresco and I met on the beach and he would usually give me some surfing advice. One time, he told me it was good to know that long-period swells were stronger and quicker, while short-period swells were more consistent and weaker.

Another time, he told me that I should cup the water along the rails while paddling. With deep and strong, but at the same time calm and stable strokes. One day, he told me I could come work at his five-square-metre workshop for cash (not a lot of it). To look after his home, probably illegal bar that he had put up to the right of the garage wall on the shady side of his house. He told me he would give me thirty euros if I brought drinks from the garage fridge to some older surfers for a few hours. I said yes.

ANA PEPELNIK

Into the Tree

V drevo. LUD Šerpa, 2025



Photo by: Tone Stojko

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Poet and translator. Her first poetry collection *Ena od variant kako ravnati s skrivnostjo* (One Way to Treat a Secret; Prišleki, LUD Literatura) was published in 2007 (nomination for the 2007 Best First Poetry Collection). Two years later, in 2009, the same publisher put out her second book, *Utrip oranžnih luči na semaforjih* (The Orange Pulse of Traffic Lights), and her third, *Cela večnost* (A Whole Eternity) in 2013. The Šerpa publishing house (Luda Šerpa collection) released her fourth poetry collection *Pod vtisom* (Under the Impression) in 2015, her fifth *Tehno* (Techno; nomination for the Jenko Award and the Veronika Award) in 2017 and *Treš* (Trash; nomination for the Veronika Award) in 2021. In 2023, her seventh poetry collection *to se ne pove* (you don't talk about that; the 2024 Kritiško sito Award, the 2026 Prešeren Foundation Award) was published by LUD Literatura. Her eighth poetry collection *V drevo* (Into the Tree) was published in 2025 by LUD Šerpa (Luda Šerpa collection; the 2026 Prešeren Foundation Award).

In 2023, Parasitenpresse published the book *nicht fisch* in the German language (awarded the Horst-Bienek-Förderpreis für Lyrik 2024).

She translates mostly American poets, such as Joshua Beckman, Matthew Zapruder, Matthew Rohrer, Noelle Kocot, Jennifer Clement, Sylvia Plath, James Tate, James Schuyler, Elizabeth Bishop, Wallace Stevens and Walt Whitman.

Her translation (in collaboration with Matthew Rohrer) of *Koža* (Skin) by Tone Škrjanec was published in the USA (featured among the ten books shortlisted for the 2015 PEN Award for Poetry in Translation).

As a poet, she collaborated on the international project *Metropoetica* (under the mentorship of Welsh poet Zoë Skoulding).

As a speaker, she is part of the impro trio *CPG Impro*.

As a poet-speaker, she is involved in the project *Poetrix*, a sound product of musician and sound artist Jaka Berger – Brgs and the multimedia project *Odkruški vedute* with sound artist Miha Šajina and visual artist Lina Rica.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The poems from the collection *Into the Tree* are a vivid texture profile of Ana Pepelnik's poetic mind, the way its content is produced. Its language, diction, direction and tracing of thought seem very associative, but not in the sense of jumping from one metaphor, image or symbol to another (this does not mean that they do not appear in the poem; rather, they are in the background while the living, organic language is at the forefront, even though language is generally unaware of itself or, according to the poet, must be recognised as a construct). It makes me think of what Henry James once called a "felt thought".

Ana Pepelnik's poetry is filled with a variety of topics, painful, joyful, dark, crazy, happy: not as classic opposites but an oscillation between all the chaotic impulses, facts, moods of being, all that emerges between nothing and "is". Reading it, one senses an almost electronic ("techno") pulse that, on the one hand, dehumanises, isolates, alienates and, on the other, leads to a kind of ritualistic primality in which entities come into contact with one another, observe each other, establish genuine connections. *Into the Tree* is an attempt to comprehend the inner glow of things, their co-existence in the Heraclitus' river of life; chasing the understanding that arises at the intersection of to-being, not-being, perception and learned conventions about the state of the world. Ana Pepelnik's language moves between the cracks of all this, recording momentary flashes, weighing the meaning of endless emergence and cessation, which many of her poems ultimately are. (by Silvija Žnidar)



continue

above the water across the entire bay an indeterminate colour like an element maybe a metal or mineral a metamorphosis of wood into stone

the evening could be different maybe i'm even imagining it being different that the body's already in the water floating swimming fading then disappearing that the body isn't on the chair isn't at the table isn't writing but keeping still removing cicadas from the ears as they're so annoying as everything is annoying as you yourself are annoying but you have no idea how

for calm to set in means to turn off the outside switch off the inside

with a word

i don't know if you know that i don't know or didn't know how it is with death how the jaw opens all by itself most probably so that the world can fall in enter get inside a person that's one interpretation and it was there and was poetic enough for us to talk about it for me to write about it and there are so too many images anyway for me not to think about abstraction and 1 in itself is already a completely processed abstraction its function is maybe just to help you disregard the abstract

i don't know

it's hard for me too

a meadow say a forest a plant close by a raven above everything and above us | my intention was just to leave out images at least here but now i see that they've overtaken me completely crashed among the words and now they're combining by chance and according to the selectivity of memory in the end i'm always saved by some random sentence cause the words we use are those we need and the smell is more intense at night cause the smell lingers and lasts cause the air is calmer and this is why i'm telling you i like darkness someone's absence to talk to them about it so i can finally say light so i can finally say that i don't know how it is with

without an end

here i am again left without you | poem | cause i chose so many others cause i thought you'd always be there you were taken for granted i'm sorry and i was left without you you've gone to i don't know scotland i'd go to scotland just like i've been planning my whole life it's just that i never go cause it's not in my nature to leave cause i leave that to you i put that burden on you beloved poem this responsibility this decision this entire irresponsibility egoism narcissism laziness everything but i don't know if you have enough freedom cause you've never become what you wanted to be i never wrote you to the end you were never perfect and here i am again left without you | poem |

but i don't know where that was where we once stopped looked into each other's eyes somewhere deep inside and i never dreamed how deep one can stare into you somehow you're without an end but i'm not scared it's entirely safe somehow outside the world somehow without gravity there outside the world which i no longer like that i've never really liked cause nothing's ever really changed really happened except for a few revolutions endless wars but man's a cunt as we know since he first figured out that something which burns is fire and lit it lit it again and again always without water lit and raped hit strangled inflicted trapped lashed slaughtered adopted broke stroked promised expected a cunt what else to say and here i am again left without you | | cause i used another to start falling beyond what is and what's called i don't feel like living anymore how can i start now how can i tell you how can i explain this how to you you eternal you mine

ANA SVETEL

Glass Walls

Steklene stene, Beletrina 2024



Photo by: Mankica Kranjec

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ana Svetel (1990) is an ethnologist and cultural anthropologist working at the University of Ljubljana. In her research and teaching, she focuses mainly on environmental and linguistic anthropology and is the author of the monograph *Spremenljive krajine severovzhodne Islandije* (Changing Landscapes of Northeast Iceland, 2024). But science is not her only calling: she has established herself as a poet, writer and columnist. To date, she has published the poetry collections *Lepo in prav* (Good and Well, 2015) and *Marmor* (Marble, 2022) and the books of short stories *Dobra družba* (Good Company, 2019) and *Steklene stene* (Glass Walls, 2024) – all nominated for notable national literary awards. *Good Company* was the basis for a series of radio plays produced by Radio Slovenija, entitled *Prevozi* (Transportation). *Glass Walls* won the author the kritiško sito, an award for best book of fiction conferred by the Association of Slovene Literary Critics, and the Maruša Krese Award for best short story collection. The book has also been selected as required reading for the 2027 high school matura exam. In 2025, she was the first Slovenian to receive the CEI Award presented at the Vilenica Festival. Her texts have been published in all major Slovenian literary magazines, translated into more than ten languages and featured in many anthologies. Her favourite break from language is classical music.

ABOUT THE BOOK

The collection *Glass Walls* by Ana Svetel brings together five short stories of various motifs and topics, which many critics have described as novellas. What the stories have in common is the distinct scent of our time, recounted in the author's harmonious, reliable and skilful writing style. What does this scent smell of? Perhaps of a hectic time in which interpersonal relationships are exposed to frost? Or of hard glass that does not produce a single drop of scent? Of embryos the size of fruit? Of victims and perpetrators among university professors and students? Of tense communication that breaks down due to social differences, prejudice and intolerant persecution? Of the faint light on the other side of translucent walls? But also of estate agents and constant moving. And perhaps of irreversible adulthood, in which old university friends reunite after years apart but cannot really remember the times past, letting nostalgia slip through their fingers... And the biggest zeitgeist is undoubtedly Elza, a fast-paced story about an online influencer, mother of two who, with her Instagram posts, becomes the perfect commentary on our time. Who or what will she follow?

From the Maruša Krese Award citation:

Glass Walls establishes Ana Svetel as one of the most intriguing and mature authors of her generation. Her stories are poignant and intellectually challenging but at the same time readable and, above all, deeply human.



EXCERPT

Elza

Hey you guys, well, I just got out of a meeting and I thought I would check in because there was a little package waiting for me outside the door, what do you say, should we open it together? She places a cardboard box on the table. *I haven't opened it yet so I have no idea what's inside.* She cuts the tape on the folds with a pair of scissors, the package opens, *Ooooh, what is this?* She pulls a card out of the box and reads, *Dear Zala, we hope that you like the shirt, we've also added a little something for your two sunshines.* She turns the card over to display the text on the screen. Two big suns are drawn under the note. *Awww, that is so thoughtful, I love it, this personal touch really means a lot to me,* she looks at the camera, *thank you. Now let's see,* she pulls out a crocheted tank top. *Oh my god, so cute, I'll go try it on right now and show you.* She stands in front of her giant

bedroom mirror, looking at herself. The shirt's neckline is too big and it falls loosely on the hips at the bottom. She finds a hair clip by the bed and fastens the straps on her back, which raises the neckline a bit. She tucks the left edge of the shirt into her jeans to cover up the unfortunate shape. She picks up the phone and starts recording, taking care to stand in front of the mirror at an angle that does not expose her back, *I mean, wow, such a nice material, beautiful details, look at the crocheting, I'm going to wear it like this, casual, but if you combine it with a blazer and a handbag, it would also work great for a more formal occasion.* She goes back to the kitchen table, puts the phone back on the holder, turns on the ring light, *and, I also got, take a look at this,* she takes out a hair band with a pink crocheted edging, *how cute is this, my little Lili loves pink, and a crocheted bunny, aw, this is perfect for Tristan. I'll paste the website link below in the comments, I ordered from them last week, they are super fast and you can customise everything if you have any wishes in terms of colours or motifs, I'm a big fan.*

She throws the shirt and the two crocheted items back in the box, placing it next to the door. Why does she have to accept such rubbish when Katja has been working with a retail chain for six months, posting which cottage cheese and chicken breast and apples she "buys" in their shops and, as a result, was able to cancel all of these stupid tiny businesses that will go under in a year anyway. She lies down on the sofa and goes through Katja's stories. Then she spends a good hour replying to her followers, adding a pink heart at the end of each reply. Tristan is out cold, so she decides to leave him alone, locks the door of the children's room, nothing can happen if he wakes up, he'll just scream a little, they'll be back soon anyway, she puts on a pair of sneakers and a light jacket, rushes down the stairs, heads across the peaceful courtyards of the blocks of flats. As she approaches the school playground, she notices that Lili is sitting on the low wall next to the play area, while a group of girls play in the sandpit. "She has a hard time fitting in," says Lidija, the afterschool teacher, as they stand at the edge of the playground waiting for Lili, who has rushed off to the classroom to collect her things. "Try to include her in your activities more often, spend more quality time with her."

Beneath her large pink bag, the little one looks like a tiny fairy, and the light falling on her through the chestnut trees, casting shadows on her hair, is just right. *Here we are, on our way home,* she points the camera at her daughter, *and this is my little schoolgirl, how was your day, Lili?* she says in a sugary voice. Lili kicks the first autumn leaves and says nothing. *How was your day, is it nice at school?* "Yes," she mumbles. Zala turns the camera back on herself, shrugs her shoulders and winks. As soon as they enter the cool hallway of their building, they hear Tristan's screaming, Zala runs up the stairs, dragging the little one by the hand, scrambles to unlock the door, pushes her inside, closes the door and unlocks the door to Tristan's room. The child is red from crying and drenched in sweat. I have to, she says to herself, I have to take him... "Tristan, could you wait just a minute, please, mummy is very hungry, are you two going to eat something too?" She goes in the kitchen and prepares a protein shake, opens a pudding for each child and hands them the cups and spoons. She tosses a few toys in her bag, puts the children in their jackets and leads them outside the apartment. They walk down the stairs together, one slow step at a time, Lili holds her brother's hand while he clutches Edi, his big plushy elephant, an adorable, lovable trio, she takes a few shots, these always come in handy, for later, too.

Outside the children's clinic, she starts having chest pain, the doctor's recent words come flooding back to her, and when they find themselves in the pale orange waiting room, she hopes that the paediatrician is not in today, that someone who does not know her is covering her shift. The nurse takes Tristan's card and answers Zala's question "is the doctor working today" with a kind nod, "working, working, we're all working". Fortunately, Tristan is not so unwell that he would cause a scene in the waiting room, and Lili is sitting on her chair and watching the other kids, her legs dangling over the edge of the seat. Zala takes her son into her arms and puts an arm over her daughter's shoulder. She feels the soft, pliable tissue under her fingertips. She closes her eyes. I hope no one... She wants to hide in the toilet and wait there until the nurse calls their name. "Umm, Zala?" says a woman on the other end of the waiting room with a shy smile, "I'm sorry to bother you. I just wanted to tell you I really like following you. And this must be Tristan and Lili?" Zala forces a smile and nods. "What is wrong with them? Oh, that's right, you said this morning that you'd had a long night. Oh, I feel for you. This is how it is with our little sunshines, isn't?" Zala is too tired to pretend, so she whispers "yes, I'm sorry, I don't want to wake him," signalling towards her son. The girl nods eagerly, putting a finger to her lips. Her baby coos happily, she leans over him and whispers something to him. Zala notices that she is using the capsule that she promoted. I hope you used my code, she thinks.

AGATA TOMAŽIČ

Ushabti

Ušabti, Goga, 2025



Photo by: Matej Pušnik

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Readers first got to know Agata Tomažič through her journalistic texts published in the editions of the newspaper *Delo*. She started working there in 2002, initially writing reports for the Panorama segment, then became a member of the editorial board for the cultural biweekly *Pogledi* in 2010. She currently works at the Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts. She translates from English and French, mostly works of literature and humanities: *The Janissary Tree* by Jason Goodwin (Mladinska knjiga, 2007), *Rumors* by Jean-Noël Kapferer (Cankarjeva Založba, 2010), *Time for Outrage!* by Stéphane Hessel (Sanje, 2011) and *The Man Who Walked Through Walls* by Marcel Aymé (Goga, 2014).

She has published seven literary works – *Česar ne moreš povedati frizerki* (The Things You Cannot Tell Your Hairdresser; Goga, 2015), *Zakaj potujete v take dežele?* (Why Do You Travel to These Countries?; CZ, 2016, awarded the krilata želva), the novel *Tik pod nebom* (Just Below the Sky; Goga, 2017) and the collection of short stories *Nož v ustih* (A Knife in the Mouth; Goga, 2020) and is the co-author of *Blodnik po Istri* (Wandering Istria; Društvo za dolgovezenje, 2019). Her latest two novels, *Bumblebee's Gutter* (2022) and *Ushabti* (2025), featuring detective Robert Obrh, are interesting genre hybrids blending the crime story, the psychological novel and the family saga.

ABOUT THE BOOK

Ushabti by Agata Tomažič is an unusual crime novel that takes the reader by surprise right at the outset. Instead of a dramatic crime, the book opens with the disappearance of a ladder, which seems an almost banal event. The case is assigned to detective Robert Obrh, who previously appeared in the novel *Bumblebee's Gutter*, in which he was portrayed as a rather average and not very successful investigator.

The focus of attention is a retired heart surgeon, Dr Vladimir Baumgarten, a confident and talkative man who floods Obrh with lengthy ruminations about social hierarchy, power and the role of the individual. Traditional questioning is replaced by almost philosophical discussions, during which the surgeon emphasises that not all people can or should climb the social ladder. The symbol of the ladder assumes a broader meaning.

The story of the missing ladder expands to other mysterious incidents, including the death of pigeons and an unusual financial fund from the times of Yugoslavia. The novel moves away from a typical detective story and turns into a contemplation about manipulation, power and human vanity. Tension mounts all the way to an unexpected ending that takes the reader by surprise. *Ushabti* is a masterfully written and intelligent novel that transcends genres and offers more than just a crime story.



EXCERPT

When Robert Obrh received a message from his boss instructing him to go to some apartment building to investigate the disappearance of the ladder that led to the attic, he initially thought his superior was making fun of him. It would have been out of character – the boss was not the kind of person who would joke very often. On the other hand, Robert was, without doubt, the kind of person colleagues would poke fun at. And he was well aware of this. Lanky, always with an unfortunate haircut – probably due to his strange, egg-shaped head – and a glum face, he looked like some tragicomic cartoon character.

He also moved in a disjointed, even clumsy manner, especially when he was under pressure or in a hurry to get somewhere. He was not completely hopeless with regards to his physical abilities – he was a moderate fan of sports and he had, after all, finished his police training. This certainly requires some motor coordination, even leaving brain development aside. In Robert's case, this

too could be questioned because of his distinctly slow speech. Perhaps it was due to this, weary of pitiful glances, that he took a taciturn stance when it came to communication. When he did speak, despite the difficulty with which words rolled from his mouth, they carried weight.

His woebegone appearance often had positive consequences: he instilled trust in people quickly and rendered in them a desire to share their deepest secrets, in this way letting him know that not everything was so terrible, that they too are not perfect. When it came to qualities for a criminal investigator, all this could be seen as an asset...

But what is this about some ladder? Robert had thought for a while as to whether he should openly confront his boss. Finally tell him what he should have said before. That he will no longer be his flunky simply because he is clumsy, speaks slowly, is not handsome and does not run marathons like Taras Birsa. He can find someone else for that! Then he looked around his office. It was not exactly spacious and the feeling of being cramped in a small space was exacerbated due to the old dark chipboard furniture. The grey lino on the floor was worn, in places even had holes in it with traces cigarette butts that had burned in the hands of his predecessors in times when smoking in enclosed spaces was still acceptable. Standing on the desk was an old computer, an off-white box with a cheap monitor of dubious origin and a huge keyboard where many of the keys were worn beyond legibility, accumulated in the gaps in between them were traces of his snack lunches of the last week. Not week, month, probably even a year. How long has he been working here? Robert stretched out his hand and touched the keyboard. Whatever he thought of his boss and his quirky sense of humour, he could not ignore the fact that jobs these days don't grow on trees. Times are hard, he needs to pay child support for his two sons and the mortgage on his flat... Besides this, work was not too bad – after all, he does have his own office. His computer may be old and worn, but it connects to the internet, meaning he can check out the dLib site any time he wants, browsing through all kinds of publications that have been added to the National Digital Library platform. He reads articles from old newspapers, amused by the adverts for products his colleagues didn't even know existed. He reads books about forgotten heroes from other times. He chooses to transport himself into a different era, choosing the people he hangs out with who tell him wonderful and exciting stories of their adventures, without expecting anything from him, only to listen.

An additional advantage is that he is alone in the office. None of this could happen were he forced to be with someone else, constantly glancing over his shoulders or, even worse, wanting to talk with him all the time. Even the mere thought of such a possibility made Robert shudder. He knew that this would eventually mean he would have to work.

No, work is not that terrible, in fact it is quite fine. After all, he has a great time. His fingers slid across the keyboard, carefully and gently, as if stroking a furry, soft but unpredictable cat he does not want to wake up. At least not now. Not yet...

Grabbing the receiver of his landline, he dialled his boss's internal number.

'Good morning. What is it with this ladder? When did it disappear, who reported its disappearance?'

'Good morning, Obrh! Nice to hear you. This is something big, you see. I would not entrust just anybody with it, but you seem to be the man to handle it! Listen, this is a truly monumental issue and...'

The boss was carefully enunciating his words as if he were a foreign language teacher speaking especially clearly and at the same time enthusiastically listening to the sound of his received pronunciation. Yes, his boss was one of those people who love the sound of their own voice.

What surprised Robert with all this talking was that he did not burst out laughing. He felt as if he had switched on a teleshopping channel. Only that he was not deciding which product to buy or not to buy. Worse, he could not even switch channels. With one hand he seized the edge of the desk as if looking for some support on a ship being tossed about in rough seas, with the other he clenched the receiver even harder. Then he slowly began to move it away from his ear.

'The disappearance was reported this morning by Dr Vladimir Baumgarten. But we cannot exclude the possibility that the ladder was removed some time earlier, for the doctor has just returned from a week-long trip to the seaside. To his holiday home in Croatia.'

'So you are telling me he has an alibi?'

'Alibi? Obrh, do you think I am a fool?! Of course he has an alibi! Why would this elderly gentleman steal his own ladder and then call the police? Do you even know who Dr Baumgarten is?'

Slovenian Book Agency: funding opportunities for foreign publishers

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